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A Study of Resiliency in African-American Middle School Boys

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A STUDY OF RESILIENCY IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN MIDDLE SCHOOL BOYS

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ANDREA CELICO

ABSTRACT

While our nation claims that we provide “equal learning opportunities” for all, the Black-White achievement gap still exists. This leads to a variety of political, economic, and social ramifications for our students. With this said, seldom are studies conducted that disprove the countless theories that explain why African-American students are at-risk for academic success.

As an attempt to determine environmental factors that contribute to the achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students, it is important to gain a greater understanding of how academically successful African-American students have managed to translate their struggles and experiences of oppression into academic success (Griffin & Allen, 2006).

Resiliency and risk have been studied for more than 40 years. Many African-American students succeed in school despite living in single-parent, impoverished families. Some African-American students from this background successfully emerge from high risk environments, coping and overcoming dire circumstances (Floyd, 1997).

Children living in single-parent families (particularly those mother-headed) are at a greater risk for negative outcomes than those in two-headed families (Brody & Murry, 1999).

In this study, the experiences of 13 academically successful sixth through eighth grade African-American boys living in single parent, impoverished homes in an urban school district in the Midwest were explored. Through demographic questionnaires and

semi-structured interviews, the self-reported factors as contributing to the students' academic success were identified.

The answers to the following research question were explored: What experiences (at home, in their peer community, and at school) do academically successful African-American middle-school boys living in single parent, impoverished homes report as contributing to their academic success?

In this qualitative study, the students reported a number of factors as contributing to their academic success. Grounded theory and the constant comparison methodology were used to obtain the findings and identify domains. They included: strategies for success, future orientation, motivating factors, homework, access to resources at home and in the community, and relationship with mother.

Information from this study can be used to help educators analyze and examine current educational practices that are in place and re-think ways to meet the emotional and environmental needs of the students they serve.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

You've heard it all before, but imagine a troubled child born into a life of poverty with a single mom who works to support her family with a minimum wage job. Go one step further and imagine being a young African-American male growing up in the early 1900's on the streets of New Orleans who had to drop out of school to help support his family after his mom abandoned him and his siblings, eventually ending up in a home for boys at the age of 12. Now, ask yourself what this child could possibly make of himself. It sounds like the ingredients for a recipe for a life filled with despair, not to mention a dismal ending. One would never know that the child described above went on to become America's ambassador of Jazz. Who, you ask? The answer: Louis Armstrong. Armstrong not only played all over America and Europe, but he was responsible for bridging the racial barriers of his time. And, still today, Armstrong's music continues to captivate a wide variety of people. Louis Armstrong had anything but an easy time growing up in New Orleans. Armstrong went through the juvenile court system, eventually ending up in a home for boys. It was there that his love for music helped straighten out his life. His desire to play the cornet in the school's brass band outweighed any desire to continue on

a path of self-destruction. Armstrong went from a troubled child to an internationally renowned musician. For those who believe an unfortunate start to life has to lead to a terrible ending, Armstrong has proven otherwise.

Exactly 100 years after the birth of Louis Armstrong, Maya Angelou was named one of the 30 most powerful women in America. Why is this so significant? Though Angelou was powerful in her later life, she was anything but powerful growing up. At the age of 8 she was raped by her mother's boyfriend, and in that one instance, a young girl's innocence was stripped from her. Known as America's poet and author, Angelou grew up lacking joy and privilege, contrary to what the public eye might believe. Angelou was a poor black girl born in rural Arkansas who found herself pregnant by the age of 16. She was a "lost soul" with no direction, living a life filled with prostitution and drugs. It wasn't until Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. involved her in the civil rights movement, that she blossomed and rose above her troubled, impoverished childhood. As the story continued, Angelou went on to become one of the most acclaimed African-American poets and authors of all time.

In both of these inspirational stories, each person was motivated or influenced by an external or internal source or sense of strength. For Armstrong, his love for music pushed him down a more favorable path that in the long run, would reward him greatly. For Angelou, it was Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. that helped her see a different way and that the path in which she was headed, was anything but pleasant. He saw in her an untapped potential that grew into something larger than life. Sometimes young children, particularly those at risk for "double jeopardy"—being African-American and poor, have a greater need for role models in order to gain resiliency and to overcome insurmountable

obstacles that lead to a bleak place with no hope for salvation.

Statement of the Problem

The achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students pervades our nation's schools. The achievement gap that plagues our kindergarten through twelfth grade students has a variety of political, economic, and social ramifications for our students and schools. Yet, seldom are studies conducted that examine the experiences of academically successful at-risk African-American students to help better understand the reasons behind their success.

It is important for society to gain an awareness of the success stories of African-American youths that beat the odds. We must put forth more energy into studying the positive, as opposed to the grim realities that we are all too aware of, for our young African-American students.

While it is important to study the successes of *all* African-American students, it is of utmost importance to figure out the social, emotional, and environmental aspects of African-American males particularly. It is no secret that society stigmatizes African-American males more than any other group. While African-American women suffer the impacts of society, society's views regarding African-American males are even more dismal. The reason behind the stereotypes and stigmas...who knows? Is it the number of African-American males identified in special education? Worst yet, is it the disproportionate number of African-American males in our penal system that places a negative stigma on this group?

Our schools are failing our African-American male students. For this reason alone, it is important to focus on this endangered species and work to undo the stereotypes and prejudices that exist for these students.

As an attempt to determine environmental factors that contribute to the achievement gap between African-Americans and their Caucasian counterparts, it is important to gain a greater understanding of how academically successful African-American students have managed to translate their struggles and experiences of oppression into academic success (Griffin & Allen, 2006). Furthermore, gaining an understanding of the experiences of African-American students in high poverty schools holds particular importance considering the fact that minority students are overly represented at the most destitute schools in the nation. In comparison to schools in more affluent areas, urban minority schools tend to have lower per pupil expenditures, access to fewer resources, and a high proportion of ineffective, untrained teachers (Griffin & Allen, 2006). Despite the economic, emotional, and intellectual pressures placed on these students, some students still succeed. Why?

Despite living in adverse conditions, youths exhibit a wide range of achievement outcomes. Many children living in poverty do quite well in school. These students are often referred to as having resilience (the notion that some people succeed in the face of adversity).

The topic of resilience has been studied for many years. Children with characteristics of resilience continue to come to school and manage to build skills and establish significant relationships despite past difficulties and setbacks (Townsel, 1997).

Faced with life stresses, many at-risk youths experience psychological difficulties, while others function well. Children in the latter group, labeled resilient or stress resistant, defy expectations by developing into well-adapted individuals (Luthar, 1991). This study examined the experiences of academically successful African-American middle school boys from impoverished backgrounds and single-parent families who have exhibited academic success despite these potential challenges. Stereotypes of this population range from superstars, to criminals, to athletes. These stereotypes are often used to define our African-American males. The societal stereotypes with social, political, and economic forces together place African-American males at extreme risk for adverse outcomes and behaviors (Cunningham et al., 2003).

In a study that was conducted by Patterson, Kupersmidt, and Vaden (1990), it was asserted that being an African-American male and growing up in poverty in a single-parent (mother-headed) household have been identified as being risk factors for childhood maladjustment. A survey was administered to second through fourth grade teachers regarding the behaviors of African-American boys in their classrooms. These teachers reported that these students were identified as exhibiting more misconduct and behavior problems than that of their non-minority counterparts. Patterson et al. (1990) concluded that the teachers' responses revealed that the lower the income, the more behavior problems the students exhibited.

This body of research is relevant to the achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students that plagues urban districts because it has serious political, economic, and social ramifications for education as a whole (Singham, 1998). Efforts to close or eliminate the achievement gap have been largely unsuccessful, even

though school officials are obligated to provide students of all races and ethnicities with the best education possible. The need to narrow the gap is increasingly urgent, as the United States becomes more and more diverse in socio-economics, race, and ethnicity (1998). Studying the experiences of academically successful middle school boys may help in our quest to understand the attitudes, behaviors, and skills of African-American males--key ingredients to closing the gap.

More effective and efficient learning techniques and strategies, coupled with positive attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions toward learning, could offer one possible solution for narrowing the achievement gap. In a quantitative study conducted by Sanders (1998), the attitudinal and behavioral variables he used (school behavior, academic self-concept, and achievement ideology) were found to be positively and significantly correlated with academic achievement.

At the moment, far too many of our children, especially African-American children and children from low-income households lack the fundamental academic skills needed to be successful. By fourth grade, nearly sixty-six percent of African-American students are reading below the basic level of achievement, whereas only twenty-five percent of Caucasian students are below grade level (Haycock & Jerald, 2002).

Through questionnaires and interviews of academically successful African-American middle school boys, the purpose of this study was to explore how the experiences of these students at home, within their peer community, and at school contribute to their academic success despite living in single parent impoverished homes. The answers to the following question were sought: What experiences do academically

successful African-American middle-school boys living in single parent, impoverished homes report as contributing to their academic success?

More specifically, this study explored the experiences of the students by answering the following research questions: a) What experiences at home do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success? b) What experiences within their peer community do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success? c) What experiences at school do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success?

Significance of the Study

There is a large body of research that addresses the education of poor African-American children (e.g. Floyd, Brody, & Murry). It is quite rare, however to see words like “aspiring” or “motivated” to describe these youth. As a result, teachers and parents often lower the expectation of these “at-risk” youth because they begin to believe that failure is the norm for these kids (Floyd, 1997). Research that focuses on single-parent families tend to have common themes linking fatherless households as a contributing factor for many social problems, including: delinquency, school dropout and failure, substance abuse, gang violence, and teenage pregnancies (Amato & Stolba, 1993).

Moreover, children living in single-parent families (particularly those mother-headed) are at a greater risk for negative outcomes than those in two-headed families (Brody & Murry, 1999). Single mothers are more at risk for depression, anxiety, and other mental distress due to the exposure of more stressful life events (Brody & Murray, 1999). The parenting practices of African-American women in particular are adversely affected due to a myriad of economic stress, marital status, and psychological distress of

being a single African-American woman. This, in turn, leads to home environments that are less likely to promote competence in children (Johnson, 1986). The families in this study were deemed at-risk because they are from impoverished homes, as determined from free or reduced lunch, and are single-parent households. In other words, the combination of being poor and living in single-parents households places stress on the children's abilities to succeed (Brody & Murry, 1999).

Often cases of resilience, success, and competence displayed by African-American youth go unnoticed and unrecognized by others (Cunningham et al., 2003). This is why it is important to draw upon the experiences of these successful youth to redirect societal attention on the conditions necessary to facilitate resilient, adaptive responses to adverse living conditions. We must put as much energy into studying the success of these at-risk students, as we do their failures. Many African-American children learn and succeed in school despite living in poverty, with only one parent, and/or falling victim to low teacher expectations. There are many students from impoverished backgrounds that overcome dire circumstances and emerge relatively unscathed by high-risk environments (Floyd, 1997).

A family has been defined as two or more persons who share resources, responsibility for decision-making, share values and goals, and have commitment to one another over time (Olsen, 1996). Regardless of the family type, the family plays a number of important roles in the lives of all people. The family provides food, shelter, clothing, communication, heritage, financial support, affection, rules, survival skills, values and tradition, and education (Olsen, 1996).

It is difficult enough for two-parent families, but single-parent families endure

many more hardships, especially those that lack the resources needed to survive. Lack of income and resources has been noted as being one of the greatest hardships for single-parent families. While single-parent households work to provide for the family, other issues such as health and home maintenance can create hardships for families. These hardships also put children at-risk for poverty and disease. Many factors that identify children as being at-risk include family income at the poverty level, minimal extended family support, poor parental monitoring, uninvolved parenting, unclear family rules and expectations, substance abuse, long work hours, high mobility, and non-nutritious diets (Olsen, 1996). In addition to these factors, many children also are at-risk for more severe temper tantrums, fighting, lying, depression, academic problems, and teen pregnancy.

In the past few decades, many changes to family life have occurred in our country. High rates of teenage and non-marital births, increases in the divorce rate, smaller families, single-parent families, and stepfamilies have reshaped the definition of family. Though families have changed, their functions have remained unchanged. Families still play the part of nurturers, caregivers, role models, and teachers for the next generation of children.

The number of children living in single-parent families is on the rise. Approximately 60% of children in single-parent families are living with a divorced or separated parent. Of these, 33% of the children of these families are living with a parent that was never married. Children that were born in the 1980s and 1990s have a 50% chance of living in a single-parent household before they reach adulthood (Murray et al., 2001). Of significance is the 88% of single-parent households that are headed by mothers (Olsen, 1996). These mothers often have lower incomes than father-only households.

Low income can have a great impact on children of single-parent households. While Olsen reports these statistics in his article, the U.S. Census Bureau is responsible for the collection of some of this information.

The Census has defined the household as all people who live in one housing unit. A household can have many definitions, including: only one family, a group of unrelated individuals, or one person living alone. Most people live in households, whether or not they are married. A family household consists of at least two people, while non-family households consist of non-relatives only or a single-person household. Between the years of 1970 and 1990, approximately 70% of households were married couples. In 1990, the percentage dropped to 55.1% (Olsen, 1996). Most are increasingly more likely to raise children without a partner. One in seven children have been reported as living in a single parent household and residing with a co-habiting couple. Most out-of-wedlock births are to single women in their 20s (teen births are less likely to be married births than in the past, but they still are not the bulk).

In the United States, almost 70% of African-American children are born to single mothers (Hymowitz, 2005). These mothers have a much greater risk than married mothers of being poor. This cycle of poverty is very likely to be passed on to their children as well. In 1970, there were 3 million single mothers. In 2003 this number increased to 10 million. Of these, 3.1% were African-American, 6.4% Caucasian, and 1.8% Hispanic (Lewis, 2005). Furthermore, 37% of African-American single mothers graduated from high school, while 35% of Caucasians graduated. The discrepancy comes with higher education. Approximately 315,000 African-American and 904,000 Caucasian single mothers held a Bachelor's degree or higher (Lewis, 2005).

Approximately 40 years ago, a Moynihan report was released that described the ghetto family as being in disarray. This stemmed from the high number of single-parent families that continued to increase. While Moynihan's position angered many, he claimed that the rise in single-mother families was due to the ghetto culture. Included in his view of ghetto culture were the high rates of delinquency, joblessness, school failure, crime, and "fatherlessness" (Hymowitz, 2005). Moynihan strongly believed that adults shape the behavior of young children. They are responsible for modeling responsible behavior, obeying the law, finishing school, getting good jobs, and avoiding pregnancy at a young age.

Meanwhile, by 1980, nearly 15 years after this report by Moynihan, the number of babies being born to single, African-American mothers more than doubled, to 56% (Hymowitz, 2005). There were many further implications for the high number of these births, as they spurred the ramifications of low-income families. According to Moynihan, of the African-American children born between 1967 and 1969, approximately 72% received Aid to Families with Dependent Children before the age of 18 (Hymowitz, 2005).

Throughout the 1980s inner city and African-American families continued to struggle in the United States. In 1993, an all-time high of 22.7% of children lived in poverty. The number of welfare recipients soared from 2 million families in 1970 to 5 million families by 1995. The number of teen pregnancies also soared. In 1990, 117 pregnancies per 1,000 teenage girls were reported. This was up from 105 girls per 1,000 in 1978 (Hymowitz, 2005).

Research Questions

In this study, the experiences of 13 academically successful African-American middle school boys living in single parent, impoverished homes in an urban school district in the Midwest were explored. In order to examine the experiences that the students offered as contributing to their success in various settings, the answers to the following general question were explored: What experiences do academically successful African-American middle-school boys living in single parent, impoverished homes report as contributing to their academic success?

More specifically, this study sought to find the answers to the following questions: a) What experiences at home do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success? b) What experiences within their peer community do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success? c) What experiences at school do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success?

Setting for the Study

The students interviewed in this study were all from a midsize Midwestern city. The ethnic composition consists of approximately 66% Caucasian, 30% African-American, and the remaining 4% is distributed among other ethnic groups. Educationally, 82% of the residents (25 years and over) are high school graduates. According to the 2000 Census, the median household income is \$35,151; however, 11% of families fall below the poverty level.

While the majority of the city's residents are Caucasian, the racial composition of the school district tells a different story. Currently, 70 % of the students are African-American, 24% are Caucasian, and 6% are designated as other.

One explanation for the discrepancy between the city and school's racial composition is that many Caucasian parents send their children to parochial schools. There were seven parochial schools in the year 2005 in this Midwestern city, but since the closing of two schools, there are now only four open in the year 2008. Approximately 85% of the students that attend parochial schools are Caucasian. The parochial schools are more representative of the community. Another explanation that can be offered is the high number of elderly and ethnic groups in this Midwestern city. There are "pockets" of elderly people from various ethnicities that still live here.

There are many implications for the vast disparity between races in the school. While it may imply racial bias, the disparity could simply be that due to the Catholic or moral beliefs of the parents, they believe their child will receive a different type of education that will better coincide with their beliefs and morals. The students that attend the Catholic schools are also from middle-class families who could afford to pay the tuition. However, as a result of the EdChoice initiative instituted by the State of Ohio, many students are eligible to receive vouchers to attend parochial or private schools if the students' home school is found to be in "academic emergency" or "academic watch." The school district suffered the loss of approximately 1,000 students to charter, parochial, and private schools over the last three years.

Conversely, the parents of public education students may have faith in the public schools and feel they will receive a good education in a more diverse setting.

Furthermore, the parents are not asked to pay tuition, which may be a determining factor for many of the low-income families in the city.

In addition, the political environment of this Midwestern city may influence the selection of schools by the parents. For instance, the city was cited by the State of Ohio for violating the Voting Rights Act in 2007. The city traditionally has had only Caucasians representing the City's Council and Board of Education. A lawsuit was filed, which led to the decision that the wards in the city were not representative of the city's total population. It was decided that the wards be more integrated, creating a more diverse population within each ward.

In the two middle schools that were studied, School A has 80.5% African-American students, 14.3% Caucasian, and 5.2% from other ethnicities. Of the 763 students that attend this school, 472 (61.8%) have submitted and been approved to receive free or reduced school lunches. In regards to parents, 458 students are from single-parent households (60%). There are 401 males and 362 females that attend the school. The percentage of students with disabilities (not including Speech only or 504 Plan students) is 17.1%. The school is located on a heavily traveled boulevard on the far west side of town. The school was built in 1966.

In School B, 78.1% of the students are African-American, 16.3% Caucasian, and 5.6% from other ethnicities. Of the 730 students that attend this school, 461 (63.2%) have submitted and been approved to receive free or reduced school lunches. In regards to parents, 485 are from single-parent homes (60%). There are 387 males and 343 females that attend the school. The percentage of students with disabilities (not including Speech only or 504 Plan students) is 21%.

School B is nestled among many homes in a secluded area in the Midwestern town. The school was built in 1959.

The Board of Education went to its voters in March 2004 and passed a 2.5 mil Permanent Improvement levy. This allowed for the transformation of the middle and high schools and also allowed for the re-opening of two elementary schools. Prior to 2004, the middle schools housed students in grade six through eight. After the reorganization, the schools became home to seventh and eighth grade students, creating more traditional “middle schools.”

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions apply:

Resilience- the notion that some people succeed in the face of adversity.

Academic success- students defined as having good attendance (90% attendance in a school year), maintaining a 3.0 grade point average or above, passing the fifth or sixth grade Reading and Math state-mandated tests, and having been suspended less than 3 times from school.

Impoverished- Students identified as receiving, or having received free or reduced school lunches.

Protective factors- traits, people, etc. that help foster positive outcomes for students that are at-risk.

At-risk- students identified as receiving low grades, having poor attendance in school, having been suspended more than three times, having low SES status, and living in single-parent (mother-headed) families.

Household- all people who live in one housing unit.

Family- two or more persons who share resources, responsibility for decision-making, values and goals, and have commitment to one another over time (Olsen, 1996).

504 Plan-A 504 plan is a legal document falling under the provisions of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. It is designed to plan a program of instructional services to assist students with special needs who are in a regular education setting. A 504 plan is not an Individualized Education Program (IEP) as is required for special education students.

CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Resiliency

Many social scientists, politicians, and the media tend to paint a bleak picture for youth living in predominantly black urban settings in this country (Steward et al., 1998). The concept of resilience is useful for studying the education of minority groups, for minorities have been identified as a population that has been a primary focus of research (Gayles, 2005).

While at-risk African-American youths may be the focus of attention for researchers, there are many African-American youths disproving the theory that poverty leads to failure, by achieving academic success. Resiliency, coupled with various other characteristics deserves the credit for producing academically successful students. Resilience helps students endure challenges and cycles of failure. According to Goldstein and Huff (1993), research has demonstrated that children can be taught to use skills to overcome dysfunction in their home and other adversities.

Resilience is mutually determined by environmental and individual factors and is context specific. This means that both environmental and individual factors and

differences in responding to environmental stressors influence individuals who successfully adapt to adverse circumstances (Maton et al., 1999). Resilience is not necessarily continuous over time, but is instead interspersed with setbacks under certain circumstances (Luthar, 1991).

A lack of resilience can contribute to early aggressive behavior. Recent literature suggests that the development of resilience in children is crucial to minimizing long-term delinquency and maximizing growth into responsible adulthood (Allen et al., 2006). Self-regulation (a child's ability to control his/her attention, emotions, and behavior) has also been linked to concepts of resilience and control, which also leads to success into adulthood (Baldwin, Baldwin, & Cole, 1990).

Children that do not exhibit resilience are more vulnerable to engage in problem behavior and are exposed to more negative influences. They also tend to have low sense of self (Jessor et al., 1995). Many characteristics are associated with non-resilient, disruptive behaviors. Some of them include peer rejection, poor academic functioning, poor school adjustment, inattention, impulsivity and poor social skills. Students who display these characteristics are more apt to act out than peers that do not exhibit this behavior (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990).

Parenting and Role Models

Parent involvement in a child's education has been proven to have a positive impact on student achievement and behavior (Epstein, 1996). Students of parents who provide structure and supervision during non-school hours are more likely to succeed in school, academically and behaviorally (Deslandes & Royer, 1997). Parents that monitor homework positively impact academic functioning of these students. In addition, when

parents living in poverty have firm, consistent rules and discipline and parental monitoring, their children are less likely to engage in misbehavior, which is a often a characteristic of children that live in high-risk environments (Garmezy, 1985).

Rutter (1987) noted that having loving, positive relationships with adults and exhibiting success in school, with friends, and in sports increases the likelihood that children will develop a strong sense of self. Parents can contribute to a positive sense of self for their children. Providing children with less cluttered, less crowded, and cleaner homes can help children to become academically successful students. Children that are exposed to substance abuse, poverty, mental illness, and violence are less able to access resilient traits (Weissman et al., 1999).

Children that are attached to at least one significant adult increase their chances of exhibiting resilience. Social support has been proven to help children deal with life stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Social support is defined as the range of significant interpersonal relationships that facilitate psychological and social functioning (Caplan, 1974). The number of sources of support, coupled with the functioning of each is identified as two key factors for social support. Ladd (1990) suggests that the degree of support that the students receive from parents, teachers, and classmates can be related to the way children adapt to the challenges of school and become comfortable and successful in the new school environment.

However, oftentimes the adults that are in these youths' lives are often subject to financial hardships, which may deter them from providing certain types of support. Nevertheless, for many resilient youths, the roles of the parent and child are clearly defined. Though economic deprivation may be problematic, concern and involvement by

parents can still be present in a child's school activities. This helps foster cohesion and organization influenced by time and environment, protection from risks, clarity, vigilance and warmth (Myers & Taylor, 1998).

In a study conducted by Morrison, Robertson, and Harding (1998), they identified parent supervision as the most important factor contributing to resilience in children. The necessity of involving parents in the educational needs of the students is paramount. In addition to the family's rules, resilient children and high achievers often conform to school rules and practices in order to achieve success.

There are a number of characteristics associated with resilience that high-achieving students demonstrate other than compliance. The literature is consistent in identifying traits that resilient students possess. Students that exhibit academic success usually have positive personal relationships, are actively engaged in the community and school, exhibit wellness, superior conduct, the ability to solve problems, and have a sense of purpose (Brown et al., 2006). Other explanations that have been offered as explaining resilience in these students include: a supportive, nurturing family and home environment, positive interactions and involvement with committed, concerned educators and other adults, and the development of two key personality traits—perseverance and optimism (Floyd, 1996). Furthermore, Floyd (1996) discusses the importance of getting along with others, pursuing goals, believing in the eventuality of one's efforts paying off, and the presence of a strong sense of trust and respect for oneself and others.

While all of the above traits and characteristics are important, one stands out in the literature as being consistent throughout the studies conducted by researchers. One of the most widely reported predictors of resilience is the presence of a positive or close

relationship with either a caring adult and/or parental figure. This relationship correlates to that of positive outcomes for children facing life stresses (Kenny et al., 2002).

Oftentimes children grow up without role models. Many children are subjected to the lack of love, guidance, or concern from a parent. Children need people to look up to, to serve as role models worthy of respect and admiration (Brown et al., 2006). Doing one's best and overcoming extraordinary obstacles is not defined by color, gender, or position in life. Rather, ordinary people can be role models, setting positive examples for all (2006).

Protective Factors

The lack of role models in children's lives could contribute to the need for protective factors. Protective factors are defined as traits, people, etc. that help foster positive outcomes for students that are at-risk (Brown et al., 1996). These factors may include personal or social control (e.g., religious beliefs, parental monitoring), involvement in extracurricular activities (e.g., church), and commitment to conventional institutions (Murray & Brody, 1999). They may have a direct impact on child development outcomes, which may serve as a protector from risk, or at the very least, may act as a buffer between risk and developmental outcomes (Murray & Brody, 1999).

Some of the protective factors found in resilient children include: coping efforts, warm supportive social environments, high self esteem and self control, internal locus of control, and the presence of educational and occupational opportunities (Brown et al., 2006). Other protective factors have been identified by Colbert et al. (2005), which include supportive adults, positive peer relationships, enrollment in honors classes,

participation in extracurricular activities, a strong sense of self-confidence, and effective coping skills for dealing with negative aspects of home and school (Colbert et al., 2005).

Richman and Bowen (1997) created a framework to help provide protective conditions for at-risk students. They include stability, load balance, and participation. Stability refers to the presence of close, stable, and caring relationships with individuals such as parents, friends and teachers. Load balance refers to the link between environmental demands and capabilities of the student. Participation refers to the function of providing chances for meaningful participation in family, school, and community environments (Richman & Bowen, 1997).

Brown et al. (2006) states that research on risk and resilience identify student traits, family, social and environmental circumstances as buffering a child from risk and serving as targets for strength based intervention. These protective factors found in children that experience risk, distinguish students who are likely to have positive outcomes from those that are negatively affected.

Jonathan Gayles (2005) conducted a study of three high school students from the least affluent high school in Florida. His research involved finding the reasons as to why some African-American students exhibit resilience despite living in dismal environments. Two themes emerged regarding resilient youth. First, the successful youths were confident that their academic achievement would enable them to “level the playing field” with others in society. Secondly, home and community reference points were not perceived as burdensome. Rather, the fact that they “started off with nothing” made them want to break out of their current class status. These students made a connection between the importance of getting good grades and reaping the benefits later. These students were

also able to separate their achievement from their social status and experienced no negative social consequences. They believed this would help to transform their futures (2005).

In a similar study, Floyd (1996) spoke with twenty African-American impoverished high school students from California that exhibited resilience. The students used internal and external forces to develop resilience. Three protective mechanisms were found in these students: 1) they all came from supportive, nurturing families, 2) they were all involved with concerned educators and adults, and 3) they all possessed perseverance and optimism (Floyd, 1996).

Adolescence

In a child's early years, he/she is dependent on adults to act as the caretakers. The quality of attachment may serve to be a more critical protective factor in early childhood rather than through the adolescent years. However, during adolescence, the importance of support and guidance by a parent cannot be overlooked. It is important for adolescents to have secure parental attachments to help provide a source of comfort and safety during this difficult time of life changes (Kenny et al., 2002). The attainment of resiliency skills in adolescence is directly tied to the ability of these young adults to navigate the transition to successful adulthood (Allen et al., 2006).

Even when children have a sound support system at home, adolescence presents itself as a confusing and vulnerable time period for these young adults. These young adults are undergoing many physical changes, along with social changes, issues dealing with sexuality, peers, and the quest for independence (Cunningham et al., 2003).

Many of the attitudes about school develop in the preschool years, reveal themselves as children enter school, and resurface through the adolescent years. As students enter middle school, they are faced with many difficult decisions (Fear et al., 1998).

Contrary to well-established teens, impoverished urban African-American boys must deal with the stresses of being adolescents, plus many other stressors such as economic disadvantage, racism, lack of a good education, violence, and high death rates. By living in urban settings, these boys must face typical developmental challenges in addition to those needed to sustain the daily experiences that many would perceive as hopeless (Fear et al., 1998).

All of these factors can promote a sense of helplessness for these young adults. The feeling of being “stuck” in less than desirable circumstances can exasperate these youth and steer them down the same path that continues to perpetuate itself. The negative expectations are understandable, as they stem from limited social, economic, and educational opportunities (Maton et al., 1999). Many then fall prey to the negative influences found in their environments, as well as the media. These adolescent boys are at high risk for behavioral, academic, and emotional failure (Fear et al., 1998).

Urban adolescents living in poverty are forced to survive and develop in conditions that surround them with drug abuse, high unemployment rates, high percentages of teenage pregnancies, poor health care, and violence (Fear et al., 1998). These are the things that urban youths must overcome to gain momentum and resilience to fight these external factors that could easily deter them from experiencing success.

Those that gain the momentum or exhibit resilience, generally end up succeeding because despite the destitute conditions. They are using their academic achievement to change their position by consciously responding to a critical awareness of societal inequality, their positioning within this social hierarchy, and a sense of futility (Gayles, 2005).

Overcoming stereotypes and stigmas is also a crucial part of becoming successful for impoverished African-American boys. Many societal stereotypes are placed on these young adults; many of which focus on their inability to experience academic success. Those that are unable to negotiate these stereotypes, typically end up suffering negative consequences, for they buy into the beliefs and accept their status as minorities or inability to “fit” with mainstream society (Bybee et al., 2001). Those that exhibit resilience are able to de-emphasize race as a way to manage conflicts and succeed in school. They believe that they can subtract some of the negative effects of stereotypes on their performance (Bybee et al., 2001). Adolescents must possess a positive sense of shared social identity with others and their own group in order to overcome stereotypes (2001).

Socio-economics and Poverty

Living in poverty only creates more problems for adolescents. African-American children living in inner cities reside in social contexts with depleted resources. These communities often offer less than desirable housing conditions, which causes an increase in health problems. The literature clearly indicates that these factors limit the ability of families to prepare their children to function successfully in society (Colbert et al., 2005). In addition to poor housing conditions and lack of nutrition, there are many other risk

factors that characterize low-income families, including parental occupation, parents' educational levels, large family size, and absence of one parent (Luthar, 1991).

Historically, children that live in poverty are disproportionately at risk for academic failure. Furthermore, schools of at-risk students continue to deliver messages filled with low academic expectations, provide students with inadequate resources, and exhibit a disconnect between values socialized in context of low-income and minority families and those in mainstream classes.

This supports the notion that according to the research, these students should not succeed. Yet, many African-American adolescent students living in poverty do in fact succeed. Some studies have been conducted to show the differences between high and low achieving students from similar backgrounds.

Fear et al. (1998) suggest that not all adolescents within urban communities share the same experiences. The students that succeeded exhibited a positive, rather than a negative outlook, which helped these students develop a healthy, positive psychological well being. These youths were able to deal with problems more effectively by having a good sense of humor, talking to their parents or siblings about what bothers them, and going along with parents' requests. The adolescents that exhibited a negative outlook engaged more in sleeping, watching TV, using prescription drugs, and playing video games. They were least engaged in humor, problem solving, remaining optimistic, and making their own decisions (1998).

The Achievement Gap

African-American middle school boys that exhibit negative outlooks often end up continuing a cycle of dead ends down various educational and vocational paths. This leads to the discrepancy between African-American and Caucasian students.

Since the Brown vs. Board of Education decision was reached over fifty years ago, a way to educate students and to close the achievement gap has yet to be discovered. Much attention has been given to why students *aren't* achieving, as opposed to why impoverished African-American boys *are* learning. In both national and sub-national samples, a large gap between African-American and Caucasian students is evident in school readiness scores by age five when students enter kindergarten (Ferguson, 2001). The gap that kindergarten students start with only grows larger as the students continue throughout their elementary school years.

By fourth grade, nearly sixty-six percent of African-American students are reading below the basic level of achievement, whereas only twenty-five percent of their Caucasian counterparts are below grade level (Haycock & Jerald, 2002). The gap continues to grow and the ripple effect continues as the students enter high school and beyond.

The achievement gap exists in a variety of urban districts, which are plagued with complex societal issues. Three of these issues offered by researchers which have been defined as posing problems for closing the gap include: demographics, accountability, and diversity. These problems not only manifest themselves in the inner-ring suburbs of large cities, but they are also problems that exist nation-wide. While many African-American students are not achieving at the same level as their Caucasian counterparts,

there are many African-American students that are achieving despite the complex societal issues they face.

Stigmas, stereotypes, family backgrounds, attitudes, perceptions, behaviors--all of these factors that affect African-American students may be reasons for the perpetuation of the achievement gap. But they also may be reasons why students achieve. Many explanations have been offered and the effects of effort, social class, parent education level, social pressures, and Honors enrollments are all pieces of the puzzle.

The first important area that is worthy of exploration in explaining the achievement gap is demographics. The various family dynamics, which include differences in ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and family and community resources, all play important roles in the disparities in educational attainment. The census data from the 1990s showed that the United States outnumbered the rest of the industrialized world in the number of children who live in poverty (Williams, 1996).

It is no surprise that families who live in poverty are less able to afford good health care or provide nutritious food and enriching cultural and educational experiences for their children. They are also unable to provide their children with access to computers and other learning devices that would stimulate and improve their learning.

Many of the urban schools draw students from neighborhoods that are plagued with crime, drugs, poverty, and an array of social problems. The more a school draws from such neighborhoods, the worse the students will perform academically (Bainbridge & Lasley, 1996).

Families have a great influence on the success of students. Though much of what a student learns occurs in schools, significant learning also occurs outside of schools.

Many poor and minority students come to school already behind their classmates. Many of these students have been forced to deal with problems such as inadequate health care, nutrition, and housing, all of which make poor and minority students' lives so difficult. The conditions for learning in schools are greatly impacted by the family, environmental factors, and the elements of the community. It has been noted for years that the best predictor of a student's academic success is the education level of the parents, particularly that of the mother (Bainbridge & Lasley, 1996).

The second area used to help explain the achievement gap is student accountability. Accountability lies in the hands of several important key players. Many educators, articles, books, and community members would agree that parental involvement in children's schooling is a key factor in determining success. Researchers agree that children perform better in schools when their parents are well educated, and that these parents tend to be more involved with school-related tasks such as homework (Ferguson, 2001).

The third area used to help explain the perpetuation of the achievement gap is diversity. Recently, the diversity in cultural backgrounds and traditions in America's schools has grown drastically. Today's world requires educators, and people in general, to have a heightened sensitivity to the needs of the diverse groups of people that they encounter. Sensitivity to students with various backgrounds is crucial to the success and effectiveness of school leaders and teachers. When educators let their personal biases and stereotypes take over, emotions hinder the students' abilities to achieve at their highest potential. Educators must embrace differences in students and look at race and beyond it.

It is of great importance for teachers to understand cultural differences, diverse backgrounds, and learning styles of students. Though some may argue that teachers are not to blame for the achievement gap, others would disagree. The study of the achievement gap also highlights the study of human development and learning, for it delves into *how* students learn and *what works best* for individual students.

The school can also take the time to have a better understanding of the students they serve. The final component for success in schools is displaying certain sensitivity to various differences in students. Understanding the correlation between family education, poverty levels, race, and achievement can help educational leaders establish equitable and fair plans for distributing resources to schools and districts that need it the most.

Ferguson (2001) addresses the importance that the fit between home and school environments plays in determining the success of students. The fit between the two environments also helps address student diversity. Most of what the fit has to do with is the relationships that are formed between teacher and student. Those teachers that take the time to understand the learning styles of their students, use appropriate instructional strategies, and who attempt to make learning more culturally relevant will help close the achievement gap and help students take a strong interest in their learning.

Many more variables help explain the achievement gap other than demographics, accountability and diversity. The paragraphs ahead tell about stereotypes, peer pressure, perceptions, and relationships.

In studies conducted by Ferguson (2001), many students discussed the peer pressure that goes along with school success. Some students shared that they were embarrassed to ask teachers for help, for fear that others would notice. Therefore,

students would rather pretend to do the work, or simply act out. The inability to complete tasks often leads to student frustration and anger. Ogbu (1998) and Ferguson each share their own theory on peer pressure and the impact it has on students. Ferguson (2001) states that African-American boys are more likely than Caucasian students to tease their classmates for making mistakes. Ogbu (1998) has found that high achieving African-American students (particularly boys) are often accused of “acting white.” The students that were interviewed in one study (Barnes et al., 2004), claimed that they feared being labeled as “acting white” if they attempted to improve their classroom performance. Resilient students often surround themselves with positive peers, which may help alleviate the stereotypes and social pressures that underachieving students face.

Contrary to the low-achieving African-American students that perpetuate the gap, successful youths often have some factors working for them. While the demographics might not act in their favor, impoverished youths of single parents that exhibit resilience often surround themselves with positive people—either peers or adults. In addition, they also take responsibility for their learning. Oftentimes, resilient youths will find a way to negotiate their differences in society and promote diversity with peers and other cultures.

While it is important to have positive influences in the lives of these students, it cannot be overlooked that the family has been greatly impacted by the changes in society. Changes in economic opportunities, environment, society, and political agendas have all affected the dynamics of the family structure. Parenting and family structures differ from generations past. For example, more two-parent families are in the work force than a generation ago. More children are living with one parent, and people who remarry create a large number of stepfamily relationships. More mothers are working outside the home

than ever before according to Olsen (1996).

The Study

In this study, the experiences of 13 academically successful African-American middle school boys living in single parent, impoverished homes in an urban school district in the Midwest were explored. Through interviews, the stories of these students unfolded and helped describe the factors contributing to their academic success. The answers to the following question were explored: What experiences do academically successful African-American middle-school boys living in single parent, impoverished homes report as contributing to their academic success?

More specifically, this study explored the experiences of the students by answering the following research questions: a) What experiences at home do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success? b) What experiences within their peer community do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success? c) What experiences at school do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Resilient children are said to be those that beat the odds or bounce back under adverse circumstances. But how does this ability to overcome adversity develop and manifest in oneself to not only “get by,” but also exceed any academic expectations?

This study sought to explore the general research question: What experiences do academically successful African-American middle-school boys living in single parent, impoverished homes report as contributing to their academic success?

More specifically, this study explored the experiences of the students by addressing the following research questions:

- a) What experiences at home do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success?
- b) What experiences within their peer community do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success?
- c) What experiences at school do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success?

Researcher's Perspective

I grew up in a predominantly Caucasian Midwestern, middle-class city. I have a Master's Degree in School Administration and am currently pursuing a Doctorate Degree in Urban Administration. I have spent twelve years in public education as both a teacher and administrator. I have had experience as a child in both parochial and public school systems. Not only am I an educator in an urban district, but I have also conducted research in the same district in which I work.

Conducting research in the school district in which I am a principal may have caused some biases that may have influenced the results of my study. Though I did not utilize my own school, I introduced myself to the students as a principal, which may have had some impact as to how the students responded to my questions.

Secondly, while working in an urban district that is plagued with transience, low parental involvement, low achievement, and low socio-economic households, I have viewed these students that come from these homes as having a much more difficult time than their two-parent, middle-class peers. However, prior to the research I suspected that many of the aspects at home, at school, and in their peer community would have a positive impact on the students. While some of the experiences may be different than those of their peers from two-parent, middle-class homes, I surmised that some of the motivating factors and influences may be the same.

Sometimes it is hard to escape the obstacles that our students face. I have some convictions about holding parents and their students accountable for their learning. Though I tried to keep my personal views separate from my research by remaining

neutral in my questions and comments, it is possible that some of my views may have biased or influenced my results to some extent.

As the stories unfolded, I looked to bring them to life. I was mindful of the fact that I am a Caucasian researcher interested in identities of those different from myself. I monitored my positionality and viewpoints in relation to understanding and relaying the accounts of the participants' stories through the research.

Research Design

Grounded theory is a qualitative approach that was used to generate a theory from observation and interviews. Grounded theory was formulated and developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The goal of grounded theory research is to construct theories in order to understand phenomena (Haig, 1995). I served as the primary instrument of data collection. It is a straightforward methodology that is comprehensive and highly structured that allows for flexibility. Grounded theory is discovered, developed, and verified through data collection and analysis pertaining to the phenomenon (Pandit, 1996). In grounded theory, I did not start with a theory then explore it, rather, I began with an area of study and the relevancy to my area of research emerged (1996). I did not know in advance what would be found during the investigation; rather the theory emerged from, and was, "grounded" in the data.

Grounded theory works in accordance with the basic analysis procedure of constant comparison, which includes a combination of systematic coding, data analysis, and theoretical sampling procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This allowed me to make sense of the data at a higher level. Constant comparison acts as the nucleus of the process, as I was able to compare interviews and similarities and differences across cases (Strauss

& Corbin, 1990). The domains and categories were drawn from the participants' themselves and tended to focus on making hidden belief systems clear. As a result, theories began to emerge quickly. The intent was to inter-relate the data collection and analysis, so as not to block any theories that may have emerged from preconceived problems or literature reviews (Merriam et al., 2002). Finally, the experiences and stories that were told were shared with the participants.

Participants

Four criteria were employed in selecting the 13 (4-sixth, 2-seventh and 7-eighth grade) students from mid-sized schools in the Midwestern city. The demographic questionnaires revealed that the students ranged in age from eleven to fifteen. The mean age of the students was 13.2 with a standard deviation of 1.05.

The students were all: 1) African-American boys between the ages of 11 and 15, 2) from single parent homes, 3) academically successful (defined as having at least 90% attendance, at least a 3.0 grade point average, passing scores on the fifth or sixth grade Reading and Math state-mandated tests, and receiving less than three suspensions from school), and 4) from impoverished homes (students identified as receiving, or having received free or reduced lunch). It should be noted that it is difficult to define "family" in an urban area, as there are many variations of what families may consist of or "look like."

Of the thirteen students, six students reported living with a stepfather or with a mother's boyfriend. Ten of the students reported living with siblings. The number of people living in the students' homes ranged from two to seven. Nine of the students reported their moms as having at least some post-secondary education. The majority of

the students lived in apartments or rented duplex or single-family homes, while four of the students reported that their families own homes.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to assess the participants' ages, races, and family structures (e.g., number of siblings, living in a home or apartment, mother's educational level). I sat with the students and answered any questions they had while filling out the questionnaire. This questionnaire is available in Appendix B.

Semi-structured interview

The interview questions were open-ended and encouraged participants to offer interpretations of their experiences. The stories revealed a sense of who the participants were. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to examine the experiences of academically successful African-American middle-school boys living in single parent, impoverished homes. I examined the students' self-reported experiences at home, in their peer community, and at school and how they believed each one contributed to their academic success. The behaviors, attitudes, and skills were also explored as to what role each one plays in the lives of these students.

For the purpose of this study, *academically successful* students were defined as: having good attendance (90% attendance in a school year), maintaining a 3.0 grade point average or above, passing the fifth or sixth grade Reading and Math state-mandated tests, and receiving less than three suspensions from school. Students identified as living in *impoverished homes* were defined as students that receive, or have received free or reduced lunches.

The interviews began by directly and informally acknowledging that the students receive good grades. I followed the acknowledgement by asking the participants to talk about why they thought they get good grades and to talk about the people that may influence or deter them from obtaining good grades.

Next, the participants were asked to describe their experiences at home and how their parents and family members contribute to their academic success. The participants were also asked similar questions pertaining to both school and their peer community and how friends, classmates, and teachers contributed to them getting good grades. Questions pertaining directly to friends were asked to learn more about the students' perceptions of the impact that their friends have on their learning.

Procedures

Recruiting and interviewing of participants

Prior to beginning the aforementioned research, an application was made to the Institutional Review Board of Cleveland State University. A purposeful sampling was used, as I asked the teachers, counselors, and Assistant Principals at the Midwestern middle schools to collaborate in order to find students that fit the description of “academically successful” students. Once the staff identified the students I hand-delivered the letters to them. I had an opportunity to meet all the boys and found each one to be unique. The letter that I handed them explained the purpose of the study, as well as, a thorough explanation of confidentiality and volunteerism. Those that agreed to participate were provided with informed consent forms which they were asked to sign (Appendix A). The students returned the signed forms to their principal, who in turn, delivered them to me.

The students were interviewed at their schools. The interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes in length. The participants' responses were audiotaped and field notes were taken. The field notes were used to record impressions and to help interpret the data. Furthermore, the field notes were gathered from the interviews and demographic questionnaires and were intertwined throughout the analysis to enrich the study and findings.

Transcription of Interviews

Once the interviews were completed and the audiotape reviewed, the data were transcribed and checked for accuracy against the audiotape. The use of audiotape and field notes helped ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data. The information from the transcripts was shared with the participants and found to be accurate, as reported by the students.

Data Analysis

While analyzing the data and keeping in mind prior research regarding characteristics of resilience (Floyd, 1996, Brown et al., 2006, and Colbert et al. 2005), general domains were uncovered. The domains that were identified included: 1) strategies for success, 2) future orientation, 3) motivating factors, 4) homework, 5) access to resources in the home and community, and 6) relationship with mother. A number of categories were also identified. Both the domains and categories pertained to the students' experiences at home, in school, and within their peer community. There were some similarities between prior research and the research conducted in this study. Some similarities in regards to resiliency included: students living in supportive home environments, positive interactions with adults, getting along with others, pursuing goals,

and the students' ability to recognize the eventuality of one's efforts paying off. While the domains identified in this study were similar to characteristics previously mentioned in the literature, there were marked differences between my study and previously stated characteristics of resiliency. More specifically, the differences in the identified categories pertained specifically to the role of mothers, the importance of homework, and motivating factors.

Open coding was used for the purpose of labeling the categories and domains that emerged in regard to the students' perceptions of influential experiences that related to their academic success. Domains, or main conceptual elements, through which all categories were connected, were identified (Strauss, 1987).

In grounded theory, after coding much of the text, some new categories surfaced, while others fit into previously defined categories that were based on previous research. Through open coding I was able to identify, categorize, and describe the phenomena found in the text. Furthermore, I looked to find the relationships between the categories, and for propositions that involved conceptual relationships (Pandit, 1996).

Open coding is often referred to as a comparative method, which involves asking questions and then making comparisons. Subsequently, the data are compared with similar answers and grouped and labeled together (Pandit, 1996). Open coding allowed me to see the direction in which to take the study by theoretical sampling before I became selective and focused on a problem. The data were broken down analytically and new insights were formed. Events and actions were compared and similarities and differences were sought. Main conceptual elements were formed and categories were created.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The data were coded and put into six domains, or main conceptual areas. The general domains that emerged in this study included: 1) strategies for success, 2) future orientation, 3) motivating factors, 4) homework, 5) access to resources in the home and community and 6) relationship with mother. Within the six domains, categories were formed that reflected the students' responses to the interview questions. The domains, categories, and number of cases are represented in Table 1.

Strategies for Success

Within the *strategies for success* domain there were many areas that were addressed. First off, a discussion involving paying attention in class and focusing on one's education were common themes for the students who attributed these actions to their academic success. The students' conscientiousness regarding their school work and grades was also evident. The students reported they were concerned about obtaining good grades. They also described ways in which they took responsibility for receiving poor grades. In addition, the students also saw making mistakes as a means for future learning.

Table 1

Research Results Summary

<i>Domains and categories</i>	<i>Number of cases</i>
Strategies for Success	
Focus	4
Conscientiousness	3
Avoidance of Distractions and Negative Influences	9
Self-Correction	4
Academic self-efficacy	3
Future Orientation	
Career	5
Money	6
College	6
Motivating Factors	
Positive Reinforcement and Recognition	13
Encouragement and Support	8
Pride and Confidence in Student's Abilities	6
Peer Support	5
Homework	
Context	8
Time Management	3
Helping siblings	2
Help-seeking	5

Self-reliant	6
Access to Resources in the Home and Community	
Computer	12
Books	13
Community/Neighborhood Relationships	3
Relationship with Mother	
Son's pride and Admiration of Mother	13
Communication	8
Involvement	2
Influence	2

The students mentioned another successful strategy for success which pertained to their ability to avoid distractions and negative influences. The students in this study reported that they were able to focus on their work while ignoring distractions from both peers and siblings.

The students were aware that they possessed a number of skills that kept them focused and “out of trouble.” They were confident in their abilities and had a strong sense of self-efficacy. Five categories emerged within this domain: focus, conscientiousness, avoidance of distractions and negative influences, self-correction, and academic self-efficacy. These categories are described next.

Focus

The first category, focus, pertained to students maintaining, listening, paying attention, and getting good grades on tests. The students attributed part of their success to having the ability to listen to their teachers and pay attention in class. One eighth grade student described why he thought he received good grades,

I think I get good grades because I try my best to focus on my work in school and try to complete homework assignments and stuff like that. Participant #2

In this statement, it was evident that this student made a connection between his good grades and his ability to focus on his work. In this next quote, an eighth grade student talked about school as being his job and how he took his education very seriously. In having this perception, he realized the importance of making the most of his educational experience as he said,

Well, in school I realize that school is like my job. The pay is education. School is like to me, it's fun, but it's like a job. Play is for later. I always never figure it as a time to waste or play. Participant #5

While Participant #5 saw the seriousness in learning, another eighth grade student attributed his attentiveness to his school work and compliance with his teacher's directives and instruction as contributing to his success,

I just think I get such good grades because I follow directions and focus on my work and I listen to what every teacher tells me to do.
Participant #13

While the students responses varied, they all contained essential items for academic success. The students were focused, attentive, serious about learning, good listeners, and responsible. The students recognized that their priority at this point in their lives was to focus on school, or as one student put it, "his job."

Conscientiousness

The second category, conscientiousness, told of the students taking responsibility for their successes, as well as their failures. The students maintained that it was up to them to earn their grades. Three students took responsibility for their actions and poor performance. They stated that if they did something poorly they felt remorseful and also reflected on the reasons as to why they did not perform well. One eighth student talked about his role in taking ownership over the learning process. He stated,

...like I take learning into my own hands out of school... like I can learn something out of school. Participant #11

It was apparent that this student knew that if he took ownership over his learning that he could take something of value away from his school experience. When exhibiting a strong sense of conscientiousness over one's school work, it is possible that disappointment may come when a poor grade is received or a bad educational experience takes place. When asked how it made him feel when he received a bad grade, this sixth

grade student responded by saying,

Kinda makes me feel bad, like I didn't do my part in trying to make this school a better place by raising the grade average. Like, all the grades I get are my responsibility. If I get a B it's because I didn't do something right. If I get an A it's because I been doing my work.
Participant #3

In this student's response, the responsibility for the grades that he received fell on his shoulders. He did not place the blame on others; rather he recognized that his grades were directly related to his actions. He also felt a sense of loyalty to his school, as he made reference to it when talking about "doing his part" to make the school a better place.

It was interesting to learn that one student felt that in receiving a 'B', he received a "poor grade." Furthermore, he felt as though the only way he was "doing his work" was if he received an 'A'. While the two students' quotes were very different, they both expressed a sense of conscientiousness about school and getting good grades. They understood that it was their responsibility to obtain good grades through hard work.

Avoidance of Distractions and Negative Influences

The avoidance of distractions and negative influences category has been defined as a student having the ability and motivation to monitor and control one's learning. In this study, the students' experiences ranged from ignoring annoying siblings to avoiding distractions from peers.

One of the sixth grade students I spoke with reported that he had a great ability to avoid distractions and negative influences that came his way. He talked about his sibling that would often bother him and how he handled distractions,

There's my sister. She's like always bothering me, which really ticks me off and so I try to do my work away from her because

she's always bothering me. Then if she's bothering me way too much whenever I move somewhere then I just stop what I'm doing because I need to take a break anyway. Participant #3

It was evident that this student's sister was viewed as a distraction to him; however, he found a way to avoid the distraction, as he knew it was time to take a break from his work and sister. While siblings can often serve as a distraction, peers can have the same effect on students.

In a conversation with one eighth grade student regarding the distractions that can be caused by peers, he spoke of the ways in which he handled these distractions,

...sometimes with arguments and I told them how I felt and I wasn't interested and ignoring it basically and journal writing. I heard that was a way to release anger so I started journal writing. I talked about my days and how did I feel about my days and stuff like that. Participant #2

This student chose to voice his frustrations and anger through journal writing. Not only did this student have the ability to avoid the problems that may have surfaced with his friends, but he also found an outlet that worked for him.

Nine of the students reported that they often ignored or avoided distractions and negative influences. While Participant #2 used journal writing as a means for handling distractions, another eighth grade student shared how he handled negative peer influences as he said,

I try to ignore it the best way... like if it's negativity, I always was taught if you see a problem or any negative activity you leave the best way you can because you never know how it's going to turn out. That's what my mom taught me because she said it could get you in a lot of trouble. Participant #5

This student obviously had the skills to ignore negative behaviors and had the insight to predict the future consequences of behavior.

While peers can have a negative impact on the students, one eighth grade student was clear that he was not going to give in to peer pressure, as he stated,

They (friends) don't really get me that distracted because I'm a part of like, I like having fun, but they don't have like peer pressure. Like I have my own mind and if I don't want to do it, I don't do it.

Participant #11

This student exhibited a strong sense of self as he shared that he was not going to make poor choices just to go along with others, but instead chose to make his own decisions.

This eighth grade student that spoke about "drama" with his friends, also talked about how he managed to focus on his school rather than social issues. He shared,

Sometimes like last year there was a couple of people, but this year I choose to focus on my work other than other problems outside of school. Some of the things were like girls liking me and like want relationships and stuff like that and I didn't want none of that and and drama, drama basically. Participant #2

It was obvious what could have distracted this student, but when asked what "got in their way of learning" and how the students handled the distractions, the students' responses varied. One student talked about an annoying sibling that he would have to physically avoid by relocating or taking a break to finish his work. Other students spoke about their peers that would try to distract them or change their focus.

Generally, the students ignored the negative influences around them. Some of them did this by simply ignoring the situation and not giving into "peer pressure," while others admitted to arguing with peers. One student used journal writing to express his feelings and to deal with his frustration of others getting in his way. The same student spoke of avoiding girls and relationships in order to stay focused on his school work.

In all of these previously mentioned instances, the bottom line remained the

same--the students remained focused on their work by avoiding distractions and potential negative influences.

Self-Correction

The self-correction category dealt with the students' ability to recognize their mistakes and correct them. The students not only corrected their mistakes, but also made efforts to learn from them. They viewed making mistakes as being a positive, rather than a negative occurrence. When asked about how he felt when he made a mistake, one sixth grade student talked about making a mistake and then working to correct it. He also recognized the importance of not only fixing a mistake, but learning from it as well,

Well, if I get a B I'm asking myself why did I get a B, not an A?
So, I try to figure out what I did wrong to correct so I don't mess
up the next time. Making mistakes are actually good so you can
learn from your mistakes to get it right the next time. Participant #3

When asked the same question, another eighth grade student shared a similar response,

Well, I try to fix whatever I did wrong or try to get help. I feel I get
upset a little bit but instead of getting upset, I try to figure out what I
did wrong and get help. Participant #5

For this student it was important that he not get upset about making a mistake, but rather seek help to solve the problem.

The students' responses were similar in the sense that the students knew it was important to figure out what they did wrong in order to learn from their mistakes, so as not to repeat the same mistake in the future. Furthermore, one student recognized that if he made a mistake and couldn't figure it out, he could simply ask for help.

Academic Self-Efficacy

The final category academic self-efficacy, concerned the students' self-awareness of their abilities. The students were not only aware of their abilities, but also recognized

the perceptions of others regarding their intelligence. Simply put, the students had confidence in their abilities. When one eighth grade student was asked how he felt when he did well in school, he exclaimed, “I feel superior!” Participant #9 Another eighth grade student was asked the same question and he responded by saying,

The feeling, I like the feeling of getting good grades because most people they stress out about whether they’re going to pass or not, but I don’t stress out because I know I’m going to pass. Participant #13

This student was confident in his abilities to “pass.” Similarly, another eighth grade student shared that he was a good student and had been told that by others. He said,

Well, I know all of my teachers have always told me I’m a good student so I already know they know I’m a good student and they always give me compliments, so I know I’m good. Participant #11

It was quite apparent from the students’ responses that they were confident in their abilities. They were proud of their accomplishments and enjoyed receiving good grades or doing well in school. For one student, the possibility of experiencing stress wasn’t an issue, for he knew he did well in school and didn’t have to worry about passing, a concern for some of his peers.

It was evident that these academically successful students possessed a number of strategies that aided in their academic success. The students were focused on their school work, conscientious about their grades and status, used making mistakes as a learning tool, were confident in their abilities, and avoided distractions and negative influences that may have stood in their way. The students reported that these attributes and abilities played important roles in their academic success.

Future Orientation

The second domain, *future orientation*, directly related to three categories that

were common themes in the students' responses: career, money, and college.

Many students made connections to the future in regards to career, money and college. Six of the students viewed education as leading to a monetary reward. Others also saw a connection to high school, sports, and subsequent scholarships to college.

The bottom line for students was the importance of making money. The students reported that in order to make a lot of money and have a profitable career, one needed to go to college. With this said, many students responses included one or more of the aforementioned categories, as they recognized a link between the three: career, money, and college. These three categories are explained in more detail in the following pages.

Career

The students were asked if they made a connection between what they were doing now in school and to their futures. Five students expressed that there was a link between education and a career. Five students mentioned specific fields in which they were interested: (2) medical, astronomy, business, and food service. Another six students spoke of education leading to a lucrative career. When one eighth grade student was asked if he saw a connection between his current education and the future, he responded,

I do find school important but, I don't know if I see a connection with the future because like I want to be an entrepreneur so it probably is connected to school, but I don't know. Participant #2

While this student may have been unsure in his verbal response to making a connection to the future, he was quite confident in what he wanted to do when he grew up. Another eighth grade student made a similar comment regarding a career and making a connection to his future. He commented,

I want to get a good job when I get older so I can take care of my mom and my family. Participant #13

This student equated getting a good job with making money, as he saw himself using the money to take care of his family.

No matter what the response or reason given by the students, the students were making connections to the future. It appeared that a career day at school had helped a couple of students make connections to the future, as they spoke highly of the day and what it had to offer. One eighth grade student said,

We had this thing like career day and it showed you what you had interest in and it showed that I showed interest in mechanics or medical like a nurse or a doctor like my mom. Participant #5

This student made a connection through not only career day, but also a personal connection with his mother. It was apparent from this response, as well as other responses in the interview, that he wanted to go into a similar field as his mother.

Aside from money, future, or family, an even deeper seeded motivation came into play for one student, as he talked about the possibility of living life without a job. This sixth grade student said,

Like some people in my neighborhood, like they don't have a job and they just sit in the house and doin' nothing. So when I look at that I say I don't want to be like that I want to be something different. Participant #8

This student was able to see the "big picture" and recognized that the life he wanted to live was dissimilar to the one he witnessed in his community.

While the students might not have been certain of what their futures would hold, it was evident that some thought had gone into specific careers for some students. Some students saw a monetary payoff for themselves, while others wanted to ensure a good life for their families. A career day for one eighth grade student may prove to be instrumental

in helping him choose a career later in life.

Money

None of the interview questions pertained directly to money, however, six students made mention of money, while another five indirectly spoke of making money as they got older. The students also made connections between money and material possessions. Two students talked about becoming “rich.” When asked about the benefits of school, one eighth grade student stated, “We talk about a lot of things like dreams of becoming rich.” Participant #11 This student was referring to conversations that he had with his mother. In another instance, a sixth grade student was asked if he saw a connection between his current education and the future. He responded by talking about his current living status as he said,

The connection is I’m trying to make a lot of money so I don’t have to live the same childhood like I do now. Like if I get one thing, I can’t get another. Say if I got shoes, I couldn’t get a cell phone. And say I chose to buy a whole lot of food, I couldn’t get a shirt and I waste my time trying to buy all these white shirts ‘cause I always get them stained, so I try to stick to black. Participant #3

The same student spoke of having a life different than the one in which he currently lives,

The connection is I’m trying to make a lot of money so I don’t have to live the same childhood like I do now. Participant #3

This student knew money was directly related to material possessions. Furthermore, he recognized that people cannot always get everything that they want, often causing people to make a distinction between needs and wants. Finally, he made a connection to his current life and a future life that in his eyes will look much different.

Participant #3 offered very revealing statements about money and his future. He talked at length about his dissatisfaction with his current living conditions and the interest

in living a future life different than his current one. He equated money to living a better life. Though only a couple of quotes were offered in this section, money was mentioned many times throughout the interviews with all of the students. Some spoke of “being rich,” like the comment by Participant #11 who was talking to his mother about his future. In all, it was evident that the students wanted to have a lot of money when they got older.

College

The final connection for a number of the students in regards to the future, was obtaining a college education. While many students talked about money and lucrative careers, six students articulated that in order to have a good career or good paying job, one must attend college first. Some students recognized that in order to get into college or to receive scholarships, one must obtain good grades.

One student talked about the importance of school and the direct link to his future goals. When asked if there was a connection between school and his future, this eighth grade student shared,

Yes it does because like what I do now, especially in eighth grade, early ninth grade it could still effect my after high school years. I mean like if I mess up I might not be able to get into college, which means I don't know where I could go if I don't get into college. The job I want to do.. it requires college—a zoologist or a dentist.
Participant #7

In this student's statement, it was clear that he made direct links between his current education, high school, college, and eventually a career. It was evident that he understood the succession of events, as it pertained to his future.

In this next quote, a sixth grade boy also made a link to his future as he talked about school and scholarships,

Well, I basically mostly try to get good grades so that like... so that I can do better in school, get a scholarship or something and plus, some of the girls like dudes that are smart. Participant #3

While girls may be a form of motivation, it was clear that he knew that he needed to get good grades in order to qualify for scholarships and to get into a good school.

Finally, four students talked about the honors classes and Jr. National Honor Society in which they took part. They were quite proud of that honor, which also served as a motivation for them. One eighth grade student spoke about the honor and where it may lead him. He said,

Cause I see a lot of things that I'm in... maybe like the National Honors Society. That's a lot of things that I could be into and go into college and help me get like a Master's degree or a Ph.D. Participant #11

This student didn't just stop at college, but he went on to talk about pursuing a Master's degree or Ph.D.!

Getting into college was important to these students. They recognized that getting good grades was the key to obtaining scholarships and admittance to good schools. Some student saw college as a means to obtaining a profitable career.

In all, while making connections to the future was "fuzzy" for some, the students were rather specific about their futures that involved college and lucrative careers. The students were able to link their current education to successful futures. The students were motivated to get good grades for various reasons, which included: attracting girls, obtaining scholarships, getting into college, and getting good jobs. One student saw the National Honors Society as helping him accomplish the above-mentioned goals.

The reasons for wanting money and a successful future varied from simply wanting to be "rich" to being able to take care of one's family. One student spoke

specifically of his current living status and the importance (to him) to make his adult life better than his childhood.

Motivating Factors

The *motivating factors* domain addresses a variety of positive reinforcement measures and forms of recognition. All of the students in this study responded to positive reinforcement and recognition from various people, including mothers, teachers, peers, and family members as a means for motivation. The students enjoyed the encouragement and support they received from these people. They also enjoyed knowing that they have made others proud. Four categories were identified within this domain. They included: positive reinforcement and recognition, encouragement and support, pride and confidence in student's abilities, and peer support. They are described in further detail next.

Positive Reinforcement and Recognition

The positive reinforcement and recognition generally pertained to rewards, words of encouragement, and teacher recognition. This helped motivate the students to do better. All of the students enjoyed being recognized for their accomplishments and talents. The students reported that they enjoyed receiving recognition from various people in their lives. The students' motivation was driven by many different factors ranging from stickers to hearing their names called out. One eighth grade student shared that he enjoyed being rewarded as he stated,

I like getting rewards and stuff like, we have a thing called star student you get it every four weeks. I believe, I got my math, science, and reading and I'm working on history and English.
Participant #2

This student, who was ready to enter high school, shared that he was motivated by being called the "star student." Another student shared that he still enjoyed receiving stickers

and candy as a means of recognition and motivation. For others, including this sixth grade boy, simply hearing one's name was enjoyable. When asked what motivated him, he said, "Teachers, ideas, honor roll. I like getting my name called out." Participant #6

For these students it was apparent that a simple sticker or hearing one's name called out was a form of motivation. For one student being called a "star student" motivated him to excel in all subjects, for the awards were given out across subject areas. It was important to this student to receive the highest number of "star student" awards as he was able to receive.

Encouragement and Support

While extrinsic means of motivating students was still popular, a mother's encouragement was reported by the most number of students in terms of motivation. Eight students reported that their mothers played a key role in their motivation to succeed. Some mothers encouraged, others pushed. Many monitored and supported their child, and in doing so, instilled the desire to succeed in their children. When asked what motivated him at home, one eighth grade student responded,

Maybe, my mom—cause like everyday I leave I have like a schedule every day and every day I have to give her a kiss and a hug and I know I get good grades and make her proud. I do good every day.
Participant #11

While just knowing that he made his mother proud was enough for this eighth grade student, four other students were motivated by monetary payoffs from their mothers. One sixth grade student said,

Well, my mom always wants me to keep my grades up. If I come home with a 'D' or an F, I have to pay her five or ten dollars. A 'C' is worth \$2, a 'B' is worth \$5, and an 'A' is worth \$10. I get paid every two weeks for doing my chores around the house so I have to try to be patient with everybody because she wants me to do everything around

the house. Participant #3

This student was obviously motivated by money. He had a clear understanding of the expectation and payoff at the end of the two week period whether it was for his grades or his chores. He reported that he had many duties around the house in addition to his school work.

Whether students were supported with verbal encouragement or through monetary means, the students were motivated one way or another. For one student making his mother proud was enough to motivate him, but for another student, receiving money at the end of a “pay period” helped him stay focused.

Pride and Confidence in Student's Abilities

The students enjoyed knowing that their teachers were not only proud of them, but that they had confidence in their abilities. The teachers played a big role in motivating students. Six of the students reported that their teachers motivated them in one way or another. When asked what motivated him, one sixth grade boy clearly stated, “Teachers.”

Participant #6

One eighth grade student was not only concerned about his poor grade or answering a question wrong, but was concerned about what his teacher would think. He was motivated by the teacher's reaction to do better. He shared,

Well, if I answer a question wrong it's not really anything, but if I get a wrong grade, that's what really kind of motivates me because if I see Ds or Fs I see my teacher motivating because I know I can get a B or an A and that makes me go even farther. Participant #11

In this student's experience, he was not satisfied with receiving failing grades and the sheer fact that his teacher had confidence that he could do better, made him try harder. While teachers and mothers reported the most number of cases as motivators for

students, other family members were instrumental in motivating three students. When asked about what motivated him, a sixth grade student stated,

I have my mom and my other family members to be proud of me and the teachers and everyone else. Participant #8

Again, the student mentioned his mother, but also acknowledged the importance of the other family members as well. Only one boy mentioned a specific influential uncle that helped motivate him. This eighth grade student said,

Like my family really motivates me and my uncle, my oldest uncle always tells me that like my mother's side of the family has always been the smart family, so I have to like keep going too." Participant #7

This student has obviously responded and bought into his uncle's way of motivating him by believing that since he is part of his mother's family that he too, must be smart.

The pride and confidence from others came from various sources. The different people in the students' lives motivated them to do better. For some it was teachers, for others their mothers, and for others still, it was various family members. No matter who the person was, each one inspired the students to do better and to believe in themselves.

Peer Support

The students' peers were instrumental in motivating the students to succeed. Five of the students reported that they had positive peers in their lives. The students reported that their friends encouraged one another to do well. They also explained that the students who may not have done as well, still continued to encourage them. These same students reported that they had good judgment in choosing their friends.

Six of the students reported that their friends only got into "minor trouble." In addition, only two of the students had been exposed to serious trouble. These same two students reported having been around drugs and gangs. Furthermore, they reported

having friends that had parole officers and told about a number of friends that they knew that have been involved with the police.

One sixth grade student spoke about the reasons for his good grades, mentioning his friends in his response,

I think I get good grades because my friends are cool and some are smart, but I try to be cool about being smart. Cause they're (friends) like, they're always calling me like the smart guy and stuff like that so that kinda encouraged me to do better.
Participant #3

It was evident that this student enjoyed being recognized by his peers. In his “catchy” phrase, this sixth grader articulated quite well his explanation of what it meant to be “smart.” Another eighth grade student talked about the help he received from his friends should he need it.

Well, in school the teachers help a lot. I mean my friends they may not say they wanna help, but I'm sure they will help me. They help a lot too if I do ask for help from my friends. They'll help me if they know it. Participant #7

The students may not all have “perfect” peers that avoided trouble, but the ones they chose were good influences on them. One student shared that his friends were smart, but mostly they referred to *him* as the “smart guy.” The students’ peers encouraged one another to do better and would help with homework or assignments should they need it.

Whether the encouragement and support came from a mother, a teacher, a family member, or a peer, the results were similar. All of the aforementioned people were influential in motivating the students to succeed. The rewards varied from simple words of encouragement, to making someone proud, to a more costly monetary reward from mothers, but all had positive effects on the students.

Homework

The fourth domain, *homework*, covered a variety of areas including the time and location of where homework was completed to managing one's time wisely. In addition, some students talked about helping their siblings, while others received help from their siblings. Some students sought help, while others were self-reliant, insisting on completing their homework on their own. The five categories regarding homework included: context, time management, helping siblings, help-seeking, and self-reliant. They are discussed below.

Context

Again, the *where, how, and when* the homework was completed was mentioned many times by the students. Several students expressed that they enjoyed doing their homework somewhere comfortable, which was often in one's bedroom or living room. Eight students said that they completed their homework when they arrived home from school. Most of the responses were similar to this sixth grade student's response to when he did his homework.

Usually when I get home I'm just home by myself and usually I have all this quiet time and as much time as I want to do my homework study, or do whatever it is I need to do. Participant #4

This student reported that he appreciated the quiet time after school to complete his homework. Others talked about the expectations at home, which included no play time until the homework was completed. Some students stated that they were home alone after school and were expected to complete their homework on their own, while others had a mother at home to make sure that the homework was being completed before the students went out to play with their friends. Whether a mom was home or not, it was

reported that the mothers checked the homework either at the time the homework was completed or when the mother came home from work.

The location of where the students worked on their homework varied. Many students reported doing their homework in the living room, at the kitchen table, in their bedrooms, or on the floor. Some talked about listening to music or watching television while doing their homework. One eighth grade student talked about his routine,

Well, I usually do it in my living room, lay on the floor, play music to calm me down and it's usually like routine for me. I'll take my homework out lay on the floor and do it. I mean like it's like peaceful there, just my brother and my mom and I do my homework and it's peaceful most of the time." Participant #11

Similar to the eighth grade student's solitude, a sixth grade student shared,

I usually do my homework in my room so that I'm comfortable by my surroundings. Nothing else will do and I clean up my room if I want to. It's the most comfortable place for me. Participant #3

The most consistent statements about homework were those that pertained to the comfort the students sought in their location and times for completing homework. The students appreciated the peacefulness and quiet in their homes in order to work.

Time Management

The students spoke of the importance of getting one's work done in order to have free time later. The students expressed that they did not like to waste time, as they took advantage of the time provided for them during the school day or in study halls to complete their homework. An eighth grade student stated,

I try to get most of it done in school. I ask a lot of teachers. I do a lot of work done in study hall so when I get home I don't have a lot to do or I have a lot of free time. Participant #5

This student obviously saw the benefit in completing his homework in school so

he could have free time later in the evening. A similar response was given by another student as he talked about using his time in school to complete his homework,

If it's like...if I could I complete it (homework) in school if I have the opportunity. I'll use team time instead of working on it at home.
Participant #2

Team time for this student was similar to a study hall. The students received one hour of lunch time, which consisted of 30 minutes for eating lunch and an additional 20 minutes for team time. During this time, students had the choice to work on the current week's assignments or use the time to socialize with their peers. This student took the opportunity to use the time to complete his homework.

The students' responses were similar in the sense that they found the time provided for them during the day to be valuable for completing their homework. The students reported that in doing their homework in school it freed up time in the evening, as well as provided the students with additional support from their teachers.

Helping siblings

Helping siblings has a double connotation, in the sense that one student received help from his sibling, while others were responsible for helping younger siblings with their homework. Two of the students mentioned that they were partially responsible for helping their siblings with their homework. While one student read with his sibling, another expressed that he learned from doing homework with his brother. A seventh grade student said with some resentment,

Usually have to read thirty minutes with my little brother. My brother reads to me the books he brings home. Participant #12

While this student may not have enjoyed his assigned "duty" to read with his brother, he still took on the task. Contrary to Participant #12's response, an eighth grade

student expressed how he benefitted from helping his brother by becoming a better speller.

...and I also help teach myself by teaching my little brother his letters and stuff and I know spelling a little bit better. Participant #2

The responses to helping one's sibling obviously varied between the two students, however, they took on the duties. Despite the variance in responses, the students recognized the benefit to helping their younger siblings.

Help-seeking

Five students expressed that they needed help with their homework. The help may have come from peers, teachers, or the students' mothers. While many mothers helped their children with their homework, six students expressed that their mothers were unable to help them with their homework, for it was either too difficult for them or it was a concept that they had not learned in a long time. These same students shared that their mothers sought help from others or encouraged their children to ask their teachers for help the next day. When asked if his mom helped him with his homework, one student responded,

Like if I don't... like sometimes I'll miss something and she'll point it out and tell me but she's not so great at math so she'll tell me to look back at my notes and if you still don't get it, ask your teacher the next day. But if, I don't understand it like.. it'll be too late so I just wait to the next day to ask my teacher to try to complete it. Participant #4

This student's mother wasn't the only one reported as being unable to help with homework. Another eighth grade student reported a similar experience.

Its...she really knows like some stuff. She doesn't know she always tells me like if you have algebra I can't help you with that. I was never really good with that so I'll call so and so to help you with it. Participant #5

While this student's mother was unable to help him with his homework, she made an effort to call someone who could help. In another similar case, one student spoke of how his mother and brother attempted to help him. This seventh grade student said,

My mom explains it more or try to like... the computer at the house. She'll try to research it and show me how like if it's a real big vocabulary word. And my brother he helps me like if he knows it, he doesn't just give me the answer, he like, explains it out.
Participant #2

While not every mother successfully helped her child with his homework, it was evident that the effort and support were present, as the mothers encouraged their children, checked in with them, and offered to find additional support to their sons. In addition, rather than just giving the students the answers, the mothers (or brother in one case) made an effort to explain the concept.

Self-reliant

Six students stated that they did not need help from their mothers and that they preferred to do their homework on their own. When prompted, some students admitted that they may have received help when they were younger. One sixth grade student talked about his preference to try to complete his work on his own. He said,

I try not to receive any help from anybody. I only get help from my teachers so that I don't get anything messed up. Participant #3

This student expressed that he did not want any help unless it was from his teacher. The reason was not explicit but apparently provided some rationale for the student. A sixth grade student shared a similar opinion.

Unless I need help, but usually I can do it by myself and if there's like a question I need help with and my mom doesn't know, I'll usually just ask the teacher the next day. Participant #4

This student was content in completing his homework by himself, but also stated matter-of-factly that if he needed help, he could simply ask the teacher the next day.

In both cases, the students exhibited a sense of independence when completing their homework. If assistance was required, the students reported that they would ask their teachers the next day in school.

The homework domain encompassed a number of different aspects. The context in which the students completed their homework was of importance, as it provided the researcher with an idea of how the home was structured and how expectations were communicated between the mothers and students.

The degree to which students admitted needing help on their homework varied. The number of students that stated that they needed help was similar to the number of students that asserted their independence with homework completion. Several of the students spoke about their mothers' inability to help with homework. Despite this small setback, the mothers still found ways to offer assistance to their children by finding people to help.

Access to Resources in the Home and Community

The fifth domain, access to resources in the home and community, addressed three areas particularly: computer, books, and community/neighborhood relationships. The students were asked questions that pertained to whether or not they had access to computers and books in their homes. The questions touched upon how the students used the books and computers within the home. They were also asked to talk about the people in their homes and communities that had a positive influence on them. There were three categories: computers, books, an access to resources in the home and community. They

are described next.

Computers

The questions pertaining to computers in the homes were quite simple. One of the questions in the interview asked the students if they simply had access to computers and the Internet. The second asked the students how they used the computers (eg, personal use, homework, etc.).

Twelve students reported that they had computers and the Internet at home. The students shared that they mainly used the Internet for email, Myspace accounts, games, videos, and research. The students also reported that they used the Internet to help with their homework or as a resource for information. When asked how he used his computer, one eighth grade student said,

If I have a question I'll go on the Internet or I'll play games or watch videos like utube or music videos. Participant #5

This student primarily used his computer for enjoyment, while another student mentioned that he used the Internet to serve as a directory for phone numbers for neighborhood establishments. When asked how he used the Internet, one sixth grade student responded,

To play games, sometimes for homework or to help my mom with something she needs to find a name or a place for a restaurant a store or something. Participant #3

This student used the Internet for a variety of reasons from enjoyment, to helping with homework, to using it for helping find information.

Twelve of the students had access to computers in their homes. The student that did not have Internet at home claimed that his family "used to have the Internet," but it was recently turned off. He also stated that they would be turning it on again shortly. It

was evident that the students used the Internet for more social purposes, than any other; however, some students used their computers as informational tools.

Books

Similar to the questions pertaining to computers, the same two questions were used in the interview process pertaining to books. The students were one again asked if they had books in their homes and if so, how they used them. All of the students reported that they had books in their homes. The amount and variety of literature varied. Most students seemed to have reference materials, chapter books, and books that belonged to their mothers. Eleven students reported a dislike for reading. One student said,

We have lots of books at home but I don't read any of them. They're all like novels and chapter books. And I don't personally like reading any of them. She buys a whole bunch of them thinking I'll read them, but I don't read any of them. They're just sitting there collecting dust.

Participant #3

Most of the eleven students stated that they would only read if they were bored. There was not a lot of conversation about the resources available to the students, as many were brief in their answers regarding books and reading. When asked about having books at home one student responded,

Yes, like usually I just use books at home like if I need a dictionary I have one to use or I just like to read books because I'm bored. Participant #4

It was apparent that this student did not exhibit a love for reading, but rather used the activity as a means of occupying himself or as a resource tool. Similar to this comment, overall, the students exhibited the same response to reading. Only two appeared to show an interest in reading. The students typically expressed that they would read if they were bored or if they needed to find out information for a report, etc. While the students had books in the home, they didn't appear to get much use.

Community/Neighborhood Relationships

The students were asked if there were people or things in their neighborhoods or communities that encouraged them to do well in school. Ten students reported that there was no one in their community that influenced or motivated them to do well in school. One student talked about a neighbor who helped him with math, and whose name he did not even know. This eighth grade student said,

There was this one guy. I didn't really know him. He lived downstairs and he was helping us figure out the problems like how to solve them.
Participant #5

It was obvious that this "guy" was no more than a casual acquaintance to the student who would occasionally help with homework. In the same manner, another eighth grade student casually mentioned a community center that was available to him. He went on to say, "We can go to the play basketball at one of the centers or something."

Participant #13

Many of the students talked about how quiet their neighborhoods were and that there were not many kids on the street with whom to play. One eighth grade student said,

Because my street is real quiet. There's no kids..like next street over or something. Participant #7

This student spoke of his neighborhood in the same manner in which the others spoke of the community center and neighbor—with little excitement or attachment.

While the students had access (either minimal or more involved) to computers, books, and community, the students did not voice a strong conviction for any of them. The students spoke of the computers as being used for enjoyment, while books were used for the exact opposite reason—to pass time. The people in the neighborhood and community had little to no bearing on the success of the students.

Relationship with Mother

The final domain, *relationship with mother*, addressed the sons' pride and admiration for their mothers. The students talked in-depth about their mothers' involvement and influence in their lives. They also described the communication process with their mothers. In this domain, the overall relationship between the mothers and sons were discussed. There were four categories in this domain, which included: son's pride and admiration of mother, communication, involvement, and influence. They are described below.

Son's pride and admiration of mother

Every student spoke highly of his mother and talked candidly about his positive relationship with his mother. It was evident, through the conversations with the students that they were proud of their mothers. One eighth grade student talked about his mother as a professional,

She's like...I know she's real strong in English so she'll help me with that. She's basically a business woman so if I have to like type a paper she'll always give me the best advice. Participant #7

This student clearly had confidence in his mother's abilities to help him. When sharing this story about his mother, it was evident that he was proud of her, as he smiled endearingly while telling the story.

One student talked about his goal to be like his mother, a nurse. He talked about entering the "medical field" to be like his mom. In the following quote by an eighth grader, he talked about his future goals coinciding with his mother's goals,

My mother has, like, 'cause she was going to school to be an RN and I want to go to school too to be like her, in the medical field. That's great. Participant #5

This student clearly felt a sense of pride for his mother. In my interview with him, he expressed his interest in his mother's career choice and his pride in her for going back to school after a number of years of being out of high school.

These two students clearly demonstrated a sense of pride and admiration for their mothers. They were proud of their career paths as well as their abilities to offer advice and be successful in a well-respected field.

Communication

In this category, communication was primarily referred to as dialogue between the mothers and their children. While five students talked about having positive or effective means of communicating with their mothers, three students reported having indifferent or minimal communication with their mothers, for they preferred to be "independent."

The students that reported that it was easy to communicate with their mothers expressed that it was easy to talk to them about anything. One eighth grade student said,

I feel like I can tell her anything. I mean if I get a bad grade on something I can easily tell her because she knows that I know that I don't like bad grades and I can bring it up. I can tell her anything.
Participant #11

It was apparent from his comment that this student felt comfortable talking to his mother about anything—good or bad. He also alluded to the fact that his mother understood that he was conscientious and was concerned about the same things she was—grades.

While some found it very easy to talk to their moms, one student talked about how he did not think his mom could relate to him as a teenager. This eighth grade student light-heartedly shared,

Well, sometimes like she really can't understand because she thinks the times were the same when she went and it's different now. It's way different. It changes like a 100 times in my eyes. So when I talk to her

I try to help her see that. That way she can help me, help myself.
Participant #7

This student shared that he really enjoyed talking with his mother and found it frustrating, though humorous at times that she could not always relate to him as a teenager growing up in the year 2008. He went on further to talk about how he taught her the “street terms” that she was no longer accustomed.

While Participant #7 found it difficult for his mother to relate to him, he still kept her informed. The vast majority of the students stated that they had good communication (or at least indifferent) with their mothers. There was only one student that said he did not talk to his mother very much. When asked if he talked to his mom about school, this sixth grade student said,

I don't talk to her about school 'cause I think school is like my only place where everything is personal for me. I don't have to tell anyone anything. At home I got to tell everything to anyone who walks up. Personally, I don't like to answer to anyone. Participant #3

The same student went on to say,

The only time I really talk to her is when it's like paycheck time so I get my money and the other times that I really sit down and talk to her is like if I have a problem going on or I'm trying to play some sports. Participant #3

While this student seemed to appreciate his independence and “being left alone,” he still would rely on his mother to help him problem-solve or help him enroll in sports.

The communication between mother and child varied from very positive to indifferent to minimal. One student shared that he could tell his mother anything. Another student felt that there was a disconnect between his mother and him, however, he was comfortable sharing with her. Though one student shared that he enjoyed talking to his

mother, in his latter statement, it appeared as though he would talk to her about not only things he needed, but also when he “had a problem going on.”

Involvement

The students reported that their mothers were involved in their education and often knew what was happening at school, sometimes even before they did! The range of the mothers’ involvement varied from asking about friends and homework, to attending school functions. When asked if his mom asked him about school, one eighth grade student said,

She does. She asks like how was school, what did you do, like ‘cause I would tell her about tests and stuff. My mom is really involved in school. Like a lot of times she knows about the events coming up at school before I do, but she’s really involved. Participant #7

This student’s mother would not only ask her child about school, but it was reported by Participant #7 that his mother was up-to-date with school events. He reported that she was “really involved.” Another student talked about what his mother asked about school as he said,

Yeah, she asks me like every day when I get home from school. First she starts off by asking me how was school and then I give her the explanation of how was school and then she as any further questions with my explaining. Participant #2

When answering this question, Participant #2 seemed a little agitated when talking about his mother’s questioning, as he rolled his eyes and occasionally sighed. It was clear, however, that his mother was interested in what was happening at school.

The mothers of the two students showed interest in their children’s education by asking their children about school. One student enthusiastically talked about how his mother was more in touch with upcoming school events than he was. The other student’s

mother obviously generated a thorough conversation, as her son stated that she asked “further questions” that needed explanations.

Influence

While the influence category might have coincided with motivation, it differed in the sense that it was not always a positive means of motivation. The term “influence” was used to describe an “approach” used by the mothers to encourage their students to do better. One sixth grade student talked about his mother’s approach to “influencing” him, as he stated,

I know my mom will get on me and it’s kind of annoying when she does that, but she’s just trying to get me to do better. Participant #4

This student has acknowledged that while his mother might “get on him,” he appreciated her concern for him to do better. Participant #9 didn’t appear to have the same understanding about his mother’s “influence.” When asked what his teacher would do or say when he did something wrong one eighth grade student stated,

She just like, she’ll call my mom –that gets my mom all ...probably punishment. Participant #9

It was quite apparent in speaking with this child that he did not want his teacher to call his mother for the simple fact that it would lead to a consequence. In the latter part of our interview, the same child shared with me that his mother was “very strict.” His nonverbal communication confirmed that, as he rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair.

It was clear from the conversations with the two participants that each mother had a different means for influencing her child. While “getting on a student” and punishment were used as two means for motivation, the extra push appeared to pay off, at least for one student who acknowledged that his mother’s efforts positively influenced him.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Strategies for Success

Recent research indicates that the development of resilient children and adolescents is essential for maximizing growth into responsible adulthood (Allen et al., 2006). It is further stated that resilient children possess a variety of attributes, abilities, and skills that include self-efficacy, responsibility, optimism, autonomy, social competence, and independence. Furthermore, caring adults and peer acceptance and support have been found to serve as protective factors for resilient children (2006).

In this study, a number of the identified domains were supported by the research. As previously mentioned, the students in this study exhibited traits of self-efficacy through various means.

The academically successful students exhibited a sense of responsibility and ownership of their work, both good and bad. This was evident with three of the students in this study. These students talked about “taking learning into their own hands” or taking responsibility for performing poorly.

The students were also in control of their emotions and actions, and when confronted about misbehavior or an occasional poor grade, the students responded with mature answers that clearly showed initiative and accountability.

Once again, much of the research talked about the various qualities and opportunities that resilient students possess, such as: coping efforts, warm supportive social environments, high self-esteem and self-control, internal locus of control, and the presence of positive educational experiences (Brown et al, 2006).

To coincide with the literature, nine of the students clearly had the ability to avoid distractions and negative influences. These students, whether frustrated by a younger sibling, having received a punishment at home, or having received a disappointing remark from a teacher, were able to control their emotions and act appropriately. Baldwin, Baldwin, & Cole (1990), have stated that self-regulation (a child's ability to control their attention, emotions, and behavior) has also been linked to concepts of resilience and control, which also leads to success into adulthood.

Future Orientation

Though all of the students did not directly connect education to future success, eleven of them were able to talk about a connection to the future. Some of the students made reference to more than one of the identified categories: career, money, and college. Of these, five students mentioned a career regarding their futures, while six mentioned money, and another six mentioned college.

Some resilient students use their current situation as reference points, which served as motivation. Participant #3 talked about how he wanted to live a life different than the one he currently lived. In a study by Gayles (2005), three students from the least

affluent high schools in Florida were interviewed. Some of them shared the fact that they “started off with nothing” made them want to break out of their current class status.

These students, like the students in this study, made a connection between the importance of getting good grades and reaping the benefits later. Floyd (1996) confirms the importance of pursuing goals and believing in the eventuality of one’s efforts paying off.

Motivating Factors

While consideration was given to combining motivation and future orientation, there seemed to be a distinct difference between the contexts in which each was referred. Therefore, future orientation referred solely to potential monetary payoffs, while means for motivation came more from people that influenced the students to one degree or another.

For eight of the students in this study, their mothers motivated them to get good grades. They also stated that their mothers encouraged them to choose positive peers. Later in the conclusion, the mothers’ influences and involvement will be discussed further.

For six of the students, teachers played an instrumental role in motivating them. The students stated that they wanted to please their teachers. The students mentioned that they were motivated through the use of extrinsic rewards (such as stickers and candy), as well as verbal praise and pride.

Finally, only three students mentioned that they were motivated by family members other than their mothers. Even while the students were discussing the various family members, it seemed as though they felt that they had to give an answer, as their

nonverbal means of communicating (a shrug of the shoulders, a tilt of the head) appeared to lessen the value of the importance that family members played in their success.

This last statement indicates a possible suggestion that there may not be a connection between the students' explanation of motivation and the emphasis that research puts on the importance of strong, positive role models. The research clearly indicates that there are three reasons that children succeed. They include supportive, nurturing family and home environments, youth's interactions with and the involvement of committed concerned educators and other adults, and the development of perseverance and optimism (Floyd, 1996). While the data may not support a strong argument for influential family members, it makes a strong argument for motivation provided by mothers and teachers that have been identified by the students as providing nurturing environments and positive involvement with the students.

In addition to supportive mothers, teachers, and family members, the students' peers played an instrumental role in their lives. The students reported that their peers had a positive impact on their learning. Nine of the students reported that they were unfazed by peers that attempted to dissuade them from performing well. These students were able to avoid potential negative encounters or outcomes.

In studies conducted by Ferguson (2001), many students discussed the peer pressure that went along with school success. Some students were embarrassed to ask teachers for help, for fear that others would notice. In this study, the findings were quite contrary to Ferguson's findings. The students in this study were not shy about asking their teachers for help.

Resilient students, such as the ones in this study, surround themselves with positive peers, which may help alleviate the stereotypes and social pressures that underachieving students face. In a study by Allen and Griffin (2006), he found that resilient students found ways to negotiate obstacles that were encouraged by high school peers. He also showed that students that associated with college oriented peers were more successful as a result of the positive support that was provided by them. He found that this was consistent with the literature regarding the importance of peer support in the lives of African-American high achievers.

Those that talked candidly about their friends shared that they made good choices in selecting positive peers. Six of the students had friends that would get into “minor” trouble, while two of the students spoke of friends that were involved with the police for more serious offenses. The “type” of friends that the students chose for themselves ranged from great kids, to “minor” troublemakers, to a more involved discipline problem child.

There was one story told by a sixth grade student (participant #3) that enriched this study in regards to his peers. It was learned from the demographic questionnaire that this student should have been in the seventh grade. He shared that he was retained in the first grade. This student had also shared that his father had been in jail more than once for drugs and crimes in general.

This student made a number of references to not wanting to end up with the same life as his mother and did not want anyone to have to go through the same childhood. He voiced that he preferred to be left alone. He also expressed that he did not like being told what to do by his mother, yet he shared that he respected her.

It was most intriguing to hear about this student's peer group and his exposure to violence and crimes. When asked if his friends got in the way of getting good grades, Participant #3 spoke of people that lived by his brother that attempted to get him to do drugs. He expressed that he did not listen to them because he knew that "smoking" wasn't only wrong, but that a person could lose brain cells and their common sense.

First, this sixth grade student had been offered drugs. Second, when telling the story, he matter-of-factly told what happens to people who "smoke." He went on to further talk about how he handled the situation. He said that he would tell the boys that smoking was bad for your health and that a person could get cancer in the mouth or gums. He further stated that he would try to influence his peers to stop smoking by offering to pay them.

It was evident that this student has made some good choices and has even tried to help his friends. This same student talked more about his peers and how they felt about school. He talked about a friend who had a police record for smoking and doing drugs. He talked informally about the same student's parole officer and his need to keep his urine clean for when he was tested. While this student has made good choices in avoiding serious trouble, only time will tell if he will maintain this status as he gets older.

One of the most revealing stories came from the most articulate and mature eighth grade student (Participant #11) that was interviewed. This student talked about his relationship with his father, and was very forthcoming with information. He shared that he resented his father who spent time in prison. The eighth grade student talked of his father's past and how he did not enjoy going to visit his father at his house. He shared that he would rather stay at home with his mother and friends. Participant #11 even went as

far to say that he didn't really like his father that much. He did not go into detail as to the resentment, but when asked if people or things got in his way of getting good grades, he stated that his father did. It claimed that having to visit his father on the weekends interfered with him completing his homework. Not only did he express a dislike for going to his father's house because he didn't care for his dad, but he also stated that it was boring at his house because there were no kids in which to play.

It was evident that this student was hurt by his father and felt animosity toward him. He expressed that he was very close to his mother and also protective of her.

Though he spoke ill of his father at times, it was possible that his father may have served as a motivation for him, for later in the interview he shared that his father had some college and that he wanted to do better than that by being the first person in his family to receive a Bachelor's Degree.

Homework

Eight of the students clearly stated that they had a certain context in which they completed their homework. That is, the students came home and before having any privileges, completed their homework in a comfortable setting. The students reported having clear routines and priorities in place. Six of the students stated that they were self-reliant and that they did not need assistance with their homework. More often than not however, the students appreciated the “final check” from their mothers.

Five of the students stated that they sought help from their mothers. While the students were receptive to receiving help from their mothers, the students reported that there were many instances in which their mothers were not able to help. The reasons they reported ranged from the material being too difficult, to the mother not having been

taught the material in many years, to the mothers simply did not understand the concepts, particularly in the area of mathematics.

Two of the students' siblings or cousins were helpful with homework to the middle school students. Two of the students helped younger siblings with their homework. Contrary to helpful siblings, two of the students' siblings were distractions to them. However, the students managed to effectively handle the distractions the siblings created for them.

Access to Resources in the Home and Community

A number of ways to explore the ways in which the home lives and community played roles in the students' lives were examined. The interview questions asked specific questions about the availability of books and computers in the students' homes. The questions also asked about influential members of the students' neighborhoods or communities that may have had a role in the students' success. The data found answers that were ambiguous in regards to the research on resources as it pertains to academic success.

All of the students reported having a number of books at home. The books in the home varied from reference materials to chapter books. Nonetheless, only two students reported that he would read the books for enjoyment. Eleven students reported a dislike for reading and stated that they usually use the books to look up information. Of the eleven that reported a dislike for reading, four of the students reported reading when they were bored.

Twelve students reported having the Internet at home. The students reported that they seldom used the Internet for homework, but rather used the computer to enjoy music, videos, utube, and myspace accounts.

It has been reported that impoverished students are at risk for failure because the schools and families fail to provide them with supportive environments, adequate educational resources, and high expectations (Zimmerman et al., 1999). In relation to this study, while books and computers were a part of the homes, the effectiveness of the tools was in question, for the students reported rarely using them or simply having used them for entertainment purposes.

The data from this study alluded to the importance of extracurricular activities and positive role models within the community. While the research suggested that children need people to look up to and to serve as role models that deserve respect and admiration (Brown et al., 2006), only three students made mention of mentors or role models in their lives. The literature was consistent throughout stating that one of the most widely reported predictors of resilience is the presence of a positive or close relationship with either a caring adult and/or parental figure (Kenny et al., 2002). While three of the students made reference to their neighborhood or community, they did so with skepticism and uncertainty. Simply put, one of the students mentioned the use of a community center and another mentioned a gentleman in the neighborhood who would occasionally help him with his math homework, but none of the students made a solid connection with any one member from their neighborhoods or communities.

It is suggested that the community at-large did not play much of a role in shaping the lives of these students and that their academic success was not reliant on community

members or people in their neighborhoods.

Relationship with Mother

Nine of the students reported that their mothers either had some post-secondary education. Ferguson (2001), along with other researchers, agree that children perform better in schools when their parents are well educated, and that these parents tend to be more involved with school-related tasks such as homework.

The mothers served as the one significant adult that increased the chances of these resilient students in regards to academic success. This support has been proven to help children deal with life stresses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While parental support is vital to the success of all children, it is particularly important during adolescence. It is crucial that adolescents have secure parental attachments to help provide a source of comfort and safety during this difficult time of change (Kenny et al., 2002).

Parent involvement in a child's education has been proven to have a positive impact on student achievement and behavior (Epstein, 1996). Like the mothers in this study, Deslandes & Royer (1997) assert that students of parents who provide structure and supervision during non-school hours are more likely to succeed in school, academically and behaviorally.

While two of the mothers seemed firm and maybe "unfair" to the students, the reward was evident in the students' performances. When parents living in poverty have firm, consistent rules and discipline, along with parental monitoring, the children are less likely to engage in misbehavior, which is often an unfortunate result of living in high-risk environments (Garmezy, 1985). The data clearly showed that the mothers had set routines for the students, clear expectations, and good communication with their children.

Communication between the mother and child was very positive. Eight students reported that they were able to talk openly with their mothers and felt comfortable telling them almost anything. Only one student reported that he did not communicate much with his mother.

Conclusions

In interviewing the students, it was evident that the students referenced specific examples of events that either just occurred or were about to occur. The students overall did not answer the questions that encompassed the past, present, and future, but rather talked about things that were currently happening in their lives. Some of the students did not have a grasp of time frames, as many of their answers did not match the sequence of events in which the questions were asked.

Twelve of the students reported that they had no dislikes for obtaining good grades. Ogbu (1998) and Ferguson (1998) have stated that successful African-American boys may be teased or accused of "acting white" for obtaining good grades. Only one student mentioned a negative reaction from peers for performing well.

One observation that was made of the students during the interview process is worth addressing. A sense of "nervousness" among two of the students was detected. It was most evident while in the hallways. The students appeared uneasy when the change of classes occurred, as they quickly moved through the halls avoiding contact with other students. When asked, the students reported that the number of students in the hallways, coupled with the loud noise level, made them anxious. These same students were conscientious, as they were concerned about being accused of cutting class. The students asked if permission was received from their teachers to miss class. They also would

reference the clock several times during the interviews. After the interviews the students asked me to walk them back to class.

Another observation that was noted during the interview process was noticed when the students were asked what they disliked about getting good grades. Twelve of the students said, "nothing." This was of interest, as oftentimes a social stigma may be associated with being smart. This may cause the students to be ridiculed by their peers. The data revealed quite the contrary; the students' peers were supportive and encouraging to the academically successful students.

An almost predictable observation was noted in regards to the teacher's reaction to poor performances by the students. When asked how the teacher reacted when they received a bad grade, the students' responses were almost identical. The teachers fed the students the same line, "You can do better." This typical response from teachers was received by almost all of the students that were interviewed.

Research Questions

The data that I have compiled and the domains that have been identified helped me find the answers to the questions that I sought to find.

1. What experiences do academically successful African-American middle-school boys living in single parent, impoverished homes report as contributing to their academic success?

The students' self reports revealed that a number of factors in their homes, peer communities, and schools contributed to their academic success. Within these environments, a number of domains were identified. They included: self-efficacy, future

orientation, motivation, peer influence and relationships, homework, access to resources in the home and community, and relationship with mother.

More specifically, this study explored the experiences of the students by answering the following research questions:

a) What experiences at home do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success?

In regards to their experiences at home, it was evident that the students had a set routine for homework. The students were responsible for completing their homework before anything else could happen. The students either received help on their homework from their mothers, or at least knew where to receive help when needed.

The mothers also set high expectations for their children and the students worked to meet those expectations in order to make their mothers proud. The mothers talked to their children about school and friends. The students talked to their mothers about most things, despite the differences in experience and age (as one student put it). It was evident that the mothers were involved in their children's education, as well as their lives. The students respected their mothers and were proud of them.

The students were provided with resources at home. The students had access to the Internet, as well as books. There were reference materials for the students to utilize in most of the homes. If the students did not have access at home, the mothers encouraged them to go to the library to find the information they needed.

b) What experiences in their peer community do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success?

Many conclusions were drawn in regards to the students' peer communities. The

students surrounded themselves with positive peers, using good choices in the selection of friends. The peers encouraged one another to do well. If the students were exposed to friends that made poor choices, they were able to avoid or ignore them. The students reported that they did not give in to peer pressure. The students enjoyed playing sports with their friends, although the students reported that they lived in "quiet neighborhoods" and that did not have many children in which to play. While the students' peers played a key role in the success of the students, conversely, the members of the community or in the neighborhood did not play an influential role in the lives of the students.

c) What experiences at school do academically successful students report as contributing to their academic success?

In regards to school, the students reported that they were eager to please their teachers. The students were motivated by their teachers and by rewards. The students took responsibility for their actions. The students had a sense of pride when they spoke about being in honors classes. When the students received a low grade in class, they felt badly about it. They worked hard to figure out what they did wrong, taking ownership over their "mistakes." The students were responsible and worked hard. They listened to their teachers and took learning into their own hands. The students were able to self-regulate and paid attention in class. They focused on their grades and school work. The students completed all of their homework in a timely fashion. It was important to the students to maintain their good grades. Some viewed school as their jobs.

The students were motivated by small rewards such as candy and privileges. However, on a larger scale, the students were motivated by scholarships, college, and good careers. The students had some idea of what they wanted to do when they grew up.

Implications for Practice

This study adds to the practical discussions of how to improve schools and the academic achievement of the students they serve. Specifically, there are important implications for both theoretical and practical models for improving schools for poor and minority students. It has been found that attentiveness to the psychosocial adjustment and school engagement of academically at-risk students are the keys to academic resilience. It has also been found that school-based initiatives that shield disadvantaged children from the risks and adversities within their homes, schools, and communities are more likely to foster academically successful students than other school-based efforts (Borman & Overman, 2004).

Therefore, it is recommended that instead of focusing solely on instructional methodology, research, or pedagogy, teachers should regularly attend in-services on child and middle childhood development, learning styles, multicultural education, peer influences, and relationship-building. This can be accomplished through monthly staff meetings, early release days, in-services, or professional development seminars. Teachers, cafeteria staff, aides, attendants, secretaries, and any other staff members that interact with students should be encouraged to attend these meetings. The most widely reported predictor of resilience is the presence of positive relationships with caring adults and close relationships with caring parental figures. The presence of these positive relationships is directly related to the positive outcomes among students facing life stresses (Kenny et al., 2002).

Teachers are encouraged to be cognizant of how they impact students' lives and how they are partially responsible for motivating students to do their best. The teachers

are also encouraged to seek out students that they deem as at-risk and find ways to get them more involved and motivated to learn. One of the ways could be to encourage students to take part in extracurricular activities. Two of the protective factors that have been identified by (Colbert et al., 2005) are participation in extracurricular activities and being a part of a positive school experience. Not only should teachers find the students that "want to be discovered," but they also need to find the less motivated, more difficult students to deal with and encourage them to work harder.

Teachers and educators alike are encouraged to be cognizant of the overuse of extrinsic motivation, as they should work to find ways to intrinsically motivate their students. This can be accomplished by talking to their students about their goals and plans for the future.

Teachers, counselors, administrators, and school personnel in general are encouraged to get to know their students well. It is of the utmost importance that students do not fall through the cracks, as warning signs for students may be missed. School personnel need to closely monitor the resilient students to ensure that the motivation and resiliency is not lost. If students present a different attitude, a lack of effort, or find themselves gravitating toward negative peers, I would encourage an adult to intervene to help them stay focused.

While the teachers play a crucial role in motivating and encouraging the students, the students' peers are also responsible for influencing these young men. It is suggested that a mentoring program be created to help at-risk African-American young men. An academically successful eighth grade student could be paired with a sixth or seventh grade student who may be struggling academically or behaviorally. This could serve as

an invaluable tool for motivation. A role model does not have to be an adult, but rather could be found in a student's peer group. Students need role models that are examples of human spirit that push them to do their best. These role models do not need to be defined by color, gender, age, or position in life, but rather just ordinary people that overcome extraordinary circumstances and through struggles, set positive examples for all (Townsel, 1997).

School officials could also learn from this study that students are motivated through extrinsic means. The teachers and principals could do their part to set up incentive programs for the students on a monthly, quarterly, semester, or yearly basis. It is suggested that students work for short-term rewards, as the impact is more immediate.

It is clear that school officials need to define the role of parents and ways in which the school can help foster involvement. Through parenting sessions, meetings, and school events, teachers, and school officials together can help create a relationship that extends beyond the school walls. Inviting the parents in to school is of great importance. Myers and Taylor (1998) reported that a parent's concern and involvement is important for at-risk African-American students' success.

The lack of African-American students in honors classes is worth exploring for central office administrators, gifted coordinators, and classroom teachers. Parents should also be cognizant of the requirements for the eligibility of students in honors classes. Schools and districts alike need to address the minute representation of minorities in honors and college bound classes and find ways to make these classes more accessible to a higher percentage of minority students.

Finally, examining the students perceptions of the role that school plays in one's

future may be of importance. By discovering if students believe that school is important for their future success, perhaps questions may be answered as to how students view the connection between school and future success. Conversations about careers can take place as early as kindergarten. By encouraging students to think about their futures and emphasizing the important role that school plays in shaping one's future, the goal is to have students make a connection between school and future success. Schools can invite various speakers of different ethnicities, races, and genders to inform students about their careers and how school and/or the skills acquired in school helped the adults accomplish their goals.

Implications for Future Research

The following recommendations for future research are based on the results of this multi-faceted study. First off, examining how students' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs are shaped and formed is worth exploring. Students' attitudes toward school are often developed even before students enter school for the first time. Students with resiliency exhibit many positive traits and characteristics that are developed over time.

It would be interesting to learn more about each student's upbringing (family, discipline, expectations, etc.) and the impact it will have on the student's future success. This can be accomplished by interviewing the parents and using that information to track student achievement over time.

Perhaps a comparison study of Caucasian and African-American boys might be telling. Furthermore, a comparison study between boys and girls of both races could also offer more insight to all children, not just one gender or one race of students. It would be interesting to examine the similarities and differences of the attitudes and experiences of

these groups.

Additional research is needed to learn more about the variations in parenting practices and how they affect particular measures of school readiness and subsequent achievement. Though tracking and studying the effects of parenting practices is difficult to conduct, a clearer definition of positive parenting practices needs to be established in order to have an objective point of view when passing judgment on practices.

Perhaps the mothers of these students could be interviewed to share their sides of the story and the viewpoints they have regarding the success of their sons. Probing the mothers for more information could enrich the study and possibly bring another perspective to the one-sided story that has been told by the students.

What may be of interest regarding mothers might be to conduct a study to see if there is a direct correlation between academically successful students and working parents. That is, is there a difference between the students' achievement of working parent(s) versus unemployed parents? This directly relates to the research conducted by Ferguson that states that students of working parents perform better (2001). All of the students, with the exception of one (whose mother is ill) had mothers that worked full-time jobs.

More research is also needed to help better understand the longitudinal patterns of these students. While information about these resilient middle school boys has been obtained up to this point, it would be worthwhile to track these students to see if the resilience that they display will continue into their high school and young adult years. Transience could pose a problem in regards to following the students, but the study would be helpful in examining sustainability in regards to parents, peers, community, and

school.

Perhaps it would be worthwhile to explore ways in which students are motivated and to distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic means for motivating the students. Through specific interviews with students regarding motivation, perhaps it could be determined what not only motivates the students, but at what age do students begin to make the shift from extrinsic forms of motivation to more intrinsic ways of motivation. While researchers may learn that some students may never make the shift, the information gained would still be valuable to learn ways to help students make the connection between hard work and the pay off that it offers in the future.

Finally, it might be worthwhile to study the schools in which the students attended in order to help identify the characteristics of effective schools in shaping African-American students' academic success. The link between the students' resilience and initiatives that address disparities between school and home environments, such as multicultural education and other work also deserves the attention of researchers.

Limitations

Although it is believed that these findings add to the literature both in areas of research and practice, readers should be cautioned as to the limitations in the design of the study. First, the data collection only occurred in one urban school district in the Midwest. This strategy may have limited the findings in regards to other urban settings.

Second, the self-report nature of the measures may have encouraged participants to portray themselves in a different light than what was really true. It must be kept in mind that much of the data were based upon student self-reports and thus are limited by student perceptions and their willingness to honestly share their views. The study may

have been influenced, for the students may have been intimidated by my role as a principal. At the very least, some may have given answers that they felt I wanted to hear, rather than their true feelings. In addition, there were at least five students with whom I was familiar from prior experiences. For four of them, I was their elementary principal or assistant principal at one time. The other student knew me as the principal of his sibling. This may have had some effect on the results.

The students should have been asked to extend their responses to the questions with more persistence, as many of the responses were not only short, but on many occasions only consisted of one word answers. The attempts failed, as many additional prompts were given to the students. Unfortunately, some of the students were either shy or unwilling to share. Perhaps they were intimidated or concerned about getting back to class. Perhaps if the students would have offered more information, it would have offered more insight and explanations as to the reasons behind their academic success. There was an interest in the students opening up and sharing more about their families and backgrounds. There was also a curiosity as to whether or not the students experienced any negative reactions from their peers regarding their good grades that would support Ogbu's theory of academically successful students' accusations of "acting white." Both Ogbu (1998) and Ferguson (2001) each shared their own theory on peer pressure and the impact it had on students. Ferguson stated that African-American boys are more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to be teased by their classmates for making mistakes. Ogbu found that African-American boys will often be accused of "acting white."

Perhaps re-phrasing some of the questions would have been helpful as well. There

were a couple of questions that stumped the participants, particularly the one regarding the connection between education and the students' futures. The students also had a difficult time answering the question regarding help they may have received from people in the neighborhood. In addition, perhaps more specific questions regarding the students' community (church, community centers, neighbors) could have been asked. This may have lead to more information regarding the students' experiences with members of their community.

Final Thoughts

Through interviews and a demographic questionnaire, I have attempted to explore a complex set of variables that play a role in the lives of academically successful African-American middle school boys from impoverished, single-parent homes.

Though the next steps are challenging, it is my job as a critical researcher to push for educators to gain an understanding of these students in hopes that they will make a difference in the lives of these young, African-American males.

If the society at-large is serious about closing the achievement gap and helping our minority students achieve at the same rate as their Caucasian counterparts, we must be prepared to face the challenges that will be encountered that involve demographic, economic, and societal realities. Our society must make fundamental changes that will focus on the rights of all students and take into account how to better serve students who are marginalized in schools.

In order to compete in the twenty first century, greater educational productivity will be necessary. Federal and state education agencies and local schools must be linked with other agencies and institutions to establish priorities in all aspects of urban services

to ensure that children and youth are receiving the highest quality education possible. Providing an education for students is one thing, but providing a *quality* education that enables all students to succeed in school is quite another.

An aggressive plan that involves engaging the public and educating them on school reforms that are desperately needed to significantly reduce educational segregation and the achievement gap is greatly needed. Much is at stake for everyone. It will take great leadership and courage to lead the way to a new, more coherent, and genuine program that can make a difference in the support of students' achievement and to bring the schools into broader collaborative efforts for the betterment of the community. The proposed policies and reforms must extend beyond the school walls.

As all educators and the community-at-large know, there is no magic formula for closing the achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students. Understanding the entangled web between demographics, accountability, and diversity can help school officials establish effective equitable plans for organizing school environments and reaching the students through effective teachers and other valuable resources. Closing the gap will require new approaches to these areas. It will also require a large commitment on the part of Americans to find ways of ensuring that those children who start school possess enough of a head start to take full advantage of their education and carry it through high school. We know many of the steps we need to take to narrow the gap. Leaders with the will to see all students succeed and the commitment to implement reforms in helping students achieve are what we need. Schools that are successful with African-American kids or poor kids are doing it by providing nothing less than a good education.

While the issue of the achievement gap remains complex, ways of simplifying and isolating confounding variables may be helpful. Rather than mentioning a variety of potential factors for the gap, such as race, social class, and parental involvement, perhaps it would be helpful to isolate one factor and work on ways to improve each one separately. Pointing the finger at one individual or one institution is not going to help deter the perpetuation of the achievement gap. Working on examining the issues and tackling the issues head on may help reduce it.

Learning the individual differences, learning styles, and motivational techniques for African-American middle school males, and all youth in general, is key to addressing not only the achievement gap, but the discrepancies in learning in general. Educators must listen to what the students are telling them and find ways to meet the needs of the students, based on their own reports. Finding what motivates adolescents is the key to increasing achievement. Building relationships is an invaluable tool that can also address the cultural differences between Caucasian teachers and African-American middle school youth.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

PARENTAL CONSENT

My name is Andrea Celico and I am currently enrolled in the Urban Ph.D. program at Cleveland State University. Not only am I a student, but I am also the principal of Upson School. I am in the process of conduct research in hopes that the information gained will help the teachers, principals, and students better understand how resiliency contributes to academic success and how relationships between adults, peers, and students play important roles in the lives of the students.

It is my intent that your child and others will benefit from this study, as educators will gain insight into the students they teach and use that information to form relationships with them.

Your child will be asked to fill out a short demographic sheet containing questions regarding: age, race, family, etc. Your child will participate in one 30-45 minute interview that includes questions related to the students' experiences at home, school, and in the community, and how each one relates to your child's academic success. The interviews will be audio taped. Please be aware that the information I obtain will be confidential and the tapes from the interviews will be destroyed after the study is completed. Once the information from your child is gained, I will collect and analyze the information, and finally, write up the research.

I do not foresee any risk involved; however, your child may feel a little uncomfortable sharing information with a principal. However, the school counselor will be available for your child, should he require any assistance.

I have read and understand the information that has been provided regarding the procedures and tasks that may be involved in this research project. I understand that my child may withdraw his/her participation at any time.

I understand that if I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.

I understand that if I have questions about the research project I can contact Dr. Hampton, the Cleveland State supervisor at 216-687-3828, or Miss Celico at 216-797-7523. I would be glad to speak to you further regarding my research or answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

Signature

Date

MINOR ASSENT STATEMENT

My name is Miss Celico. I am a doctorate student at Cleveland State University. I am trying to learn more about the experiences of academically successful African-American middle school students. I hope to use this information to help our students learn better. I have some questions I would like to ask you. There are two things I would like to do with you: 1) Have you fill out a short survey, and 2) Interview you about school, home and peers. The interview should take about 30-45 minutes. I will audio tape your responses during the interview. Please understand that the audio tapes will be destroyed after the study is complete.

Some of the questions I ask might be a little hard to answer. If that happens, you can ask me to explain or to skip that question. You can stop answering the questions any time you want. I will not share your responses with any of your teachers, principal, or fellow students.

Even if your parents said you can answer these questions for me, you can still say no if you do not want to do it. You can also withdraw at any time without penalty. Please be aware that the school counselor will be available for you, if you should need her for any reason.

I understand that if I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.

I understand that if I have questions about the research project I can contact Dr. Hampton, the Cleveland State supervisor at 216-687-3828, or Miss Celico at 216-797-7523. Thank you.

If you sign your name on the line below, it means that you understand and agree to answer the interview questions.

Student Name

Date

APPENDIX B

Demographics Sheet

Subject Number _____ (to be filled in by researcher)

Age _____

What elementary school did you attend? _____

In which city? _____

Race: (please circle one) Caucasian African-American Hispanic Other

Number of people living in the home _____

Who do you live with? Please check all that apply.

_____ Mom _____ Dad _____ Stepmom _____ Stepdad _____ Number of brothers

_____ Number of sisters _____ Number of stepsisters _____ Number of stepbrothers

_____ Grandmother _____ Grandfather _____ Number of aunts

_____ Number of uncles _____ Number of cousins

_____ Other (list) _____

Do you live in a: (please circle one) house apartment duplex other _____?

Does your family rent or own? _____

What is your mom's level of education? High School

Some College

Bachelor's Degree or Higher

APPENDIX C

Interview questions

General:

- I. Let's be honest. We both know that you get good grades. Why do you think you get good grades?
 1. Are there people or things that help you to get good grades?
 2. Are there people or things that get in your way of getting good grades? How do you handle them?

Home:

- II. Tell me what happens at home to help you get such good grades.
 1. Tell me what it's like to do your homework. (where, when, help)
 2. Do your parents and/or family help you with your homework? If so, how? When?
 3. What's it like for you when you talk to your parents about school? What do you talk about? Do they ask you about school? Do they ask you about homework? Do they ask you about friends?
 4. Do you have access to books at home? Do you have the Internet? If so, how do you use the books and/or Internet?

School:

- III. Tell me what happens at school to help you get such good grades.
 1. What motivates you in school?
 2. Do you see a connection between what you're doing in school now and what you might do after you're done with school? Why? Why not?
 3. What's it like for you when you do something well in school? (get good grades, answer a question correctly) What does your teacher do or say? How does this make you feel?
 4. What's it like for you when you do something poorly in school (bad test grade, give a wrong answer) What does your teacher do or say? How does this make you feel?

Peer Community:

- IV. Tell me what happens in your neighborhood to help you get such good grades.
 1. Do your friends help you get good grades? How?
 2. Do your friends get in the way of you getting good grades? How? What do you do about it?
 3. What do your friends do?
 4. How do your friends feel about school? Do they get good grades?
 5. Do your friends get into trouble? If so, how?
1. What do you like about getting good grades?
 2. What do you dislike about getting good grades?