Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Student Works

An Examination of Successful Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Males in a Northeast Tennessee Middle School

Stephen E. Long
East Tennessee State University

Recommended Citation

An Examination of Successful Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Males in a Northeast
Tennessee Middle School

_____

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

_____

by

Stephen E. Long

December 2014

_____

Dr. Eric Glover, Chair

Dr. Cecil Blankenship

Dr. John Boyd

Dr. Virginia Foley

ABSTRACT

An Examination of Successful Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Males in a Northeast
Tennessee Middle School

by

Stephen E. Long

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors

that contribute to positive educational outcomes as measured by the EXPLORE test for eighth

grade males who qualify for free or reduced price lunch. In addition, this study was conducted

for the purpose of improving the educational program at a Northeast Tennessee middle school.

Archival EXPLORE data, as well as free and reduced price lunch data, were used to identify

high school graduates, 6 males and 6 females, who had performed at or above expectation on the

eighth grade EXPLORE test. Females were included in this study for the purpose of determining

if the factors vary with respect to gender. The participants were interviewed for the purpose of

gaining a rich understanding of the factors that enabled them to experience success, while the

majority of their socioeconomically disadvantaged peers did not, as well as to determine if these

factors varied with respect to gender.

Two overarching themes emerged as a result of the interview data analysis: connection to school

and support and motivation. Each of the participants reported a sense of connection to the school

via of one or more of the following 5 subcategories: teachers, peers, other adults, extracurricular

activities, and school structure, culture, and supports. Also, all of the participants spoke of

support and motivation via 1 or more of the following 4 subcategories: parents, other adults, preparation, and ability and talent.

Two factors emerged that seemed to be most important to their success: connection through relationships and outside support. Each participant was able to establish meaningful relationships during middle school, with 11 of 12 sharing accounts of their connections with school adults, and 12 of 12 discussing their peer relationships. Additionally, each spoke of feeling supported or motivated by a parent or other outside adult.

There was little difference with respect to gender. Boys indicated a slightly higher proclivity towards extracurricular activities, while girls seemed to place slightly more importance upon peer relationships. However, establishing meaningful connections within school was of paramount importance for both genders.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife Angie and our four wonderful children Connor, Dillon, Graham, and Madelynn. I could not have done this without your patience and understanding.

I would also like to dedicate this work to my parents Huey and Linda Long. Thank you for your constant love and encouragement and for instilling in me the value of education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for all of the blessings in my life, one of which has most certainly been the opportunity to pursue learning.

I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Eric Glover, for his patience, wisdom, guidance, and encouragement throughout this entire process.

I would also like to thank Dr. Cecil Blankenship, Dr. John Boyd, and Dr. Virginia Foley for their support and guidance as members of my dissertation committee.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Gender is a variable that has emerged as a significant factor in the educational outcomes of students. Males and females experience schooling differently, and their perceptions and experiences can be quite different. Over the past 10 to 20 years an increasing amount of attention has been given to the educational outcomes of boys because they have fallen behind their female counterparts. Myriad explanations have been proposed to explain this phenomenon, ranging from a shift in cultural norms to the very structure of typical public schools. It is likely, however, that a combination of factors is responsible for the poor performance of boys.

Poverty is a "chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple synergistic risk factors and affects the mind, body, and soul" (Jensen, 2009, p. 6). It is a global problem that has devastating effects on the educational outcomes of children, and this is certainly true in the United States. Few states have a higher percentage of poverty than Tennessee, with areas of Upper East Tennessee having poverty rates among the highest in the state (United States Department of Commerce, 2011). As a result of living in generational poverty many students are not able to focus on their education because of day-to-day struggles that require their constant attention: hunger, conflict in the home, absence of one or both parents, and homelessness or unstable living arrangements. When these factors are coupled with school factors such as inadequate resources, lack of understanding of the students on the part of teachers, and a singular focus on standardized testing as opposed to the individual student the situation becomes all the more difficult.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes as measured by the EXPLORE test for eighth grade males who qualify for free or reduced price lunch. In addition, this study was conducted for the purpose of improving the educational program at a Northeast Tennessee middle school. Data were obtained and analyzed through interviews with former successful students who attended the school and continued their success throughout high school and beyond.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed with the goal of improving educational outcomes for students in a Northeast Tennessee middle school:

1. What are the factors that enable some students of poverty to experience success while the majority of them fall behind?
2. Are there differences among male and female students of poverty?

Significance of Study

While there is an abundance of literature addressing the needs of boys in education, as well the needs of students of poverty, there is relatively little about the intersection of the two issues. The narrow scope of this study notwithstanding, it could represent a contribution to the knowledge base in this area. More importantly, however, this research provides an in-depth contextual understanding of the factors that enhance the educational and life outcomes of male, and potentially even female, students of low socioeconomic status (SES). This research was

11

conducted for the explicit purpose of improving the educational program in a Northeast Tennessee middle school.

Scope of the Study

This study addressed the two research questions through the use of qualitative case study methodology. All interviews were conducted with former members of a single middle school community who have since graduated from high school. Prior to conducting participant interviews, I reflected upon my own experiences, both as a teacher and administrator, as well as on informal communications with teachers regarding the students served within the school community. This reflection was used for the purpose of informing the student interview process. Twelve students, six males and six females, were then interviewed using the Student Interview Guide (Appendix A). The purpose of these interviews was to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, circumstances, and experiences of successful low SES students. The student interviews represent the data source for this study.

Researcher Perspective

During the time the interviews were conducted, I served as principal of the middle school that the student participants formerly attended. However, prior to the completion of the study, I transitioned to the position of Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction for Grades 7 through 12. It is important to note that I did not serve at the school in any capacity during the times that the participants were students at the school, though I did serve as a teacher at the high school the students attended, where I had the opportunity to serve some of them directly as one of their teachers.

Having observed the disconcerting trends of lagging performance among males and low SES students over time, I became very interested in finding ways to improve, not only their performance, but their life outcomes. I attended conferences and workshops, read numerous articles and books, and implemented changes and interventions. However, it became increasingly clear that all of these things failed to account for the uniqueness of our students and the culture of the community in which they lived. As such, my goal became finding a unique solution, or solutions, that would enable our students to experience greater success.

Statement of Research Bias

As an educator of 16 years, I have only served in two school systems. Both are located in Northeast Tennessee, and both have very high poverty rates. Of those 16 years, 12 were spent as a high school math teacher, 1 as a high school assistant principal, and 3 as a middle school principal. In each of these roles I have seen firsthand the effects of poverty. Additionally, I have had considerable training, both voluntary and mandatory, related to students in poverty. One result of these factors has been the formation of my own opinions and beliefs surrounding these students, what motivates them, and how they should be taught. Because the purpose of this research was to gain a rich understanding of how the participants view themselves, it was necessary for me suspend my beliefs and opinions, making a concerted effort to maintain objectivity.

As a school leader I believe that relationships are of paramount importance. A school leader must have a good rapport with all members of the school community: teachers, students, and parents. As such, it is important for me to disclose that I knew each of these participants, some better than others, prior to conducting this research. Furthermore, as one charged with the

oversight of both the well-being and learning of these students, I had and continued to have a vested interest in the outcomes of these students. As previously stated, this made it necessary for me to make a constant effort to maintain objectivity.

To alleviate these biases I employed the interview guide approach so as to avoid leading questions that were colored with my own preconceived notions. Additionally, great care was taken to report findings using the participants' own words verbatim. Finally, each participant reviewed the transcript of her or his interview and was given full authority over the final content of the transcript.

<div align="center">*Limitations and Delimitations*</div>

This study was limited to former students of a Northeast Tennessee middle school who have gone on to become successful high school graduates. Interviews were conducted with participants in order to gain an in-depth understanding of their perceptions and experiences as successful, socioeconomically disadvantaged students for the purpose of improving the educational program within the school.

<div align="center">*Definition of Terms*</div>

EXPLORE Test: The first part of the ACT testing system that also includes the PLAN and the ACT. The EXPLORE is generally given to students in the 8th or 9th grade, followed by the PLAN in 10th grade, and culminating with the ACT in 11th or 12th (EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT, 2014).

Gender Gap: The gap between the typical achievement rates of males and females (Legewie & DiPrete, 2012).

Mentoring: This refers to "a method of sharing real-life experiences and knowledge" (Johnson & Lampley, 2010, p. 68). For the purpose of this research this includes school-based programs that assign students to a single adult for the purpose of fostering a meaningful, caring relationship with the student.

School Supports: Structures, either during or after school, that enhance student success by providing elements that they lack. These may include mentoring, tutoring, clubs, empowerment groups, and other extra-curricular activities (Hall & Charmaraman, 2011; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2004).

School Structure: The elements of the school that are not directly molded or influenced by students on a day to day basis. For example, bell schedules, class schedules, class rosters, student population, and interventions.

School Culture: The result of the collective personalities, as well as student perceptions of those personalities, and the feelings that these cause students to have in real time about their school and school experiences.

Overview of the Study

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the topic and established the purpose and rationale of the study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature related to gender and poverty in education. Chapter 3 is a discussion of the methodology of the study and contains descriptions of participant selection, the collection and analysis of data, and ethical protocol. Chapter 4 contains the collected data and presents the findings of the study. Chapter 5 includes a summary and implications of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter consists of a review of the literature related to the struggles of boys and students in poverty. The first section reviews the needs of boys and is subdivided into several topics that address these needs. The second section reviews the needs of students of poverty. This section is also subdivided into several relevant topics. The third section, which is also divided into subtopics, discusses the long-term implications of these issues for boys and students of poverty. The chapter concludes with a summary of the review of related literature.

Needs of Boys

The struggles faced by boys are not limited to any one class or ethnic group. The collective, lagging perfomance of boys is cause for much concern nationally. As a result, a substantial body of research has emerged in an effort to both better understand this phenomenon, as well as to mitigate the effects of it (Gurian & Stevens, 2005). Research indicates that there are several reasons for this. Kindlon and Thompson (2000) stated that while there are certainly exceptions, boys are developmentally disadvantged in their earliest years of schooling. The work of Sax (2007) supports this assertion. He stated that in the early years of school girls are better developmentally suited than boys to adapt to the increasingly rigorous academic environment, adding that they are more capable of complying with the typical teacher expectations of sitting still and listening, and that they have a greater innate desire to please the teacher. Clark, Lee, Goodman, and Yacco (2008) also highlighted the lagging performance of boys by pointing out that boys tend to view school as less important than their female counterparts. The implications of this statement alone are staggering. Unfortunately, however,

the explanation is not that simple, with several researchers having provided a myriad of reasons why boys might feel this way (Clark et al., 2008; Kehler & Martino, 2007; Martinez & Semrud-Clikemen, 2004; Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012).

National Trends

According to the most recent data from the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP), boys are outperforming girls in mathematics by a narrow margin: 1.04 points in grade 4, 0.56 points in grade 8, and 3.33 points in grade 12. However, girls are outperforming boys by a much greater margin in reading at all three grade levels: 6.67 points in grade 4, 9.88 points in grade 8, and 12.00 points in grade 12 (United States Department of Education, 2013). Perhaps most striking is the fact that there is very little difference in male and female achievement among the upper-class. That is to say, a disproportionate percentage of the observed overall difference is due to the disparity among male and females from lower socioeconomic classes (Kimmel, 2006; Southworth, 2010). This increasingly lagging performance in reading is troubling because "this is a trend that cuts through racial, ethnic, and class divisions, and can even be seen in other countries" (Educational Achievement, n.d., para. 1). Several industrialized nations have implemented focused efforts to alleviate this trend. However, the United States has not (Educational Achievement, n.d.).

National statistics show that boys are not only struggling in elementary and secondary education but also in higher education. In 2009 – 2010, the last year for which data were available, females earned approximately 62.0% of all associate's degrees, which represents an approximate 2% increase from 1999 – 2000. Females earned approximately 57.4% of all bachelor's degrees, which represents a 0.1% decline from 1999 - 2000. They earned

17

approximately 62.6% of all master's degrees, and 53.3% of all doctoral degrees, which represent

gains of 2.6% and 6.3% respectively (United States Department of Education, 2012). While

more women and men are enrolling in postsecondary institutions than ever before, the rates are

increasing more rapidly for women, particularly among the working-class (Kimmel, 2006).

School Conntectedness

Niehaus et al. (2012) contend that many of the problems facing boys can be explained by

examining their perceptions of school connectedness. They very succinctly stated that "feelings

of belonging are not only desired but needed" (p. 444). This represents the third tier of

Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs. Schools have traditionally focused on the first two tiers,

which adress basic physiological and physical needs. In fact, schools have done very well at

meeting these basic needs. However, focusing on these most basic needs and neglecting the

others has come at a cost. Schools are not satisfying student needs for belonging, respect, and

self-actualization. The current climate of accountability and high stakes testing has left many

students to wonder where they fit into their own schooling, and, frankly, what is truly in it for

them (Glover, 2013).

Akos (2006) indicated that school connectedness is of particular importance for students

who are transitioning to middle school. The transition to middle school is marked with

numerous difficulties, but research has shown that effort on the part of educators to connect with

students by creating a warm and caring classroom environment, as well as student participation

in extra-curricular activities, may have a positive impact on student outcomes (Akos, 2006;

Penner & Wallin, 2012). Again, this is consistent with the work of Maslow (1970), who stated

that once one's basic physiological and physical needs are met, he or she needs to feel a sense of

belonging or connectedness. It is only after this need for connectedness is met that the individual

can feel that he or she is valued and, in turn, move toward self-actualization.

The innate human need for connection is one that schools are largely failing to meet for

boys because research has indicated that girls feel stronger bonds with their teachers, a greater

sense of support from them, and a stronger connection to the school at large (Martin, 2003).

Niehaus et al. (2012) stated that boys are more likely to experience school maladjustment

because they often report feeling that there are no adults at school with whom they can share

their emotional needs and concerns. In other words, boys often feel that they must work through

their struggles, both personal and academic, alone. In fact, 31% of boys versus 19% of girls feel

that their teachers do not listen to what they have to say (Sommers, 2013). These findings are

consisent with those of Martinez and Semrud-Clikemen (2004), who stated that boys are more

likely to experience school maladjustment and to engage in negative sensation seeking

behaviors. This leads to increased instances of disruptive behavior, which in turn leads to a

higher frequency of special education referrals. In fact, they stated that although the proportion

of males and females is roughly equal, boys account for approximately two thirds of all special

education students. This is consistent with the findings of Clark et al. (2008), who asserted that

boys are diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) with much greater

frequency, and that they are referred for placement in special education programs at a

significantly higher rate. This is especially troubling, "given that students with school discipline

problems are at risk for dropping out of school" (Martinez & Semrud-Clikemen, 2004, p. 417).

One possible explanation for boys' increased maladjustment and lack of feeling

connected to schools is that they cope differently than girls (Santiago & Wadsworth, 2009), yet

schools are structured in a such a way that is more typically suited to girls (Legewie & DiPrete,

19

2012). Santiago and Wadsworth (2009) found that boys are not as adept at using primary control

coping, that is, strategies that involve changing one's situation or one's emotional response to it.

Boys tend to prefer distraction and thinking differently about the problem. In other words, rather

than trying to proactively change or improve their situation, boys are more likely to accept a

negative situation, and then be reactive to it. This need for distraction is likely one cause of

many disruptive and sensation seeking behaviors on the part of boys (Martinez & Semrud-

Clikemen, 2004).

Prevailing Views of Masculinity

Simply put, the current prevailing climate in schools today functions in opposition to the

prevailing view of masculinity held by society and, consequently, by many boys. In fact, many

schools "implicitly encourage – or at least do not inhibit – development of a peer culture that

constructs resistance to schools and teachers as valued masuline traits" (Gunzelmann & Connell,

2006; Legewie & DiPrete, 2012, p. 464). Behrend (2009) stated that the typical male, once

known as a strong, independent hunter, is often now the "emotionally disabled hunter" (p. 29),

struggling to identify where he fits into the schooling process. Boys are often more highly

valued by their peers for nonacademic behaviors such as sports, interactions with girls, and

resistance to authority. Kehler and Martino (2007) found that such views of "hegemonic

heterosexual masculinity" (p. 92) have been institutionalized, which prohibits meaningful

discussion and change. In fact, they asserted that many behaviors of boys can be attributed to the

pressures placed on the boys by society's definition of acceptable male behavior and the

perception of boys that they cannot truly be themselves. Dalley-Trim (2009) stated that the

widely accepted views of typical male behavior not only hinder the progress educators make in

working with boys but the boys themselves. In connection to this, Stoltz (2005) has found that

the socialization of typical masculinity can lead to serious consequences such as anger and anxiety. Kehler and Martino (2007) stated in their study that typical male culture tends to value physical prowess above academic standing, and that boys often engage in mishavior for the purpose of improving their social value.

Kimmel (2006) maintained that it is the cultural view of masculinity held by males themselves, as opposed to school structure and feminism, that is holding boys back. He stated that the male insistance that disciplines such as English and foreign languages and traditional liberal arts studies are feminine and counter to natural male tendencies is the primary cause of male shortcomings in education. Furthermore, he cautioned against the idea that intiatives that have enhanced the outcomes of females have done so to the detriment of males, stating that many such initiatives including improved school structures and teacher training leading to enhanced pedagogical methods that focus on individual student needs have improved the outcomes of all students, both female and male. While not denying that there is a gender crisis in our country, he stated that legislators, not schools, are responsible because they have cut funding for "unnecessary" programs and positions such as after-school athletics and counselors. In short, solving the problems of males in education should not include engaging in an educational gender war with females because they are not to blame.

On the other hand, Sax (2006) posited a different possible explanation of the struggles of males in school, having stated that the emerging science of gender differences needs to be further examined. He highlighted the physiological differences in males and females, ranging from the way they see, hear, and smell to preferences in ambient temperature and the way they process and interpret emotions. This is consistent with the research of Bonomo (2010), who pointed out that males and females differ significantly in brain development, sensory-perception, and

autonomic nervous system function. There are also differences, generally speaking, in ideal

teaching methods for both genders. As such, Sax (2006) has advocated for single-gender

classrooms, coupled with teaching educators the hard-wired differences of the genders so that

they can interact and teach them more effectively by incorporating gender-based best practices.

This enables the typical view that "computer science is for boys, and advanced foreign languages

are for girls" (p. 198) to give way to the more fluid notion that any discipline is suitable for either

gender. Building upon this idea, he concluded that, though counterintuitive, single-gender

classrooms combat gender stereotypes, while co-ed classrooms propagate them. It is important

to emphasize, however, that single-gender classrooms are not a panacea and that they require an

extraordinary amount of professional development in order for teachers to be able to maximize

gender-specific teaching strategies (Spielhagen, 2011).

Motivations and Aspirations

Another problem related to boys failing to feel connected to school is their lack of

motivation and high aspirations relative to their female peers. Gurian and Stevens (2005) stated

that girls have "higher professional expectations than boys – more schoolgirls that schoolboys

envisioned themselves completing high school, college, then graduate or professional training"

(p. 24). One possible explanation of this uses possible selves theory, which is a method of

examining the envisioned future outcomes of individuals. These visions of the future can be

positive or negative, and students may have conflicting visions for themselves depending on the

domain upon which they are focused at any given time. These various visions of future

outcomese often present conflicting desires. These visions of possible futures have been found

to be of great importance in the areas of behavior control and goal-setting as well as in predicting

the consequences of failing to meet goals. Boys have also been shown to have more fragile self-

esteem that limits their confidence in their ability to learn (Pollack, 1998). Quite simply, boys

have demonstrated a tendency to have less lofty views of their future selves. To exacerbate this

problem, studies have shown that having positive possible self-views is more important

academically for males than females. In light of research demonstrating that girls have greater

educational aspirations (Clark et al., 2008), this seems to be particularly problematic.

Self-Discipline

According to Duckworth and Seligman (2005) self-discipline is a consistently more

important trait than innate intelligence when it comes to predicting success among eighth grade

students. This finding is of particular concern when it comes to boys because many studies have

shown that they are relatively deficient in this area based upon delay of gratification measures, as

well as ratings by teachers, parents, and, most stikingly, boys themselves. Additionally,

according to Clark et al. (2008) boys are less likely than girls to complete assignments and meet

deadlines, and girls have been found to consistently perform at a higher academic level as a

group. Furthermore, girls demonstrate a higher level of self-control, with boys acting more

impulsively (Clark et al., 2008; Martin, 2003). Finally, the difficulties that boys face, coupled

with their diminished sense of self-efficacy, puts them at a much greater risk of experiencing

disciplinary problems (Pollack, 1998).

Teacher Perceptions of Males

Research has indicated that, while girls are certainly not devoid of problems, boys are at a

greater risk for negative outcomes (Niehaus et al., 2012). This is likely due in part to the

crossfire of contradictory expectations experienced by boys. Gunzelmann and Connell (2006)

highlighted this idea:

On the one hand, we are less tolerant of boys: we expect them to be strong and keep their concerns to themselves—not to whine or be crybabies. Yet on the other hand, we expect boys to act the way girls do in school: to sit still, color inside the lines, and learn in the same sequence and manner as girls. (p. 96)

This confusing environment for boys, along with the current climate of narrowly focusing on high-stakes testing, increases the risk for boys because they progress differently than girls and are often not developmentally prepared for the assessments they are given. Gunzelmann and Connell (2006) asserted that our current culture of high-stakes testing, both at the state and federal level, tends to favor the learning strengths of girls, particulary in the early grades. Even more strikingly, boys are no longer catching up to their female counterparts around the fourth grade, which has been the case historically. The stress of academic pressure and failure is causing them to give up rather than catch up. This presents a particularly challenging scenario for those who educate our male students.

While teachers report that they do not feel there is a difference in the abilities of boys and girls, some have expressed a sense of lacking sufficient knowledge of how to work with boys in particular. One female teacher commented that "teachers are not prepared to teach specifically to male students and most of the time the issues boys face in the classroom may be a result of the teacher's inexperience and lack of knowledge about gender issues" (Clark et al., 2008, p. 118). Gurian and Stevens (2005) highlighted the innate differences between boys and girls that educators often fail to consider when structuring their classrooms and teaching styles. Boys are more likely to fidget and move about. These qualities were once interpreted as strengths, with boys being viewed as energetic and willing. However, they are now viewed as disruptive liabilities. They contend that trying to change boys to fit traditional paradigms is not only ineffective but immoral. Gunzelmann and Connell (2006) upheld this view, stating that boys

"should not be made to feel inferior by receiving lower grades, reprimands, or medication because they develop at different rates than girls" (p. 95-96). This, along with the work of Legewie and DiPrete (2012), who emphasized the tremendous importance of teacher quality as it related to student learning, highlights the glaring need for providing high-quality professional development for teachers in the areas of reaching and teaching boys.

Gentilucci (2004) found that proper teacher behavior has dimished over the years, with teachers often failing to model professional behavior and appropriate instructional communication with students. This has resulted in decreased instructional efficacy and is especially problematic for students already considered at-risk. He stated that the prevailing viewpoint that many students do not recognize the importance of school has been overstated and that two of the greatest impediments to quality instruction are the belief that school factors are not the most important factors for students and the failure on the part of educators to understand the unique realities of individual students due to the prevalent objectivist view. The first results in a lack of belief on the part of educators in their abilities to positively impact students. The latter may have even more devastating effects because it ignores the subjectivist viewpoint that enables one to have a greater understanding of why students behave as they do, what these behaviors mean to them, and how they perceive their own learning. This is consistent with the constructivist paradigm, which holds that every individual has a unique perspective that has formed as a result of his or her unique experiences and exploration (Wadsworth, 1996). Gentilucci (2004) stated that educators and policy-makers must abandon their constant search for new insights that are based upon "politically fashionable issues" (p. 142) rather than furthering understanding of student perspectives. This call to focus on doing the things that work represents a pragmatist view, where practices are evaluated based on their effectiveness rather

than their theoretical basis or even their compatibility with current perceptions (Patton, 2002). Glover (2013) stated that the pragmatist viewpoint requires educators to constantly question current beliefs and practices because "we humans, at any given time, do not know what we think we know" (p. 54).

Gurian and Stevens (2006) offered biological and neurological insights into the issue of male difficulties in education, asserting that research proves that gender differences, and in turn many gender-specific behaviors and learning styles, are hard-wired into the human brain from conception. For this reason, they maintained that teachers who ask themselves why boys continue to be so disruptive in the classroom are not merely asking a pedagogical or behavioral question but ultimately a question of morality. They stated that this question should ultimately be summarized as, "should we keep trying to change our boys, or should we change the educational system in which they are now taught" (p. 88). Regarding the teaching of boys Gunzelmann and Connell (2006) have said that we must learn to change our approach and stop trying to change boys. However, educators have historically attempted to change boys due to the long-accepted the idea of "over-all neural plasticity" (Gurian & Stevens, 2006, p. 91), which leads them to believe that all students learn in essentially the same way and, therefore, can be taught in the same way. As a result, educators are not being taught about gender-based differences in learning. Gurian and Stevens (2006) pointed to these factors as major contributors to the stuggle of boys in education, which lead to years of frustration for many boys, whose abilities and character have been called into question by their failures and undesirable behavior in school. As a result, they have called for the undertaking of two goals: assisting all students in the "expression and development of the natural self" (p. 92), and in "compensation for areas of inherent disadvantage and fragility" (p. 92). Despite the magnitude of this challenge, they have

put forth an optimistic viewpoint, citing the great progress made over the course of a few decades in the area of improving outcomes for females by dismatling the patriarchal and sexist norms that were prevalent in our society, stating that the system can and must be changed again in order to help males in a way that does not harm females.

Boys and Mentoring

"Mentoring, as a method of sharing real-life experiences and knowledge, has been shown to be an effective intervention strategy for at-risk middle school students" (Johnson & Lampley, 2010, p. 68). Hall and Charmaraman (2011) have found that boys need extra school supports, advocating the use after-school mentoring and empowerment programs that are led by strong male role models. In their study of such programs boys reported learning to better evaluate the consequences of their actions and how they are viewed both in and out of school. The boys in these groups also reported forming strong bonds with their mentors and, in turn, viewing them as father-figures. In another study where 54 at-risk middle school students were each paired with an individual adult mentor, the researchers found that there was a statistically significant impact on student GPA, the number of discipline referrals, and student attendance (Johnson & Lampley, 2010). This is consistent with the findings of Niehaus et al. (2012) regarding school-connectedness. Increased knowledge of working with boys on the part of educators and programs to support boys may help to alleviate the disconnectedness so many of them feel.

Changing School Culture

Legewie and DiPrete (2012) found that schools must make a concerted effort to change their cultures in such a way that boys do not feel they are compromising their masculinity by being good students. This can be accomplished by establishing learning-oriented environments

that capitalize on the basic tendencies of boys. This includes fostering a culture of academic comptetition, which enables boys to be more fully academically engaged without feeling that they are, or appearing to be, compromising their masculinity. This acknowledgement of gender differences may prove instrumental in effecting positive changes for boys (Bonomo, 2010; Gurian & Stevens, 2006).

Nelson, McMahan, and Torres (2012) have found that moving from a singular focus on standardized testing may have a profound impact on school culture. In their 2-year study involving a community intervention program at a high-poverty junior high school, they found that increasing community and parent involvement in a positive, supportive, culturally aware environment yielded increases in student acievement. This was not due to curricular changes or even to changes in staff, but rather to changes in way students perceived their schools. Students reported feeling a greater connection to the school, believing that the adults they worked with genuinely cared for them. When the leadership of the school changed and reverted to a focus on testing, the positive results were immediately reversed. Students felt that they were only valued for their test scores and not for who they were as individuals. The primary implication of their study is clear: educators must respect who students are, their families, and their culture if they want to form meaningful connections and change school culture.

Needs of Students of Poverty

The United States has more than 12 million children living in poverty, which is more than any other industrialized nation. Edelman and Jones (2004) stated that despite the fact that in the last 30 years our nation's per capita wealth has nearly doubled, more children than ever before are living below the poverty line. Murnane (2007) found that "equality of educational

opportunity has for years been more the rhetoric than the reality of the nation's political life" (p.

161). There is little debate about whether or not students of low SES fare as well as their non-

low SES couterparts; quite simply, they do not (Kimmel, 2006; Southworth, 2010; United States

Department of Education, 2013). Students in poverty are much more likely to attend schools that

are poorly equipped and have less effective teachers. No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002)

contains provisons aimed at increasing proficiency among the poor and minorities, with one of

its foundational tenets being that education is the key to lifting folks out of poverty. While some

certainly argue that NCLB alone is inadequate (Anyon & Greene, 2007; Murnane, 2007) or even

represents a seriously flawed viewpoint at its very foundation because it assumes that

educational outcomes can be predicted in terms of causes and effects (Glover, 2013), there is

little doubt that the achievement rates, educational outcomes, and life outcomes of students in

poverty are a problem that must continue to be addressed. In short, "poverty is a complex issue

that needs more attention from government officials, researchers, and those in partnerships with

schools" (Parker, Grenville, & Flessa, 2011, p. 129).

National Trends

According to the most recent NAEP data, students who are eligible for the National

School Lunch Program (NSLP) are being outperformed in mathematics by their noneligible

counterparts by a significant margin: 23.78 points in grade 4, 27.16 points in grade 8, and 22.24

points in grade 12. The margins are similar in reading: 28.60 points in grade 4, 23.90 points in

grade 8, and 20.72 points in grade 12 (United States Department of Education, 2013).

Despite increasing demand for highly-skilled labor in the United States, two thirds of all

jobs do not require high skills or advanced education. These jobs are marked by lower earnings

and diminished job security. In the United States in 2004 there were over two million people living in poverty despite having at least one member of their household working full time year round. Despite the increases in overall employment rates of the last 2 decades, the most recent economic downturn notwithstanding, the wage gap between skilled and unskilled laborers has continued to increase. The implications of this are alarming: we can no longer assume that the poor are unemployed because a growing number of them are consistently employed on a full-time basis (Nightingale & Fix, 2004).

As the U.S. economy has shifted from a manufacturing base to a service base, the real wages, adjusted for inflation, of men without a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma have decreased by 25% since 1973. Only those with more than 4 years of college have seen an increase in earnings during this time period, which highlights the demand for highly-skilled educated workers (Nightingale & Fix, 2004). With no sustained progress in this area, "the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that 46% of all jobs in 2014 will be filled by workers with a high school diploma or less" (Berlin, 2007, p. 20). Additionally, the job loss rates for these workers is roughly twice that of their more highly-skilled and educated counterparts (Nightingale & Fix, 2004). While our economy has made a dramatic shift, our methods and structures of schooling have remained essentially static since the industrial era. When viewed through this lens, the current wage crisis, while still troubling, is much less surprising. Simply put, schools educate young people in ways that prepare them for types of jobs that no longer exist (Glover, 2013).

These factors, combined with wages for women that continue to lag behind those of men, have serious implications for our nation's children, who have the highest poverty rate of any group in the nation. The growing number of single-parent households, the majority of which are

headed by women, amounts to an increase in children living in poverty (Berlin, 2007;

Nightingale & Fix, 2004). The problems are even more pronounced for the increasing number of

minority children and children of immigrants because they face poverty rates that are more than

double the rates of white non-Hispanic children (Nightingale & Fix, 2004). Gorski (2008)

contended that current perspectives on poverty often relegate those living in it to generational

poverty because they lead educators and policy-makers to a focus on "fixing" the poor by

tending to the "so-called achievement gap" (p. 27) rather than the conditions that perpetuate

poverty. It has certainly been established that the burden of solving the poverty problem is often

placed squarely upon the shoulders of public education (Duncan, Ludwig, & Magnuson, 2007;

Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; Glover, 2013; Isernhagen, 2012; Krashen, 2005; Murnane, 2007;

Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2004).

School Connectedness

The work of Niehaus et al. (2012) does not focus solely on boys. On the contrary, the

focus of their reseach was on the perceptions of school connectedness of sixth grade students in

general. Their findings not only had serious implications for boys but also for students of low

SES. The problems faced by low SES students only serve to further highlight the need for

school connectedness, which has proven to be one of the most important indicators for positive

or negative educational outcomes for students who are transitioning to middle school. Baker and

Holloway (2009) found that the problem of school connectedness, and connection with adults in

general, is often exacerbated by a history of abuse and neglect that many, but certainly not all,

low SES students experience. Such students feel the need to be in control because their past

experiences have taught them to trust no one. For these students specialized interventions are

31

necessary because simply caring for and loving them, which is certainly a proper start, is not sufficient.

Green, Oswald, and Spears (2007) conducted a study to gain understanding of teachers' perceptions of resilience in students. They found that many teachers confuse resilience, defined by success despite the presence of difficulties, with competence, which is defined as success in the absence of difficulties. Such difficulties, such as living in poverty, cause students to be considered at-risk. While teachers seemed to have a firm grasp on the difficulties their students face, their collective misunderstanding of resilience has very serious implications. Simply put, failing to fully understand resilience renders them incapable of encouraging and fostering it. Furthermore, the teachers demonstrated a tendency toward underestimating the positive effects that the culture of their classrooms, of which teaching and learning are a part, can have on their at-risk students. As a result, the teachers in the study placed a greater emphasis on hard work and achievement as a way to overcome difficulties, and a much lower emphasis was placed on encouraging students by providing and helping them to find the resources that they need.

Hopkins (2005) found that among Tennessee schools with the highest levels of poverty, those classified as rural often outperformed others in mathematics achievement. While she was careful to state that her study cannot be used to establish causality, she proposed that it is possible that a greater sense of community and belonging in these communities may be significant, citing the tendency of these locales of identify individuals in terms of their belonging to a larger group such as a family, church, school, or the community itself. This increased capacity for social capital could, in turn, lead to greater feelings of security, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Niehaus et al., 2012). Despite these possible advantages, being rural also has its disadvantages. In more socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, federal mandates that have

placed an increased focus on standardized testing have caused poor districts to increase spending on test preparation. This diversion of already limited funding results in fewer resources being devoted to things that can positively impact students (Howlee, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009). Also, "students from poverty who have no family members experienced with higher education require exceptional levels of support in order to successfully graduate from college" (Burney & Cross, 2006, p. 18). Financial difficulties, attendance and enrollment-based funding, low teacher salaries, and stressful working conditions can make it difficult to provide such support. Conversely, however, rural schools may often have increased opportunities for students to form meaningful relationships and connections with educators and community members (Horst & Martin, 2007).

The work of Brighton (2003) revealed that middle school teachers sometimes have underlying beliefs that undermine reform initiatives they otherwise claim to support. However, she maintained that this contradiction is not intentional, stating that the gap between teachers' stated beliefs and practices is "filled with teachers' deeply held beliefs about the nature of middle school, the role of teacher [*sic*] in the middle school, and students' natural proclivities toward challenging learning" (p. 186). Brighton identified four underlying beliefs that present a challenge to school-connectedness: the teacher is an entertainer, teaching is talking and learning is listening, academic difficulties cause students to resist and shut down, and all students should do the same things in the same way. Research has indicated that teachers can be influenced to increase their use of school connectedness strategies, with those who receive appropriate training after entering the profession, as opposed to during their preservice college years, indicating they use such strategies with greater frequency (Vidourek, King, Bernard, Murnan, & Nabors, 2011).

Students of low SES tend to focus on day-to-day survival, which, in turn, leads to a greater sense of hopelessness about the future. This tendency to live solely in the moment results in dimished self-esteem and views of their potential selves (Clark et al., 2008). As such, these students are more likely to engage in riskier behaviors. When considered in combination with the physical and emotional changes experienced by middle grades students, these factors can lead to considerable turmoil for these students both academically and personally (Niehaus et al., 2012).

Hutton and Holmes (2005) further highlighted the economic tendencies of those of low SES. They examined the notions of time orientation and time preferences, contrasting those of different economic classes. Students in poverty and of lower SES consistently display a pattern of focusing on the present, because they have a fatalistic belief that they cannot ultimately change their circumstances. Low SES students view income as something to be spent to provide the greatest immediate gratification, whereas those of the middle and upper class view it as something to be invested. Furthermore, this tendency is shown to be connected to an even greater problem: time orientation is a reliable predictor of school investment, and is "inversely correlated with with income and educational achievement" (p. 3). The long-standing War on Poverty has had measurable positive effects for many of our nation's students. However, this study revealed an increase in low SES households with children under the age of 18 headed by working age, nonworking adults, from 18% in 1960 to 36% in 1999. This is likely due, at least in part, to the present-biased time preferences of those in poverty. With such preferences, these individuals "tend to make impulsive choices, driven by a tendency to overweight rewards and costs that are in close temporal or spatial proximity or are salient" (p. 4). The tendency to focus

only on the present also has implications in the area of adoloscent pregnancy. Many adolescent females who live in poverty do not believe that they have any chance furthering their education beyond high school. Additionally, they do not believe that there is any hope of changing their SES. As a result, these young women often conclude that the most worthwhile and noble thing that they can do to bring meaning to their lives is become a mother (Domenico & Jones, 2007).

Parents

Another factor that has shown to be an indicator of future student outcomes is the educational level of parents. It is no secret that the parents of low SES students tend have have a lower educational attainment level than the parents of middle class students. McClanahan and Beck (2010) found that despite the fact that 80% of unwed mothers studied had worked in the previous year, they still earned only $11,000 annually, compared to the $26,000 earned by their married counterparts. However, it is clear that the marital status of these women is not the cause of this discrepancy. The common thread among the vast majority of these mothers is their low level of educational attainment in comparison to their married counterparts. Simply put, this means that positive perceptions of school connectedness are even more important for students of low SES because they receive less academic and school related support from home. It is important to note that this in not an indictment of the parents of these students but rather an observation arising out of research (Niehaus et al., 2012). Kyle (2011) reported that while many parents of low-SES students realize the importance of their children obtaining a higher level of education than they did, these same parents often have conflicting goals for their children. Additionally, they often have negative perceptions of schooling because of their own experiences and, as a result, often feel unwelcomed in their childrens' schools (Rapp & Duncan, 2012).

In connection to this, Rapp and Duncan (2012) stated that parental involvement in education is typically lower among among children of poverty. Bigelow (2006) found that poverty hinders learning by undermining competent parenting. This results not only in diminshed parental involvement but also in increased incidences of learning disabilities. However, these parents want to be involved, and they want their children to be successful, just as their non-low SES counterparts (Parker et al., 2011). Their diminished involvement may be due to demographic causes such as difficulty work schedules that often involve multiple jobs and lack of reliable transportation (Rapp & Duncan, 2012). Additionally, many of these parents may face "psychological barriers, such as a lack of confidence in their own intellect and/or negative connotations about their own schooling" (p. 8). Furthermore, many schools do very little to make these parents feel welcome, with many educators making broad and unfair generalizations that lead to decreased school-initiated communication. For these reasons educators must make concerted efforts to involve these parents by making them feel respected, engage them using casual register, discipline carefully, realize that these parents must often deal with time constraints, and communicate the importance of education. Only then can schools truly involve them and more fully harness their potential influence on the education of their children (Payne, 2006).

Conflict and Lack of Support at Home

Santiago and Wadsworth (2009) stated, quite frankly, that "poverty contributes to and exacerbates family conflict" (p. 192) and creates a "context of stress" (p. 192) within the home. One implication of this is that poverty is not only a major hurdle in itself, but it also magnifies other problems because it requires so much energy on the part of students who must deal with its repurcussions on a daily basis, with a second implication being that school simply is not as

36

important to these students because they are forced to focus on day-to-day survival (Niehaus et al., 2012). This often leaves these students, who lack essential basic supports, to cope with their situations as best they can, resulting in greater susceptibility to anxiety and depression (Santiago & Wadsworth, 2009). The work of Cherlin (2005) also addressed these issues. He stated that in recent years the occurrence of single-parent households has increased at a greater rate among those in poverty, and that, while the divorce rate has decreased for college-educated women, it has increased for the less-educated. As a result, the income gap between married, educated, dual-earner households and single-parent households has widened. This exacerbates the problems facing children in single-parent homes. The work of Kalil and Ryan (2010) confirmed this. Their study highlighted the increase of "fragile families" or families that arise out of the increasing occurrences of nonmarital childbirths. These families, which include single mothers and cohabitating couples, are much more likely to experience poverty than their married counterparts. Married households have greater earning potential, and they benefit from economies of scale, meaning that an additional working adult typically brings considerably more resources to the family than he or she consumes (Thomas & Sawhill, 2005). Quite simply, the issue here is not which living arrangements are inherently good or bad but rather that, generally speaking, one is increasingly more financially stable than the other, with the children in the fragile homes experiencing diminished outcomes as a result of the economic deprivation and the stress that accompanies it (Cherlin, 2005; Kalil & Ryan, 2010; McClanahan & Beck, 2010; Thomas & Sawhill, 2005).

Kyle (2011) found that parental involvment decreases after elementary school. Some parents reported that work and other life circumstances are the reason for this. However, others blamed schools, at least in part, maintaining that middle schools fail to make a substantial effort

to involve parents. In addition, the parents felt that the schools became less interested and responsive to the individual needs and learning styles of their children as they advanced to higher grade levels.

Developmental Implications for Middle Grades Students

Research has shown that elementary teachers are more likely than middle school teachers to employ school connectedness strategies (Vidourek et al., 2011). This is troubling because school connectedness can have a profound impact on at-risk middle school students who do not believe that postsecondary education is an option because of their disadvantaged circumstances. Additionally, many of them do not believe that they have the ability to succeed in postsecondary education (Radcliffe & Stephens, 2008). These beliefs regarding self-efficacy can greatly enhance or inhibit the educational outcomes of students. Usher and Pajares (2006) stated that the transition to middle school is a critical time to examine the factors that contribute to the self-efficacy beliefs of students because many of these factors are unique to middle grades students. Their work, based in invitational theory, focused on the use of invitations by individuals to "send uplifting and powerful messages to themselves and to others that serve to improve their own functioning and well-being" (p. 8). These invitations help the individual students realize their potential as well as enhance that of others. Conversely, middle grades students who fail to make connections to their schools are much more liklely to engage in risky behaviors because they have increasing opportunity as they grow older and because they are more likely to do so at that stage of development (Vidourek et al., 2011).

Radcliffe and Stephens (2008) highlighted the findings of their 7-year longitudinal study following a cohort of at-risk students beginning in the sixth grade. The interventions provided

include mentoring, use of technology, campus visits, and parent education. Students were mentored and tutored by preservice teachers who not only helped them with academics, but also instilled their beliefs surrounding college and the importance of education by forming bonds with the students. Results indicated that the student participants experienced enhanced perceptions of college and an elevation of their educational aspirations. This study provided strong evidence that it is possible to change students perceptions and goals regarding postsecondary education, and that it is important to begin this process prior to the high school years.

After even a cursory examination of these circumstances one can easily see that, generally speaking, students of low SES are much less likely to reach their full potential, thereby leading to diminished academic achievement. Schuette, Ponton, and Charlton (2012) have found that low SES children have lower aspirations than their middle-class peers. This phenomenon can be attributed both to their fear of failure, as well as to the risk of being estranged to their families and peer groups, which often occurs when one exceeds the status of his or her defined group. In addition, the overwhelming focus of schools on high-stakes tests that are designed based upon the learning strengths of middle-class students leaves many of these already disadvantaged students in an even more precarious position (Glover, 2013). The combined effect of these factors lead to student perceptions that become especially powerful influences in the middle-grades because it is then that they reach a developmental stage where they being to more fully understand their SES and, in turn, define themselves and form associations based upon it (Schuette et al., 2012).

The work of Kyle (2011) is encouraging for educators. In a follow-up study conducted 13 years after her initial study involving seven students from mostly low-income families, she found that five were engaged in postsecondary education of some type, one was planning to

39

enroll the following year, and one was in the process of becoming a professional firefighter. The common thead among all seven students was that they all had excellent teachers in their early years of schooling. In addition, their teachers made several home visits and fostered a relationship of trust and collaboration with the parents. While Kyle was careful to point out that she makes no claim of causality, she notes that "we can speculate and wonder a bit" (p. 21) regarding the impact of these early positive and meaningful experiences on the educational and career outcomes of these students.

Implications for Mathematics Instruction

One particular area of concern regarding the achievement of low-SES students is mathematics. McKinney and Frazier (2008) stated that even though schools serving high populations of these students have diversified their pedagogical methods to an extent, the traditional methods of lecture and teacher led instruction with a focus on drill and practice continue to define many high-poverty classrooms. The problem with this is that these methods have been shown to be less effective for all students, but especially low SES students. Furthermore, although some schools have shown improvement among members of this demographic, the improvements only occurred in the area of basic skills, providing little or no benefit in more critical areas such as problem solving. This is further supported by findings that students attain greater mathematical achievement when pedagogical methods include exploration and reasoning through more hands-on, student-directed approaches. Such methods have been shown to increase students' abilities to make connections between mathematical learning and their own life experiences, which is an essential element of the constuctivist paradigm (Wadsworth, 1996). Furthermore, research has shown that a one-size-fits-all curriculum often fails to address the needs of at-risk students (Woodward & Brown, 2006).

One possible way to mitigate the negative affects of poverty for these middle grade students in through implementation, full or partial, of what is known as the middle school concept. In a study of several high-poverty, high-performing schools Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, and Sobel (2004) highlighted several components of this concept that have proven to be effective over time. They found that "successful middle schools share a belief in excellence and equity for all" (p. 4). These schools made a coordinated and concerted effort not to passively discriminate against low SES students by holding them to diminshed expectations. On the contrary, the educators within these schools firmly maintained that "a student's background and prior academic performance do not pass as reasons to lower expectations" (p. 5). This no excuses culture has shown to be critical in the outcomes of students in poverty. However, these expectations alone are insufficient because, as has been previously stated, these students lack the necessary framework and supports to reach their potential. Quite simply, if these students are to reach their potential, schools must not only have high expectations, they must also provide the frameworks and supports that the students lack. This is where the other elements of the middle school model are so important. School structures represent one such element. For example, successful schools often employed student teams to create a seemingly smaller, more intimate and supportive environment for their students. Additionally, these schools ensured that the teachers serving individual student teams have plenty of time for common planning and collaboration. This also helped to create a more personal level of instruction and to establish a more positive school culture. In addition to school structures, successful middle schools paid particular attention to individual student needs by providing them additional time through the use of very specific strategies to ensure that all students have opportunities to form meaningful

41

connections with at least one adult within the school. This included the use of afterschool

programs that were tailored to the needs of students. Yet another crucial element of these

successful schools was the use of data to provide targeted instruction in areas of individual

students need. Teacher-generated data, benchmark testing, and longitudinal student data were all

used to inform instruction. Finally, these schools placed a great emphasis on continuous, high-

quality professional development. These schools often used curriculum coaches to deliver

content-specific assistance to teachers for the purpose of enhancing instruction.

Implications: High School, College, and Beyond

There is no question that boys are struggling throughout all levels of education (Clark et

al., 2008; Hall & Charmaraman, 2011) and that low SES students have significantly lower school

success and academic attainment than their non-low SES counterparts (Niehaus et al., 2012;

Santiago & Wadsworth, 2009; Schuette et al., 2012). However, to fully understand these issues,

one must look beyond the current school setting to the educational, career, and life outcomes of

these students.

Increased Dropout Risk

As mentioned previously, Clark et al. (2008) reported that boys tend to exhibit negative

behviors more frequently than girls, which, in turn, leads to an increased risk of dropping out of

school. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) maintained that one possible explanation for this is that

education is more highly valued among more affluent families, and that poor grades and low

achievement are risk factors for dropping out. They further emphasized the importance of

family, stating that "parental education, occupation, and income, - in other words, socioeconomic

status" (p. 85) all add increased risk. It is imperative that interventions begin early because

42

dropping out is typically not an isolated response to a single event. On the contrary, it is the culmination of an ongoing pattern of disengagement. This is consistent with the findings of Niehaus et al. (2012) regarding school connectedness. When boys, or girls for that matter, fail to connect to their schools, they are almost unfailingly at a distinct disadvantage. It is important to note that the effects of dropping out are not short-lived. They typically have a negative impact for the rest of the student's life, and not just for the student. These negative effects are manifested in dramatically decreased earnings on the part of the individual and limited financial contribution to society as a whole (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Some research has even found that students of low SES are encouraged by schools to leave. This is a direct repurcussion of high-stakes accountability, where teachers, administrators, schools, and districts can face punitive measures for failing to meet certain achievement and gap closure goals. As a result, some schools have begun to encourage struggling students, many of whom are of low-SES, to leave school altogether. This artificially inflates the performance of these schools because many of the lower achieving students are no longer factored into the scoring (McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008). Glover (2013) stated that these assessments are designed to accommodate learning styles displayed by white middle-class students. Furthermore, "test-focused instruction works against the development of the kinds of skills that would enable all students, including while, minority, high-income, and low-income students to perform better in the workplace" (p. 70).

Decreased College Enrollment

Sax (2007) highlighted the gender gap within our nation's postsecondary institutions by pointing out that the majority of girls who enroll will eventually earn a degree, while most boys

43

will not. Moreover, Chenoweth (2012) has stated that college admissions officers "invariably give more weight" (p. 12) to verbal competencies in which girls are generally more advanced. He went on to explain that the gender discrepancies in our nation's colleges are simply extensions of what is happening in our elementary and secondary schools: girls are outperforming boys, making them more likely to seek postsecondary education as well as more likely to be recruited by postsecondary institutions.

Schrader and Brown (2008) reported that 57% of all bachelor's degrees are awarded to women. Behrend (2009) found that many colleges are expecting that the imbalance in enrollment on their campuses will reach 60% female to 40% male. While this certainly represents dramatic progress for women, it serves to further highlight the educational decline of boys. This is troubling because research demonstates the importance of college in the development of successful adults (Gurian & Stevens, 2005), and "a disproportionate number of our males are not finding a home in college" (p. 27). This is consistent with the findings of Kimmel (2006), who pointed out that college enrollment rates are increasing for both males and females, but that the rate of increase is greater for females. The problem is not with the numbers themselves but with the the demographic and ethnic disparities. He found that working-class women are finding a place in college at a much higher rate than working-class men. This is likely due, at least in part, to the fact that college-educated women still earn roughly the same amount per year as high school-educated men, which illuminates another continuing problem in our society. Nevertheless, when viewed alongside the United States's increasing poverty rate, this trend is still disconcerting.

Motivation and Perceptions of Self-Efficacy

Generally speaking, all students experience a decrease in motivation as they go through college. However, this is more problematic for males because they are less motivated, both intrinsically and extrinsically, than their female counterparts (Brouse, Basch, LeBlanc, McKnight, & Lei, 2010). Schrader and Brown (2008) reinforced the idea that boys continue to struggle well beyond middle and high school, stating that females tend to outperform males across all grades and many subjects. This problem is further exacerbated for low SES college students, who are typically first generation because research shows that they are twice as likely to drop out before the second year. Examined together, these factors highlight the need for secondary and college-level programs that provide male students with the necessary coping strategies, study skills, resiliency, and general support (Yeh, 2010). Such intervention programs could serve to alleviate the problem, at least in part, by providing these males with a much-needed sense of increased self-efficacy, which research has shown to be a more critical indicator than previous success or achievement (Bembenutty, 2007).

Life Outcomes

Finally, males are increasingly experiencing diminished life outcomes as a result of their difficulties with schooling. Conroy (1998) found that males consistently exhibit lower educational aspirations. In his study, of the students indicating that they only aspired to obtain and high school diploma, over 70% were male. Of the students who reported planning to obtain a bachelor's degree, approximately 41% were male. This is consistent with the previously highlighted study by Clark et al. (2008) that stated that girls generally have higher educational aspirations than boys. Though male and female college enrollment has increased over recent

45

decades, the rate of increase is much greater for females, with the percentage of females enrolled in undergraduate programs having surpassed that of males by 1980. By 2004 females represented 57% of student enrolled in undergraduate programs (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, & Fox, 2007). Research has indicated that low SES males face even greater challenges because of diminished parent involvement and its effect on college enrollement and completion (Woodside, Gibbons, Davison, Hannon, & Sweeney, 2012). Males from these lower SES households begin to receive messages, implicit and explicit, that shape their views of work and career. Such males are less likely to enroll in college. Moreover, if they do enroll in college, they are at a greater risk to struggle, and are much less likely to finish. These males have a diminished sense of self-efficacy, and they perceive many barriers to their lifelong success. As such, they often resign themselves to limited opportunities. In this study those who did experience varying levels of success and job fulfillment indicated that their parents, in particular their fathers, were a vital influence (Woodside et al., 2012). Unfortunately, a large percentage of low SES males do not have fathers or male role models in the home (Hines, 2007), with paternal involvement steadily decreasing as they get older (McClanahan & Beck, 2010). Cherlin (2005) highlighted this, pointing out that changes in economic and cultural trends have led to an increase in single-parent households in the United States, with a disproportionate number of those being single-mother households. He went on to state that this is directly linked to the high poverty rates of the United States because it offers less support, both through social welfare and other supports such as child care, than almost all other developed countries. As a result, children in the United States have a lower relative standard of living than children in other developed countries, with those of very low SES experiencing a "profound level of deprivation" (Baker & Holloway, 2009, p. 37) that

has "been well documented through reduced graduation rates, higher incidents of incarceration, and a perpetuation of family legacies defined by impoverishment" (p. 37).

Questions and Challenges Raised by the Literature

The risk factors associated with boys as well as those associated with low SES students are significant. However, a consideration of the combined effects of the two is especially alarming. Boys in poverty tend to feel even more isolated in schools than boys in general (Niehaus et al., 2012). Low SES boys in particular feel that they can increase their status among their peers by demonstrating a rebellious, antischool attitude. In fact, boys in poverty tend to cultivate an "oppositional culture" (Legewie & DiPrete, 2012, p. 468) in schools. Moreover, it is likely that the girls, who are outperforming boys in general, do so by an even greater margin in low SES schools. Research has also shown that boys, who are already more disruptive and impulsive than girls in general, are even more disruptive and impulsive when the element of poverty is added (Clark et al., 2008). Furthermore, boys in poverty tend to have lower aspirations than, not only girls, but also middle class boys because they feel more confined by societal as well as their own perceptions of masculinity (Conroy, 1998; Schuette et al., 2012). If schools are to ever overcome, or even alleviate, these negative effects they must take proactive steps to reach these boys. Positive teacher relationships, greater school connectedness, and increased teacher quality are all essential elements to improving the outcomes of these students. Glover (2013) addressed this need when he stated that "the emphasis on academic achievement discourse represents a crisis because it has virtually eliminated human development discourse" (p. 70). In simplest terms, policymakers and educators must come to understand and truly believe that much of what is lacking in the lives of these students is not purely academic. The literature presented in this chapter suggests that focusing solely on the academic neglects the

higher tiers of Maslow's (1970) hierarchy and, in turn, undermines the ability of students to be truly self-motivated. Limiting what happens in our schools to a strict set of standards and relegating student outcomes to a certain test score may limit students and especially those who are already at a disadvantage. It may be time to shift the goal of educators from producing higher test scores based entirely upon an ineffective industial age paradigm and transition to a focus on teaching students how to learn (Glover, 2013).

The work of Legewie and DiPrete (2012) is particularly encouraging because it implied that school culture can determine the behaviors and outcomes of these low SES boys rather than the prevailing view that their behavior determines the culture. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important for educators to believe that these boys can reach their potential, and that properly structured schools staffed with high-quality teachers can make a difference in their lives. Furthermore, research has shown that interventions designed to improve boys' self-perceptions can have a positive impact (Bembenutty, 2007; Hall & Charmaraman, 2011).

While elevating the expectations of educators and providing meaningful interventions represent a noble starting point, it seems likely that a greater paradigm shift will be required to alleviate the problems facing boys. Gurian and Stevens (2005) captured the dangers of our current educational and societal climate:

> Whether the boy in your life is high performing or low performing, he is at risk of being taught, managed, and guided in a system that may find him defective and may not know how to fix either him or itself. (p. 25)

When the already considerable challenges facing boys are exacerbated by poverty, conducting school in traditional, longstanding ways is likely to prove ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. In short, the exceptionally difficult challenges facing boys in

poverty call for exceptional measures to be taken by educators and policymakers (Berlin, 2007; Edelman & Jones, 2004; Legewie & DiPrete, 2012; McNeil et al., 2008; Parker et al., 2011; Sax, 2007, 2006).

Summary

This chapter was an examination of the literature related to the increased difficulties encountered by boys as well as students of poverty. The first section of the chapter began by examining the needs of boys. The second section was an examination of the needs of students in poverty, while the third section focused on the implications of gender and poverty factors for these students as they progress throughout their lives. The last section was a discussion the conclusions and possible implications that were drawn from this review of the literature.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study is an examination of the characteristics, perceptions, and circumstances of socioeconomically disadvantaged eighth grade males who performed at or above expectation as measured by the EXPLORE test. Archival EXPLORE data, as well as free and reduced price lunch data, were used to identify high school graduates, both male and female, who had performed at or above expectation on the eighth grade administration of the EXPLORE test while receiving free or reduced price lunch. Females were included in this study to determine if factors leading to success and participant perceptions differed with respect to gender. Prior to conducting participant interviews, I reflected upon my own experiences, both as a teacher and administrator, as well as on informal communications with teachers regarding the students served within the school community. This reflection was used for the purpose of informing the student interview process. Following this reflection, the Student Interview Guide (appendix A) was developed, and 12 students meeting the necessary criteria were interviewed. The collective responses of the students offered valuable insight into the characteristics of these students, their available supports, their views of education, their relationships with their parents or guardians, and their relationships with educators within the school. This chapter provides a description of how participants were selected, the interview process and protocols, and the categorization and analysis of the data.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes as measured by the EXPLORE test for

eighth grade males who qualify for free or reduced price lunch. In addition, this study was conducted for the purpose of improving the educational program at a Northeast Tennessee middle school. Student participants were interviewed during May and June of 2014. These student interviews serve as the data source for this study. The following research questions served as focal points throughout the process:

1. What are the factors that enable some students of poverty to experience success while the majority of them fall behind?
2. Are there differences among male and female students of poverty?

Sampling Strategies

Because the purpose of this study was to gain in-depth understanding of a very specific population within a single school, the researcher chose to use a qualitative case study. Case studies are focused "on a single instance of something or a single entity, not on methodology" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 345) and involve "organizing the data by specific cases for in-depth study and comparison" (Patton, 2002, p. 447). Both of these descriptions are quite consistent with the goals of this research. However, taking into consideration the narrow scope of this research, the sampling strategies used by the researcher were inherently limited.

When using purposeful sampling, the "researcher selects particular elements from the population that will be representative or informative about the topic of interest" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 132). Because the focus of this study was to gain a richer understanding of the factors that enable some low SES males to be successful, as well as to determine if there are differences between low SES males and females, I chose to employ this strategy. Former students both male and female who have since graduated from high school were selected based upon their having scored at least a 16 composite on the EXPLORE test while in eighth grade, as

51

well as upon their eligibility for free or reduced lunch prices during that same time. A composite

score of 16 is the college-readiness benchmark for the EXPLORE test ("ACT's College

Readiness Benchmarks", n.d.). I chose to use this selection criterion because these scores are

readily available and because of my belief that they provide the greatest degree of consistency

available across multiple academic years.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010) convenience sampling involves the

selection of participants based upon their accessibility. Because the focus of this research was on

a single school where the researcher served as principal, this sampling strategy was used.

Recruiting Protocol

Before any participants were recruited for this study, I first obtained approval from the

Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Director of Schools because archival district data were

used as the selection criteria. Following the acquisition of these permissions, former students of

both genders who met the sampling criteria were identified. Prospective participants were then

contacted via telephone using the Phone Script (Appendix B). The Phone Script included a

description of the purpose of the study and asked the prospective participants if they would be

willing to consider participating. If they indicated that they would, they were given

approximately 2 weeks for reflection and making their decision, then they were contacted again

by telephone. At that time, if they indicated that they were willing to participate, appointments

were scheduled for the purpose of reviewing the process, ensuring that the student was willing,

and completing the necessary informed consent paperwork.

Interview Guide

In order to allow for more conversational and natural responses during the participant interview process, an interview guide was developed. The interview guide approach allowed for a certain degree of standardization in the interview process as well as ensured that all pertinent questions were asked to each participant, while also providing me with the necessary flexibility regarding sequencing, wording, and follow-up questioning (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This approach allowed participants to respond more freely by allowing for a more conversational environment, thus reducing the likelihood of leading questions while increasing the "naturalness and relevancy" (p. 355) of participant responses. This level of standardization served to keep the interviews on topic as well as to ensure that the limited time available for each interview was fully used (Patton, 2002).

The questions used in the participant interviews were all designed to address the research questions. They were based in part upon my reflections upon my own experiences as an educator as well as reflections and insights shared informally by other professional educators. These reflections provided the foundation for the formation of questions used in the interview guide. All questions were carefully reviewed to ensure that they were open-ended, not dichotomous, that they did not jeopardize my rapport with the participants, and that they served to maintain the dignity of the participants as well as my neutrality as the interviewer. Finally, the questions were categorized as experience and behavior, opinions and values, feeling, knowledge, sensory, and background. This information was then used to tentatively sequence the questions, although I did not consider myself completely bound by the sequencing (Patton, 2002).

Interview Logistics

Participant interviews were scheduled at times that were convenient for the participants. All interviews were held in a meeting room at the school, unless requested otherwise by the participant, and were scheduled to last for 1 hour. I asked questions of each participant, with all interviews being recorded and transcribed in their entirety for the purpose of categorization and analysis of data.

Ethical Protocol

This study was first approved by my dissertation committee, then by the IRB of East Tennessee State University. It was also necessary to obtain the permission of the Director of Schools, because archival school data was used in the selection process. Finally, consent from each individual participant was obtained in accordance with the IRB of East Tennessee State University regulations.

I assured participants that their confidentiality was of paramount importance. Pseudonyms were used for each participant, and the participants were allowed to choose their own if they so desired. Furthermore, they were informed that all recordings and transcripts would be destroyed after the completion of the study. Finally, all interview transcripts were reviewed by the participants and were only used as data after the participants approved their content.

Data Analysis

All participant interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim. The data were then coded using the five steps identified and described by McMillan and

Schumacher (2010). First, all interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times so that I could begin to process their content, both individually and collectively. Initial codes were then generated and written in the margins during subsequent readings. The codes were then listed, compared for duplication, refined, and classified as *major*, *important*, or *minor*. Unmarked copies of the transcripts were then coded using the refined system. Finally, additional refining was done throughout all subsequent analysis as themes and categories continued to more clearly emerge.

Analysis of the data was then conducted by organizing the emergent themes into a spreadsheet. Further analysis was also conducted by using the themes to create a cross-classification matrix (Patton, 2002).

Quality and Verification

For this study quality and verification were addressed in several ways. During the interviews member checking was used. If something was unclear, clarifying questions were asked to ensure that the intended meanings of the participants were understood. As previously described, participant interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participant verification was subsequently used. All participants were given complete authority to edit or remove any of their words from the transcripts. During the data analysis phase of the research emphasis was placed on describing observed phenomena and constructing meaning from participants' own words. Peer review was used to ensure the validity of the researcher's findings. Finally, researcher bias was fully acknowledged.

Summary

The methodology used in the completion of this study has been outlined in this chapter. The chapter began with a description of the research methods that were used. This was followed by a description of the purpose of the study and the research questions that guided it. The third and fourth sections provided a description of the sampling strategies that were used and the recruiting protocol. The fifth section provided a description of the development of the interview guide, while the sixth section consisted of an explanation of the interview logistics. The seventh section included a discussion of the ethical protocol used for this study, while the eighth section contained a description of the data analysis procedures. Finally, the ninth section provided a discussion of the quality and verification measures that were taken to enhance the validity of this research.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes as measured by the EXPLORE test for eighth grade males who qualify for free or reduced price lunch. In addition, this study was conducted for the purpose of improving the educational program at a Northeast Tennessee middle school. Interviews were conducted with 12 participants, all high school graduates who were at least 18 years of age who had attended the middle school that is the focus of this study. Additionally, each of the 12 participants had proven to be academically successful as measured by the EXPLORE test, and each received free or reduced price lunch during the time they attended middle school.

During the interviews I sought to determine what factors, if any, enabled these former students to be successful despite their socioeconomic status. The transcripts of these interviews serve as the data for this research project. Using the interview guide approach, the following questions, along with follow-up questions that arose naturally from participant responses, were asked of each participant:

1. What are the dominant experiences or big things that you recall from middle school?

2. Who are the people you knew in middle school and perhaps know now that were strong influences on you? How did they influence you?

3. Who outside of school influenced you during the middle schools years? How?

4. How well did the elementary school prepare you for middle school? What might have provided you with better preparation?

5. How well did the middle school prepare you for high school? How might that preparation have been better?

Eleven of the interviews were conducted in a private office at the school that is the focus of the study. The remaining interview was conducted in a private room at the library of the university attended by the participant. Prior to each of the interviews, the participant was given the Informed Consent Document so that she or he would be completely aware of the process and what she or he was being asked to do. During this time I invited them to ask any questions they desired to ask. Each of them voluntarily signed the document and agreed to participate in the study.

The interviews lasted anywhere from approximately 15 to 40 minutes, depending on the depth of responses given by the participant. Just before each interview, I reinforced my commitment to protect the identity of each participant and invited him or her to select the pseudonym by which he or she would be known for the purpose of this research. Table 1 lists the participants by pseudonym and gender:

Table 1

Participants by Pseudonym and Gender

Pseudonym	Gender
Samuel	Male
Amy	Female
Phil	Male
Ted	Male
Hazel	Female

Table 1 Continued

Janie	Female
Cadence	Female
Andrew	Male
Maggie	Female
Ashley	Female
Josh	Male
James	Male

After each interview was completed and transcribed, a copy was given to each participant for her or his review. This was done to ensure accuracy both of word and intended meaning. Each participant was given full editorial authority over the final contents of his or her interview.

After all 12 transcripts were edited and approved by the respective participants, the data were reviewed and coded. Initial codes were generated through my own repeated review of the data, with each subsequent review leading to refinement of the codes. This process was repeated until no new codes or combinations of codes emerged.

Although the participants were told that they did not have to use names during their interviews, no attempt was made to restrict such use because I wanted their responses to be as authentic and natural as possible. In several instances the participants did mention other individuals, whether peers, teachers, or other adults, by name. All such names have been changed or omitted to protect the identities of these individuals, as well as that of the participants themselves, while preserving the intended meaning of the participants.

Initial analysis of the interview data revealed numerous themes. However, continued analysis and refinement revealed 11 recurring themes that addressed in various ways the reasons why these students reported they had been successful in middle school and beyond. Upon further analysis of these themes, two emerged as overarching themes that encompassed the other nine. The overarching themes are connection to the school and support and motivation. The following outline lists these themes along with their subthemes:

I.   Connection to school

      a. Teachers

      b. Peers

      c. Other adults

      d. Extracurricular activities

      e. School structure, culture, and supports

II.   Support and motivation

      a. Parents

      b. Other adults

      c. Preparation

      d. Ability and talent

Other adults is listed under both dominant themes because, in some instances, the other adults were within the school, while in others they were not. The following is a discussion of those common themes.

When asked the questions from the Interview Protocol, nearly all of the participants

spoke in various ways about how they felt a connection to the school. Although they generally

did not use the word *connection*, they spoke of teachers and other adults in the school, their

peers, and the activities in which they participated in ways that made it clear that the school, or at

least areas within the school, were places where they felt they belonged.

Teachers

When the participants spoke about what stood out to them from their middle school

experience, 10 of them mentioned teachers in some way. Some mentioned negative experiences

with teachers, but most described being positively affected by a teacher or teachers.

Samuel captured both ends of the spectrum regarding his relationship with his teachers

when he stated:

> Well I'm not going to lie. There were some teachers that really got on my nerves and
> made me want to punch a wall. But overall, my teachers were amazing. They, they
> made it fun to be there sometimes. There was one teacher that I had, she made it actually
> really, really fun to be in a math class. And I'm good at math, but I absolutely despise it.
> Unfortunately she's gone now. She was a great teacher. She really knew how to connect
> with students.

He elaborated by stating that there was only one negative instance he could remember, and that

"it was just because of some slight pompousness" on the part of the teacher. Later in the

interview he again complimented his teachers, stating that, "when you were having trouble they

would help, and this even extended into high school." He also said that the teachers who

impacted him "somehow found the balance between teaching a buttload of students and caring

for each and every one of them," adding that he was comfortable with them because there was a "relaxed feeling in the room." He went on to say:

> But here it felt like the teachers had the idea of, "okay, you did bad on this test, how can I help you do better on the next one or give you something that I can help you bring up this grade with extra credit of something?" Because it seemed like they were genuinely concerned with us as human beings instead of us as a product of the work.

Amy shared some of the same sentiments. Speaking particularly of her math and science teachers, she said, "they were awesome." She elaborated:

> Like if you had a question, you know, on a subject, you were able to ask and not be afraid. You know, because sometimes you're intimidated by teachers, you know, when they may be like, "I don't want you to ask." But here you can ask and they listen to you, and they understand you and you can talk to them. They are your friend, I can say.

She spoke specifically of how her teachers encouraged her when she was in middle school by stating:

> They knew that I could do more than everyone expected. You know, I could do more and I could go beyond…you know I went more advanced to more honors courses, and that was, in some cases, that was a challenge. Because for me, you know, I wasn't sure I was going to be able to do this. But as teachers they were always, "you know you can do this. You know how to do this", and they were always there for me. And if I had a question, or if I had something about the subject, they knew how to push me to my limit to go beyond what was expected…there's two or three from the middle school that did that.

She also indicated that her teachers supported her in other, nonacademic ways, stating that they were very understanding and supportive when her parents divorced while she was in middle school. She shared that she still keeps in touch with some of them, saying that there are some "that I still talk to once in a while when I have a chance that are from my middle school."

Ted did not provide as much detail about his middle school teachers but said that "any teacher, really, who just didn't take a complete and utter disliking to being a teacher" had a positive impact on him. When asked if he had any of those he replied, "honestly, almost all of my English and math teachers seemed to really, really enjoy their job and enjoy kids. And Mr. Harley with social studies."

Hazel spoke fondly of the influence that her enrichment class teacher had on her while she was in middle school. She stated, "I loved going to enrichment with her, and, like, going to enrichment camp and all those things."

Janie spoke of several teachers she had, providing insight into what it was about them that made a difference for her. She stated:

> Like Ms. Martin, Alice Martin. She's awesome, friendly. And let's see who else. Ms. Easter. I like my English teachers a lot. I don't know why, they've always been really cool. Ms. Hanson. They were all influential. Really my favorite subjects were, like, English and stuff like that. But like Ms. Hanson…I never was a big science person, but she helped me a lot when I was in science class. Ms. Andrews, yeah she was super good.

She further elaborated on what caused her to feel a connection to some of her teachers. She explained:

> Well, they were just easy to relate to and just super nice. I've had a lot of experiences with teachers who were strict and mean, and they don't really try and connect with the students. The ones that have, when they do, it's like you're more open to learning because I had a streak like in middle school when I was a little rebellious, and I don't know if that's for everyone. But I don't know, the teachers who connect with you and stuff, it's nice. It makes you feel like you have a friend in the school. Especially, like, the transition from elementary school to middle school was a big deal, so mostly all of them were my seventh grade teachers. Just having those friendly faces that I saw, and that helped me a lot.

Cadence spoke of the importance of her relationship with the assistant principal, who she knew prior to middle school through a friend. She said, "I knew that she was always there if I needed anything. I could go right to her." She also knew the librarian because of where she attended church, and she knew another of her teachers who was the spouse of a teacher she had in elementary school. She stated that "because of the small town, I liked that we knew other people," adding that "it helped me to be more confident to know people."

Andrew spoke of the importance of the relationship he had with three of his teachers and the way they conducted their classes. He said:

> Ms. Hanson, she was my biggest one. She was like the first teacher I had in Middle School. She was always really awesome. She was one of those free teachers, you know, and you could actually have a class discussion with. I mean that was really important. I liked that a lot. There was, I enjoyed the openness that we had with Ms. Easter, too, because she was…we did a play with her, which is totally out…She just opened up a new door for us and we could do something out of the blue, spontaneous. I really liked that too.

When speaking of these teachers, he also said, "And you kinda [*sic*] take something from those people because you can just connect with them." He went on to say that they were not traditional, lecture-type teachers, and that when it came to discipline and classroom management, they "know how to present their control in a different environment."

Maggie expressed sentiments similar to several other participants when she explained what made a difference to her when it came to teachers. She stated:

> They were just very good teachers for one, and they were people you felt like you could go talk to if you needed them. They were there. And you could be open with them and they were just sweet and kind and good. That's probably the main thing.

She added that "they were always open to help you whenever you needed it", which "made it easy to learn."

Ashley shared her experience with a particular teacher who "was very personable" that served as a confidant for her. She said, "She was that [a confidant] for me. There were a few instances when I really leaned on her for a few things." She also indicated that she had a connection with two other teachers, one through her mother and one through church, prior to coming to middle school, and that this had a positive effect on her middle school experience.

Josh spoke of the importance of being able to trust his teachers. He stated that when his teachers offered extra support that they would "keep up on their word, too," by following through and doing what they said they would do. He also said, "They were nice. They always compliment you, even if you're doing it wrong. They always help you, and just the compliments help a lot. [They] don't push the kid down." Josh indicated that he believed that teachers were the most important success factor for him. He stated:

> I would probably say the most important factor, even over my parents and stuff, is how well the teachers take you in, like basically, like, you're their own, you know. And the teacher is probably the one that helped out the most.

Peers

Another predominant theme in the data centered on the importance of peers. This was evident in several different contexts. All of the participants mentioned peers to varying degrees at some point during their respective interviews.

Several participants spoke of the closeness of their middle school friends and how such friendships helped them to manage the adjustment of going to middle school. At other times the

participants spoke of how their peers enhanced their academic performance through support, encouragement, and even competition. In addition, some of the participants shared memories of their peers as examples of what not to do.

Samuel spoke of how his friends helped him to cope with difficult situations, saying:

And all through elementary school I didn't have all too many friends, and it's about the same amount as I had in middle school, but my friends in middle school were closer than my elementary school friends were. And it brought me out of my shell a little bit, and they helped me do that. But they also, whenever something was going on with school and I felt like I wanted to bash my head against a wall, I would hang around them, chill out, and everything would be fine because I realized while I was hanging out with them that even if I screwed up something, that there was always something I could do to remedy the situation.

He later added, "They were great for morale," indicating that they helped him with the transition and through other difficult situations.

Amy recalled how "you always have that one best friend that you're always together, you do everything together," and went on to add, "And with me, my friend, she was always there for me." Amy indicated that this friendship benefited her, not only from a supportive standpoint, but also from an academic standpoint. She said:

And when testing comes, we would study together and make sure we got everything, you know, so we could do our best. And we were always trying to compete. I can say, you know, when report cards came out, well I got one more point than you, you know, or you got me this time. You know, those were fun times. But, you know, we made…learning a competition sometimes, but a good competition is to make the best.

She went on to say that their academic relationship was not always competitive. She elaborated:

It was like, if she was not I guess, very good at math, that was one subject that I was good. You know I always helped her out, and with English, she always helped me out, or with grammar. You know we always helped. Our strongest, sometimes it was their

66

weakness, so we helped each other out. Our weakness was their strongest so we helped each other out all the time.

She indicated that this friendship has lasted up to the present, saying, "We are still, even though I live in another state, you know, we are still talking and communicating with each other."

Although Phil did not speak as directly about the importance of friends, he did say, "middle school kinda [*sic*] got me on the right track, and kinda [*sic*] the friends groups I'd be in, but not necessarily certain friends." Phil did mention a particular friend and the effect they had on one another, both socially and academically. He stated:

> I had one friend that I made in middle school and we were close, played video games together, hung out and played some sports. I mean, we were both in "honors-ish" classes, so. We took drama together and stuff, but it was kinda [*sic*] competitive at the same time, but it was, it was very competitive because we were both in the gifted program and we were trying to, like, be all these little benchmarks.

Ted spoke of the importance of having a friend he could go to during difficult times both at school and at home. He stated:

> I had one friend that was always the guy who I was, like you know if I was having a hard time at home or anything like that, I would like, "hey, can I come stay with you?", and he would, "Hey, sure, of course." It wouldn't ever matter.

Hazel recalled having good friends with whom she competed academically. She stated that she liked to compete with the older students as well as those who were her age. She said, "and even Nancy tried to be the very best, and oh well I made this and I made that. We kinda [*sic*] pushed one another to do that."

Janie shared how she formed friendships with many other girls through being part of the school volleyball team. She said:

Well, I became a member of the volleyball team my seventh grade year, so I think that helped a lot, having a team that you talked to everyone and stuff. And then it just kinda [*sic*] expanded from there. I didn't really have a social problem.

She later stated that she is still friends with several of those same girls, although she never considered herself part any single friend group. She said:

It's kinda [*sic*] weird, like I had friends who were really strong, like academically, friendly, sociable, and everyone liked them and stuff. And then there were some people that I would hang out with that weren't as academically strong and stuff like that. I don't know. I kinda [*sic*] hung out with both sides of people.

She did, however, state that she and her very close friends "kinda [*sic*] pushed each other to do well." She stated:

Well, we would mostly all have the same classes together, and if we were like struggling in a class, we would all help each other out. Or is one of us got something in math or science or something, you know, one would help us or vice versa. Like, we would help each other in that way. Like, we always wanted to be, I don't know, we always, like, strove to do our best.

Cadence indicated that having successful friends motivated her, saying, "If my friends were exceeding, I would be exceeding, too." She said that she and her friends were important factors in one another's success, stating, "I had a positive group of friends that I was surrounded with that helped me." She added, "I mean we were all together, - a good influence together. Stay strong together." She further indicated that she thought it was important to be around other strong students when she said, "I've always stayed with the honors group of kids…"

Andrew shared the importance of meeting new people in middle school, and how those relationships had a positive effect on him. He said that his friends were the first thing he thinks of when he recalls is middle school experience, saying, "I actually got a chance to meet new people and that actually meant the most to me, because I kept most of those friends that I made

in middle school." He also said, "I like making new friends and stuff, and you could actually find people that were just like you from a different place that you never knew and, you know, you just make a connection." Unlike the other participants, Andrew indicated that his friends did not affect him academically, stating that "all my friends didn't care about school," which from the context of our conversation seemed to indicated that none of them did. In connection to this, Andrew shared how he viewed many of his peers as examples of what not to do. When discussing some of the negative things his peers were doing, he said "I just wasn't into that." He went on to say:

> You hear about all your friends going and doing some crazy stuff, but for middle school that is ridiculous, some of the stuff that my friends were doing. I mean they're not the best friends that I have, but, I mean, I consider myself friends with them because I would talk to them on a daily basis, but if they would have had something to occupy their minds, something to look forward to everyday, instead of going home and like doing drugs and stuff.

Maggie, despite recalling some negative social experiences, shared a similar sentiment when she said, "I made a lot of good friends that are still my friends today." She shared that having one good friend "who kinda [*sic*] did her own thing, too" made a difference for her. She stated that "She [her friend] was kinda [*sic*] different, too, and she was friendly," adding, "she was really open with me and just, I guess, took me in." Discussing the impact of friends on her academic performance, she had this to say:

> Well, my friends, they were, they were, you know, in the same thing. They liked to do good. They wanted to do well on their tests and class, and we just helped each other, you know. If we needed help with something, we would all get together and just try to figure it out.

Though not as positive, Ashley recalled relying on a particular friend when she was making the transition into middle school. She said:

Completely honestly, Amelia. I followed her around like a puppy dog, and did anything she did to a point. And that kinda [*sic*] fizzled in high school. But when I moved here and met Amelia, I, we clicked, and from that point on, she was my person…but [I] did everything that she did, and I just hid behind her for years.

She shared memories of how the two of them missed being in school during the summer so they asked Amelia's mother to make worksheets for them to complete. She said, "I guess we missed school. I don't know why we did that. She was really, really smart. I guess she, at some point she helped me, like helped me with my homework and stuff." Ashley indicated that she believed her friendship with Amelia helped her in school, saying, "I don't think we ever talked about [how] we need to make good grades, but we did." Ashley and Amelia were in honors classes together, and Ashley stated that she "wouldn't have had anybody to lean on" had that not been the case. She went so far as to say she believes she would not have been as successful were it not for Amelia. She elaborated:

I don't think [so] because I was very, very shy, and the only people I did talk to was because of her, and I think that shyness has a lot to do with how you can do in school…But I think that if I didn't have anybody in school, I wouldn't have wanted to come or try or anything.

Ashley also spoke of viewing several of her peers as examples of what not to do. She stated:

And to be completely honest, one of the negatives that I remember is drugs. Realizing how I was so naive about stuff going on around me. Because a lot of it was going around and I just wasn't a part of it. And when I heard about it, it was kinda [*sic*] scary. But there was a lot of it. I didn't realize until after the fact. And sexual activity. That was, not to make this a negative direction, but that really surprised me, too.

She shared how she and her close friend eventually drifted apart, and how she felt lost until she was able to make a new friend, saying, "Thank goodness I had the mind to get someone good, what I wanted to do."

Josh spoke of the importance of having a cousin in school with him, saying "[he] lives right next to me, and he had a pretty big role in keeping me straight on school and stuff, you know." He added that his cousin helped him academically by giving him "somebody to study with all the time," adding that he "just kept me going that way, in the right direction."

James had a somewhat unique take on his friendships from middle school. He indicated that he deliberately sought out friends who would help him succeed. He said:

> And when everybody had their group of friends and I remember trying to pick out the people that I thought had the most likelihood to succeed. I got to hang out with Will and Aaron, because I thought they, like, they seemed to have their head more, most on their shoulders.

He went on to speak of the competitive and supportive aspects of these friendships. He stated:

> They, well Will, is mostly like a competition. Because he was always one of the best students, and so it was a competition because he understood, like, his background was somewhat similar. He moved to Tennessee with his parents, and so he was an outsider. That's what I thought myself to be, because I just never really truly fit into the Tennessee jargon. So he was an outsider and then he was also smart, so. So I viewed him kinda [*sic*] like myself, so. With him it was just like a competition, like who could do better or who can do this. Then with Aaron, it was just, me and him just became good friends… and so it was just anytime we had problems or questions we could bounce [them]off one, on each other.

Other Adults

Three of the participants mentioned other adults within the school who had a positive impact on their experience and the connection they felt to the school. Janie spoke of the influence that her grandmother, an educational assistant at the school, had on her learning. She said:

> She's independent. I like that about her. She's friends with everyone up here. Everyone loves her. And I don't know, she's just a very caring, giving person. She had a big

influence on me in middle school because that was when I first like moved in with her, so. She was a big role model in my life then.

She went on to add:

> Well, she was an assistant with Ms. Andrews. I've never been really good at math. She would always help me in class and at home, like, stuff that we would do in class. She knew how to do it and she would teach me how to do it. She was always like a stickler about getting my work done and stuff like that. It was nice to have her here just as comfort, but also academically. She did help me a lot in math.

Andrew also mentioned the importance of an educational assistant in his math class who, along with the teacher, "made this environment that you could actually have a good time in."

James shared his memories of the middle school library assistant who always made an extra effort to help him find books that interested him. He said:

> But I would go in there and I wasn't interested in children's chapter books, I was looking for Stephen King or Anne Rice and stuff like that. And they didn't have any of those at the time. I don't know if they do now, but she pointed me into other books around that area and reading those, I mean they weren't anything to do with school, they were just, like, good stories. And she broadened my horizons on the different authors to read and stuff, and she was a big influence just because she helped me, like, go into different subject matters that I have never been to.

Extracurricular Activities

Eight of the participants mentioned the importance of extracurricular activities as they related to their overall perceptions of their middle school experiences. These activities varied dramatically, but the common theme seemed to be that they enabled the participants to feel like they were part of the school, which in turn gave them a sense of belonging.

Although Phil did not go into great detail about it, he referred to participating in drama while he was in school. However, he did speak extensively about what a difference Upward

Bound, a program designed to give disadvantaged students a head start on postsecondary

education beginning in the seventh grade, made for him. He even brought it up on his own

during our conversation. He said:

> Upward Bound helped me a lot…I mean I met my best friend there. It's just, like, I never
> went on summer vacations or anything that was just really fun. I think it's a good
> experience and kids in my situation should look at that a lot more because a lot of people
> don't take advantage of it.

He expressed that he felt the program should be more effectively promoted because too many

students fail to take advantage of it. He stated:

> I mean maybe you could group up the kids that actually qualify or look like they would
> qualify when they apply, and, instead of having everyone go in there at once. Maybe
> have someone talk to them for a bit longer. I think all we did was watch a video. I think
> that was the year after I joined. I think the year I joined it was just there and you just
> filled out paper work for it.

Ted alluded to using sports as a way to help him handle his sometimes difficult transition,

not only from elementary to middle school, but of moving to the area the year before starting

middle school. He stated that he was really involved in baseball before he moved, but this area

did not have a strong baseball program. He stated:

> Because whenever I was down there, I mean, I've got trophies for years, showing that we
> went like 48 and 0 and 50 and 0, and we were state this and state that. It was ridiculous.
> But whenever we came here there was no baseball, no nothing, and so I was, like, I want
> to play sports so I got into basketball and football and, well first it was football just
> because I was heavier whenever I was in middle school and elementary school, and that
> went upward because I was playing sports and this county is very profound on sports.
> And then I started playing basketball, but there was quite a bit of picking on in sixth
> grade and even in seventh grade. There was, you know, "he's new, he's kinda [*sic*] an
> outcast, he doesn't know what we do around here" or whatever, so I just did my own
> thing and did the sports that I wanted to do and focused on school and that was about it.

Although Hazel only made a single reference to extracurricular activities, she did say that playing volleyball in eighth grade had a positive influence on her.

Janie also mentioned volleyball but did so more extensively. She indicated this helped her socially. She said:

> Well, I became a member of the volleyball team my seventh grade year, so I think that helped a lot, having a team that you talked to everyone and stuff and then it just kinda [*sic*] expanded from there. I didn't really have a social like problem. I liked everyone back then from what I remember, so.

She elaborated by saying:

> Well there was people that I knew that were, like, in the same grade as me, but they were from different schools, so that helped because it was a bunch of people you didn't know. But getting to know everyone on the team, and then that kinda [*sic*] helped with making friends with all the other people, like, in the school, too. And also, like, when you are just playing any sport, you know, it helps. It creates bonds and stuff like that. With people it helps you do it easier than people who don't, so.

When asked to recall her dominate experiences from middle school, Cadence simply responded by saying, "pep rallies." Though she did not go into detail, she followed with, "Pep rallies were fun."

Andrew talked about extracurricular activities more than perhaps any other participant. He spoke of participating in the music program, saying, "I actually went the music route, and I liked a lot of those people." Having played football in high school, he expressed regret that he did not start earlier while in middle school. This is connected to other sentiments he expressed lamenting the fact that the middle school staff did not do more to actively push extracurricular activities. He said:

74

I played in elementary school. One thing I hated about the middle school is that they never pushed me to do anything. Like when I got to high school, it was like, "you should play football, you should play football." And Coach Jones, he was the only one who tried to get me to do something. [They] never really try. When I was in high school they would always try to recruit you to do some kind of club, something extracurricular. If they would had did that here, a lot of my friends probably wouldn't be in places they are now.

When I followed up by asking him if he was referring to sports, he said:

It could be other activities, but that puts the mentality of a leader into you because, even when I was a freshman, they'll beat it into your head and that's something that could happen in middle school that would help us out. You know what I'm saying? And like [middle school] steel pan band. That is the weirdest thing to ever be in, but I don't regret it. My dad, he was making fun of me for it, but I don't regret anything I did in middle school because it was just fun. It was a good time. I had fun. We went on lots of field trips. I did middle school [chorus]. You know when I look back now, I'm talking to other people, they're like dude you were really weird in middle school. I was like, well I wasn't afraid to do what I wanted to do in middle school.

He indicated that he avoided the mistakes made by many of his friends because he "always found something weird to do," adding, "But me, I was always into school stuff."

Ashley stated that, although she didn't make the school softball team, being the team manager was important for her. She said, "I remember loving that," and added that it "kept me in the group of friends that I was in for a while."

James recalled the impact that field trips had on him, particularly his visit to East Tennessee State University, which was his first visit to a college campus. He stated:

It made me realize I needed to attend college. Just going there and seeing how close and how, like, to me it wasn't really like a frightening idea, like, I guess a lot of kids have about college. It was just like a stepping stone to get to the places where I wanted to be.

All 12 of the participants mentioned school structure, culture, and supports to varying degrees. Participant comments at times reflected both positive and negative perceptions of school structure and culture, thus affecting their connection to the school accordingly.

Despite sharing positive sentiments about his teachers and friends, Samuel initially said that he did not "really remember all that much in great detail about middle school" because he "tried to put it out of [his] head." He described the overall experience by saying, "Generally, it was unpleasant." He attributed much of this to his peers watching television shows that depict "how high school is supposed to be, and then emulating that making it a nightmare," and to the fact that most of the students are experiencing puberty. When comparing middle school to elementary school, he indicated that things become more complicated and that bullying increases. He stated:

> But with middle school, they've developed some more and they've spent years with you so they know what pushes your buttons And so I guess they get more efficient in middle school at how they screw around with you, or help you, and also when something happens and you tick them off they get very vindictive. Not always, but the ones that try to make your life a nightmare.

He clarified this statement by saying he was generally referring to bullies, but that it can sometimes refer to friends. He added:

> Sometimes your friends will do things like that because you've ticked them off. You will hack off your friends sometimes, that's not a…it's an eventuality. It's a "you'll never do this." Just by being in such close quarters with someone you will eventually find something that irks them. But, overall, the social situation isn't too much different. You still have your little, the kids that no one talks to, the ones that are just kind of there, the bullies, the smart ones. And in elementary they don't really segregate all that much socially, but in middle school it kind of starts to. I was lucky with my high school experience that my class realized, "hey we're stuck here for four years, we might as well make it at least tolerable." So I don't know how it works with other groups, but, for

certain ones, the social dynamic changes a lot, and it's, it's really hard to put into words. The best way I can put I think is that if they are the bullying type then they get more effective or creative at how it's done.

Amy's perceptions differed considerably. Having moved from a much larger area, she greatly appreciated the size of the school, which she considered to be quite small. She liked that "you meet everyone," adding, "You might not get along with everyone, but you know them." She added that the small size enabled her to form and maintain friendships. In addition, she stated that she benefitted from smaller class sizes than those to which she was previously accustomed. Though she initially stated that she could not think of any negative social aspects of middle school, she went on to say that she felt her experience would have been improved if the school had required uniforms. She elaborated, saying "that people sometimes criticize you for what you wear, how you dress and, you know, in [her previous area] you [all] wear the same things." She felt that she was unfairly characterized at times by the way she dressed. Finally, Amy spoke at length of the importance of receiving free lunch. She said:

> The free or reduced lunch thing, - I was thinking about how that helped me, benefit me. And seeing the other students that didn't have the free or reduced lunch. That's a wonderful thing here because when you get free lunch you're not worried, like, "okay I'm going to eat and that's going to be fine." But, then students, I see some students, some classmates that didn't eat lunch because they didn't have the money to pay for their lunch. So that's another wonderful thing about this school system that they do, that they give us free or reduced lunch, because it's a very good benefit. Because paying every day to eat lunch and worrying about that, if you are going to eat at school or not, or you have to wait till you get home at four o'clock in the afternoon to eat.

She added that receiving free lunch enabled her "to concentrate on the subject, not my hunger."

Phil emphasized the importance of navigating the first year. He stated that it "was a lot more important…because that's when everyone got together and you figured out who your friends would be and everything." He said his experience was "overall positive," adding, "I

made a lot of really good friends," though he shared that he "lost a couple of old ones, but that's life." As far as the academic climate, he said, "It was a little bit harder at first, but it wasn't too much more than elementary, I'd say."

Ted indicated that the level of rigor was inadequate in the middle school, saying, "I feel like I had one task throughout the entire middle school that was at all difficult, and that wasn't because the task itself was difficult. That was because I'm nervous about talking in front of people at all." He said that much of it seemed to repeat things he had learned in earlier grades, with the exception of science. Regarding the culture of the school, he stated that the drastic size differences, as well as curricular differences, among the feeder elementary schools had a negative impact on the middle school. He said:

> I wouldn't want to be in this little tiny confined area subject to only 50, 60 people every day, and then have to be put into an area where there is five, six times that, and especially when you come up here you have all these different kinds of, I mean they all live in [the same area], but it's still a different culture from each school.

Hazel shared her initial impression of beginning middle school and how she eventually grew accustomed to her new environment. She stated:

> That was pretty, like, it was pretty hard because it seemed like such a big place, too. Like compared to now it doesn't, but it seemed like such a huge place and there was always new people and I didn't know them. I don't remember who I was friends with at the time, but I'm pretty sure I like clung to the people from [my elementary school], because you didn't know anyone else and there was all kinds of new people... And it was pretty hard, but I felt like, I don't know, I felt like I probably got used to it kinda [*sic*]. You get used to it after a while.

She added that she did not think that the work was too difficult but that it was definitely more challenging than elementary school had been. Referring to some of her work in her English

class, she said, "I actually had to work to do it," and added that she "wasn't really used to it, honestly."

Janie shared that she felt the middle school could have been "more structured," because "it wasn't as hard as [she] was expecting it to be at all." However, she did state that the "laid back" atmosphere was something she enjoyed about her experience.

Cadence stated although her elementary school was departmentalized in sixth grade, meaning that she was accustomed to class changes, she had to get used to different people being in each class. She said "you know, we stayed with the same class [students]" each period. She went on to say that being able to get to know everyone because of the size of the school was a positive, stating "but you still know everybody," and adding, "Luckily, we live in a small town."

Andrew shared mostly positive feelings about the school culture. He said, "I guess I wasn't at the top of the food chain, wasn't at the bottom," adding, "I always got along with people." He stated that he particularly enjoyed school, saying, "I really like school, all through school." He indicated that all of the opportunities to get involved in the school, both through extracurricular activities and active classroom settings, made his experience a positive one. However, he did say that the school did not do enough to encourage others like him to get involved, both academically and socially. He said:

> I mean we were all on an equal level until we got out of elementary school. But when we come into middle school was when they started separating us and piecing us up and keeping people from seeing other people throughout the school. I think that, I don't know, it's just everyone seemed more prepared when they left elementary school, but less prepared when they left here. You know what I'm saying? Because when you go to the high school, people that you never expected [are] in the lower end classes, and it's not because they're not smart enough, it's because they didn't put the effort and they didn't have the right teachers to motivate them. Because I know people who were in the lower end in my grade that should have been with me. They just didn't put forth the effort.

79

And they think they're slower. They think they're dumber, but they're not. They need somebody to push them instead of holding them back.

Using one of his friends as an example, he said, "The least he has to do is what he is going to get away with, because I just think that that's what they instilled in those kids, is why they never really went farther than they should have."

Maggie's initial recollections were decidedly negative. When asked to recall the dominant experience of middle school, she replied, "Being made fun of, yeah," which she attributed this to her appearance. She said:

> I don't know. I've always been different, I guess. I'm not, I don't know. It's hard to explain. I just had braces and glasses and you know. Every girl goes through that awkward stage and I wasn't really in the popular group yet. And I did my own thing. I liked it that way. It didn't bother me, so.

She went on to share, however, that things improved by the second year with her making many "good friends." She further elaborated on the challenge of beginning middle school:

> I guess, just, you lost a lot of your friends that, more people came into school and it was a whole different surrounding. And, you know, I guess you started switching classes, you weren't used to being with the people you have always been with. And you're introduced to other people, so. Guess that was the biggest change.

She also stated that having different students in each class was an adjustment for her. When asked if there was anything else she wanted to share, she said:

> No. I mean middle school was kinda [*sic*] rough, but it's rough for a lot of people. It wasn't horrible. Yeah I got made fun of, but I got over it and it's made me who I am. That's mainly all I want to put because I don't want people to think, "oh she was just made fun of and now she's insecure and all that." No, it really made me the person I am. It made me grow up and see how people are and how to handle things. It prepared me for life. It really did. Middle school is one of the main things, I can honestly say that.

Ashley's experience was much more positive. Having moved to the area the year before beginning middle school, she recalled there being extensive bullying where she had lived previously. She stated that things were much better here, saying:

> But up here, I mean, I had my few friends, but no one else really bullied me. Nobody was mean to me. I didn't stand out as a nerd. I don't know. But I was the same person but from different schools. It was a complete different experience. Here, I was never bullied or felt bad about myself ever. It was a very positive experience with my peers.

Josh also shared that he believed the biggest aspect was the transition to a much larger school. When asked to share his dominate experience, he said:

> Probably getting to know everybody was probably one of the biggest, because, you know, coming from [his elementary school], it's smaller than [another elementary in the district], and then when you get together with everybody, you know, different groups kinda [*sic*] change a little bit.

He stated that his experience was positive, particularly once he overcame his shyness. Though he insists he was never bullied, he did say, "There's more bullying to go with more people of course, you know." He also indicated that the school had a positive academic culture, with teachers being eager to help students. However, he did indicate that he could have been challenged more, saying, "Maybe, kind of, for the people that's always making hundreds, maybe raise them up a level, get them going a little further." He added that this would have helped to better prepare him for college level work.

James also moved to the area a couple of years before beginning middle school. With his previous area being much larger, he stated that he was surprised at the number of students who attended his middle school, saying, "I really didn't think there were that many kids [from here]." He had a very matter of fact view of being in middle school. He stated:

81

I mean there was the normal, like, every kid experience just learning how to cope with the abundance of people and trying to switch between classes and getting used to that. But as to negative, there wasn't too many negatives through middle school or high school. It was just learning to deal with things and like just life experiences.

He elaborated by saying:

Well, I knew back then that even through middle school, I mean, every kids deals with that and, like, there was always bullying and stuff, but just from my life background and having to move and just everything. Growing up in [another state], I knew that it wasn't anything that could do any significant damage to me or anybody else, it was just you had to deal with it and it made you stronger. Like, I viewed it mostly, like, if kids were bullying or kids were bullying other kids, I viewed it either they're going to make it out of it or they're not. And so when people would bully and things like that, it was just another, like, stepping stone. It wasn't really negative, it was just like if I can get through this, then better off for me.

James said his overall school experience was much more positive here than in his previous state. He shared that when he moved here in fifth grade he could not read or write, but his elementary school challenged him. He said they told him that if he "was able to keep up a passing grade in English and all that, that they wouldn't put [him] back in IEP after the first year." He said that, once here, his teachers took the time and they helped to understand," and that "by the time I got to middle school I was starting to go into honors English in seventh grade."

Support and Motivation

The second major theme that emerged from the interviews was that of support and motivation. All of these participants indicated in various ways and to various degrees that they had support while they were in middle school, and all indicated that they were motivated in some way. Some participants even seemed to make a connection between these two factors, which is why they are discussed together here.

Parents

Nine of the participants spoke of their relationship with their parents as it related to their schooling. The insights and comments shared by the participants regarding parents were overwhelmingly positive; however, exceptions have been included as well.

When I asked Amy about people from outside the school who had influenced her, she immediately said, "My parents." She added:

> My parents were always there if I needed something. They were always there and parents are a big part. I think parents are a big part of students to go on to continue their education. They have an important, you know, because you always try to make them proud. Make them proud and, you know, that you made them proud when you walk across the stage with your diploma. And you can see their smile across the room, you know, saying that's my daughter or that's my son. Parents are a big influence. Even now, even that I am older and in college. My mom still says, "Have you done your homework, are you okay, do you need anything in school, how are your grades?" Everything, always.

She said that her parents had pushed her to do well in school from an early age. She stated:

> They didn't went to school. Mom didn't finish high school, my mom. So she wanted me to go beyond that. She always says, "If I couldn't do it, that doesn't matter, you can do it." It always was, "Go ahead and do it, you can do more, you know. Nothing can stop you."

Ted recalled his mother pushing him "extremely hard" to excel in school, though he added that he "can't say that it was in the right way." He spoke of the time period when his parents divorced and things were difficult for him:

> My real dad and my mom were getting a divorce, and that was, like, my real dad came over to me and everything was put the blame on, you know, the oldest sibling…my mom, she academically she pushed me, and to her credit she still did everything that she could but I think that she did it in the wrong way.

He said that a male relative came to live with them and help out during that time, and that this

led to several bad experiences for him. He stated:

> And everything was fine for like the first 2 months, and then it started going really haywire and he started punching holes in the walls. I remember sitting there and seeing him throw my mom to the ground on the pavement by her hair. I remember being eight or nine and him picking me up by my throat and putting me up against a door and throwing a doll house at me, a full size doll house. And I remember whenever she was gone at work and trying to put food on the table, he was, instead of showing up to work, he had to run some errand. And I was watching my little sister and he had picked up a gun out from underneath a mattress and told me that if I didn't sit back there and watch her, then he was going to blow my head off because I told him that I wasn't old enough to watch her and he said "yes you are." So that all happened, and during this time whenever my mom would try to academically push me, if I had gotten a question wrong, and I think he was a big influence on her attitude as well, but whenever I had gotten a question wrong, I remember this little workbook that I had with a red apple on the front of it, and if anything was wrong or something like that, my face would hit the book and there would be blood on the book until I had gotten the question right. Or if I didn't get them right, and I was standing on the other side of the room waiting for her to check it, there would be a remote flying at me if the question was wrong.

He said that once the abusive relative left, the situation improved. He shared a belief that her

behavior was largely attributable to the relative. He said:

> Once he left, my mom as a person improved. Because she wasn't really like that until he came around, and then, like I said, I mean if someone makes me mad, I usually take it out on other people. I just don't see how you could take it out on your kids. But it was just an improving factor after he left.

He concluded by saying, "I guess out of sheer fear of being physically punished or anything like

that, that made me want to do a whole lot better as well."

Hazel, who lost her father when she was in elementary school, said that her mom was her

biggest influence from outside of school. She stated:

> Well, it was kinda [sic] like it was just me and her there for a while, or still is I guess. But I had to get used to that and she was, like, she was always, like, tried to help with school stuff, always kinda [sic] involved, like, taking me to things and always expected

me to do well and, like, tried to help me because, like, I was always expected to do really good grades and stuff. But she was, she was always, like, very encouraging with that, and always would help me with school when I needed it.

Hazel added that she always felt that her mother had high expectations of her, but that she did not feel pressured. She said:

I don't know, I felt kinda [*sic*], I don't know, I just felt like she was very proud of me and stuff. She would be, like, embarrassing, like, go "Hazel made all A's…" Uh, I don't know, I just felt like I was expected to do that.

Janie shared that her mom and her aunt were positive influences in her life and on her education. She stated, "They were helpful. If I ever needed help with anything, they would always help me with stuff that they knew how to do." She said that her family was very close, and that they encouraged her to do well throughout her schooling.

Cadence, whose parents were divorced, lived primarily with her mother, though her father, who lived out of state, was involved. She had this to say:

Really my parents never pushed me to do good in school. It was just me. I knew I wanted to be a nurse, too, my whole life, so I knew to be a nurse you had to have good grades to get into nursing school. It was just looking at my future ahead of time.

However, she went on to say that her father did encourage and push her somewhat. She stated:

My dad, he, I mean he wasn't ever around us too much when we were little. We saw him during the summers but he was always, he's very smart and I knew that. And he would always help me with my math when I was down there. He would always make sure that he pushed school on us a little bit while we were down there and help us with anything we didn't understand. He would always get us a tutor or anything.

She added, "He would always reward us for good grades."

Andrew explained that he was motivated by wanting to make his parents, particularly his mother, proud. He said, "Yeah, I'm learning in the hard classes just because my mom, she means a lot to me and she's proud of me, so I always did as hard as I could." He said that "she didn't really push" him, but that he was still motivated by her. He stated:

> She would never reward me. She would never do any of that really. It's just knowing that there are, my parents are those people that would tell you something, you just know you've got what makes them happy and you gotta [*sic*] do it, so. And that's just how it was, and she never really talked much about it. She was like, "I'm proud of you for doing good on this." I would always go home and tell her my test grades and stuff, but.

He went on to say that making her happy and proud made him happy. He also spoke in a positive way of the structure and discipline they provided him at home even though he did not always enjoy it at the time. He stated:

> I'd go to one friend's house maybe like every month. We didn't really necessarily have a lot of family time, but they were strict on me because they knew, I guess they knew what an influence everyone is on someone.

He then added, "They knew what I didn't know back then, and it made me mad as crap back then when they wouldn't let me do something…"

Ashley lived with her mother and said that she was her best friend. She shared how her mother always had high expectations of her. She said, "She was never mean about it, but I was going to college and I was going to make good grades." She added:

> So, I mean she, she was very willing to help with anything I needed and help with homework if she was home. And she was very behind for the way we did things because she was 40 when she had me, so she was a lot older. But she tried, she tried very hard to learn the way I was trying to learn it so she could teach me. She was pretty much my only influence.

Ashley shared that she was motivated by never wanting to disappoint her mother. She said that her mother "being so supportive and pushy" played a major role in her success.

Josh also said many positive things about his parents and their influence on his education. He said, "Well, my parents influenced me by just keeping me in school really, you know, and helping me when I needed, you know, studying and stuff." He stated several times that they, along with others, "kept him going." When asked to elaborate on that phrase, he said, "Some kids, if they don't get help, you know, they'll just give up and, you know, if you get help, it makes you try a little harder," adding that they helped him "get it right the next time." He also said that they would regularly reward him for doing well in school, adding that this practice "helped a lot." Regarding the ways in which his parents influenced his goals, he said:

> They wanted to see me succeed in life. They didn't want me, probably didn't want me to stay all the time in [his home town]. There's not really that much here, and I'm going to college for automotive technology, and probably won't stay here to work on cars, you know. Yeah. So they wanted me to succeed and do good so I could go somewhere.

James talked quite a bit about life lessons that he learned from his mother and step-father. He shared how they emphasized school, especially after moving to the area and experiencing substantial financial difficulty compared to their previous location and standard of living. He said that his mother emphasized the importance of choosing his friends wisely. He stated:

> I mean, growing up in [another state], and then again there was another lesson my mom taught me. Growing up in [another state], you saw the different kids and you knew which kids were doing drugs, and you knew which kids were skipping school, and then you knew which kids that were doing okay. And then growing up, mom just always taught me to pick the people you want to be around, that are going to do the best with their lives because, usually, they will either pull you along or you will pull them along, so it's like a give and take. And so that was something she tried to teach me early.

He spoke very directly about the effect watching them struggle to "put food on the table" had on

him. He appreciated what his parents had done but did not want his life to be the same. He said:

> It was also the motivation. Like, mom, the first 4 years she didn't have a job and then
> O'Reilly's opened up and she got on with them. Then [my stepfather] was back and forth
> between shops in town because either they would tell him he was too qualified or he
> didn't get along with how they did their business, and so they were also, like, trying or
> finding different jobs. They would kill themselves to be able to put food on the table for
> me and [my brother]. That was my motivation. Like I saw how hard they wanted to,
> how hard they were working, and it just made me realize that if I don't want to do this, or
> I want my children to have a better life, then I'm going to have to work harder in school.

He spoke of forming a closer bond with his stepfather because they would have to go out

together to chop wood to provide heat for the family in the winter.

> So it was just me and him and so we're bonding and, like, at the time like I hated it
> because I hated the manual labor, like, splitting wood out in the winter when it's a
> blizzard. But looking back on it, like he was just that father-son bonding times like every
> kid needs. So that was like the first time that we had ever done that. It was like the first
> time I really ever had father bonding time because up until then we weren't really close
> and he was always…he was always working. And so it was the first time that we had
> like those life talks about everything, so. So during middle school was when I was big
> enough to always be out there with him. When we first moved there I was like too, they
> didn't let me go out at night, but during middle school we would be out there till 10:30 or
> 11:00 splitting wood. So it was always, like, our talk.

He said the subject matter of those talks was not typical. He stated:

> Yeah. I mean we wouldn't just have like those just like normal son-dad talks, we would
> have, like, deep, just because I think our relationship was different than father-son. It
> was more like bonding friends because he was my stepdad and I never called him dad, I
> just called him [by name]. So it was like an older, like, kinda [*sic*] like someone you
> would like follow, like, an older figure. So that's how our relationship formed. So we
> would have different like talks about psychology and, like, philosophy. And just
> anything I'd ask him about, like, "why is this happening," or "why math is like this."
> Because I mean he was a fairly smart man. He just never was able to, his option was to
> work or go in the Air Force, and he went into the Air Force, and so he really didn't have a
> college option, but he's still like, he's a pretty smart man. There's a lot of things he
> knows about just from doing everything that he's done.

Ten participants shared how they were influenced by other outside adults. These were often other family members, but this was not universally the case.

Samuel stated that a man who led the Bible Study Class at his church had an impact on him when he was younger. He said that this relationship made him "a lot more religious than I had been or have been since," adding that class "helped me get a different perspective." He also said that, "Something about him made me want to be more religious and become closer to God," though he added that he was not "quite sure what it was exactly." He added:

> It made me want to be a generally better person, but it also made me want to work a little bit harder, because it actually says in the text that no matter what you do, do it with the fervor that you would if it were God asking you, and so that gave me a little bit more of a drive to do things.

Amy also indicated that people from her church influenced her but from more of a standpoint of support. She said:

> My church family is one main thing, too. They were always making sure, they were always asking you, "So how's school doing? So how are you doing in school?" And today, "How's school, are you doing good, are you keeping up?"

She added, "The church family was always supporting, and always making sure if you needed something, like materials if you didn't have, or if you just needed somebody to talk to if something was going on." She went on to say that there were times, especially during her parents' divorce, that they had helped her by supplying materials and other things.

Phil briefly mentioned the importance of his grandmother's support. Though she lives

out of state, he said that "when she would visit she was always really nice and understanding,"

adding, "Everyone needs someone like that I guess."

Ted mentioned the father of one of his teammates and peers. He said:

[His friend's dad], he was always really there, especially through middle school. He was, like, because sometimes I would show up for practice and, you know, he would be able to tell that there was something wrong. And he was, like, "You know if you ever have any kind of problem or any kind of trouble just let me know."

Although he didn't mention them specifically, another friend's parents impacted him because he

said he often stayed with them when things were bad. He shared that whenever he wanted to

come stay there that "it wouldn't ever matter," which seemed to indicate that he was always

welcome there.

Janie indicated that her extended family was a source of support, both emotional and

academic for her. She shared that she felt very close to them, particularly her aunt. She said that

she believed that her "family and friends" helped her "throughout middle school."

Cadence was influenced by several family friends who happened to be teachers, though

they did not teach in her school. She said of one particular that "just her being a teacher"

provided her with a role model. She stated that yet another "would help me with math or

anything if I needed it," adding that she "knew there was help if I needed it outside of school,

too, not just inside." She shared that this prevented her from ever feeling that she was alone,

because her mother was not able to help her very much academically.

Andrew was another participant who mentioned the importance of his grandmother. He

said that "she would always put everything that was in the newspaper on her refrigerator, and

she's still got it framed," adding, "It's pretty, if people saw it, you know, it's just one of those moments where…that's embarrassing, but it's…"

Maggie talked extensively about a relative who was also a teacher in another school. She said that she served as a role model. She stated:

> She always did so good. There was nothing that, she overcame everything that was ever in her way. And she did it gracefully and she was always kind to people, and very smart and, like, that was my main influence.

Maggie added that she was very encouraging, saying "she helped me with math all the time," and that this encouragement was particularly important because she "was with her a lot."

Ashley shared how her sister served as a powerful example of what not to do, saying, "I didn't know what I wanted to do but I didn't want to be like my sister because she went down the complete opposite track." Fortunately, she shared that her sister "ended up completely turning around and ending up very well for herself, too, but seeing the complete hardship that she did go through, I knew that I did not want that." She also said that her church family was a positive influence on her because they would regularly compliment her on her accomplishments. She stated that she "didn't want to disappoint them, so I had to make good grades, and I had to stay off drugs and alcohol and all that." She went on to say that she regretted not leaning on them more, because she was hesitant to ask for help of any kind, though she now realizes that "if I would ask any of them for anything, they would drop whatever they were doing and do it."

Josh indicated that his "whole family" was important to him. He said they "just kept me going and gave me an advantage, I guess, because, you know, they were always good to me and they'd compliment me and stuff like the teachers, you know." He indicated that his family was

very close knit and seemed to view them almost as additional parents, often referring to them and his parents simultaneously.

Preparation

All participants were asked questions about whether or not they felt adequately prepared for middle school in addition to how well they felt middle school prepared them for high school. Their responses to these questions provided insight into the ways in which social and academic factors affect their schooling.

Samuel indicated that he felt academically prepared for middle school. However, he said that he was "not in the slightest" way prepared socially. Speaking about the transition to middle school, he said:

> Between being with people that you don't know in the absolute slightest, and being around people that you've known for years and you either, a) you really like them, or b) you'd just rather never talk to them again in your life, it made things very difficult socially.

He suggested that the elementary schools install lockers for their upper grades students because he felt that lockers were "what a lot of students have trouble with." He also felt that upper elementary could perhaps be restructured so that students change classes. He said, "I think getting a good 2 years practice on that would be very beneficial." Samuel indicated that the transition to high school was somewhat smoother. He said, "I was lucky with my high school experience that my class realized, 'hey, we're stuck here for 4 years, we might as well make it at least tolerable.'" Regarding his academic preparation for high school, he said:

> But academically, I think it did a pretty good job of it, to be honest. The teachers put a pretty good workload on us for middle schoolers, and they pushed us because they knew

we could handle it. And because of that we were able to do a lot more in high school and do better in high school, and just, they've given us a real boost when we needed it.

Amy said that she felt quite prepared because, compared to the area where she previously lived, the school was small. She said that the school she would have attended had she not moved was very large, with kindergarten through high school students sharing the same campus. When speaking of moving to this area, she said:

> It was reassuring that I was going to make it through middle school, and not like over there it's going to be, like, "am I going to make it?" "What if I'm not smart enough like the other kids," or, but here it's just so small and it was awesome.

She indicated that the transition to high school was very easy academically because the teaching styles were very similar in the two schools. She did, however, feel that the social transition was more challenging. She stated, "It was a big social change, because you had bigger kids. You had bigger kids, and when you are in middle school it is only two grades, seventh and eighth, two grades." She added:

> So that was a big social change, that there were more students who were higher than you. You know, in the beginning it was a scary thing because I was thinking, "What if I sit at a table and some seniors come and say 'this is my table?'"

Fortunately, she went on to add that this never happened.

Phil simply stated that he felt well prepared academically for the transition to middle school. He said it "was much different" socially, which represented "the biggest change." Regarding his transition to high school from middle school, he said, "I felt well prepared, honestly," and later added, "Like, high school to college I thought was something that was a little different, but middle school to high school I felt confident about."

Ted stated that his elementary experience should have been more rigorous because he had

previously learned much of what was being taught while living in another state. He said that

some of his teachers spent extended periods of time on simple subjects, as if they did not want to

teach other things. He said "that having a teacher who actually taught, that would have been

great." However, he did say that he "could not have gotten more prepared for math because Mr.

Jensen did a great job." Socially speaking, he said he had some difficulties at first because he

was still regarded as the new kid. He added that "it wasn't a terrible time, but it could have been

a little bit better." As far as being prepared for high school, he said:

> The math here could have been a whole lot more rigorous. The science usually held up to par. Mr. Richmond usually did a pretty good job. I mean, I didn't even know what an element was until I came to middle school. I wasn't learning anything that I hadn't learned already as far as science and social studies with Mr. Carter. I learned a lot of what I had already known with math and English, which is not the teachers fault, it's just the curriculum. But it prepared me as far as, like, the amount of work. I mean it progressively just increases to natural where you come from elementary school to middle school to high school. That helped me out because if I jumped from the amount of work from elementary school to high school, then I would have failed no matter how academically gifted I was. But the curriculum could have been a little bit more rigorous still.

Hazel had generally positive things to say about her preparation for both transitions.

Regarding her preparation for middle school, she said:

> I think it prepared me pretty much, pretty well. Like, I didn't feel behind or anything when I was in middle school. I felt like it prepared me pretty well. Maybe, I don't know how to fix that, just the initial shock of all these new people and all these chances to pick what I wanted for once. Academically I think it prepared me really well. Like, I didn't feel lost or anything.

Regarding her preparation for high school, she said:

> I think it prepared me pretty well. I think the classes I took, especially the English, because there was a lot of, like, for the High School, most homework I did outside of

class, was always English classes, which you had to do papers and things like that, so I think, like, the English classes I took in middle school really helped me prepare for that. I think the math did, too. And, see, I don't know, I think it prepared me pretty well.

Hazel shared that not only was she better prepared but that some of her success and motivation came from being placed in harder classes and from being encouraged to continue to take them. She stated:

> I would say, like, whoever told me to take like more of the honors classes and stuff, like, the harder classes, and always take the harder classes, and try to do your best in that, like, I don't know why I took all the honors classes and stuff like that. I don't entirely remember. I think that was probably the biggest thing. If I had just taken, like, the plain and, like, one of my friends, she was the kind who didn't really care enough to do. "I don't want to work that much. I'm fine. I'll just take the lower classes." I don't know what to call them. I don't want to be insulting or anything. But she just never really cared enough to try that hard I guess. But I was just always, like, "yeah, of course," and take all the harder ones, like that was just second nature. Like encourage people to take the harder classes and actually be motivated.

Janie shared that she believed that she was perhaps too prepared for middle school. However, this seemed to be more of a statement about the level of rigor at the middle school than one of unnecessary difficulty at the elementary school. She said:

> I think elementary school over prepared us kinda [*sic*], because we were always, I felt like elementary school was always really strict and stuff and they were always, "Oh, you are going to have to write in cursive when you get in middle school, and you are going to have to do all this stuff." And when we got up here it was just we didn't have to do any of that. It was laid back. I like that it was just laid back. I felt elementary school prepared us more for middle school.

Regarding her transition to the high school, she said that middle school could have been better but added that she "didn't get to high school and be like, 'I don't know any of this. They didn't prepare me.'" She indicated that though she did well in high school, she believed the middle school could have done more to better prepare her.

Cadence said that the most difficult transition for her was from her 10th to 11th grade years of high school because that was when she started taking dual-enrollment classes. When I asked her specifically about the transition from eighth to ninth grade, she said that it was not a problem for her academically or socially.

Andrew stated that he felt completely prepared for high school but that he felt the elementary schools should do more to help their students mature. He said:

> They didn't really mature you, to push you to mature yourself before you went. If I was a little bit more mature in middle school, I would probably have been less embarrassed myself. I embarrassed myself a lot in middle school.

He added, "I think they babied us too much in elementary school," but went on to say that he felt better prepared coming out of elementary school than middle school.

Maggie focused on the social aspect of being prepared for middle school. She said, "I guess just you lost a lot of your friends that, more people came into school and it was a whole different surrounding." She went on to say that elementary school does not prepare you for that. In contrast, she said middle school prepared her "very well" for high school both academically and socially. She said:

> It really prepared me for high school. I wasn't nervous going into high school. You get a taste of what it's going to be like, you know. You know you are going to have to meet new people and you're going to have to be open with that, and that's just how it has to be. So it really prepares you to do that, to get out there and be okay with that.

Ashley's feelings were complicated by the fact that she and her family had moved several times prior to settling in this area. She stated:

> I didn't feel like I wasn't prepared. I jumped around in schools a lot. We moved like every 6 months or a year. There were a few times that, and this isn't the schools fault,

but there was a few times that I had, like, gone to this school and they had already done something that I had missed, and I never got to sit down with anybody and learn that particular thing like long division. That's something that I completely learned myself because of skipping around in school. But as far as the schools job, I didn't feel like I wasn't prepared.

Her feelings about going to high school from middle school were similar. She said:

Umm, what I'm remembering the, what really only scared me about was finding my classes. Because you know there was just one hall there and here it was scattered out more. I mean this school isn't half as bad as schools other places. I moved my junior year and I thought that was the end of me. But we came back, thank goodness. But freshman orientation, I think that was what it was called, they really helped with finding things and being… I think if I had known people older than me more to help me, show me around and stuff like that, it would have been a little bit better. But that was a social kind of thing. Again I don't really feel like I was unprepared much from middle school to high school.

Josh said that he felt very prepared for middle school and specifically mentioned his fear of speaking in front of others and how that was helped by a program in his elementary school called "We the People." He said:

Well when I was in fifth grade, my teacher, Ms. Fraley, she, we done "We the People," and socially that helped out a lot because speaking in front of people is hard, it's hard to speak in front of people. And we went to Washington DC and spoke in front of congress and all that good stuff. And that was pretty hard, but you know, after you get over it you know, you're like, "Wow! I spoke to Congress." You know, I could speak to anybody.

He also said that "the after school programs helps out a lot," and went on to say, "I felt very prepared even after leaving the middle school and going to the high school. Very prepared." He added:

The testing helped out a lot because there is a lot of testing in high school. And it helped out a lot, and I didn't think middle school was hard, but the transition was easy from middle school to high school, like elementary school to middle school, because the way the homework was and the classes. It was pretty on track to the high school, moving up to the high school.

James felt as though he was prepared by the schools in the area but not by the schools in area where he previously lived. He stated:

> So when I came here, they took the time and they helped to understand, and then they, like, expanded off your strengths and built up your weaknesses. I don't think…that if I came from [another state] out of the middle school to our middle school or to the high school, I think I would be a completely different student and person that I am now. Just because the elementary school, they helped you so much and prepared you.

He shared that his transition to high school from middle school did not "feel like much of a change" because of how the middle school and high school are physically situated in relation to one another. He said it felt "like just 6 years in one building," and that "it was an easy transition."

Ability and Talent

Only four of the participants spoke of their natural abilities, two males and two females. However, none of them made blanket statements about their intellect as a whole. Instead, their comments were very specific about certain talents and abilities that enabled them to do well.

Ted made a fleeting reference to being classified and Intellectually Gifted. While Samuel went into slightly more detail, lamenting the fact that he did not, and still does not, know how to study. However, he attributed this to his ability, saying, "I adapt to things very easily and I pick up on things very quickly." He said that he simply remembered "everything that the teacher went over in class."

Amy recalled fearing that she would not be as smart as the other students when she got to middle school but realizing that she was as intelligent as her peers.

Ashley said, "I have the uncanny ability to listen and get it." However, like Samuel, she framed this comment around a perceived deficiency, stating, "I was never good at taking notes, which I had to pick up in college."

Summary

Analysis of data centered on the schooling experiences of 12 participants, with a focus on their middle school experiences, revealed several emergent themes. However, all of the themes fall into two categories: connection to the school and support and motivation.

The 12 participants were evenly divided with respect to gender, with six males and six females being interviewed. The participants, all adult high school graduates, attended the same middle school in an East Tennessee school district. Although common themes have certainly surfaced, the significantly varied backgrounds of the participants are reflected in the substantial variation found in their responses.

The forthright and candid responses of these participants were vital to this research. The experiences and perceptions shared by the participants were universally insightful, with no two of them the same. Their comments revealed insights into what has worked, as well as what has failed to work, for each of them individually. Many of the participants shared their ideas concerning ways in which they feel school could be improved.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes for middle school students who are economically disadvantaged. Participants were selected for interview based on successful scores on the eighth grade EXPLORE test. In addition, this study was conducted for the purpose of improving the educational program at a Northeast Tennessee middle school. Interviews were conducted with 12 former students of the middle school who have since graduated from high school. These interviews provided information about the participants' perceptions of their middle school experiences and what factors contributed to their success.

Two major themes surfaced as the interview transcripts were analyzed: connection to school and support and motivation. Connection to school contained five subthemes: (a) teachers, (b) peers, (c) other adults, (d) extracurricular activities, and (e) school structure, culture, and supports. Support and motivation contained four subthemes: (a) parents, (b) other adults, (c) preparation, and (d) ability and talent.

Research Question 1

Research question 1: What are the factors that enable some students of poverty to experience success while the majority of them fall behind?

Adult Relationships

The participants all expressed feelings of connection to the school. Naturally, their experiences and perceptions of those experiences varied widely. However, 11 of the 12 spoke of a meaningful positive relationship with an adult inside the school. In most of these cases the adult was a teacher, but strong connections to instructional assistants and the assistant principal were also discussed.

Although middle school in general is widely regarded as a challenging time in the lives of students, especially developmentally and socially, these former students seemed to have fond memories and perceptions of at least one adult within the school. Several of them discussed feeling that the teachers cared for them in a meaningful way, sharing their experiences of how the teachers helped them both academically and personally. James discussed how the library assistant took the time to help him find books that he would enjoy reading for pleasure because he was initially unable to find works by authors he wished to read. Having adults within the school who cared and took an interest in the participants' lives seems to have fostered a sense of security and belonging within the students.

These adults served to steady the experiences of these students during what is an inherently unsettling period of transition and uncertainty. Two quotes from two of the male participants capture this idea. Samuel stated that his teachers "were genuinely concerned with us as human beings instead of us as a product of the work." Josh goes even further by saying, "I would probably say the most important factor, even over my parents and stuff, is how well the teachers take you in, like basically, like, you're their own, you know."

These feelings of connection empowered the students by providing them with the necessary structure and stability to move forward and thrive in the school setting. It is the researcher's belief that these connections are not merely the result of the positive attributes of the adults in the school but also of the characteristics and traits of the participants because all meaningful relationships require the effort of all involved.

Nine of the participants discussed their relationships with their parents, with eight of them being positive and one being negative. The positive perceptions spanned a wide range of sentiments. Seven participants spoke of how their parents encouraged and supported them throughout school. This encouragement was most often in the form of validation and positive reinforcement. These parents were there for the participants in ways that enabled them to feel supported even when they felt uncertain about their schooling.

It also seems likely that these positive relationships served to provide a greater sense of stability and well being both in and out of school. For example, Hazel, Amy, and Andrew shared that their parents were always proud of their accomplishments, while Ashley went so far as to say that her mother was her best friend.

Additionally, many of these participants reported that their parents had high expectations of them and that these expectations served as a motivator for them to work harder in school. Some discussed understanding the reasons for those expectations, which seemed to provide added value for those participants. For example, Josh explained that his parents knew that he would need to do well because they wanted him to be able to make it in another location that would provide greater opportunity for him. Others stated that their parents provided incentives by rewarding them when they did well. However, in general, it seems that the participants were

motivated by just knowing that their parents cared about their learning and especially about their well being.

Finally, six of the participants stated that their parents helped them by providing direct academic support. This included helping them master concepts and skills that they encountered in school. Josh captured the importance of this idea when he said "if you get help, it makes you try a little harder," adding that this help kept him from wanting to give up.

Ten of the participants spoke of the importance of adults outside of school. Their feelings about these adults often seemed similar to the way many of them discussed their parents. These adults ranged were other relatives, family friends, and church members. They helped the participants in several ways. First, they supported the participants' academic endeavors by encouraging them. They would ask them how they were doing in school. This explicit and outward showing of interest and concern provided the participants with an even greater sense of belonging, support, and motivation. In fact, for two participants who did not mention their parents at all it was their only outside adult influence. In addition, many participants reported viewing these adults as role models both in the positive and negative sense. For example, Maggie had a great deal to say about an adult who "overcame everything that was ever in her way," and Samuel stated that an adult in his life "made him want to be a generally better person" and to "work a little bit harder," while Ashley shared that she knew she never wanted to be like her sister because of the bad choices her sister had made. These adults sometimes provided academic and material assistance especially in situations where they were better equipped than the parents to do so.

Peer Relationships

During the transition to this particular middle school students from five elementary schools come together for the first time in their academic lives. The number of students per grade level in the middle school is 3 to 4 times larger than that of the largest elementary school in the district, and even greater for students from the smaller elementary schools. Students transitioning to middle school may or may not have classes with friends from their elementary schools, so they are left to form new friendships. While not all of the peer interactions shared by the participants were positive, all 12 of them indicated that they were able to establish friendships within their new peer groups.

In fact, this was the only emergent theme that all 12 participants discussed, indicating that friendships are of paramount importance to students, and perhaps even more so during times of transition. Students need support, and because they spend more time in school with their peers than any other group, much of that support seemed to come from peers. Based on the participant responses, that support seemed to manifest itself in two major ways: socially and academically.

Nine of the participants shared how their friends benefitted them socially, with three of them only mentioning friends in this capacity. These peer interactions were supportive in nature, providing the participants with one or more friends with whom they could share their experiences and navigate the transition to middle school and, later on, to high school. For example, Andrew said that "you could actually find people that were just like you from a different place that you never knew and, you know, you just make a connection," while Ashley stated that had she not had a friend she "wouldn't have wanted to come or try or anything."

Nine of the participants spoke of the academic benefits they received from their friends, with three of them only discussing this aspect of their friendships. Several of these participants indicated that their friends helped them academically by simply being a positive influence. In other words, they wanted to do well because others in their peer group were doing well. Three of the participants took this a step further, indicating that they were driven by competing with their friends. Others shared that they had symbiotic relationships with their friends in which they would study and complete assignments together.

School Involvement

Nonacademic school involvement surfaced as a very important factor in the participants' success. Eight participants discussed their involvement in activities to varying degrees. These activities can generally be described as extracurricular activities, and they included drama, athletics, chorus and other music activities, after school programs, and field trips. Two of the participants mentioned pep rallies that occurred during the school day. All of them shared a greater sense of belonging and connection as a result. Additionally, some participants mentioned learning important lessons such as leadership and teamwork. The enhanced sense of belonging provided by these activities, as well as the development of a stronger connection to the school must not be underestimated. Although discussed separately here, it is my assertion that in many instances this factor cannot and should not be divorced from the participants' connections to their peers and school adults, because many participants reported that their relationships with their peers and school adults were either formed or enhanced via their mutual participation in such activities. Finally, these activities provided positive outlets for students that would keep them from other activities that were detrimental, both academically as well as in general. Andrew seemed to have particularly strong feelings about extracurricular activities and went so far as to

105

say that students needed to be "pushed" to participate more because it would provide them with more productive things to do rather than the less wholesome alternatives. He shared how these activities helped him to avoid negative activities, stating that he "wasn't afraid to do what he wanted to do," and that he "was always into school stuff."

Preparation

Because questions concerning preparation were included in the Interview Guide, each participant spoke about it in some way. However, their responses varied dramatically. Some of the participants focused on the social aspects of their preparation for middle school, while others focused on the academic. Some of them simply stated that they felt prepared and did not offer much more, while others went into considerably more detail about the ways in which they felt prepared. The responses all had one thing in common, and that was that every participant indicated that she or he was prepared for middle school from an academic standpoint. In addition, every participant who spoke of the transition from middle to high school reported feeling academically prepared, although three of them indicated they could have been better prepared. The preparedness level of the participants is a critical factor because it seems that they were never left to wonder if they had the necessary skills and ability to succeed. Instead, they were able to begin middle school with a degree of confidence, at least academically speaking.

Clearly, the level of rigor at the middle school would be a determining factor in the level of preparedness of the participants. Three participants indicated that they believed that the middle school's academic program should have been more rigorous, so it is possible that their level of preparedness while transitioning into middle school was magnified by this, while their preparedness for high school was decreased, although there is no way to be certain of either.

106

However, it does seem reasonable to assume that the students were able to successfully, though perhaps not optimally, learn while in middle school as indicated by their performance on the EXPLORE test, a nationally normed standardized achievement measure.

In general, the participants reported being academically prepared to enter middle school, although many were less confident socially. This academic preparation was most certainly a contributing factor to their continued success throughout middle school and beyond. When Hazel said, "I think it prepared me pretty much, pretty well. Like, I didn't feel behind or anything when I was in middle school," she seemed to capture the tone and sentiment of many of the participants. These participants were all successful former students who had been successful prior to middle school. When I asked them about their level of preparedness, it is not surprising that they responded positively. After all, they had always done well and likely expected this to continue. However, this does not diminish the significance of this factor. It is the researcher's belief that the participants were almost able to take their level of preparedness for granted because of their respective backgrounds and support systems, although their stories would likely be quite different had they been unprepared.

Research Question 2

Research question 2: Are there differences among male and female students of poverty?

Generally speaking, the male and female participants discussed many of the same experiences and perceptions. Based upon the data, there is little debate whether or not males and females need structure and support, or whether or not meaningful relationships within the school are important for both genders. However, a closer examination seems to indicate that the male and female participants tended to emphasize different aspects of their experiences. For the

purpose of this analysis, the following sections discuss the differences in male and female

perceptions based upon the factors that surfaced as most significant for each respective gender.

Males

When examining factors that fostered a connection to the school, males seemed to share

experiences relating to extracurricular activities more frequently, as well as more explicitly, than

their female counterparts. Two of the three girls who spoke of extracurricular activities

mentioned them almost as an afterthought, while the third, Janie, said that playing volleyball

helped her with making friends. Five males spoke of extracurricular activities, with only one of

those speaking about them as passively as the females. For example, Phil spoke at length about

the importance of Upward Bound. He stated that it helped him a great deal, adding:

> It's just like, I never went on summer vacations or anything that was just really fun. I
> think it's a good experience and kids in my situation should look at that a lot more
> because a lot of people don't take advantage of it.

In addition, although the difference was not as pronounced, connection to teachers

seemed to be slightly more significant for males. For both genders, five of the six participants

mentioned teachers in some way. However, only one of the female participants made more than

a passing comment about her teachers, while three males made more in-depth comments. Amy

elaborated on how her teachers influenced her, saying they knew "how to push [her] to her

limit," and that they "were always there" for her. Samuel shared, among other things, how his

teachers were able to make him feel comfortable in the classroom, and that they "were genuinely

concerned with us as human beings." Andrew spoke of his "really awesome" science teacher

with whom he felt he "could actually have a class discussion with." Finally, Josh went so far as

to say, "I would probably say the most important factor, even over my parents and stuff, is how well the teachers take you in, like basically like you're their own, you know."

Among themes related to support and motivation, there did not seem to be significant differences based upon the data collected for this research.

Females

Concerning themes related to school connection, females spoke more frequently and explicitly of the importance of peer relationships. The greater frequency may or may not be significant. However, when they did speak of peer relationships, they spoke of them differently. Generally speaking, the perceptions they shared were more deeply personal and more likely to mention a specific friend or group of friends. For example, Amy said "you know you have that one best friend that you're always together," and that hers was "always there" for her. Ashley shared having one best friend with whom she just "clicked," and that without her she "wouldn't have had anybody to lean on." While the one of the male participants made similarly detailed comments, in general, the male participants spoke of their friends in less specific and emotional ways. For example, Josh spoke of having a cousin in school who "had a pretty big role in keeping [him] straight on school," and James discussed how he selected friends who he thought we be academically beneficial to him.

In the areas related to support and motivation, females discussed relationships with outside adults with greater frequency and detail. For example, Maggie spoke extensively about a female relative who served as a role model for her, saying that she had handled difficult times "gracefully," and that "she was always kind to people and very smart." Some of the males shared similarly detailed accounts, but most of them made more general statements. For

example, Phil said that when his grandmother would visit from out of state that "she was always really nice and understanding." Furthermore, the females shared instances of receiving support for nonfamily members more often. Both Amy and Ashley spoke of the influence and support provided them by their church family, with Amy saying that her church family even helped her in material ways when her parents were divorcing. In addition, Cadence shared how a "neighborhood friend" who was also a teacher was a positive influence on her.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes as measured by the EXPLORE test for eighth grade males who qualify for free or reduced price lunch. In addition, this study was conducted for the purpose of improving the educational program at a Northeast Tennessee middle school. Twelve participants, six males and six females, were interviewed for the purpose and gaining insight and a richer understanding of the factors that enabled some students of poverty to be successful while others fall behind, as well as to determine if these factors differed by gender.

Analysis of the data caused several themes to emerge, and further examination of these themes reveals that there are several factors that have likely contributed to the success of these students. First, relationships with adults within the school, particularly the teachers who serve the individual students, were of paramount importance. In addition, positive relationships with adults outside of school, particularly parents, proved to be very significant. Also, having meaningful peer relationships contributed to the success of these students. Another factor was school involvement. Increased participation in extracurricular activities had a positive impact on

110

the students who reported such involvement. Finally, most of the participants indicated that they felt adequately prepared both for the middle school and by the middle school. All of these factors represent different forms of meaningful relationships that served to enhance the participants' feelings of connection to the school as well as to provide them with stability and structure.

Although it seems possible that some of the factors were more significant with respect to gender, none of the factors were exclusive to either gender. Both males and females benefit from positive relationships with adults and peers, school connection and involvement, and an adequately rigorous academic program. The researcher wishes to acknowledge that it is possible that some of the discrepancies in the data may be explained by the speaking patterns and general expressiveness of the individual participants.

Conclusions

My perceptions of gender differences among socioeconomically disadvantaged students at the individual student level have changed as a result of this research. As an educator of 16 years, I had come to believe that there were considerable differences in the ways in which socioeconomically disadvantaged males and females approached their schooling. Though I acknowledge that my research in no way eliminates this possibility, such differences were not apparent via the data collected for this research. There were differences, but they seemed to be much more subtle.

The most striking aspect of this research, especially when considering my previously held belief, is the similarity between socioeconomically disadvantaged males and females. Perhaps males more readily connect to schools when they are involved in extracurricular activities, while

111

females, perhaps, depend more heavily on peer relationships. However, based upon this research it is my belief that school connection, as well as relationships with adults within the school, and support from outside adults are of paramount importance for all students, especially those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Although this research seems to indicate that successful socioeconomically disadvantaged males and females have a few differences at the individual level, the male and female groups differ in one very clear way: a higher percentage of females are successful. In the Northeast Tennessee middle school attended by the participants, examination of 2 recent consecutive years of EXPLORE data revealed that 47 females reached the composite benchmark of 16, while only 22 males reached the benchmark. While individual low SES males and females who are academically successful have much in common, including their performance as measured by EXPLORE, the percentage of females is much greater. Although this disparity was not directly addressed in this study, it was apparent that there were many more females than males during the identification of prospective participants. It is my belief that this warrants further research for the purpose of gaining an even deeper understanding of what enables low SES boys to be successful, and seeking to determine how to foster and create these conditions within our schools.

Recommendations for Practice

Poverty and gender are factors that have a proven effect on the educational outcomes of students, and the Northeast Tennessee middle school focused upon in this study is no exception. Based upon this research, the following recommendations are made:

1. Establish a mentoring program that pairs every student with an adult in the building. This will serve to help all students feel a connection to someone in the building.

2. Provide professional development for all staff that provides them with strategies for reaching and connecting with all students, especially those who are most reluctant.

3. Establish additional extracurricular activities that appeal to a wide range of students and encourage all students to participate.

4. Seek funding for after-school transportation so that more students can participate in after-school programs and events.

5. Establish a peer-pairing program to help foster connections between students.

6. Conduct after-school family events that encourage parent involvement.

7. Provide workshops for parents that teach them the importance of their involvement and provide them with strategies to use with their children.

8. Develop an in school process for identifying students who are struggling to form meaningful connections with peers or adults. Provide intervention in the form of individualized plans that serve to foster positive connections.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based upon the findings of this research, the following are recommendations for future research:

1. A follow-up study could be conducted in which the participants are divided by gender into two focus groups and asked questions based upon the themes that emerged during this study. This would be done for the purpose of seeking an even deeper and richer

understanding, including the participants' beliefs surrounding the gap between the number of successful socioeconomically disadvantaged males and females.

2. A mixed methods study could be conducted to better understand why successful females substantially outnumber successful males among students of poverty and to identify possible ways to address this disparity.

3. A quantitative study focusing on the emergent themes of this study could be conducted. Survey data could be collected from a much larger sample to more accurately determine if there are differences with respect to gender and what they are if they do exist.

4. Provided that the school establishes an intervention program that assists students who struggle to form meaningful relationships with peers or adults, research could be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the program as well as to determine ways in which it could be improved.

REFERENCES

ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks. (n.d.). Retrieved from ACT improve yourself:

    https://www.act.org/education/benchmarks.html

Akos, P. (2006). Extracurricular participation and the transition to middle school. *RMLE Online:*

    Research in Middle Level Education, 29(9), 1-9.

Anyon, J., & Greene, K. (2007). No Child Left Behind as an anti-poverty measure. *Teacher*

    Education Quarterly, 34 (2), 157-162.

Baker, J., & Holloway, D. M. (2009). A comprehensive approach to disruptive behaviors in the

    classroom and home. *International Journal on School Disaffection, 6* (2), 37-40.

Behrend, C. (2009). Reflections on where the boys are. *Journal of College Admission*(205), 28-

    30.

Bembenutty, H. (2007). Self-regulation of learning and academic delay of gratification: Gender

    and ethnic differences among college students. *Journal of Advanced Academics, 18* (4),

    586-616.

Berlin, G. L. (2007). Rewarding the work of individuals: A counterintuitive approach to reducing

    poverty and strengthening families. *Future of Children , 17* (2), 17-42.

Bigelow, B. J. (2006). There's an elephant in the room: The impact of early poverty and neglect

    on intelligence and common learning disorders in children, adolescents, and their parents.

    Developmental Disabilities Bulletin, 34(1 & 2), 177-215.

Bonomo, V. (2010). Gender matters in elementary education: Research-based strategies to meet

    the distincitive learning needs of boys and girls. *Educational Horizons , 88* (4), 257-264.

Brighton, C. M. (2003). The effects of middle school teachers' beliefs on classroom practices.

    Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 27 (2), 177-206.

Brouse, C., Basch, C., LeBlanc, M., McKnight, K., & Lei, T. (2010). College students' academic

    motivation: Differences by gender, class, and source of payment. *College Quarterly, 13*

    (1), 1-10.

Burney, V. H., & Cross, T. L. (2006). Impoverished students with academic promise in rural

    settings: 10 lessons from Project Aspire. *Gifted Child Today, 29* (2), 14-21.

Chenoweth, G. (2012). The cultural bind on the American male. *The Journal of College*

    Admission (214), 12-17.

Cherlin, A. J. (2005). American marriage in the early twenty-first century. *Future of Children, 15*

    (2), 33-55. http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/15_02_03.pdf

Clark, M. A., Lee, S. M., Goodman, W., & Yacco, S. (2008). Examining male underachievement

    in public education: Action research at a district level. *NASSP Bulletin, 92* (2), 111-132.

Conroy, C. (1998). Influence of gender and program enrollment on adolescents' and teens'

    occupational and educational aspirations. *Journal of Vocational and Technical*

    Education, 14 (2), 18-28.

Dalley-Trim, L. (2009). The call to critique "common sense" understandings about boys and

    masculinity(ies). *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 34*(1), 54-68.

Domenico, D. M., & Jones, K. H. (2007). Adoloscent preganancy in America: Causes and

 responses. *Journal for Vocational and Special Needs Education, 30* (1), 4-12.

Duckworth, A. L., & Seligman, M. E. (2005). Self-discipline outdoes IQ in predicting academic

 performance of adolescents. *Psychological Science, 16* (12), 939-944.

Duncan, G. J., Ludwig, J., & Magnuson, K. A. (2007). Reducing poverty through preschool

 interventions. *Future of Children, 17* (2), 143-160.

Edelman, M. W., & Jones, J. M. (2004). Separate and unequal: America's children, race, and

 poverty. *Future of Children, 14* (2), 134-137.

Educational Achievement. (n.d.). Retrieved from The Boys Initiative:

 http://www.theboysinitiative.org/educationalachievement.html

EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT. (2014). Retrieved from EXPLORE:

 http://www.act.org/explorestudent/tests/epas.html

Fusarelli, B. C., & Militello, M. (2012). Racing to the top with leaders in rural high poverty

 schools. *Planning and Changing, 43* (1), 46-56.

Gentilucci, J. L. (2004). Improving school learning: The student perspective. *The Educational*

 Forum, 68 (2), 133-143.

Glover, E. S. (2013). *The myth of accountability: What don't we know?* Lanham, MD: Rowman

 and Littlefield Education.

Gorski, P. (2008). Beyond the "culture of poverty": Resources on economic justice. *Multicultural*

 Perspectives, 10 (1), 27-29.

Green, D., Oswald, M., & Spears, B. (2007). Teachers' (mis)understandings of resilience. *International Education Journal, 8* (2), 133-144.

Gunzelmann, B., & Connell, D. (2006). The new gender gap: Social, psychological, neuro-biological, and educational perspectives. *Educational Horizons , 84* (2), 94-101.

Gurian, M., & Stevens, K. (2006). How boys learn. *Educational Horizons, 84* (2), 87-93.

Gurian, M., & Stevens, K. (2005). *The minds of boys: Saving our sons from falling behind in school and life.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hall, G., & Charmaraman, L. (2011). Growing boys: Implementing a boys' empowerment group in an afterschool program. *Afterschool Matters, 13*, 49-51.

Hines, M. (2007). Adolescent adjustment to the middle school transition: The intersection of divorce and gender in review. *RMLE Online: Research in Middle Level Education, 31* (2), 1-15.

Hopkins, T. M. (2005). If you are poor, it is better to be rural: A study of mathematics achievement in Tennessee. *The Rural Educator, 27* (1), 21-28.

Horst, M. D., & Martin, B. N. (2007). A case study: Leadership and its effect on achievement of children from poverty in a rural setting. *Rural Educator, 28* (3), 33-40.

Howley, A., Rhodes, M., & Beall, J. (2009). Challenges facing rural schools: Implications for gifted students. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 32* (4), 515-536, 576-577.

Hutton, P. A., & Holmes, J. M. (2005). Savings education: Learning the value of self-control. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 13* (28), 1-20.

Isernhagen, J. C. (2012). A portrait of administrator, teacher, and parent perspectives of Title I

    school improvement plans. *Journal of At-Risk Issues, 17* (1), 1-7.

Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what*

    schools can do about it. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Johnson, K. C., & Lampley, J. H. (2010). Mentoring at-risk middle school students. *SRATE*

    Journal, 19 (2), 64-69.

Kalil, A., & Ryan, R. M. (2010). Mothers' economic conditions and sources of support in fragile

    families. *Future of Children, 20* (2), 39-61.

Kehler, M., & Martino, W. (2007). Questioning masculinities: Interrogating boys' capacities for

    self-problemization in schools. *Canadian Journal of Education, 30* (1), 90-112.

KewalRamani, A., Gilbertson, L., & Fox, M. A. (2007). Status and trends in the education of

    racial and ethnic minorities: Chapter 6 - postsecondary participation. *Journal for*

    Vocational Special Needs Education, 30 (1), 28-38.

Kimmel, M. (2006). A war against boys? *Dissent, 53* (4), 65-70.

Kindlon, D., & Thompson, M. (2000). *Raising cain: Protecting the emotional life of boys.* New

    York: Ballantine Books.

Krashen, S. (2005). The hard work hypothesis: Is doing your homework enough to overcome the

    effects of poverty? *Multicultural Education, 12* (4), 16-19.

Kyle, D. W. (2011). Families' goals, school involvement, and children's academic achievement: A follow-up study thirteen years later. *School Community Journal, 21* (2), 9-24.http://www.adi.org/journal/2011fw/kylefall2011.pdf

Legewie, J., & DiPrete, T. A. (2012). School context and the gender gap in educational achievement. *American Sociological Review, 77* (3), 463-485.

Martin, A. J. (2003). Boys and motivation. *Australian Educational Researcher, 30* (3), 43-65.

Martinez, R. S., & Semrud-Clikemen, M. (2004). Emotional adjustment and school functioning of young adoloscents with multiple versus single learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 37* (5), 411-420.

Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality.* New York: Harper and Row.

McClanahan, S., & Beck, A. N. (2010). Parental relationships in fragile families. *Future of Children, 20* (2), 17-37.

McKinney, S., & Frazier, W. (2008). Embracing the principles and standards for school mathematics: An inquiry into the pedagogical and instructional practices of mathematics teachers in high-poverty middle schools. *The Clearing House, 81* (5), 201-210.

McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (2010). *Research in education: Evidence-based inquiry.* Boston: Pearson.

McNeil, L. M., Coppola, E., Radigan, J., & Heilig, J. V. (2008). Avoidable losses: High-stakes accountability and the dropout crisis. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 16* (3), 1-48. http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/28/154

Murnane, R. J. (2007). Improving the education of children living in poverty. *Future of Children, 17* (2), 161-182.

Nelson, L. P., McMahan, S. K., & Torres, T. (2012). The impact of a junior high school community intervention project: Moving beyond the testing juggernaut and into a community of creative learners. *School Community Journal, 22* (1), 125-144.

Niehaus, K., Rudasill, K. M., & Rakes, C. R. (2012). A longidudinal study of school connectedness and academic outcomes across sixth grade. *Journal of School Psychology, 50* (4), 443-460.

Nightingale, D. S., & Fix, M. (2004). Economic and labor market trends. *Future of Children, 14* (2), 46-59.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 115, Stat. 1425 (2002).

Parker, D. C., Grenville, H., & Flessa, J. (2011). Case studies of school community and climate: Success narratives of schools in challenging circumstances. *School Community Journal, 21* (1), 129-150.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3 ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Payne, R. (2006). *Working with parents: Building relationships for student success.* Highlands, TX: Aha! Process.

Penner, C., & Wallin, D. (2012). School attachment theory and restitution processes: Promoting positive behaviors in middle years schools. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* (137), 1-36.

Picucci, A. C., Brownson, A., Kahlert, R., & Sobel, A. (2004). Middle school concept helps high-poverty schools become high-performing schools. *Middle School Journal, 36* (1), 4-11.

Pollack, W. (1998). *Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood.* New York: Random House.

Radcliffe, R., & Stephens, L. C. (2008). Preservice teachers are creating a college culture for at-risk middle school students. *RMLE Online: Research in Middle Level Education, 32* (4), 1-15.

Rapp, N., & Duncan, H. (2012). Multi-dimensional parental involvement in schools: A principal's guide. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 7* (1), 1-14.

Santiago, C. D., & Wadsworth, M. E. (2009). Coping with family conflict: What's helpful and what's not for low-income adoloscents. *18* (2), 192-202.

Sax, L. (2007). *Boys adrift: The five factors driving the growing epedemic of unmotivated boys and underachieving young men.* New York: Basic Books.

Sax, L. (2006). Six degrees of separation: What teachers need to know about the emerging science of sex differences. *Educational Horizons, 84* (3), 190-200.

Schrader, G., & Brown, S. (2008). Evaluating the first year experience: Students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. *Journal of Advanced Academics, 19* (2), 310-343.

Schuette, C. T., Ponton, M. K., & Charlton, M. L. (2012). Middle school children's career aspirations: Relationship to adult occupations and gender. *The Career Development Quarterly, 60* (1), 36-46.

Southworth, S. (2010). Examining the effects of school composition on North Carolina student achievement over time. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (18), 1-45.

Spielhagen, F. L. (2011). "It all depends...": Middle school teachers evaluate single-sex classes. *RMLE Online: Research in Middle Level Education, 34*(7), 1-12.

Stoltz, J.-A. (2005). Masculinity and school violence: Addressing the role of male gender socialization. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 39* (1), 52-63.

Thomas, A., & Sawhill, I. (2005). For love and money? The impact of family structure on family income. *Future of Children, 15* (2), 57-74.

Tyler, J., & Lofstrom, M. (2009). Finishing high school: Alternative pathways and dropout recovery. *Future of Children, 19* (1), 77-103.

United States Department of Commerce. (2011). State and county quickfacts. *United States Census Bureau* . Retrieved from http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47000.html

United States Department of Education. (2012). The condition of Education 2012. *National Center for Education Statistics*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2012045

United States Department of Education. (2013). NAEP State Comparisons. *National Center for Education Statistics*. Retrieved from

http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/statecomparisons

Usher, E. L., & Pajares, F. (2006). Inviting confidence in school: Invitations as a critical source of the academic self-efficacy beliefs of entering middle school students. *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice, 12*, 7-16.

Vidourek, R. A., King, K. A., Bernard, A. L., Murnan, J., & Nabors, L. (2011). Teachers' strategies to positively connect students to school. *American Journal of Health Education , 42* (2), 116-126.

Wadsworth, B. J. (1996). *Piaget's theory of cognitive and affective development.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Woodside, M., Gibbons, M., Davison, J., Hannon, C., & Sweeney, J. (2012). Work and career experiences of men from families without college experience. *Qualitative Report, 17* (53), 1-16.

Woodward, J., & Brown, C. (2006). Meeting the curricular needs of academically low-achieving students in middle grade mathematics. *Journal of Special Education, 40* (3), 151-159.

Yeh, T. (2010). Service-learning and persistence of low-income, first-generation college students: An exploratory study. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 16* (2), 50-65.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to provide information for this study. After reading the letter of consent, you know that I am attempting to understand how former students of our middle school have come to understand their middle school experience. So, I am interested in how you perceived the experiences you had when you were there and how you think those experiences have impacted your life since that time.

I have a set of questions that will serve to guide our conversation, but please don't feel that your responses need to be limited by the questions. I want to understand both the positive and negative aspects of your experiences and I hope you will share both with me.

1. What are the dominant experiences or big things that you recall from middle school?

    -follow up with questions that probe the positive and negative aspects of those experiences.

2. Who are the people you knew in middle school and perhaps know now that were strong influences on you? How did they influence you?
    -follow up by getting respondent to talk about teachers, principals, counselors, other students and how they influenced (positive, negative, or both)
3. Who outside of school influenced you during the middle schools years? How?
4. How well did the elementary school prepare you for middle school? What might have provided you with better preparation?
5. How well did the middle school prepare you for high school? How might that preparation have been better?

Appendix B

Phone Script

Hello, my name is Stephen Long, and I am the principal of (name of school). I am also a graduate student at East Tennessee State University. I am calling you because I am conducting a study involving former (name of school) students who did very well on the 8th grade EXPLORE test, and who also received free or reduced price lunch while in 8th grade.

Would it be alright if I told you more about the study?

If "no", thank them for their time. If "yes" proceed below.

Only former (name of school) students who are now high school graduates will be asked to participate. If you do choose to participate you will be asked to allow me to interview you for approximately 1 hour. We will discuss your educational experiences and perceptions, as well as your background as it relates to your education. Your identity will be protected; neither your name, the name of the school or district, nor any identifying information will be included in the final results of the study.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw if you should change your mind. Other than the cost of transportation to the interview site, I do not see any costs or risks associated with your participation, with the possible exception of the emotional toll of recalling past events.

Would you be willing to consider participating?

If "no", thank them for their time. If "yes" proceed below.

I would like to give you adequate time to reflect so that you don't make a decision too quickly. Would it be alright if we met in two weeks to go over the paperwork? If you decide before that time that you are not interested you can notify me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you decide that you are interested, I will have informed consent paperwork with me at that time.

Thank you for your time!

Appendix C

Informed Consent Document

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: **Stephen Long**

TITLE OF PROJECT: **An Examination of Successful Socioeconomically Disadvantaged**

Males in a Northeast Tennessee Middle School

This Informed Consent will explain about being a participant in a research study. It is important that you read this material carefully and then decide if you wish to be a volunteer.

<u>PURPOSE</u>:

<u>The purpose(s)</u> of this research study is/are as follows:

1. To determine the factor(s) that enable some socioeconomically disadvantaged students to experience greater success in middle school and beyond than other socioeconomically disadvantaged students
2. To determine if these factors differ among males and females
3. To improve the educational program in a local middle school and, in turn, improve the educational outcomes of the students it serves.

<u>DURATION</u>

You will be expected to participate in one interview, which will last approximately 1 hour.

<u>PROCEDURES</u>

You will be expected to participate in one interview, which will last approximately 1 hour. The interview will be conducted at a location convenient to you, but must be one that provides complete privacy. The interview will be recorded, and then typed out word for word. After that is completed, you will be expected to meet once more, also at a location convenient to you, so that you can review the typed interview. At this time, you will have every right to add to your words, delete any portion you wish delete, change any portion you wish to change, or withdraw your interview altogether.

<u>ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES</u>

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate, there are no alternative procedures for you to undertake.

<u>POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS</u>

The possible risks and/or discomforts of your involvement include:

The only foreseeable risk is the possibility of some emotional discomfort from recalling past events and experiences.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

The possible benefits of your participation are:

1. This study will give you the opportunity to share your school experiences in a completely confidential, risk-free, yet meaningful way. The research is designed with an emphasis on the perspectives of former students, as opposed to an emphasis on the perspectives of adults employed by the school.
2. The results of this study have the potential to change the practices within the school, leading to a better environment for socioeconomically disadvantaged students, more effective teaching, and better outcomes for these students.

FINANCIAL COSTS

The only cost associated with this study would be the cost of transportation, if the participant chooses a location that requires him or her to travel. There are no additional costs to you.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this research experiment is voluntary. You may refuse to participate. You can quit at any time. If you quit or refuse to participate, there are no negative consequences. You may quit by calling Stephen Long, whose phone number is xxx/xxx-xxxx.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

If you have any questions or problems related to this research, you may call Stephen Long at xxx/xxx-xxxx, or Dr. Eric Glover at xxx/xxx-xxxx. You may call the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board at xxx/xxx-xxxx for any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject. If you have any questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone independent of the research team or you can't reach the study staff, you may call an IRB Coordinator at xxx/xxx-xxxx or xxx/xxx/xxxx.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of the records from this study will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office at xxx xxxxxxxxxx xxxx, xxxxxxxx xxxx, xx xxxxx for at least 5 years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a subject. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the ETSU IRB, the ETSU department of Educational Leadership and Policy analysis have access to the study records. Your records will be kept

completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above.

By signing below, you confirm that you have read or had this document read to you. You will be given a signed copy of this informed consent document. You have been given the chance to ask questions and to discuss your participation with the investigator. You freely and voluntarily choose to be in this research project.

_____

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT   DATE

_____

PRINTED NAME OF PARTICIPANT   DATE

_____

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR   DATE

_____

SIGNATURE OF WITNESS (if applicable)   DATE

Appendix D

Letter to the Director of Schools

Director of Schools

Address

Street

City, State, Zip Code

Date

(Name),

As you know, I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis Department of East Tennessee State University. As principal of xxxxx, I am interested in conducting a study that has the potential to benefit our students, our school, and our community.

For this reason, I would like to request permission to conduct interviews of recent high school graduates who qualified for free or reduced lunch during eighth grade and scored a minimum of 16 composite on the EXPLORE test. As such, I am also requesting permission to use previous EXPLORE and free and reduced lunch data in order to identify prospective participants. The purposes of this research are to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that lead to success for certain socioeconomically disadvantaged students, to determine if there are differences among socioeconomically disadvantaged males and females, and to ultimately use that information to further learning and success at (name of school). Speaking with academically successful graduates about why they have been and continue to be successful also serves to eliminate the sometimes problematic issue of interviewing minors.

I am seeking your permission because the majority of the discussion with these graduates will center on their experiences while attending schools in our district. However, I assure you that the students, schools, and the district will not be identified in any way, nor will any individual test scores be included.

It is my belief that such a study has the potential to provide a significant benefit to our students because it will provide insight into how the students perceive themselves, their school, their teachers, and their education. My hope is that this information can then be used to provide other demographically similar students with a greater opportunity for success.

Respectfully,

Stephen Long

Graduate Student

Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

VITA

STEPHEN E. LONG

Education: Ed. D., Educational Leadership, East Tennessee

                           State University, Johnson City, TN

                           2014

                           Ed. S., Curriculum and Instruction, Lincoln Memorial

                           University, Harrogate, TN

                           2011

                           M. Ed., Educational Administration and Supervision,

                           University of Tennessee at Martin, Martin, TN

                           2010

                           B.A., Mathematics, Emory and Henry College,

                           Emory, VA

                           1998

Professional Experience: Supervisor of 7 -12 Curriculum and Instruction,

                           Johnson County Schools, Mountain City, TN

                           2014 – Present

                           Principal, Johnson County Middle School

                           Mountain City, TN

                           2011 – 2014

Assistant Principal, Johnson County High School

Mountain City, TN

2010 – 2011

Mathematics Teacher, Johnson County High School

Mountain City, TN

2006 – 2010

Adjunct Mathematics Instructor,

Northeast State Technical Community College

Blountville, TN

2002 – 2011

Mathematics Teacher, Unaka High School

Stoney Creek, TN

1998 – 2006