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Pathways to School Success: An Examination of Perspectives of African American and Latino/a Low-income Students

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Abstract

This research study examines the perspectives of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families who are especially successful in an urban, public school to elicit and gain insights into factors that mediate their academic success, conditions and contexts that nurture these factors, and the process through which these factors mediate their academic success. Utilizing a qualitative, phenomenological theoretical framework (Van Manen, 1990), this study bridges critical gaps in the empirical research literature on the academic success of such students by centering and validating the marginalized, yet authentic, voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of the adolescents (Gayles, 2005; Howard, Dryden & Johnson, 1999). It examines extant research literature on resilience, racial/cultural identity and racial socialization to inform the questions put to subjects in the present study.

Data for the study were collected through qualitative, semi-structured, open-ended, one-to-one interviews of ten students, in grades 11-12, in an urban, public high school. The students are from African-American and Latino/a, low-income families and have a minimum average school grade of B or 3.0. Data analysis was guided by qualitative coding cycles (Saldana, 2013).

This study finds five emerging themes or factors with eight sub-themes that the adolescents believed mediated their academic success. The five factors which are found to be external influences emanating from the adolescents’ ecological contexts (family, school, community, and social media), are: high expectations, caring and supportive relationships, participation in positions of responsibility, positive racial socialization, and positive belief systems. The eight sub-themes or sub-factors reflect the adolescents’ responses to the external factors: value for education, focus on future goals/clear sense of purpose, self-push, internal locus of control,
desire to make family or caregivers proud, sense of belonging, clear sense of good versus bad choices and their implications, and positive racial identity.

This study also finds several implications that are critical to the academic success of these students: the power of preponderance of the emerging factors, the power of socialization of the factors into the students from their external, ecological contexts, the power of caring and supportive relationships (all the factors were socialized into the students within such relationships), and the criticality and interactivity of the adolescents’ agency in responding positively and actively to the external factors or influences. Most critical to this study’s findings is the suggestion that all the emerging factors can be cultivated in these adolescents through strategic interventions that can be sustained by a strong partnership between schools, families, and communities that comprise the key ecological contexts of minority children and adolescents from low-income families, attending urban public schools.
Pathways to School Success: An Examination of Perspectives of African American and Latino/a Low-income Students

by

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I express my deep gratitude to the impressive students I interviewed for this study for so generously and richly sharing their lived experiences and time with me. I am very hopeful that their voices will lend important insights to this discourse and that they will march on to achieve their dreams of uplifting themselves, their families, and their communities.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This research study proposes to examine the perspectives of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families who are especially successful in schools to elicit and gain insights into factors that mediate their academic success, conditions and contexts that nurture these factors, and the process through which these factors mediate academic success.

Research Rationale

Across urban schools in America, substantial and ever-increasing numbers of African American and Latino/a students from low income families are failing to achieve academic success (as measured by standardized state assessments and school report cards) and are dropping out of school despite decades of changes and innovation in district and school re-organization, curriculum, instruction, high stakes assessments, teacher and administrator evaluations, school and district accountability, funding, programs, resources, parental and community engagement, and efforts to create effective schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2008).

This unfolding tragedy is imbued with urgency because as these students continue to exit school without the knowledge and competencies required for post-secondary education and meaningful employment, they become excluded from the benefits of life and upward social and economic mobility that a good education affords (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Delpit, 2006; Delpit, 2012; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Nieto, 2010; Noguera, 2008;). In addition to this, and lending an even more critical nuance to this problem, significant numbers of these students
become embroiled in or vulnerable to pervasive, generational unemployment, low-skilled/low-wage employment, poverty, crime, and violence in their neighborhoods. Inevitably, an increasing number become fodder for the infamous school-to-prison pipeline (Rios, 2014).

Sounding an urgent call to action, Darling-Hammond (2010) warned,

At a time when children of color comprise a majority in most urban districts, and will be a majority in the nation by 2025 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), we face pernicious achievement gaps that fuel inequality, short changing our young people and our nation.

Today, in the United States of America, only 1 in 10 low-income kindergarteners becomes a college graduate. A greater number join the growing ranks of inmates in what the New York Times recently dubbed our “prison nation (p.3).

Reiterating this compelling call, Darling-Hammond (2010) asserted that approximately 17% of African American youth between the ages of 25 and 29 and 11% of Hispanic youth earned a college degree in 2005 in comparison to 34% of white youth, 50% of youth in European countries, and over 60% of youth in Korea (p. 16, citing U. S. Bureau of Census, 2005). Noguera (2008), reiterating the stance of Kozol (1991) and Noguera and Akom (2000), asserted that “academic performance outcomes [of minoritized students in U.S. urban schools] generally reflect broader patterns of inequality that are evident elsewhere in American society” (p.192). Such inequalities include disparities in school funding and resources, high quality teachers, housing, healthcare, employment, mortgage, nutrition, transportation, higher education, and others (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kozol, 1991, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2008; Kozol, 1991, 2005)
Pivoting to a more localized context of this problem, in the QT City School District, with 22,000 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten to grade 12, of its 72% of students who are from African American and Latino/a, low-income families, a dismal 8.1% in 2015 and 10.9% in 2016 achieved proficiency levels in the New York State English Language Arts and Mathematics Assessments administered to students in grades 3-8 each year and which are based on the Common Core Standards (QT City School District Office of Shared Accountability: QTCSD Elementary/Middle Level Performance on the 2016 New York State Grades 3-8 English Language Arts and Mathematics Exams, July 29, 2016). Similarly, recent student performance are 13.1% in 2017 and 15.2% in 2018 (QT City School District Office of Shared Accountability Report 2018). This phenomenon of low academic outcomes among students in these sub-groups has prevailed for over a decade across New York State. (New York State Education Department: The New York State Report Card, 2001-2016). The student graduation rate from the district’s high schools hovers around 60% and lower. (QT City School District Office of Shared Accountability).

It is pertinent to note that despite this prevalence of low academic achievement among minority students from economically disadvantaged sub-groups, there is a smaller number of such students who continue to achieve high academic outcomes in the same schools, from the same environments, and with the same resources.

This study utilizes a positive deviance theoretical framework, whose fundamental principle propounds that every community possesses the solutions to its own problems (Sternin, Sternin, and Marsh, 1998), to examine perspectives and experiences of students from these groups who are succeeding. This study also utilizes a phenomenological theoretical framework to center the voices of the students as experts of their own lived experiences. Focusing on student success,
this study examines extant empirical research literature on resilience, racial/cultural identity, and racial socialization to distill insights that may inform the current study. Of interest also is what, if any, are intersections between the phenomena of resilience, racial/cultural identity, and racial socialization and the academic success of African American and Latino/a, low-income students? Being a qualitative, inductive study, however, this research study will be focusing on generating rich, thick descriptions from participant students’ perspectives of factors contributing to their academic success, in which analysis, interpretation, and conclusions will be grounded.

For purposes of this study, the term “school success” focuses on student academic achievement as measured by the high stakes New York State assessments and school report cards. To this effect, the benchmark New York State Grades 3-8 Assessments in English Language Arts and Math and the New York State Grades 4 and 8 Assessments in Science prescribe student proficiency levels on these tests as scores of Levels 3 or 4. Also for purposes of this study, school success focuses on student academic success and is defined as a G.P.A. of B and above on the student school report card.

**Gaps in Extant Empirical Research Literature**

Empirical research studies and initiatives that have sought to examine and address this prevalent situation have left gaps or areas for further examination that would facilitate a deeper understanding of this situation.

Firstly, empirical research literature on the phenomenon of school success of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families has tended to marginalize the voices and experiences of these students and thereby their insights and wisdoms borne from the passion, originality, and authenticity of their direct knowledge of their own lived experiences and
realities. Thus, a gap exists in empirical research literature on this phenomenon under study with respect to the perspectives of children and adolescents on factors that mediate their resilience and school success (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999). Howard et al (1999) reiterated the warning of Winbourne and Dardaino- Ragguet (1993, p. 195), that “a major shortcoming of many studies in this area is the apparent disregard for viewpoints of children targeted in the research”. To this effect, Gayles (2005) asserted that the narratives of students should be interrogated by researchers to more deeply understand how and why students engage and maintain academic achievement. Affirming experience as a special way of knowing and a privileged standpoint rooted in passion, lived suffering, and remembrance, hooks (1994) asserted that “it cannot be acquired through books or even distanced observation and study of a particular reality” (p. 90). She posited experience as adding depth to knowing and as being a valid “standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory” (p. 90). The present research study steps into this gap by eliciting the voices of students to examine their perspectives and experiences with respect to factors that mediate their school success and conditions and contexts that nurture these factors.

Secondly, empirical research studies on the phenomenon of resilience, which underlies my current research study, highlight a need to study resilience in various specific and localized contexts in order to understand cultural variations and nuances with respect to risk and protective factors that underlie individual differences in resilience. Such specificity of study would also help to unmask any unknown or unique factors (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999, p. 307). Endorsing this view, Ungar (2011) reiterates the criticality of more deeply understanding the role that social and physical environments play in the positive developmental outcomes of individuals who face adversity. He postulates the idea of atypicality: that protective mechanisms used in specific contexts may be atypical, non-normative, or abnormal but still function as protective
factors by facilitating the individual to overcome, cope with, or recover from adversity or trauma. My research study steps into this gap by positioning itself to examine a specific locale, the QT City School District, and specific contexts, including the family, school, and community, and seeking to more deeply understand not merely factors that mediate the school success of the research subjects, but also social, cultural, physical, and other contexts and conditions that nurture and facilitate these factors.

Thirdly, the body of literature on resilience calls for more inquiry into understanding the biological, psychological, social, and cultural mechanisms that underlie individual differences in behavioral adaptive or maladaptive outcomes with respect to encounters with the same or similar adversity (Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 2006; 2013; Werner, 1991). Framing this gap as a need “to focus on the processes underlying individual differences in response to environmental hazards, rather than resilience as an abstract entity” (Rutter, 2006, p. 10), Rutter (2013) reiterates that “many influences are relatively context specific, making it mandatory to consider individual circumstances more closely” (p. 482). Werner (1997) frames this as a need to study why children from the same environment may respond differently to risk factors. My research study will address this gap by utilizing semi-structured and open-ended interviews to elicit from research subjects their individual beliefs, attitudes, behavior, qualities, experiences, and influences that facilitated their individual responses to adversity and mediated their school success amidst the low academic outcomes of most of their peers.

Finally, a gap exists in the paucity of utilization of a positive deviance theoretical framework to examine and address the pervasive, intractable problem of low academic achievement of African American and Latino/a, low-income students in urban, public schools across America. My research study again steps into this gap. Indeed, this study is unique in its intersection of the
phenomena and extant empirical research literature on resilience, racial/cultural identity, racial socialization, and the positive deviance theoretical framework as vehicles for examining the school success of these students, thereby shedding new light on an old problem.

In summary, there is an urgent need for qualitative research studies that can more deeply examine and understand the factors mediating the greater academic achievement of the few students who are succeeding in the QT City School District as well as the conditions and contexts that nurture these factors, and the process or pathway through which these factors mediate academic success, from the authenticity of the lived experiences, layered realities, and indigenous perspectives of students in the district. This would facilitate deeper insights that can inform innovative interventions and solutions, culturally suited and tailored to this specific locale or context.

**Research Purpose**

The purpose of this research study is to uncover and understand the factors that mediate the school success of African American and Latino/a low-income students, contexts and conditions that nurture these factors, and the process or pathway through which these factors mediate the students’ academic success, through an examination of the perspectives of a sampling of such students who are achieving school success. Utilizing a positive deviance and phenomenological theoretical framework, this study seeks to uncover any uncommon practices, behavior, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, experiences, qualities, habits of mind, influences, or other factors, whether internal or external to the students, that enable these students to achieve more successful outcomes than their peers who, seemingly, have access to the same or similar resources.
Research Questions

1. What are the perspectives of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families on factors that mediate their academic success?
2. What are the perspectives of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families on conditions or contexts that nurture their academic success?
3. What are the processes or pathways through which these factors mediate the academic success of these students?

Research Significance

a) This study will begin to bridge the paucity of utilization of positive deviance as a theoretical framework for examining the school success of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families in urban schools across America. It will shed light on factors that mediate the school success of the few students who are achieving high academic outcomes in urban, public schools as well as on the conditions and contexts that nurture these factors, and the processes or pathways through which these factors mediate the academic success of these students. Thereby, it will inform interventions that can facilitate the successes of the generality of their peers who are plagued by low academic outcomes.

b) This research study may shed light on if and how resilience, racial/cultural identity, and racial socialization intersect with the academic success of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families.

c) This research study will furthermore, extend the development, testing, and understanding of the use of the positive deviance concept as a theoretical framework for empirical research and community development initiatives.
d) Finally, the findings of my research study would inform the development and implementation of interventions, programs, and policies for increasing the academic and socio-emotional learning outcomes of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families.

**Positive Deviance Theoretical Framework**

**A Global History – Origins of the Positive Deviance Concept**

The concept of positive deviance originates from the fields of healthcare and global nutrition initiatives with a multitude of empirical applications across diverse contexts in over forty countries (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010; Sternin, Sternin, & Marsh, 1998). Dr. Marian Zeitlin (who pioneered empirical research on positive deviance on child malnourishment, in rural communities, in South East Asia, from 1987-1992, funded by UNICEF), Jerry and Monique Sternin (who pioneered positive deviance empirical studies from the early 1990s, in Vietnam) and David Marsh, spearheaded and shed light on this concept as both theoretical lens and methodology for finding and implementing quick, affordable, and sustainable solutions to prevalent, intractable community problems. The fundamental principle of positive deviance rests on the premise that every community inherently possesses the solution to its own problem; that solutions that are harvested from within a community are more acceptable to the community members because they are usually culturally appropriate; and that such solutions are sustainable by the community members because they locally possess the resources that generate their own solutions. This principle advocates identifying positive deviant members of a community perceived as having a widespread problem, uncovering the uncommon practices of the positive deviants that have led to their successes in combating the problem, and disseminating these practices to the rest of the community (Ahrari et al. 2006; Bradley et al. 2009; Fowles,
Hendricks, & Walker, 2005; Future Generations, Afghanistan, 2013; Lewis, 2009; Marsh et al. 2004; Marsh et al. 2007; Obote-Ochieng, 2007; Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010; Sternin, Sternin, & Marsh, 1998; Stuckey et al. 2011; Vossenaar et al. 2009; Walker et al, 2007; Zaidi, Jaffrey, & Moin, 2010). Zeitlin, Ghassemi, and Mansour (1990) explicated and advocated the use of the positive deviance concept to combat global childhood malnourishment by endeavoring “to identify successful child-care and feeding behaviors and to determine effective aspects of social support systems as a basis for designing policies and programmes to reinforce and extend these adaptations to more mothers.” (p.1) Zeitlin et al. (1990) noted that the concept of positive deviance was used in nutrition literature by Hegsted (1967), Wray (1972), and Greaves (1979). They noted that Hegsted “advised that we should pay a great deal more attention to those individuals who are apparently healthy while consuming diets which seem to be restricted. We should pay more attention to the reasons for nutritional success rather than nutritional failure.” (p.1) They noted that Wray (1972) “advocated studying successful mothers.” (p.1) They also noted that Greaves (1979) advocated a “tremendous opportunity for research” in identifying and studying community members who have successfully tackled the problem of malnourishment. (p.1) Charged with combating malnourishment in Vietnamese villages in South East Asia, possessing scarce funds, and inspired by the work of Dr. Zeitlin, Jerry and Monique Sternin galvanized the villagers to assist in identifying village members – positive deviants – who had robust children. They visited these mothers at home to observe their feeding practices. They discovered that these mothers were deviating from locally accepted norms – they were feeding their children shrimps and crabs from the rice paddies as well as sweet potato greens which other persons in the community considered inappropriate for children; they were feeding their children four small portions a day instead of two large ones; and they were washing their children’s hands
before each feed. The Sternins collected these uncommon practices and disseminated them throughout the other villages. At the end of two years from their pilot program, child malnutrition decreased sharply by 65-85% across the villages. Since the pioneering work of Zeitlin and the Sternins, international non-governmental organizations including UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), in collaboration with myriad governmental agencies across the globe, have applied the positive deviance concept to successfully address myriad global problems including: issues in public health, agriculture, conservation, and child protection, child malnutrition in Vietnam, female genital circumcision in Egypt, hospital infections in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, child soldiers in Uganda, infant mortality in Pakistan, security development and peace building in Afghanistan, and many others (Future Generations Afghanistan Research Report, 2013; Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010; Sternin, Sternin, & Marsh, 1998).

**Criticality as a Guide to Research**

Sousanis (2011) explicated succinctly that “theory brings the unseen to the surface, providing insight for making sense of what is seen.” (p. 126). In tandem with this insight, Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) asserted intuitively, “there are many ways for us to come to know something and even then our knowledge is partial.” (p. 84). Theory facilitates researchers to develop new perspectives on existing problems or on existing knowledge about phenomena and to think in new ways about old problems (Suppes, 1974). Encapsulating this rejuvenating and versatile utility of theory on research perspective, Suppes (1974) termed it “a radical reorganization of how to think about the world” (p. 5). The positive deviance theoretical framework is utilized in the current research study as a theoretical lens to reframe an old dilemma in a new way. This framework is utilized to frame the research topic, research
rationale, research purpose, and research questions of the current study as articulated above. At
the core of this reframing is a focus, not on school failure as is the case with the considerable
body of research on student achievement, but on school success of African American and
Latino/a students from low-income families despite the prevalent low academic performance of
their peers. Echoing the need for such intrepidity in the field of education research, Rolling
(2013) succinctly explicated, “the scientific and institutionalized belief systems that build
taxonomical models in education present a monumental and oppressive structure that too easily
occludes those educational stories that emerge from the margins --- stories that disrupt the central
or centering storyline” (p. 205). Rolling (2013) insightfully contended, “travelling along this
marginality can open up places for “innovation and experiment rather than the habitual ---” (p.
205)

A Strengths-based Perspective

The positive deviance theoretical framework harnesses the strengths of the research
participants in a racialized, debilitating environment. Minority students living in urban
environments in the U. S. are immersed in systemic, structural, and institutionalized racism and
inequities orchestrated by the dominant, hegemonic group that, in truth, cause the host of
complex, social problems that plague their disenfranchised families and constrain or compromise
their wellbeing (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2011; Yosso, 2005, Children’s Defense Fund
Report, 1986.).

A multiplicity of scholarly and empirical research studies, particularly in the field of culturally
relevant and responsive teaching have identified myriad systemic, inequitable barriers to the
learning and academic achievement of these marginalized students (Delpit, 2012; Irvine, 2003;
Milner, Nieto, 2010; Perry, Steele, and Hilliard, III, (2003). These barriers are often embedded within both school and societal structures, systems, ideologies, policies, and practices. Such barriers include: a) In School Barriers – inadequate school funding; public schools’ re-segregation by race, ethnicity, and class; inadequate learning resources and infrastructures of learning; lack of high quality and experienced teachers; low teacher salaries and poor working conditions resulting in high teacher instability or turnover with concomitant discontinuity of instruction and teacher-student relationships and disruption of teacher collaboration and shared experiences which support student learning; teacher low expectations of students; lack of culturally relevant and responsive curriculum, pedagogy, and resources; teacher and school deficit ideologies, policies, and practices b) Out of School Barriers – such as racism and poverty and their attendant effects: unemployment; underemployment; poor healthcare, nutrition, housing, transportation, and family learning resources and supports; crime; violence; incarceration, and hyper-stress. Indeed, the learning and achievement of marginalized students cannot be divorced from the poverty in which they and their families and communities are enmeshed and the multiplicity of social problems that are attendant upon such poverty (Kozol, 2006; Nieto, 2010; Noguera, 2009).

The positive deviance theoretical framework is an assets-based ideology. It does not excuse, ignore, or justify the racist and inequitable, structural and systemic barriers to the academic achievement and wellbeing of marginalized students, their families, and their communities. Nor does it blame the majority of those who confront these obstacles for not having found ways of overcoming them. The positive deviance theoretical framework is foregrounded in the foundational belief that within marginalized students, their families, and their communities dwell robust, internal strengths and solutions that mediate the school success of the positive deviant
students among them despite the intransigent, inequitable barriers to their learning encountered daily by these students. The positive deviance theoretical framework seeks to mine and uncover assets that might be disseminated across the rest of the student population to facilitate their increased academic learning outcomes. Indeed, the positive deviance theoretical framework views positive deviants as possessing assets and agency that can overcome obstacles without necessarily eliminating the underlying causes of these obstacles (Lewis, 2009).
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

A. Resilience

The concept of resilience originally emanated from studies in pediatric psychiatry and psychopathology and social and behavioral sciences (Benard, 1991; Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 2006, 2007, 2013). Any research study focused on examining factors that mediate the school success of students from marginalized groups cannot validly dissociate itself from or overlook the body of empirical findings and scholarly ruminations on the phenomenon of resilience. The field of resilience studies embodies a wealth of empirical findings and knowledge on resilience as a phenomenon that mediates the psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing and academic success of children and adolescents facing adversity (Benard, 1991; Borman & Overman, 2004; Garmezy, 1991; Greeff & Loubser, 2008; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Lee, Kwong, Cheung, Ungar, & Cheung, 2010; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Perez et al., 2009; Rutter, 1979, 2006, 2007, 2013; Sameroff et al., 1987; Smokowski, 1998; Walker & Greene, 2009; Wang, 1997; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997; Werner, 1988, 1989, 1997; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010; and others). Because African American and Latino/a students from low-income families face myriad forms, contexts, and conditions of adversity in their daily lives, the field of resilience studies embodies tremendous insights into factors that mediate the school success of these students as well as conditions and contexts that nurture these factors. These findings and insights are rich fodder for my research study which will purposefully frame and utilize qualitative, semi-structured, and open-ended interview questions to elicit thick descriptions, from research participants that may reveal similar factors or novel ones.
Resilience has been defined by scholars as the capacity, of children and adolescents facing adversity or obstacles to their wellbeing, to overcome such adversity or obstacles, to recover from the traumatic effects of such adversity or obstacles, or to cope with such adversity or obstacles, and achieve positive outcomes (Benard, 1991; Garmezy, 1991; Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 1979, 2006; Wang, 1997).

To this effect, Garmezy (1991) defined resilience as “the capacity for recovery and maintained, adaptive behavior that may follow initial retreat or incapacity upon initiating a stressful event” (p. 459). Masten et al. (1990) distinguished between three kinds of resilience phenomena: a) good outcomes despite high risk environments, b) sustained competence or coping skills in children experiencing stress factors or threat, and c) recovery from trauma. Wang (1997) framed resilience as the “concept of human capacity for successful adaptation despite developmental risk and adversity” (p. 261). Rutter (2006) defined resilience as “an interactive phenomenon that is inferred from findings indicating that some individuals have a relatively good outcome despite having experienced serious stresses or adversities – their outcome being better than that of other individuals who suffered the same experiences” (p. 474). Liquanti (1992) framed resilience as “that quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency problems they are at greater risk of experiencing” (p. 9). Werner (1997), following her forty year longitudinal study of 698 multiracial children, born in 1955, into families in the Kauai Island of Hawaii, who experienced a host of adversities including chronic poverty, perinatal stress, severe family conflict and instability, abuse, and neglect, found that while two-thirds of the children succumbed to the adversities and experienced negative outcomes, one-third of the children overcame the adversities and developed into
“competent, confident, and caring adults” (p. 103). She thus defined resilience as overcoming great odds and achieving successful outcomes (p. 103).

Integral to the definition of resilience by research scholars are three critical components: a) risk factors – that create conditions which expose a child or adolescent to adversity or stress b) adversity – which impedes or limits the child or adolescent’s likelihood of achieving positive life outcomes, and c) protective factors – which protect the child or adolescent from the adversity or its negative influences or effects by enabling the child or adolescent to avoid the adversity, cope with its continuance, or recover from it, and thereby achieve positive outcomes (Benard, 1991; Garmezy, 1991; Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 2006, 2007, 2013; Wang, 1997; Wang et al., 1997; Werner, 1988, 1997).

**Characteristics of Resilience**

Resilience is imbued with distinct characteristics that shed light on the nature of this phenomenon. Fundamental to the concept of resilience is the idea of successfully overcoming, coping with, or recovering from adversity and achieving positive outcomes or wellbeing. Concomitant to this idea are the established, empirical findings that adversity includes stress, deprivation, risk, threat, trauma, obstacles, challenging circumstances, and other factors that heighten or expose a child or adolescent to the likelihood of negative outcomes (Benard, 1991; Garmezy, 1991; Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 2006, 2007; Wang, 1997; Werner, 1988, 1997).

**Internal dimension: Individual internal qualities or characteristics.**

Empirical findings have established that internal qualities of an individual may imbue the individual with resilience or nurture resilience in the individual. These characteristics are referred to by scholars as protective factors, internal strengths, or internal assets, and include
social skills, communication skills, responsiveness, positive attitude, sense of self-efficacy, belief in oneself, flexibility, sense of internal locus of control, motivation, empathy, high expectations of self, perseverance, hopefulness or optimism, high educational aspirations, high self-esteem, positive identity, and sense of future purpose (Benard, 1991; Garmezy, 1991; Floyd, 1996; Howard et al., 1999; Wang, 1997; Werner, 1997).

**External dimension: Ecological or environmental characteristics.**

Factors or influences that imbue children or adolescents with resilience may be embedded in their environments such as the family or home, the school, and the community or neighborhood (Benard, 1991; Garmezy, 1991; Howard et al., 1999; Masten et al., 1990; Perez et al., 2009; Wang et al., 1997; Werner, 1997). Shedding light on this environmental dimension of resilience, Perez et al. explicated:

Resilience is an ecological phenomenon. Environments may contribute to a person’s risk of various problems, but can also provide protection to enhance the likelihood of positive outcomes. [Environmental] resources are positive factors that are external to the individual and help overcome risk such as parental support, adult mentoring, or community organizations that promote positive youth development (p. 154).

**Interactive, transactional, and dynamic process.**

An individual’s level of resilience is a product of an on-going, interactive transaction between the individual’s internal characteristics and the individual’s environments (Benard,

The development of human resiliency is none other than the process of healthy human development – a dynamic process in which personality and environmental influences interact in a reciprocal, transactional relationship. The range of outcomes according to Werner is determined by the balance between the risk factors, stressful life events, and protective factors. Furthermore, this balance is not determined only on the basis of the number of risk and protective factors present in the life of an individual but on their respective frequency, duration, and severity, as well as the developmental stage at which they occur. According to Werner, “as long as this balance between stressful life events and protective factors is favorable, successful adaptation is possible. However, when stressful life events outweigh the protective factors, even the most resilient child can develop problems (p. 23).

Scholars of the resilience phenomenon caution that it would be misleading to regard children or adolescents exhibiting resilience as invulnerable, or invincible, or stress-resistant, or immune to the impact of stress or adversity. They warn that resilience is not static or permanent, but can ebb and flow over time depending on the presence, absence, or levels of the conditions that create the adversity (risk factors) and those that nurture resilience (protective factors). Thus resilience depends on a perennial battle of balance and preponderance between risk factors and
protective factors, and whichever of them outweighs the other determines if the child or adolescent will prove to be resilient or vulnerable (Benard, 1991; Garmezy, 1991; Masten et al, 1990; Howard et al., 1999; Rutter, 1979, 2006, 2013; Wang, 1997). Explicating the variable, non-static, and dynamic nature of resilience, Rutter asserted:

----- resilience is not a single quality [or an observed trait]. People may be resilient to some sorts of environmental hazards but not to others. Equally, they may be resilient in relation to some kinds of outcomes but not to others. In addition, because context may be crucial, people may be resilient at one time period in their life but not to others. (p. 4)

Garmezy (1991) also cautions that “resilience does not necessarily reflect an imperviousness to stress” and “is not intended to present a heroic image of children exhibiting resilience when compared with others who meet similar situations with retreat, despair, or disorder” (p. 459). Thus relentless, cumulative risk factors can cause a child or adolescent to succumb to adversity or negative life outcomes (Garmezy, 1991, p. 466). Integral to the nature of resilience is the spectrum of variation in the responses of individuals to the same environmental risk factors or adversity (Rutter, 2006, 2013). Rutter (2006) emphasized the need to examine and understand the mechanisms or factors that influence such variation.

Finally, factors that mediate resilience in children or adolescents can be cultivated or nurtured in children and adolescents and in their environments (Wang, 1997). These factors, referred to as protective factors, can be embedded in children or in their environments through appropriately designed interventions.
Major Shifts in the Concept of Resilience

Empirical studies and scholarly discourse on the phenomenon of resilience or human adjustment in the face of adversity has undergone two major shifts:

**Shift from risk to resilience.**

The concept of resilience itself represents a shift in focus from a deficit perspective that focuses on risk and maladjustment of individuals to an assets- or strengths-based perspective that focuses on internal (individual characteristics) and external (characteristics in systems or environments) strengths or assets that foster resilience in children and adolescents (Howard et al., 1999). Referring to this shift as a “paradigmatic change from an earlier focus on risk for psychopathology” (p. 309), Howard et al. (1999) explained that the shift reflects a dissatisfaction, in scholarly fields, with a deficit model or perspective to studying risk and negative life outcomes which inadvertently seemed to place blame on individuals responding to adversity. Howard et al. (1999) further explained that the shift, rather, “focused on assets in individuals and systems instead of on deficits” (p. 309) and generates fresh ideas about prevention and intervention.

**Shift from internal to external protective factors.**

The field of resilience studies is increasingly shifting from a focus on individual characteristics of children and adolescents that foster resilience in them to a focus on their interactions with three key contexts or systems – the family, the school, and the community. Lee et al. (2010) expounded:

The resilience construct has gone through several conceptual revisions, beginning
with a focus on the individual – traits, characteristics, capacities, abilities, and internal resources – and later evolving into an ecological framework, seeing resilience as a product of the interactions between and among external risk factors, protective factors, and a person’s internal resources, with protective processes mitigating harmful effects on children to differing extents depending on the nature of risks (p. 438).

Benard (1991) explicated that this shift is catalyzed by “an increasing acceptance of Bronfenbrenner’s theory of the transactional-ecological model of human development” (p. 3). This theory expounds that human personality and development or life outcomes are negotiated between an individual and the individual’s environment through the individual’s interaction with his or her environment and that human beings are thus engaged in an on-going adaptation to the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013; Onwuegbuezie, Collins, & Frels, 2013). Such interaction or adaptation can therefore result in positive or negative outcomes.

According to Bronfenbrenner’s theory, four environmental contexts or systems impact human development or the development of a child or adolescent: a) the microsystem – which is the immediate environment of the child or adolescent and includes the home, school, and neighborhood or community, b) the mesosystem – which consists of the interaction between two or more microsystems, c) the exosystem – which consists of external contexts or systems that impact the microsystems and therefore indirectly impact the child or adolescent, and d) the macrosystem – which comprises the society, culture, belief systems, norms, values, policies, and laws that indirectly impact the child or adolescent (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1979; Onwuegbuezie et al., 2013). Scholars of resilience therefore examine these contexts or systems, particularly the
microsystems, in order to identify protective factors in them that nurture resilience in children and adolescents and increase chances of their positive adaptation to their environment and their positive life outcomes.

Buttressing this pivotal line of thought, Wang (1997), examining the ecological contexts of resilience development, found that overlapping and multiple, interactive contexts surround the development of individuals and that “healthy development and learning success occur in interactive contexts of a multitude of environmental, dispositional, and circumstantial influences, not as a result of a single precipitating event or innate personal characteristic” (p. 262-263). To this effect, she asserted that “three powerful and pervasive contexts influence children: the family, the school, and the community” (p. 263). Summing up both major shifts in the study of human development, Benard (1991) asserted:

In order to avoid falling into the pathology paradigm and “blaming the victim” syndrome with its concomitant focus on “fixing kids”, our perspective is that personality and individual outcomes are the result of a transactional process with one’s environment. To be successful, prevention interventions must focus on enhancing and creating positive environmental contexts – families, schools, and communities that, in turn, reinforce positive behaviors (p. 3).

In similar vein, I will seek to elicit from my research participants, thick descriptions of any protective factors embedded in their microsystems or larger environments that nurture academic resilience in them or mediate their academic success.
Educational or Academic Resilience

A subset of resilience is the concept of educational or academic resilience. This subset of resilience is defined by various scholars as: “academic success and persistence despite stressful events and conditions during childhood and adolescence” (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009, p. 154-155); “academic achievement when such achievement is rare for those facing similar circumstances or within a similar socio-cultural context” (Gayles, 2005, p. 250); and “the heightened likelihood of educational success, despite personal vulnerabilities and adversities brought about by environmental conditions and experiences” (Wang et al., 1997, p.4). Reiterating the ecological nature of educational (academic) resilience and affirming that it is fostered in children and adolescents through their interaction with factors embedded in their environments which mediate such resilience, Wang et al. explicated that “educational resilience is conceptualized not as a product of a single precipitating event, but of continuous interaction between an individual and characteristic features of the environment” (p. 4). They further explained that “educational resilience can be fostered through interventions that enhance children’s learning, develop their talents and competencies, and protect or buffer them against environmental adversities” (p. 4).

The Concept of Risk Factors

The body of research literature on resilience has defined risk factors as conditions primarily embedded in the environment of a child or adolescent, including the family, school, and community, which negatively impact the child or adolescent and render him or her susceptible or vulnerable to negative life outcomes (Benard, 1991; Frieberg, 1993; Garmezy, 1991; Howard et al., 1999; Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 2013; Smokowski, 1998; Wang et al, 1997; Werner, 1997).
Lending insight to the impact of risk factors on children and adolescents, Howard et al. (1999) defined risk factors as “environmental factors that either singly or in combination have been shown to render children’s failure to thrive more likely” (p. 308). They further explicated that the term is used to predict the vulnerability or susceptibility of children and adolescents, who are facing adversity, to a range of negative life outcomes (p. 308).

The body of research literature on the phenomenon of resilience has established numerous examples of risk factors that heighten the likelihood of dismal socio-emotional and academic outcomes in children and adolescents. Risk factors embedded in the family system include: abuse, neglect, substance abuse, alcoholism, poverty, unemployment, underemployment, low family income, juvenile delinquency, parental criminality, parental mental disorder, schizophrenia, depression, or heart disease, severe family conflict or discord, death of parent or caregiver, inadequate healthcare, and poor maternal health (Benard, 1991; Garmezy, 1991; Howard et al., 1999; Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 1979, 2006, 2013; Sameroff, Seifer, Baroccas, Zax, and Greenspan, 1987; Smokowski, 1998; Wang et al., 1997; Werner, 1997). Risk factors embedded in school contexts include: inadequate funding; tracking of minority students into low-level, remedial, or basic skills courses; poor quality teachers; poor quality instruction; lack of critical thinking and challenging curriculum; paucity of advanced placement and college preparatory courses; low teacher expectations of students; and inequitable disciplinary practices and consequences for minority students; (Borman & Overman, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Delpit, 2006, 2012; Gay, 2010; Kozol, 1991, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Nieto, 2010; Noguera, 2008). Risk factors embedded in the community or neighborhood include: poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, alcoholism, crime, violence, despair, dilapidated
infrastructures, inefficient social services and learning resources and opportunities, and deviant peer groups (Rutter, 2013; Smokowski, 1998; Wang et al., 1997).

Scholars of resilience have posited that racial minority status and socio-economic disadvantage, particularly being of African American descent, are risk factors. This is because attendent upon such status are debilitating “daily experiences of discriminatory behavior from individuals and institutions, and political, occupational, and residential restrictions motivated by race” (Borman & Overman, 2004, p. 179; Rutter, 2013; Sameroff et al., 1987). Buttressing these findings, a report of the Children’s Defense Fund (1986) found an “overwhelming pattern of risk factors associated with impoverished families living in the ghetto” (p. 416), particularly black children, including that: 50% of children living in poverty are black; 45% are Hispanic; over 50% live in homes headed by females; black children are twice as likely as white children to die in their first year, be born prematurely, suffer low birth weight, have mothers who received late or no prenatal care; and have no employed parent; black children are three times as likely as white children to have mothers who die in child birth, to be in foster care, or die of known child abuse; black children are four times as likely as white children to live with neither parent, to be supervised by a child welfare agency, and to be murdered before one year of age or as a teenager; and black children are twelve times as likely to live with a single parent (usually a female). It is pertinent to note that all these are risk factors that co-occur often and work together to overwhelm families living in poverty and undermine the socio-emotional and academic outcomes of their children. Noguera (2008), attributing these risk factors to the systemic racism and inequities prevalent in society and its institutions, asserted that the poor academic outcomes of children and adolescents living in poverty cannot be validly divorced from these social problems.
The body of research literature on resilience has established that attendant upon and co-occurring with poverty is a host of risk factors (enumerated above) that accumulate in the environment of children and adolescents living in poverty and exacerbate the vulnerability of these children and adolescents to negative life outcomes including mental health and socio-emotional problems, school failure, and criminality (Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 1979, 2006, 2007; Sameroff et al., 1987; Werner, 1997). Resilience scholars have found that the greater the number of risk factors experienced by a child or adolescent, the greater the degree of adverse impact on the child’s or adolescent’s cognitive, psychological, and socio-emotional development and the greater the likelihood of the child or adolescent’s school failure or low academic performance (Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 1979; Sameroff et al., 1987; Smokowski, 1998). Indeed, cumulative risk factors have an exponential degree of adverse impact on children and adolescents. Rutter (1979), a distinguished British psychiatrist and scholar studied children in an underprivileged inner borough of London, living in poverty and exposed to multiple stressors or risk factors that include severe mental discord, low socio-economic status, overcrowding or large family size, parental criminality, maternal psychiatric disorder, and foster care. He found that despite the low socio-economic status of all the families, exposure to one or no stressor led to only 1% increase in psychiatric disorder in the children; exposure to two stressors led to 4% increase; and exposure to four stressors led to 21% increase in psychiatric disorder. In a similar study, Sameroff et al. (1987) found similar exacerbated effect of multiple risk factors, in their longitudinal, empirical research study in Rochester, New York, spanning 15 years. They found that each of the ten family risk factors they investigated cost a child four IQ points in comparison to their normative peers (children with normal development). The ten risk factors examined by Sameroff et al were: maternal mental illness, high maternal anxiety, maternal inflexible child
rearing beliefs and practices, minimal maternal interaction with child, unskilled occupational status of head of the household, minimal maternal education, disadvantaged minority status, minimal family support, large family size, and stressful life events in the family (family stressors).

The Concept of Protective Factors

Despite the impact of risk factors and adversity on children and adolescents, protective factors have been found to be even more potent determinants of life outcomes than risk factors (Garmezy, 1991; Lietz, 2009; Perez et al., 2009; Werner, 1997). Garmezy (1991) explicated that negative life outcomes from risk factors are not inevitable and that protective factors embedded in the same environments as the risk factors can ameliorate the adverse effects of the risk factors and lead to positive school and life outcomes for children and adolescents. To this effect, Garmezy (1991) asserted that “protective factors can serve to contain the dire forebodings that have surrounded the future status of children in poverty” (p. 420). Subscribing to the same view, Werner (1997) asserted that protective factors act as “buffers” and “make a more profound impact on the life course of children who grow up under adverse conditions than do specific risk factors or stressful life events” (p. 105).

Howard et al. (1999) asserted that Rutter (1987, 1990) identified four types of protective factors: a) those that reduce the impact of a risk factor on a child or adolescent or reduce the child’s or adolescent’s exposure to the risk factor, b) those that reduce negative responses that follow traumatic experiences, c) “those that promote self-esteem and self-efficacy through achievements”, and d) “positive relationships and new opportunities that provide needed resources or new directions in life” (p. 311). Protective factors intervene against the presence or
impact of risk factors, in the lives or experiences of children and adolescents, to produce more positive outcomes. Thus protective factors have been variously defined as “traits, conditions, situations, and episodes that appear to alter ---- or even reverse --- predictions of negative outcomes and enable individuals to circumvent life stressors” (Benard, 1991, p.3); “protective mechanisms that mitigate against adversity (and negative life circumstances) and support healthy development and educational success” (Wang et al., 1997, p. 4); “internal assets of the individual” and “external strengths occurring within systems in which the individual grows and develops” (Howard et al, 1999, p. 310); “protective practices that shield or lessen the negative effects of stress, promote healthy adjustment, and foster resilience in students’ homes, schools, and communities” (Floyd, 1996, p. 182); factors that “moderate the effects of individual vulnerabilities or environmental hazards so that the adaptational trajectory is more positive than would be the case if the protective factor were not operational” (Masten et al., 1990, p. 426); and factors that “[buffer] the damaging effects” of risk factors” (Rutter, 2013, p. 480). Protective factors have been found to include positive beliefs about self and future (Lee, Kwong, Cheung, Ungar, & Cheung, 2010) and high parental expectations (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). The present research study will seek to uncover the presence or absence of these factors in the research participants and how they may operate to build resilience in the participants.

Despite the potency of protective factors to ameliorate the effect of risk factors, resilience depends on the balance and interaction of risk factors versus protective factors in the life of a child or adolescent. The preponderance, duration, frequency, and intensity of these factors ultimately determine the impact on the child or adolescent and the outcomes of such impact (Benard, 1991; Masten et al., 1990; Howard et al., 1999; Rutter, 2006, 2007, 2013). To this end, Howard et al. (1999) explicated:
Just as risks have been identified as cumulative, protective factors seem to have the same cumulative effect in individuals’ lives. The more protective factors that are present in a child’s life, the more likely they are to display resilience (p. 310).

Protective factors have also been found to transcend race, ethnicity, social class, and geographical boundaries (Howard et al, 1999; Werner, 1997).

**Kinship to the positive Deviance Theoretical Framework**

Howard et al. (1999), reviewing and critiquing “the most influential literature” (p. 307) in the field of resilience research, including the empirical studies of Benard (1991, 1993), Garmezy (1994), Garmezy and Rutter (1983), Rutter (1994), Werner and Smith (1988, 1990), Wang (1995), and others (p. 307), framed fundamental questions underlying the concept of resilience as: “What is it about these children that enables them to survive? What makes them apparently immune to the factors that negatively affect others?” (p. 309). These same questions are fundamental to the positive deviance theoretical framework which is the lens through which my research study is designed. Thus the positive deviance question that is foundational to my research study is: Why are some students from economically disadvantaged groups achieving academic success in the QT City School District (the locale or context of my research study) while the majority of their peers in the same school district are not? Thus, at the core of the concepts of resilience and positive deviance is the principle of robustness despite adversity and an inquiry into this phenomenon.

Scholarly and empirical literature on positive deviance, echo a belief that positive deviants are imbued with resilience. To this effect, Lapping et al. (2002) asserted that:
The traditional application of positive deviance approach for childhood nutrition involves studying children who grow well despite adversity, identifying uncommon, model practices among positive deviant families, and designing an intervention to transfer these behaviors to the mothers of malnourished children (p. 128).

It is pertinent to note that the concept of robustness “despite adversity” as articulated by Lapping et al. (2002) is the cornerstone principle upon which the phenomenon of resilience is anchored.

B. Racial/Cultural Identity

A copious body of research literature, both qualitative and quantitative, on racial identity, cultural (ethnic) identity, and racial socialization has found that a strong, positive racial or cultural identity (particularly one that integrates an academic identity) inculcated in children and adolescents, cultivates a host of factors and effects that mediate the psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing and academic engagement and achievement of students from economically, racially, and socially disadvantaged groups (Wright, 2009; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007).

The Concept of Identity

A person’s identity is an individual’s recognition of self, recognition of who one is, and identification with the racial or cultural group to which one belongs. To this effect, Richardson (1982) defines personal identity as “the person’s recognition of self” (p. 22) and asserts that “an individual’s identity alerts him to his essential sameness – the central core of the self which makes him unique and which remains constant through all the attendant changes he is experiencing” (p. 3). Other scholars have defined racial/cultural identity in various terms: “accurate and consistent use of an ethnic label based on the perception and conception of
themselves as belonging to an ethnic group” (Ford et al., 1994, p. 14); “the sense of belonging that an adolescent feels toward a racial or ethnic group as well as the significance and qualitative meaning that the adolescent assigns to that group membership” (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007, p. 148); “the aspect of individuals’ social identity that is derived from membership in their ethnic group and the significance individuals attach to that membership” (Umana-Taylor et al., 2009, p. 391); “an individual’s self-identification with a racial or ethnic group (e.g. culture, traditions, values) and the person’s emotional responses to that group (e.g. feelings, preferences)” (Evans, Smokowski, & Cotter, 2014, p. 46); “a sense of attachment to a collective and imagined community of similar others” that “provides purpose, attitudinal and behavioral prescriptions and proscriptions, and a shared definition of the in-group’s position relative to other ethnic/racial groups” (Brown et al., 2009, p. 387); “a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular group” (Helms, 1990, p. 3); and “the feelings of closeness to similar others in ideas, feelings, and thought” (Miller & Macintosh, 1999, p. 161, citing Broman et al.)

Different scholars have associated different dimensions to the concept of identity. Richardson (1982) associates identity with self-acceptance – acceptance of who one is and one’s racial or cultural group. Richardson (1982) emphasizes that identity is distinct from self-concept. He postulates that while identity is recognition of who one is and the racial or cultural group to which one belongs, self-concept is one’s idea or belief about who one is and the racial or ethnic group to which one belongs. By this distinction, identity is real and permanent and profoundly fundamental to one’s essence, while self-concept is imbued with transience and may be accurate or inaccurate. Racial or cultural (ethnic) identity – recognition of self and the group to which one belongs – occurs along a continuum of degrees or levels. Thus, each individual
may have a different degree or level of racial/ethnic identity, depending on the degree to which
the individual accepts, identifies with, or embraces himself or herself and his or her
racial/cultural (ethnic) group (Evans et al., 2014, p. 46). A fundamental component of
racial/ethnic identity is a sense of belonging and sameness that one feels towards a racial or
ethnic group with respect to physical characteristics, histories, cultural heritage, traditions,
values, language, nationality, feelings and ideas (Brown et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2014; Demo &
Hughes, 1990; Ford et al., 1994; Harper, 2007; Miller & Macintosh, 1999; Wakefield & Hudley,
2007).

An essential characteristic of identity which flows from the sense of belonging to a group, is
the sense of interconnectedness to and interdependence with common ancestors (representing the
past), living members of the group (representing the present), and generations to be born
(representing the future). This sense of interconnectedness and interdependence, in turn, imbues
the individual with a sense of responsibility to think and act in ways that bring affirmation to the
group (Akom, 2003; Brown et al., 2009; Richardson, 1982). Flowing seamlessly from the sense
of belonging, interconnectedness, and interdependence is the sense of collectiveness of identity
(Akom, 2003; Boykin, 1986; Harper, 2007). This implicates that a student’s allegiance or
identification with a racial or cultural group has the potential of establishing such group as a
source of role models for the student.

The empirical or scholarly literature on racial or cultural (ethnic) identity affirms the
fundamentality of such identity to one’s essence and worth as a human being, worthy of a
rightful place on earth, equal to that of other human beings, and belonging to a group of similar
human beings who affirm one’s worth and place. These authors assert that this sense of
belonging, of interconnectedness and interdependence, and of a collective destiny acts as an
anchor that provides stability and coping resources in environments rendered capricious by inequities, acts as a compass for successful navigation of systemic and structural barriers and maintenance of a trajectory towards one’s goals, and imbues one with confidence needed to persevere in times of stress and uncertainty (Akom, 2003; Brown et al., 2009; Richardson, 1982).

In tandem with this reasoning, Richardson (1982) notes that Erikson (1968) “first used the term [identity] to denote the precise developmental goal of adolescence” (p. 1), regarded identity as “pivotal” to one’s existence, “seeing all the previous developmental stages of childhood as preparatory for it, and all the successful one’s of adulthood as dependent on it”, and considered “the recognition of one's identity” as “essential to psychological good health” (p. 1). Richardson (1982) affirmed Erikson’s stance, asserting that an individual’s recognition of his or her identity is “essential for psychological good health, since lack of it results in a state of confusion (the identity crisis) or alienation (the negative identity)” (p. 5).

Wright (2009) maintains that: “The REI [Racial/Ethnic Identity] of African American youth is integral to every aspect of their being particularly in a society where white, middle-class Western perspectives are superimposed on them” (p. 127). Wright (2009) argues that this superimposition by which the white, dominant society ignores valuable characteristics and cultural capital of African American youth and judges them by values established for and by the white, dominant group, results in a misinterpretation of the behavior and needs of African American youth and adversely influences the behavior and attitudes of these youth in the school environment which, in turn, undermines their school success. He therefore argues that the nurturing of a strong, positive racial/ethnic identity is “a necessary and central part of the overall development of African American male students in order to overcome barriers that can potentially impede their academic progress” (p. 127).
Scott (2005) affirmed the stance of Ward (2000) to the effect: “that the development of a sense of Black identity that is “unassailable” is the most significant strategy for resistance to racial oppression and hence is requisite for African American children and adolescents” (p. 523).

Oyserman, Harrison, and Bybee (2001), lending their voices to the imperativeness of inculcating a strong racial/cultural identity in marginalized students as a fundamental component of their education asserts:

In the face of stereotypical images of racial and ethnic minorities, sense of cultural difference and restricted opportunities, adolescents of color must create a sense of self that includes a positive sense of shared social identity with others of their group (p. 384).

Integral to the emergence of a fully formed Black adolescent possessing of a strong, positive racial identity is the process of Black racial identity development. Smith (1989) defined this process as “a process of coming to terms with one’s racial group membership as a salient reference group” (cited in Ford, Harris, Webb, and Jones, 1994. P. 14). Ford et al. (1994) referred to this process as Negromacy and explicated it as a “transformational process by which Blacks become Black” and “overcome their dependency on white culture for self-validation” (p. 15). Thomas (1970), Cross (1971), and Phinney (1996) postulate theories that frame this process as a progressive continuum of: a) initial unemancipated equilibrium, much like a cocoon in which one exists in a false sense of wellbeing and unawareness of racism and discrimination as it relates to oneself, b) rupture, dissonance, and disequilibrium, which ensues when encounters with racism and discrimination shatters one’s cocoon, c) a cycle of reflection, inquiry, and search for one’s true identity, and then d) a state of emancipated equilibrium as a positive, proud, and
confident black self emerges, better prepared with an understanding of one’s environment, one’s rightful place in it, and how to successfully navigate it to achieve one’s goals.

**Mediating School Success**

Racial-ethnic identity has specific components that may or may not mediate academic engagement and achievement. Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, and Smith (1997) posited four of these components in their Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity: Racial Salience/Racial Centrality - the extent to which an adolescent views race as important or central to his or her definition of self; Private Regard - the extent to which an adolescent views his or her blackness positively or negatively; and Public Regard - the extent to which an adolescent believes that society views his or her race positively or negatively. Components posited by other scholars include: Positive In-group Identification or Connectedness – the feeling of a positive sense of connection, common destiny, and unity with member’s of one’s racial or ethnic group and a sense of pride in the history, traditions, and culture of the group (Oyserman et al., 2001; Altschul et al, 2006; Oyserman et al., 1995; Quintana & Segura-Herrera, 2003); Awareness of Racism - an adolescent’s awareness of racial discrimination and negative stereotypes against oneself and one’s racial or ethnic group (Oyserman et al., 2001; Altschul et al, 2006); Embedded Achievement - the extent to which an adolescent regards academic persistence and achievement as a fundamental characteristic of his or her racial or ethnic group (Oyserman et al., 2001; Altschul et al., 2006).

It is pertinent to note that an adolescent’s positive view of his or her self and racial or ethnic group (private regard), sense of positive connection or identification with his or her racial or ethnic group (positive in-group identification or connectedness), and feeling that academic persistence and achievement is an integral part of his or her racial or ethnic group (embedded
achievement or academic identity), particularly the latter, have the most significant positive impact on motivation, academic engagement, and achievement (Altschul et al., 2006; Chavous et al., 2003; Oyserman et al., 2001). Indeed, Altschul et al. (2006) noted that:

Because negative stereotypes about Black or Latino youth include low academic achievement, disengagement from school, and lack of academic ability, when academic achievement is not directly addressed within the REI [Racial-Ethnic Identity], youth will be less able to recruit sufficient motivational attention to override these messages and stay focused on school success. By viewing achievement as part of being African American or Latino, identification with this goal is facilitated (p. 1156).

Altschul et al. (2006) also posited that: “REI [Racial Ethnic Identity] may either promote or undermine academic achievement depending on whether content of REI is positive or negative with regard to academics” (p. 1155-1156). This finding may lend insight into the phenomenon of oppositional identity whereby minority adolescents may possess strong racial/ethnic identities but still view academic engagement and achievement as a characteristic of whites and, thereby, oppose such engagement with school resulting in disengagement with school and low academic outcomes. This finding thus implicates the critical importance of inculcating within the racial-ethnic identity development of an adolescent, a value for education, academic effort, engagement, and excellence. Robinson and Biran (2006), reiterating the crucial role of schools in cultivating racial/cultural identity in marginalized students, asserted that before students can excel in school or in any environment:

They must have a sense of who they are or a cultural base to orient themselves to
prevent becoming lost or discouraged. African identity provides Africans with a sense of purpose and the resources necessary to motivate efforts to excel in any environment. Identity is what anchors a person to a cultural reality and it is what helps to maintain a focus that motivates academic success (p. 51).

McDonough (1998) articulated that a child’s cultural identity is fundamental to the fostering of the child’s personal autonomy and empowerment of the child’s capacity to make meaningful choice. Acosta (2007), affirming the same stance and reiterating the urgency for inculcating racial/ethnic identity in Hispanic students as a pathway for facilitating them to rediscover and reclaim their academic identity which in turn would mediate their academic engagement and achievement, asserts:

The reality for many Chicano/a or Latino/a youth in our country is that school has rarely worked for them and they feel that it is not built for them to succeed. Our barrios and communities often perpetuate this feeling by claiming that academic success is “acting white”. Having internalized their oppression and formed these attitudes, it is crucial for students in the beginning stages of their journey to look within themselves and their history to discover their humanity and academic identity (p. 37).

The possession of a strong, positive racial or cultural identity by a child or adolescent has been found by empirical research studies to nurture and mediate the following effects in the child
or adolescent: motivation, sense of belonging to a group, high self-esteem, self-worth, and selfconfidence, positive self-concept, self-pride, self-acceptance, internal locus of control, sense of self-efficacy, self-determination and personal autonomy, psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing (Akom, 2003; Robinson & Biran, 2006); positive attitude and positive behavior toward school and other persons (Wright, 2009); positive negotiation of racism and discrimination (Wright, 2009); less stress, anxiety, depression, and psychological distress (Wright, 2009); less delinquency, violence, substance abuse, and anti-social behavior. (Wright, 2009); less eating disorders (Bisaga et al., 2005); less internalization of negative stereotypes (Hudley & Graham, 2001); community engagement and commitment (Robinson & Biran, 2006); Resilience (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007); value for education, academic motivation, academic persistence/effort, academic engagement, and academic achievement (Altschul, oysterman, & Bybee, 2008; Bowman & Howard, 1985; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007).

It is pertinent to note that the above factors found by scholars to be mediated by a strong, positive racial or cultural identity add to the arsenal of protective factors and coping skills or mechanisms that a) build resilience in marginalized students which, in turn, mediates their school success and b) help marginalized students overcome, cope with, or recover from the daily structural, systemic, and societal discrimination, inequities, and obstacles they encounter in their lives which possess the potential for undermining their school success (Scott, 2005; Wakefield & Hudley, 2005, p. 151; Ward, 2000). The present research study, through the thick descriptions elicited from the research participants, will examine the data for the presence or absence of these factors in the lived experiences of the research participants and how these factors, if present, may operate to facilitate the school success of the participants.
C. Racial Socialization

Racial socialization is the transmission to children or adolescents of racially and culturally marginalized groups, by their parents, family members, or other significant adults, of values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors they need to help them successfully navigate and achieve their goals in the racialized, hostile, and inequitable environment in which they live (Miller & Macintosh, 1999, p. 161).

The body of empirical and scholarly literature on racial socialization reveals various definitions by scholars including: “messages and strategies used by Black parents to teach their children about Black American culture, prepare them for potential experiences with racism and prejudice, and promote healthy mistrust of non-Blacks” (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002, p. 324); “process by which parents teach their children about the significance and meaning of race” (Neblett, Chavous, Nguyen, & Sellers, 2009, p. 246); “parental practices that communicate messages about race or ethnicity to children” (Caughey et al., 2002, p. 1612); “process whereby children of color are taught about the meaning of ethnicity and race, including race-related structural inequities” (Brown et al., 2009, p. 385). Sanders (1997) defines positive racial socialization as “that which is positive towards one’s racial (or ethnic) group of membership, and that promotes a healthy racial identity as well as an awareness of and constructive responses to racism without promoting hatred or discrimination toward members of other racial or ethnic groups” (p. 90). Such positive messages include the importance of hard work, a good education, and racial pride” (Sanders, 1997, p. 90). Racial socialization assumes various forms which include “modeling of behavior, specific messages, and exposure to specific context, objects, or environments” (Brown, 2008, p. 33). Such objects and environments may include homes,
schools, and community spaces filled with books, texts, artifacts, materials, and resources relevant to the cultures of children and adolescents. To this effect, Brown (2008) affirmed the definition of racial socialization espoused by Stevenson, Cameron, Herrero-Taylor, & Davis (2002), as “... a set of behaviors, communications, and interactions between parents and children that address how African Americans ought to feel about their cultural heritage and how they should respond to the racial hostility or confusion in American society” (p. 33). Racial socialization messages may also be “synergistic, verbal or non-verbal, deliberative or unintended, and proactive or reactive” and may be miscommunicated to a child or adolescent (Hughes & Chen, 1999, cited in Caughy et al., 2002, p. 1612). This indicates a need for clarity and caution on the part of parents and adults to ensure that messages received by children or adolescents do not embody misleading negative or destructive nuances.

Numerous empirical studies establish that racial socialization functions as a critical mediator or cultivator of racial identity which, in turn, catalyzes a host of effects, as explored above, that mediate academic engagement and achievement of minoritized students (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Brown, 2008; Caughy et al., 2002; Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Neblett et al., 2009; Sanders, 1997). Highlighting this criticality, Brown et al. (2009) asserted that “within the ethnic/racial identity theoretical framework, family ethnic/race socialization is best viewed as a precursor to development of a central ethnic/racial identity” (p. 386). They reiterated that “family ethnic-race socialization is critical in preparing children of color to function in U.S. society because non-white phenotype remains a stigmatized status and an impediment to upward mobility” (p. 386). In tandem with this stance, Caughy et al., (2002) asserted that Black parents have a responsibility to effectively transmit racial socialization messages to their children in
order to promote their physical and emotional health within a society in which being black has negative connotations (p. 1611).

**Kinds of Racial Socialization Messages.**

Racial socialization messages fall within several distinct categories or kinds (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Caughy et al., 2002; Hughes & Chen, 1999; Neblett et al., 2009; Thornton, 1997). Each kind of message imports specific effects and may result in a positive or negative outcome as will be explored below. The various kinds of racial socialization messages include: Racial or ethnic pride - these messages emphasize racial or ethnic pride, cultural heritage, history, traditions, norms, values, and unity (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Caughy et al., 2002); Self-development/Self-worth - these messages emphasize individual excellence, individual worth, character-building, integrity, and self-reliance (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Neblett et al., 2009); Racial Barriers - these messages emphasize an awareness of racism and racial inequalities in society and its systems and institutions (Bowman & Howard, 1985); Preparation for bias/Coping with bias - these messages emphasize strategies for coping with and navigating racism, strategies for interacting effectively with other races, and the role of spirituality and religion in coping with or navigating racism and systemic, inequitable barriers (Caughy et al., 2002); Egalitarianism - these messages emphasize the equality of all races, multi-ethnic co-existence, and expanded opportunities made available through interaction with other races (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Caughy et al., 2002; Thornton, 1997); Endorsement of mainstream culture - these messages emphasize the relative importance of the majority culture, its institutions, norms and values, and advantages of one’s involvement with these institutions (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002, p. 327); Culture-centric environment - these messages are transmitted through the interaction of a child or adolescent in an environment that is rich in
culturally relevant literature, artifacts, and experiences including books, magazines, texts, websites, art works, materials, resources, activities, and learning experiences (Caughy et al., 2002); Racial mistrust - these messages emphasize and foster mistrust of other racial groups with or without transmitting strategies for coping with or navigating racial barriers and experiences (Caughy et al., 2002).

Thornton (1997) postulates three kinds of racial socialization messages: a) Mainstream experience - these messages focus on the importance of achievement, moral values, fundamental equality of all races and positive self-image. It is pertinent to note that these themes are symmetrical to the categories discussed above relating to self-development and egalitarianism. b) Minority experience - these messages emphasize the significance of race, recognition of discrimination and institutional barriers, and acceptance of being black. It is pertinent to note that these messages are symmetrical to the categories discussed above relating to racial barriers/awareness of racism. c) Black cultural experience - these messages emphasize Black history, traditions, achievement, and the development of racial pride. This category is symmetrical with the category of racial pride, discussed above.

**Academic Effects of Racial Socialization**

Numerous empirical studies establish that racial socialization functions as a mediator of racial/ethnic identity which, in turn, catalyzes a host of factors (discussed above) that mediate academic motivation, persistence, engagement, and achievement in racially, culturally, and economically marginalized students (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Brown, 2008; Brown et al., 2009; Caughy et al., 2002; Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Miller & Macintosh, 1999; Neblett et al., 2009; Sanders, 1997; Scott, 2005; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). However, racial socialization
messages consist of various kinds, some of which facilitate more positive outcomes than others in children and adolescents.

High frequency of transmission of racial socialization messages (occurring several times a week) may inadvertently produce negative outcomes in children and adolescents such as: a rigid, narrow world view with respect to issues of race and the significance of race and being black which would limit opportunities for “self-discovery and expression”; magnifying of children’s and adolescents’ awareness of systemic, racial barriers and inequities which could produce fatalism, helplessness, and low self-esteem in children and adolescents; or fostering of an oppositional identity in children and adolescents which views academic engagement and achievement as characteristics of a white, dominant society, thereby, resulting in rejection of these characteristics, disengagement from school, and low academic outcomes (Brown et al., 2009, p. 400; Constantine & Blackmon, 2002, cited in Neblett et al., 2009, p. 256). Caughy et al. (2002) found that a home environment rich in African American culture and literature developed increased factual knowledge and problem-solving skills in African American pre-school children which are fundamental to their school achievement in later grades (p. 1622). Spencer et al. (2001) found significant positive correlation between the levels of Afrocentricity (positive immersion in and awareness of African American culture and history) of African American secondary school students and their self-esteem and academic achievement (cited in Constantine & Blackmon, 2002, p. 331). Racial socialization messages emphasizing racial pride and the histories, cultures, experiences, and achievements of marginalized groups have significant positive correlation with the development of strong, positive, racial identities, psychological and socio-emotional wellbeing, high self-esteem, and academic persistence, engagement, and achievement with respect to children and adolescents (Acosta, 2007; Akom, 2003; Brown, 2008;
Caughy et al. (2002) also found that racial pride messages negatively correlated with numbers of behavior problems and increased the positive school adjustment of students (p. 1622). Self-worth messages positively correlate with high academic outcomes (Neblett et al., 2009). Awareness of racism and racial barriers messages must be delivered with caution, prudence, and moderation, if they are to foster positive outcomes in children and adolescents. While Stevenson (1995), Bowman and Howard (1985), and Sanders (1997) found that these messages correlated with stronger racial identity, sense of efficacy, and academic achievement, Smith (1996) and Marshall (1995) found that these messages correlated with lower academic achievement (Caughy et al., 2002, p. 1613). Such messages, when too frequently transmitted to students, risk producing in them feelings of fatalism, helplessness, and low self-esteem which would undermine their motivation, persistence, and academic engagement and achievement (Brown et al., 2009). Such messages may also foster an oppositional identity which would cause children and adolescents to regard academic engagement and achievement as characteristics exclusive to white culture. This would, in turn, result in disengagement from school and low academic outcomes (Brown et al., 2009, p. 400). To this effect, Ogbu (1974 as cited in Hughes & Chen, 1997, p. 207) reiterated that: “overemphasis on racial barriers and discrimination seemed to undermine children’s sense of efficacy and to promote distrust and anger toward mainstream institutions leading to maladaptive behavior” (Caughy et al., 2002, p. 1613). Finally, racial mistrust messages promote alienation and disengagement in children and adolescents and correlate with low academic and socio-emotional outcomes and delinquency (Biafora et al., 1993; Caughy et al., 2002; Hughes & Chen, 1997; Ogbu, 1974).
Chapter 3 – Methodology

Introduction

This chapter explicates the research design and methods utilized in the present study as a heuristic to deconstruct and understand the mediating factors, conditions and contexts, and processes that African American and Latino/a low-income students perceive as affecting their academic success. The research design and methods are described in the following sections: Research purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, research site, selection of participants (sampling and criteria), recruitment of participants, summary of participants’ demographic information, profiles of research participants, data collection, data analysis, overcoming researcher bias (subjectivity and positionality, situating the researcher in the research study, reflexivity and bracketing of researcher subjectivity), and methods for establishing trustworthiness.

Research Purpose

My purpose in this research study is to uncover and understand the factors that mediate the academic success of African American and Latino/a low-income students, contexts and conditions that nurture these factors, and processes or pathways through which these factors mediate the academic success of the students, through an examination of the perspectives of a sampling of such students who are achieving school success. I seek to uncover any practices, behavior, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, experiences, qualities, habits of mind, influences, or other factors whether internal or external to the students, that they believe enable them to achieve
more successful outcomes than their peers who have access to seemingly same or similar resources.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the perspectives of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families on factors that mediate their academic success?
2. What are the perspectives of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families on conditions or contexts that nurture their academic success?
3. What are the processes or pathways through which these factors mediate the academic success of these students, from the perspectives of the students themselves?

**Theoretical Framework**

**Qualitative Orientation**

In this study, I utilize a qualitative research design framework. This design is best suited for answering the research questions posed in this study because it will yield thick descriptions of the phenomenon under study. Qualitative methods facilitate the researcher to study issues in depth and in detail, to study externally observable behavior as well as internal states such as perceptions, perspectives, feelings, knowledge, experiences, worldview, opinions, values, beliefs, attitudes, and symbolic constructs (Patton, 2002). From these, rich insights into and understandings of the phenomenon under study can be gained. To this effect, Patton (2002) succinctly stated: “the themes, patterns, understandings, and insights that emerge from fieldwork and subsequent analysis are the fruit of qualitative inquiry” (p.5). Qualitative research brings the ability to “focus on naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings” and yields data
imbued with “richness and holism, with a strong potential for revealing complexity” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 11). Ungar (2003) argues that, unlike qualitative studies, the quantitative research orientation lends itself to arbitrariness in the selection of outcome variables to be studied as well as inability to take into account the socio-cultural context, conditions, and influences that may intersect with the phenomenon under study. Ungar (2003) argues that a qualitative research method of inquiry is best suited to the study of phenomena, such as resilience, that impact the school achievement of minority students because: i) it possesses the ability to uncover novel or unique factors, protective processes, patterns, variability, and complexity specific to the experience of particular subjects, ii) it provides thick descriptions of phenomena that lend deeper insights into behavior in context, iii) it gives voice to minority subjects and their marginalized discourse, thus lending trustworthiness to the research findings, and iv) it avoids generalizations that omit deeper and more nuanced understandings of complex phenomena. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) emphasized that while qualitative researchers “develop a focus as they collect data, they do not approach the research with specific questions to answer or hypothesis to test” but are, rather, “concerned with understanding behavior from the informant’s own frame of reference” (p. 2). They noted also that qualitative data are gathered from natural, real life settings, are descriptive, are analyzed inductively, and are concerned with how the research participants make sense or meaning of their real life experiences. Reiterating the criticality of research that situates itself as proximally as possible to the research participant and centers the lived experiences of the participant, Denzin and Lincoln (2013) defined qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” and asserted that “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or
interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p.10). Subscribing to this view, Creswell and Poth (2018) adopting the definition of Creswell (2013, p. 44), asserted that:

qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns and themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (p. 8).

In tandem with the views of the above authors, bell hooks (1994) advocated that the lived experiences of the research participant affords the participant an invaluable “privileged standpoint” that is an original way of knowing and emanates, not from the “authority of experience”, but from the “passion of remembrance” (p. 90). She reiterates that this lived experience is a “standpoint on which to base analysis and formulate theory”, that it affords the participant a “unique mixture of experiential and analytic ways of knowing” and that “it cannot be acquired through books or even distanced observation and study of a particular reality” (p. 90). In line with the above protocols, I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews of the research participants in their naturalistic setting (school and home) and elicited rich descriptions from them of their own lived experiences in order to gain insights into the factors, conditions, and processes that mediated the academic success of the participants.
Phenomenological Orientation

Introduction.

The research topic, purpose, and questions of this study as well as data collection and analysis were mandated and oriented by a phenomenological theoretical lens. This lens focuses on the lived experiences of the research participants in relation to the phenomenon under study and the meaning they make of their experiences (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2013; Van Manen, 2018). The qualitative characteristic of this lens generates rich, thick descriptions of the phenomenon under study: the process of achieving academic success - the factors, conditions, and processes that mediate the academic success of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families. This lens facilitates the examining, distilling, and extrapolating of codes, categories, themes, patterns, and relationships from the lived experiences of participants as well as hypotheses and questions that can be further qualitatively and quantitatively examined. Patton (2001) explicates that the theoretical framework of phenomenology focuses on how people experience and describe phenomena through their senses. Van Manen (1990) succinctly expounded:

Phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a thing what it is and without which it could not be what it is. Phenomenology aims at getting a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. (p. 10).

In tandem with Van Manen’s line of thought, Patton (2002) explicated that phenomenology requires
carefully and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others (p. 104).

He further asserted:

to gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest, that is they have “lived experience” as opposed to second hand experience (p. 104).

The philosophy of phenomenology.

Clearly articulating the nature or characteristics of the philosophy of phenomenology at the onset of research that utilizes this theoretical framework is critical to imbuing all components of the research study with clarity, coherence, and alignment. (Van Manen, 1990)

Phenomenology is a “meaning-giving method of doing inquiry” (Van Manen, 2018, p.16). Phenomenology strives to understand the meaning of a phenomenon by seeking to understand the nature of the phenomenon, how it comes to happen, and how it affects those experiencing it. To achieve this end, phenomenology examines the original source of knowledge about the phenomenon – the lived experiences of persons who have experienced the phenomenon and their accounts of the meaning that they attached to their experiences with the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2018). Referring to persons with lived experience of the phenomenon as “originary sources of meaning” and to their lived experiences of the phenomenon as “originary personal experience” (Van Manen, 2018, p. 15), Van Manen (2018) explicated that “it is the search for the source and mystery of meaning that we live in everyday life that lies at the basis of these various inceptual phenomenological philosophies” (p. 22). At the centrality of phenomenology is the cardinal dictum of Husserl (1982, p.252): “We must go back to the things themselves”. This
dictum signifies the cardinal principle of phenomenology – the examination of a phenomenon through the lived experiences of persons who experienced the phenomenon. This principle mandates an immersion of the researcher in the participant’s lived experiences. While the theorist examines phenomena through the lenses and methods of the theory, the phenomenologist examines the experience itself to gain insights into the nature, meaning, and conditions of the phenomenon. Thus Van Manen (2018) asserted: “It is the experience that is the ultimate bearer of meaning, not some theory, linguistic formulation, or abstractive construction.” (p. 65)

Phenomenology seeks to understand the origins of phenomena and the conditions that enable them to arise or occur (Van Manen, 2018, p.61). It seeks to understand the origins of emotions, beliefs, and desires, the nature of these, and the conditions that mediate them (Van Manen, 2018, p. 61). It is imbued with pathos – an empathy for the affects, perspectives, and situation of the participant – in order to achieve a degree of immersion in these lived experiences that will mediate elusive insights and understandings often rendered unapparent by the heightened subtlety and nuance inherent in their nature (Van Manen, 2018, p. 17). It is an inherently reflective practice, necessitating the researcher to wonder and ponder, to reflect upon and contemplate the meaning of lived experiences and meanings generated by participants in order to distill insights about the phenomenon under study (Van Manen, 2018, p. 62). It is a heuristic tool for deconstructing phenomena and discovering the hidden parts. Heidegger (1962) asserted that phenomenology is an imperative because phenomena “are proximally and for the most part not given” (p. 60). Thus, because the entirety of a phenomenon is mostly unapparent, undiscovered, buried, or hidden, phenomenology aims to peel and reveal its multi-dimensions and fullness. It acknowledges the futility of completely capturing in language or expression the
fullness and richness of existence, lived experience, or phenomena with their appurtenant subtleties, nuances, emphases, and complexities (Van Manen, 2018, p. 21).

At the heart of phenomenological practice and critical to its effectiveness is an openness that allows it to discover, unhampered and unconstrained by theories, methods, procedures, or other strictures (Van Manen, 2018, p. 29). This openness facilitates the researcher’s immersion in the lived experiences and meanings made by research participants. This openness also imbues the researcher with a liberatory sense of unencumbered wonder that focuses on the search for insights and understandings. To this effect, Van Manen (2018, p. 26) asserted that phenomenology is an “abstemious reflection” that aims to “abstain from theoretical, polemical, suppositional, and emotional intoxications” (p. 26).

Finally, phenomenological data may include opinions, perceptions, or beliefs about phenomena as vehicles for shedding light or gaining insights into lived experiences of the participants that underlie the opinions, perceptions, or beliefs. (Van Manen, 2018, p. 300).

**Conditions of phenomenological research.**

Phenomenological research is predicated upon two critical conditions: a) Heuristic clarity: The research question must have heuristic clarity. It must articulate a phenomenon to be examined that is capable of being explored or discovered b) Experiential data: The data to be collected must be grounded in the lived experiences of the persons who experienced the phenomenon being studied. (Van Manen, 2018).
Procedures for phenomenological research.

Moustakas (1994) as cited in Creswell (2018), p. 78-80 articulated steps for conducting phenomenological research as follows:

1. Determine if the research problem seeks to understand a phenomenon by examining the lived experiences of several individuals who have experienced the phenomenon.
2. Articulate a description of the phenomenon.
3. Explicate the key features of the philosophy of phenomenology.
4. Utilize in-depth qualitative interviews to collect data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon.
5. Analyze the data by highlighting “significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon”. This is a process similar to coding as articulated by Saldana (2013).
6. Develop “clusters of meaning” from the highlighted statements, sentences, and quotes. This is a process similar to building categories as articulated by Saldana (2013).
7. Develop themes from the clusters of meaning.
8. Utilize the significant statements and themes to describe the phenomenon and the contexts and conditions that influenced it or influenced how the participants experienced it.
9. Report the essence of the phenomenon by writing a composite description of it that highlights the common experiences of the participants.
Applying a phenomenological orientation to the present study.

A phenomenological orientation is suited to the present research study because I seek, through the present study, to understand the phenomenon of achieving academic success by African American and Latino/a low-income students in urban high schools, from the perspectives of the students themselves. The present research study seeks to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of ten of these students who are achieving academic success in an urban high school. This study utilized in-depth, qualitative interviews to collect data from these students. Saldana’s (2013) coding process was utilized to identify and highlight significant statements, sentences, and quotes from participants’ verbatim data transcriptions that provided an understanding of how participants experienced the phenomenon – the process of achieving school success. These significant statements, sentences, and quotes were synthesized into clusters of meaning or categories. Themes were extrapolated from the clusters of meaning or categories and final analysis articulated the nature of the emerging factors, conditions, and processes through which the African American and Latino/a students achieved school success. It is critical to note that though Moustakas (1994) outlined a set of procedures for doing phenomenology, Van Manen (2018) warned that primacy must be given to studying the lived experiences and meanings of persons who experienced the phenomenon in order to drill down to the essence of the phenomenon rather than hampering this critical openness by trying to fit phenomenology into a set of procedures, methods, or theories.

Research Site

The ten students interviewed in this study are from a large, urban high school located in New York State. The city has a population of over 143,000 people and the high school is one of five
high schools operated by the city school district. The high school comprises grades 9-12 and the total student enrollment is 1,596 students all of whom reside within the city. The racial/ethnic composition of the student population is: 43.6% Black or African American students, 28% White students, 12.8% Hispanic or Latino/a students, 10.6% Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1.3% Native American or Native Alaskan, and 2.8% multiracial students. The percentage of Limited English Proficient or English Language Learner students is 22.7%. The percentage of students with disabilities is 16.8%. The percentage of students who receive free lunch is 66.5% and the percentage of students who receive reduced lunch is 1.6%. The percentage of Title 1 student population is 68.1%. The attendance rate is 86.5%. The school has one principal, three assistant principals, one dean of students, six guidance counselors, one psychologist, and 105 teaching staff. 92.4% of the teaching staff have valid New York State teaching certificates. 89.5% of the teachers have more than three years teaching experience. Average teacher absences is 1.64 days. For the school year 2016-17: the four-year graduation rate = 63.2%; the six-year graduation rate = 63.3%; ELA student performance at level 3 and 4 = 81.1%; Mathematics student performance at levels 3 and 4 = 67.1%; Global History student performance at levels 3 and 4 = 66.2%; U.S. History student performance at levels 3 and 4 = 77.2%; students achieving Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation = 8.2%. The vision of the school states:

QT is a strong academic community where students build confidence to be college and career ready. All students and staff are active learners engaged in meaningful experiences that promote mutual respect, trust, and character.

The mission of the school states:

QT community is committed to collaborating to achieve individual excellence
and academic growth for all students. We will strive to become a National Blue Ribbon School.

QT school has a diverse student population representing over 30 countries of origin ranging from the United States, Africa, Eastern Europe, Americas, South America, and Middle East to South East Asia; over 20 languages; and religions including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindi. The school has a wide range of student clubs and extra-curricular activities including National Honor Society, National Arts Honor Society, Journalism Club, Drama Club, Environmental Club, Cheerleading, DECA (entrepreneurship and leadership), Seeds of Peace (peace-building, leadership, critical consciousness and social activism), Anime, Film, Science Olympiad, Link Leadership, and many others. Students participate in a wide range of varsity and junior varsity sports as well as scholastic, career, leadership and public affairs competitions, seminars and workshops locally and nationally. Students also organize and participate in a range of multicultural festivals and events to celebrate the rich cultural heritage of students and their families. The school offers a range of Advanced Placement, college credit-bearing, and career preparatory courses linked to internships in health and technology work places.

Despite the richness of the school’s culture, climate, and programs, the school is designated by the New York State Education Department as Priority School in Need of Improvement on indicators of student academic performance in English Language Arts, student graduation rate, and school safety.

Selection of Participants – (Sampling and Criteria)

Purposeful sampling was utilized in the present study to select ten students in QT High School who were determined as achieving academic success in accordance with the criteria for
sample selection of this study. The goal of purposeful sampling is to “select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 48). In line with the phenomenological theoretical orientation, these students have lived experiences of achieving academic success and therefore are originary sources of this phenomenon and can provide in-depth understandings and insights into the process of achieving school success through their descriptions of their lived experiences of the phenomenon and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Van Manen, 2018).

Criteria for selection

The criteria for selection of students who participated in this study are: a) male or female students, b) in grades 9-12, c) in an urban high school, d) of African American or Latino/a descent, e) from a low-income family as determined by the student’s eligibility for free or reduced lunch, f) with a minimum of B average or 3.0 GPA on the student’s school report card. The minimum GPA of B or 3.0 was selected because this is deemed by the school district in which QT High School is located as a grade that indicates proficiency and mastery of a subject.

Participant sample

Ten students participated in this study. Thus, the participant sample met the original goal of this study for number of participants. 9 students are in 12th grade and 1 student is in 11th grade. 7 students are female and 3 students are male. 5 students are African American (comprising 2 males and 3 females). 4 students are Latina (all females). 1 student is biracial (African American father and Caucasian mother) and male. 1 student (African American and female) is 16 years old. 8 students are 17 years old. 1 student is 18 years old (African American male). Additionally, the students have GPA ranging from 81 to 87. Two students have SAT scores of
480 and 780 respectively and 8 students have SAT scores ranging from 930 to 1120. 9 students have taken and are currently taking Advanced Placement or college credit-bearing courses. 9 students work part-time at local businesses.

**Recruitment of Participants**

Prior to the commencement of this study, I had a meeting with the principal of QT High School during which I explained the topic, purpose, questions, and design of the present research study and submitted the research abstract to the principal. I obtained the principal’s support and written letter of approval to conduct the present study with a sample of students from QT High School. The principal’s letter of support was made contingent upon my obtaining approval to conduct the research from the Institutional Review Boards of the City School District in which QT High School is located and Syracuse University. I next submitted an IRB application to the Institutional Review Board of the city school district in which QT High School is located. This application was approved. I then submitted an IRB application for the conduct of human research to the Institutional Review Board of Syracuse University. This application was also approved. I sent a copy of the IRB approval from Syracuse University to the city school district and to the principal of QT High School. I also sent a copy of the IRB approval from the city school district to the principal of QT High School and to Syracuse University. The principal of QT High School designated a vice-principal in QT High School to assist me with identifying students who fit the criteria for the research. I had a meeting with the vice-principal during which I explained the topic, purpose, questions, and design of the present research study and submitted an abstract of the research study to the vice-principal. The vice-principal, in due course, searched through students’ academic, personal, and social records and identified 16 students who fit the criteria for the present research study. Though my goal for the research
study was to have 10 participants, 16 students were targeted because it was expected that not all the students would consent to participate in the study. On a scheduled date, 12 students attended the initial meeting with me. I explained the topic, purpose, questions, and design of the research study to the 12 students as well as the content of the recruitment letters to the students’ parents and students. Each student was given a recruitment letter for his/her parent, an informed consent letter for his/her parent, and an informed consent letter for the student. I answered questions from students. I then scheduled an interview date for each student. I explained to students that they would only participate in the scheduled interviews if they submitted their duly completed and signed informed consent forms to the designated vice-principal prior to the scheduled interview date. 10 students returned their duly signed parent and student informed consent forms to the designated vice-principal prior to their scheduled interview dates. These students became the research participants and participated fully in the present research study.

**Data Collection**

**Demographic questionnaire**

A demographic questionnaire was utilized to gather pertinent information about the research participants’ characteristics. Such characteristics included: age, grade, gender, race, GPA, SAT score, advanced placement or college credit-bearing subjects taken in high school, honors or awards received, extra-curricular activities engaged in, projected college major, work or occupation, head of household, and eligibility for free or reduced lunch. Highlighting the importance of these questions during data collection, Patton (2002) asserted that “answers to these questions help the interviewer locate the respondent in relation to other people.” (p. 351). Questions in the demographic questionnaire (except gender) were posed to the participants
during the qualitative interviews of each participant to enhance corroboration and triangulation of data. Information from the questionnaires and other pertinent information in the interview data were utilized to create a profile of each participant for analysis.

**Summary of participants’ demographic information.**

10 students from QT High School participated in this study. Three (30%) of the participants are male and seven (70%) are female. Six participants (60%) are African American and four participants (40%) are Latina. Three participants (30%) are African American and male and three participants (30%) are African American and female, and four participants (40%) are Latina and female. Two Latina male students were solicited for this study but did not return their informed consent forms. At the time of the study, one participant (10%) was 18 years old, eight participants (80%) were 17 years old, and one participant (10%) was 16 years old. Nine participants (90%) are in 12th grade and one participant (10%) is in 11th grade. The GPA of the participants range from 81% to 87% with a median of 86%. The SAT scores of participants ranged from 780 to 1120 with a median of 965. All participants (100%) are from low income families as determined by their eligibility for free or reduced lunch. Eight participants (80%) have taken or are taking at least one advanced placement or college credit-bearing subject in high school. Most participants have taken or are taking several of such subjects. Eight participants (80%) are engaged in extra-curricular activities through sports and/or various clubs and organizations. Six participants (60%) are on Honor Roll. All participants (100%) have participated in several college visits. All participants (100%) have a declared college degree major including veterinary medicine, civil engineering, psychology, business, computer engineering, sports science, sociology/anthropology, nursing, music, and criminal justice. Eight participants (80%) work part-time at various local businesses. Five participants (50%) are from
households headed by a father and five participants (50%) are from households headed by a mother. The number of persons in each household ranges from 2 to 9 persons. Finally, the self-identified personal attributes of the participants include: determined, flexible, easy-going, out-going, friendly, supportive, funny, hardworking, motivated, family-oriented, sporty, open-minded, dependable, intelligent, organized, and understanding. Seven participants (70%) describe themselves as easy-going, flexible, out-going, or friendly.

Interview guide

An interview guide was developed by me and utilized as a framework to guide and focus the qualitative interviews of each participant. By delimiting the questions to be asked of each participant and keeping the questions open-ended, the guide ensured that my questioning was systematic, comprehensive, consistent, and focused across the participants while also affording me flexibility to explore and probe deeply, in a comfortable, conversational manner, to elicit thick descriptions from participants of their lived experiences of the phenomenon under study and meanings they attach to their experiences (Patton, 2002, p. 343). Key questions I asked of each participant which were then followed with probing questions as needed, include: Tell me about yourself. Tell me about your beliefs and how they influence you. Describe what is important to you. Tell me about your values and how they influence you. Tell me about your family. Tell me about experiences in or with your family and how they affect or influence you. Tell me about your school and the schools you have attended. Describe your typical day in your school. Tell me about your teachers. Tell me about your community or neighborhood. Tell me about any religious or spiritual beliefs you have and if and how they influence you. Tell me about your race, how you feel about it, and your experiences relating to it. Tell me about what your parents, family members, or other persons tell you about or do in relation to your race and
racism and how these affect you. Tell me about people, things, experiences or environments that could have negatively affected your school work and what you did about them. Tell me about people, things, experiences, or environments that have positively affected your school work or contributed to your school success. Is there anything else you wish to tell me about your school success?

**Semi-structured, open-ended interviews**

In-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interview questions, in line with the qualitative and phenomenological orientation of this study, comprised the primary strategy for data collection in the present study. These broad questions invited students to provide rich, thick descriptions of wide-ranging areas of their lives, leaving students with conscious choice to identify, select and discuss areas of their lived experiences that they considered meaningful. Reiterating the critical role of this mode of data collection in qualitative inquiry, Patton (2002) explicated: “the major way in which qualitative researchers seek to understand the perceptions, feelings, and knowledge of people is through in-depth, intensive interviewing. (p. 21) Categories of questions included: demographical or background questions, experience questions, behavior questions, feeling questions, opinion/value questions, intention questions, belief questions, attitude questions, and disposition questions. In order to refrain from leading respondents to my subconsciously pre-determined responses or responses influenced by my bias, I utilized broad question stems such as: Tell me about ___; Tell me more about ____; Describe to me__. Questions were also kept very broad such as: Tell me about your family. Tell me about your school. Tell me about your community. Tell me about your teachers or staff in your school. Tell me how you feel about _____. What does that mean to you? Tell me about your experiences with _____. Beliefs and
value questions were framed broadly as: Tell me about your beliefs. Tell me about your values.
Tell me about things that are important to you.

Nine participants were interviewed in a private location in QT High School (office, conference room, empty classroom, and corner of an empty cafeteria). One participant was interviewed in the dining room of her home. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. On each of the ten days of interviews, I conducted only one interview. Each interview was recorded with a digital audio recorder. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, on the same day, by me. The proximity in time of the transcription to the data collection as well as the sameness in identity of the researcher and the transcriber imbued the transcription process with familiarity and investment with respect to the research and data that operated critically to limit errors in punctuation, emphasis, terminology, paragraphing, deciphering of participants’ words from the tape, and other inaccuracies or omissions that adversely impact the accuracy of transcription and representation of the participants’ words and meanings in text. Such inaccuracies, in turn, negatively impact data analysis, interpretation, and trustworthiness (Tilley & Powick, 2002). The interviews generated 108 typed pages of thick descriptions of the lived experiences and meanings of participants with respect to the factors and processes that mediate their academic success.

I scheduled a subsequent meeting with all ten participants at QT High School to afford them the opportunity to review and check their transcribed verbatim data for accuracy. Nine of the ten participants attended the meeting. The duration of this meeting was one hour. During this meeting, I gave each student his/her transcribed data to review. At the end of the review, students noted that the transcriptions accurately represented their responses. Students also remarked that they did not realize they had spoken so much, that they had wondered about the
outcome of the interviews and how their words could really be of benefit to the research study, and that seeing their words in script has brought tangible meaning to their efforts. All participants requested to keep a copy of their individual transcripts and I gave each of the nine participants at the meeting a copy of his or her transcript. The participants also requested that they would like their real names to appear in the acknowledgement section of the finished dissertation and would like a copy of the finished dissertation. I stated that I would look into the possibility of granting these requests.

**Documents**

Documents relating to QT High School, QT school website, and the district’s online database of information comprised an invaluable source of information about the participant students’ demographic information and participation in extra-curricular organizations, sports, and events in the school as well as the school’s demographic information, composition of the student and staff body, curricular and extra-curricular programs and activities, school climate and culture, vision and mission statements, and school improvement plans and documents mandated by the New York State Education Department. Such documents which I gathered include: QT High School monthly newsletters from September 2016 to June 2018; mission and vision statements; Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness; Receivership Quarterly Reports and Continuation Plan; Community Engagement Team Recommendation for School Intervention Plan; and School Improvement Grant (SIG) Continuation Plan. Highlighting the importance of documents as critical sources of corroboration and triangulation in relation to qualitative inquiry, Patton asserted:
“Records, documents, artifacts, and archives --- constitute a particularly rich source of information about many organizations and programs. Thus archival strategies and techniques constitute part of the repertoire of field research and evaluation” (p. 293).

**Other data**

Other sources of data which I collected for the present research study consist of information from QT High School administrators and guidance counselors verifying the demographic data of the participant students.

**Profiles of Research Participants**

To maintain confidentiality of the participants in this study, letters are used to identify each participant. The profiles are intended to enable readers to frame a mental picture of the participants, analyze their similarities and differences, and gain insights into the nature and characteristics of the participants that may further illuminate the essence of the phenomenon under study.

**KL**

KL is 17 years old, male, and in 12th grade. Tall, lanky, with maple-brown complexion, he arrived for his interview in faded blue jeans pants, grey hooded pullover, and white sneakers. His black hair was closely-cropped and he wore an air of self-confidence and cheerfulness. He was friendly, polite, courteous, and seemed comfortable in his own skin. He described his race as primarily African American with some Native American and Hispanic ancestry. He also described himself as Christian, determined, humble, out-going, and funny. He is a member of the football, basketball, and track teams. He also belongs to On-Point for College and Christian
Youth Organization. He is enrolled in two college credit-bearing subjects, scored 1100 in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and has a GPA of 81%. He has visited Syracuse University, Medaille College, and SUNY Albany through On Point for College, and intends to attend college to study veterinary science or technology. He also works part-time at a local business. His household consists of four persons with his mother as head of the household. He receives free or reduced lunch at QT High School.

LA

LA is 17 years old, female, and in 12th grade. About 5 feet 5 inches tall, she arrived for her interview in sweat pants, t-shirt, pullover, and sneakers. She was soft-spoken, polite, and self-assured in a demure manner. She had a quiet, calm air about her. Her long, dark hair framed a face with light brown eyes and she spoke with a subtle lisp. She seemed very mature for her age. She stated that she is partially deaf but this was not noticeable to me during the interview. She described her race as Hispanic and explained that her father is from Dominican Republic while her mother is from Puerto Rico and both parents are first generation immigrants to the United States. She described herself as Christian, intelligent, kind-hearted, and helpful. She volunteers at the VA Medical Hospital and at the RSPCA Health Accounts and works part-time at the local mall. She is enrolled in a college credit-bearing subject, scored 1120 in the SAT, and has a GPA of 81%. She has visited Medaille College and hopes to attend it to study Veterinary Science. Her father is the head of her household. She stated that her father has a high school diploma and her mother has a Grade Equivalent Diploma (GED).
LR

LR is 18 years old, female, and in 12th grade. She arrived for her interview wearing blue jeans pants, black t-shirt, grey and pink sports jacket, and a black bandanna around her pony tail. Slim and self-assured, she walked with a gentle bounce to her heels in the manner of athletes. She smiled all through the interview and spoke in an undulating, cheerful tone, her voice rising and falling rhythmically as her cheerfulness often turned into excitement. She was polite and courteous. She described herself as African American, happy, “chill”, sporty, and determined. She is a member of the tennis and volleyball teams. She takes a full schedule of subjects including rigorous subjects like Engineering and Architecture, Algebra 2A, and Physics even though she has already passed the Math Regents and needs only two more credits to graduate. Her GPA is 87% and she is on the school’s Honor Roll. She has visited Onondaga Community College and Syracuse University and hopes to study Civil Engineering. She works part-time at a local business. She and her mom comprise her household. She receives free or reduced lunch at school. She stated that her mother has a high school diploma and she has an older sister at a two-year college.

MB

MB is 16 years old, female, and in 11th grade. She arrived for her interview, dressed casually in grey sweatpants, t-shirt, cropped jacket, and sneakers. With maple-brown skin, a heart-shaped face, and large almond-shaped eyes, her hair was gathered on top of her head in a bun. Fine tendrils of hair were pressed into curls around her forehead. She spoke with maturity and wisdom beyond her years. She described herself as African American, caring, hardworking, motivated, very thoughtful, and “passionate about helping and educating people”. She stated that
her father is African American and Caucasian (biracial) and her mother is Panamanian. Her paternal grandfather is Caucasian and her paternal grandmother is African American. She lives with her father and visits her paternal grandparents often. She belongs to the National Honor Society, the National Art Honor Society, QT High School Honor Society, and is captain of QT High School Cheerleading Team. Her GPA is 86%. She is taking five Advanced Placement and college credit-bearing subjects. She works part-time in a department store. She has visited several colleges and her desired college major is Psychology and Business. Her father is a construction worker and she receives free or reduced lunch at school.

BB

BB is 17 years old, female, and in 12th grade. She arrived for her interview dressed casually in sweatpants and a pullover. She wore eye glasses and her hair was held back in a ponytail. Though petite in size, with a quiet and demure manner, she spoke in a confident and authoritative voice. She described her race as Hispanic. Her parents are first generation immigrants from Cuba. They arrived in America with her and her older brother when she was nine years old. She stated that her father was a mechanical engineer in Cuba and her mother was a medical doctor in Cuba. Presently, in America, her father is a truck driver while her mother is in the Crouse Hospital nursing program. Her brother struggled in the English Language Learner program in the city school district and finally dropped out of high school. She lives with both parents, her brother, and her grandparents. She described herself as out-going, family-oriented, and friendly. She belongs to On Point for College and has visited several colleges with this organization including: Onondaga Community College, SUNY Albany, and SUNY Morrisville. She takes several college credit-bearing subjects. She scored 880 in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)
and intends to study Business or Psychology in college. She expressed that fear of ending up like her brother propels her to work hard at school.

**JG**

JG is 17 years old, male, and in 12th grade. He arrived for his interview wearing jeans, a pullover, and sneakers. He was over 6 feet tall, lanky, and had an athletic-looking build. His hair was closely cropped, with a wavy look. He spoke with a quiet confidence and was polite and courteous. He described himself as African American, funny, and “chill”. He explained with a smile that ‘chill’ means laid back and that he does not like too many people around him, and likes just a small number of friends. He loves basketball. He is a member of the school’s basketball team and On Point for College. He takes Syracuse University Project Advance (SUPA) Physics, Algebra, and Principles of Engineering. He has visited two colleges and intends to study Computer Engineering or Sports Science in college and play professional basketball. He scored 1020 in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), his GPA is 85%, and he is on the Honor Roll. His mom works in a dental office and his father is incarcerated. He lives with his mom and brother and receives free or reduced lunch in school.

**DS**

DS is 17 years old, female, and in 12th grade. She is skinny, petite (about five feet tall), with long dark hair. She described her race as Hispanic. She described herself as friendly, easy to get along with, understanding, open-minded, and frank. She belongs to On Point for College and is the only student member of QT High School’s School Climate Team. This team is comprised of administrators and teachers. The team plans and organizes initiatives and events to promote a healthy climate and culture in the school for all stakeholders (students, staff, families, and
community) and progress-monitors the impact. She takes several college credit-bearing subjects. She scored 930 in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), her GPA is 87%, and she is on Honor Roll. She has visited several colleges including Medaille College, SUNY Oswego, and Syracuse University and intends to major in Sociology and Human Development or Guidance Counseling. She works part-time in a supervisory position at a local car wash business. She went to Catholic school from grades 3-7. She stated that her father did not graduate high school and her mother is a Teacher Assistant at one of the district’s schools. She lives with both parents. She receives free or reduced lunch at school. She is on track to graduate with an Advanced Regents Diploma.

SB

SB is 17 years old, female, and in 12th grade. Petite, thin, and pretty, she wore a bright fuschia-colored, long-sleeved sports shirt and black sports pants. The researcher interviewed her in her home, an attractive, detached, bottle-green bungalow in a quiet neighborhood, in the city. As she sat at her dining table with the researcher, her mom worked busily in the kitchen but peeped in once to check on her daughter. Her little chihuahua dog barked continuously and her little brother wandered in and out of the room twice, staring curiously at his sister and the researcher. SB was polite and spoke with ease and confidence. She described her race as Hispanic. She stated that her parents are first generation Cuban immigrants. Her parents did not graduate high school. Her father is a truck driver and her mother works at a factory assembly line. She described herself as Roman Catholic, big-hearted, fun, easy-going, out-going, dependable, and creative. She is in the Medical Assistance Program at her school and is undergoing an internship at the Syracuse Community Health Center. Through the program, she takes several rigorous courses including nursing, anatomy, physiology, and college-level psychology. She scored 780 in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), her GPA is 87%, and she is on Honor Roll. She has
visited several colleges including Onondaga Community College, LeMoyne College, and Syracuse University. She intends to become a Pediatric Nurse, Pediatric Psychiatrist, or Pediatric Surgeon. She receives free or reduced lunch at school. She stated:

**MO**

MO is 17 years old, male, and in 12th grade. He is tall with piercing eyes. He brimmed with self-confidence and spoke in a self-assured manner. He was polite and courteous. He described himself as biracial and African American. His father is African American and his mother is Caucasian. He also described himself as funny, “chill”, easy-going, out-going, caring, focused on school, and determined. He explained that “chill” means flexible and not easily frustrated or stressed. He was homeschooled by his parents until 10th grade. He enrolled in QT High School in 10th grade. He belongs to the school Band Club. He is passionate about music and playing drums in Band and he intends to major in Music in college. He scored 980 in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and his GPA is 82%. He lives with both parents and his father is the head of his household. His father is retired as a Federal Meat Inspector and presently works in a local laundromat. His mother works at Burger King. He is the only child from both parents but he has two sisters and four brothers who do not live with him and his parents. He receives free or reduced lunch at school.

**TC**

TC is 17 years old, female, and in 12th grade. She had a quiet, cheerful personality. She was polite and courteous throughout the interview and spoke with quiet self-confidence. She wore jeans, a pullover, and sneakers. She described her race as African American. She described herself as kind, caring, organized, and intelligent. She is a member of On Point for College, Link
Leadership, and Hillside Work Scholarship Connection (a tutoring program). She scored 950 in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), her GPA is 86%, and she is on Honor Roll. Through On Point for College, she has visited several colleges including SUNY Buffalo State College, SUNY Cortland, SUNY Oswego, and Medaille College. She has been accepted to Medaille College which is her first choice and intends to enroll there to major in Criminal Investigation. College-level subjects she has taken or is currently taking include: Onondaga Community College Pre-Calculus, Syracuse University Project Advance (SUPA) Forensic Science and SUPA American History. There are nine persons in her household and her mother is the head of the household. She receives free or reduced lunch at school.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was guided by Saldana’s (2013) qualitative coding cycles. Saldana (2013) defines a code, in qualitative inquiry, as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Coding, while not synonymous with analysis, is the first step in the rigorous process of extrapolating analytic interpretations, meanings, and significance from concrete data that represents the lived experiences of participants (Charmaz, 2010, p. 43; Saldana, 2013, p. 8). Coding is an imperative for rigorous qualitative research analysis. Saldana (2013) explicates it as a methodical, cyclical heuristic tool for exploration and discovery that facilitates deep reflection on the data and its meaning, linking units of data to an idea, linking each idea to all other units of data related to the idea, mediating deeper immersion and reflection on the clustered data and birthing emergent insights and understandings (P. 8). Thus, this analytic tool facilitates the phenomenological researcher to immerse and reimmerse the self in the lived experiences and meanings of the research participants and drill down to the
Subscribing to this view, Charmaz (2010) asserted that line by line coding enables the researcher “to remain open to the data and to see the nuances in it”, to “gain a close look at what participants say and struggle with”, to learn about the worlds of the participants, and to “reduce the likelihood that researchers merely superimpose their preconceived notions on the data” (p. 50-51). This thoroughness enhances the trustworthiness of the research data.

I utilized an initial or open coding method during the first coding cycle to code the verbatim interview transcripts of participants line by line, sentence by sentence, or paragraph by paragraph. This is an open-ended process that breaks down the data into unit parts and closely examines the data to identify similarities and differences (Saldana, 2013, p. 100, citing Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). This process allowed me to immerse myself in the data, its pathos, and its nuances, mediating deep reflection and generating insights and understandings (Saldana, 2013). This process also facilitates the researcher to remain open to the data and where it could lead (Charmaz, 2010, p. 48) and to “build your analysis step by step from the ground up without taking off on theoretical flights of fancy” – jumping to interpretations and assertions that are unjustified by and ungrounded in the data (Charmaz, 2010, p. 51).

In line with the process of initial coding, I employed a series of code types to code the data and draw out essential features, meanings, and nuances. These codes are as follows: a) **In vivo coding**. Here, I coded units of data with participants’own words drawn from the data being coded. For example: LR’s statement: “I influence myself. I push myself” (LR, p. 3) was coded as “I push myself”; LA’s statement: “It’s myself. I push myself to be a better student” (LA, p. 8) was coded as “I push myself”; BB’s statement about her parents: “They work really hard. They gave up a lot for me to be here. That’s why I want to really do good. Make them proud or
something” (BB, P. 2) was coded as “Make them proud” b) **Attribute coding.** Here, I coded essential participant information, characteristics, or demographics. For example: KL’s statement: “I am African American, Native American, and I have some Hispanic origin” (KL, p. 1) was coded as “Racial identity: African American, Native American, Hispanic”; LA’s statement: “My GPA is around 83” (LA, p. 3) was coded as “GPA: 83”; c) **Descriptive coding.** Here, I coded the topic of a line, sentence, or paragraph. For example: KL’s statement: “The whole breakdown about me: KL. 17 years old. Syracuse, New York. Senior. Trying to go to Medaille College. I have a bright future ahead of me, I’m very determined so I feel I’m going to get to where I want to be in life” (KL, p. 10) was coded as: “Determined: Focus on future goal: college” d) **Process coding.** Here, I coded action in the datum. For example: LA’s statement: “I’m currently volunteering in the VA Medical Hospital to get my volunteer hours but I also plan on staying there much longer. I also volunteer at the RSPCA Health Accounts because of my preference to work with animals” (LA, p. 6) was coded as “volunteering” e) **Emotion coding.** Here I coded emotions in a piece of datum. For example: LR’s exclamation and statement: “Yea! In the past, about African Americans, it’s like we’re coming up now! We’re more confident about ourselves! It’s like what you see usually white people doing, we’re now doing, like, we’re going to school, we have money and all that, so yea!” (LR, p. 1) was coded as “racial pride/pride in one’s race” f) **Values coding.** Here I coded beliefs, values, and attitudes in each datum. For example: DS’s statement: “I value my school, my education, and my family is very important to me. As for my school, I take it very seriously. I want to excel” (DS, p. 3) was coded as: “value for education”, and g) **versus coding.** Here, I coded conflicts, tensions, struggles, dilemmas, inconsistencies, contradictions, indecisions, competing interests or goals, and other binaries. For example: LR’s statement: “He says that I’m really smart. I mean, I down myself a
lot. I really down myself a lot and he will tell me: oh no! You’re really smart! You’re really
good! And then he would boost me up, my confidence, and then I would be ready” (LR, p. 4)
was coded as “self-downing versus peer boosting/self-disapproval versus peer approval”.
Indeed, the overriding code which all these codes could be said to fall within is the descriptive
coding that codes the main topic of a piece of datum.

During the second cycle of coding, I clustered codes into categories. Pattern coding was
employed to search for patterns, relationships, and explanations from the categories and to
develop metacodes and metasynthesis of the data in the form of emergent themes. (Miles &
Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2013). For example, codes such as: family expectations, teacher
expectations, expectations from organizations, expectations from coaches, teacher approval,
positive teacher type, school expectations, teacher encouragement, meaning of success, college
visits, On Point for College, college level school subjects, GPA, Honor Roll, resentment of
disruptive students were condensed into the category of expectations. Teacher role modeling,
parent role modeling, family role modeling, peer role modeling were condensed into the category
of role modeling. From these categories emerged the theme or connecting thread, in this case, of
high expectations from others of the participants.

Codes such family support, family provision, family guidance, family advice, teacher
support, teacher guidance, teacher advice, school support/guidance, coach support/guidance,
school-based organization support/guidance, peer advice, parental vetting of friendships, lack of
family support vs. strong peer support, self-disapproval versus peer approval, parental
protectiveness, family cohesion, family environment, work place customers encouragement,
workplace supervisor encouragement were condensed into the categories of family caring and
support, teacher caring and support, school caring and support, coach caring and support, community caring and support from which emerged the theme of caring and support.

Codes such as cheerleading, basketball, tennis, band club, link crew, part-time work, volunteering, drama club, school climate team were condensed into the categories of sports, clubs, volunteering, and part-time work from which emerged the theme of participation in positions of responsibility.

Codes such as feelings towards teachers, feelings towards school, importance of school work, education as key to future success, education as key to good job, education as key to good life, education as key to uplifting family or race, resourcefulness, perseverance with school work, determination to succeed in school, determination to get good grades were condensed into categories of value for school work, value for education, desire for school success, from which emerged the theme: value for education.

Codes such as feelings towards other races, pride in one’s race/racial pride, racial memorabilia/artifacts at home, researching/learning about one’s race, meaning of identity, meaning of racial identity, cultural celebrations, beliefs about one’s race, beliefs about how others view one’s race, were condensed into categories of racial pride, racial identity, and racial beliefs from which emerged the theme of positive racial identity.

Codes built into categories such as teacher communications about race/racism, parent communications about race/racism, social media communications about race/racism yielded the theme of positive racial socialization.

Codes such as belief in karma, belief in God, belief in failure as a learning experience, belief that God will make things right, belief that things happen for a reason, belief that things work out
in the end, learning from one’s experience and moving on, refraining from stressing about
tests/things, praying, church-going, reading bible were condensed into categories of spiritual
beliefs, religious beliefs, positive attitude. From these emerged the theme of positive belief
system.

   Codes such as high school graduation goals, college goals, career goals, desire to succeed in
life, desire to provide for future family, desire to give back to/uplift one’s race, desire to give
back to/uplift one’s family were condensed into categories of school goals, career goals, future
goals. From these emerged the theme: focus on future goals/clear sense of purpose.

   Codes such as positive peer pressure, negative peer pressure, navigating friendships,
navigating peer pressure, negative versus positive peer pressure, negative peer pressure versus
school work, good push versus bad push, positive GPS system/ability to recalculate,
understanding good versus bad choices, determination to avoid trouble, learning from bad
experiences of self, learning from bad experiences of others, learning from good experiences of
others, learning from one’s good experiences were condensed into the categories of navigating
peer pressure, understanding choices and implications. From these emerged the theme of: clear
sense of good and bad choices and implications.

   Codes such as: hard work brings success, hard work leads to future success, hard
work/studying brings good grades, good grades bring college acceptance, one can shape one’s
future, one can be what one wants to be, one will succeed in life, one has a bright future, one will
achieve one’s goals, belief in one’s intelligence, belief that one is smart, belief that one can be
what one wants to be, etc. were categorized as self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and
were condensed into the theme of internal locus of control.
Codes such as gratitude to family, gratitude to teachers, gratitude to peer caregiver, desire to make family proud, desire to make peer caregiver proud, desire to make friends proud, desire to make teachers proud, etc were categorized as desire to make family proud and desire to make caregivers proud and finally themed as desire to make family or significant other proud.

Codes such as “I push myself”, “I put my mind to it”, pushing self to get work done, pushing self to attend classes, pushing self to study, pushing self to get extra help, were categorized as pushing self and finally themed as self-push.

Codes such as: likes school, likes teachers, enjoys sports in school, enjoys clubs in school, enjoys college visits, proud to be on School Climate Team, proud to be Link Crew member, liked by teachers, bond with teachers, bond with coach, school as safe place, enjoys classes, were categorized as sense of belonging: classes, sense of belonging: school staff, sense of belonging: extra-curricular activities and finally themed as sense of belonging.

I utilized analytical memos to critically reflect upon and record emergent explanations, relationships, insights and understandings emanating from the data. These memos were written in a journal and sheets of paper as I continually reflected upon the participants’ statements. Significant statements of each participant were clustered under each of the above themes emanating from the data as mediating the academic success of the participants. These statements were further reflected upon and analyzed to ensure that they match the themes. This was done by writing each theme boldly at the top of a sheet of paper and then combing through the verbatim typed statements of each of the research participants, extracting statements that reflected the theme, and writing such statements underneath the theme. In this manner, under each theme, I
clustered verbatim statements, from all the research participants, reflecting or representing the theme.

I next scheduled a meeting at QT High School to meet with the research participants to afford them the opportunity to a) check their significant statements for accuracy and b) check for alignment between each theme and their significant statements in which the theme is grounded. This meeting lasted for one hour. The participant students were in agreement that they believe their statements to be accurate and that they believe the themes I constructed to be aligned to their significant statements. Of course, some limitations of this process is that a) one hour may not be enough time for each participant to substantially review these documents and b) the students may not have the expertise to skillfully review the documents for errors, misrepresentations, and mis-alignments.

Upon further analysis and reflection, as explained in the below, I found it necessary to **condense the thirteen above-mentioned themes into five key themes** with eight appurtenant sub-themes as follows: a) Theme – High expectations from others; sub-theme – value for education, focus on future goals/clear sense of purpose, internal locus of control, and self-push b) Theme – caring and supportive relationships; sub-theme – desire to make caregivers proud, sense of belonging, and clear sense of good versus bad choices and their implications c) Theme – participation in positions of responsibility d) Theme – positive racial socialization; sub-theme – positive racial identity e) Theme – positive belief system. The **rationale for this further condensation** is that I found that each of the five key themes catalyzed its appurtenant sub-themes. These sub-themes are essentially the research participants’ responses to the externally or ecologically influenced themes. Thus, for example, communications of high expectations from others imbued the participants with value for education, focus on future goals, clear sense of
purpose, internal locus of control, and self-push. Finally, comparisons across themes indicated that each of the themes included an element of external influence encompassing family, school, and community and a participant response or personal agency. More in-depth discussion about this analysis follows in chapter four.

Establishing Trustworthiness and Credibility

Credibility or validity in qualitative inquiry is predicated on “how accurately the account represents participants’ realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them” (Creswell & Miller, 200, p. 124-125). In the present study, I utilized a range of strategies to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the research study.

Triangulation of data sources

Triangulation requires the researcher to compare and cross-check the consistency of information across more than one data source (Patton, 2001, p. 559). Creswell and Poth (2018) explicate this method as corroborating evidence across multiple data sources (p. 260). The present study utilized a range of documents from QT High School as enumerated in the data collection section above as well as the district’s online data base and verifications from administrators and guidance counselors from the school to corroborate a variety of information elicited from participants during the qualitative interviews. Such information include participants’ demographic information, course enrollment, GPA, SAT scores, participation in extracurricular organizations, clubs, and activities. An important caveat here is that while I utilized triangulation to cross-check or corroborate the research participants’ demographic and background information as listed above, I did not utilize it to cross-check the accuracy of their reports of their experiences and perspectives with respect to factors that influenced their
Generating rich, thick descriptions

The present study utilized in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews of the research participants to generate rich, thick descriptions of the participants and their contexts and lived experiences with respect to factors mediating their academic success, conditions and contexts that nurture these factors and the process or pathways through which these factors mediate participants’ academic success. For example, these thick descriptions are represented by the research participants copious verbatim quotes cited in chapter four of this study. Such profusion grants readers vicarious access into the lived experiences of participants and “allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability” (Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

Peer review or debriefing of the data and research process

Creswell (2018) explicates this method as an external check by “someone who is familiar with the research study or phenomenon. This peer debriefer acts as a “devil’s advocate” - keeping the researcher honest, asking hard questions about the researcher’s methods, process, analysis, and interpretations and mediating the on-going critical reflection of the researcher on the data (Creswell, 2018). In the present study, my advisor, Dr. Joseph Shedd, acted in this critiquing role. Throughout this study, he has constantly read, reviewed, reflected upon and commented orally and in writing upon the research data, analysis, findings, implications, limitations, and conclusion and all aspects of this research study and provided invaluable critique and insights to me.
**Clarifying researcher bias and engaging in reflexivity**

This strategy involves the researcher’s disclosure, in the research study, of personal biases assumptions, values, beliefs, experiences, background, history, or other influences that the researcher brings to the research study which may influence aspects of the research including the research topic, questions, design, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Patton, 2002). I made this disclosure in the section of the present research study titled: Situating myself in the present research study.

**Member checking or seeking participant feedback**

This strategy mandates the researcher to take the transcribed verbatim interview data as well as the researcher’s analysis and interpretations back to the research participants to allow them to check the accuracy of these items with respect to representing their statements and lived experiences (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002; Turner & Coen, 2008). Lincoln & Guba (1985) asserted that member-checking is “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” in a research study. (p. 314) The present study utilized this method as explicated in the data collection and data analysis sections of this study.

Patton (2002) articulates three conditions of credible qualitative research: a) rigorous data collection methods that “yield high quality data that are systematically analyzed with attention to issues of credibility” b) appropriate training of the researcher in qualitative research methods, and c) one’s belief in the philosophy and value of qualitative inquiry (p. 552-553).
Subjectivity and Positionality

Subjectivity, in qualitative as well as quantitative research methodology, is the state of mind of a researcher whereby the researcher’s interests, experiences, perspectives, beliefs, values, and other internal states work to influence all stages of the research from selection of topic and methodology to questions, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and conclusion (Peshkin, 1988, 1994; Patton, 2002). Peshkin (1988) defined subjectivity as: “an amalgam of the persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one’s class, statuses, and values interacting with the particulars of one’s object of investigation” (p. 17). Peshkin, (1994) asserted that “three interrelated aspects of self” render a researcher subjective in the conduct of research: the affective state (values, attitudes, and tastes), the history (one’s past and experiences), and the biography (personal attributes, gender, age, religion, marital status, occupation, and political affiliation (p. 47). Peshkin (1994) further reiterated that “subjectivity operates throughout the entire research process, beginning with the choice of what we study, including our methods for data collecting and our analysis of data, and ending with the conclusions we draw” (p. 50).

Succinctly affirming the presence of subjectivity in researchers, Sousanis (2011) warned: “And no matter how removed we attempt to position ourselves, our own standpoint is always reflected in our observations” (p. 126). Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) further elaborated:

As researchers, our stances, our angles of repose, do affect what we are interested in, the questions we ask, the foci of our study, and the methods of collection as well as the substance of analysis. And the meanings we make from our research projects are filtered through our beliefs, attitudes, and previous experiences as well as through
the formal and informal theoretical positions we understand or believe in. As
researchers, we bring multiple stances to our studies – in degrees of conscious and
subconscious awareness – as we choreograph, depict, and resculpt stories and meanings
from what we are examining ---. (p. 38)

Subjectivity is not peculiar to qualitative research methodology but is inherent in any
methodology. To this effect, Patton (2002) asserted that: “The ideals of absolute objectivity and
value-free science are impossible to attain in practice and are of questionable desirability in the
first place since they ignore the intrinsically social nature and human purposes of research” (p. 50). Subscribing to this view, Peshkin (1994) reiterated the thesis of Gould (1989, p. 244):

Most of us are not naïve enough to believe the old myth that scientists are paragons
of unprejudiced objectivity, equally open to all possibilities, and reaching conclusions
only by the weight of evidence and logic of argument. We understand that biases,
prejudices, social values, and psychological tales all play a strong role in a process of
discovery (p. 45).

Situating Myself in the Present Research Study

Peshkin (1988) emphasizes the importance of revealing, monitoring, and bracketing one’s
subjectivities from the very beginning of one’s research up to its conclusion in order to reduce
their intrusion into and distortion of the research study. To this effect, he asserted that:
“researchers should systematically seek out their subjectivity, not retrospectively when the data
have been collected and the analysis is complete, but while their research is actively in progress — to enable researchers to be aware of how their subjectivity may be shaping their inquiry and its outcomes” (p. 17). I, therefore, seek here, to shed light on my subjectivities.

I am of the Igbo ethnic group of South Eastern Nigeria, in West Africa. The core values of my people are enterprise, industry, independence, individualism and self-reliance, cooperation for the betterment of the community, integrity, fundamental importance of the family and its wellbeing, and a deep value for education as a pathway to success and fulfilment. I am of royal birth. My father was the traditional ruler of my people as was his father and ancestors before him – the Uthoko na Eze (Eagle and King) royal family lineage of Achalla Isuana village – group. My father was also a lawyer. He was educated at the University of London and Gray’s Inns of Court, England and was an affluent business man. My mother was a homemaker and was educated at a Girls’ Secondary Catholic School. I grew up in a household in which my father was a beloved and revered autocrat and yet deeply believed in the imperativeness of educating his daughters (alongside his sons) in order that they would be independent and emancipated. My father deeply believed that a good education affords one invaluable opportunities to make robust life choices and be truly free. He always declared: “Seek you first a solid education and all else will follow”. I am Roman Catholic. (Incidentally, Africa has the second largest catholic population in the world.) My father was sent by his father, at the age of 14 years, to live with Irish missionary priests and, there, learn to serve God. My father deeply believed in God, served him in myriad ways, and had an abiding reverence for the Blessed Virgin Mary. He prayed his rosary every single morning and night and several times in-between. He died in the month of May, a month consecrated to the Blessed Virgin. His rosary lay in his hand. One of the fascinating vignettes recounted about my father and grandfather is that my
grandfather sent my father’s school teacher to accompany my father to England and study law alongside my father so that he would watch over my father and bring him back safely from the land of the white man. My father’s school teacher later returned to Nigeria and became a Chief Justice of Eastern Nigeria. I am also a wife, mother, and naturalized citizen of the United States of America.

And so I grew up proud of my race, pedigree, and rich cultural heritage. I grew up confident, deeply believing in God, deeply believing in the values of my father and my people, and unwaveringly entrenched in an abiding belief in the indomitability and resourcefulness of the human spirit and my race. Years later, when I studied law at the University of Southampton, England, obtaining Bachelors and Masters Degrees in Law, I effectively deployed this arsenal of resilient protective factors to help me overcome instances of racism that I experienced.

And so I am drawn to the work of Paulo Freire (1970) in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. I deeply understand when Paulo Freire declares: “This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well” (p. 44). I deeply understand when Paulo Freire asserts:

Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it (p. 45).

I deeply understand when Paulo Freire enunciates his belief that the oppressed and the marginalized possess the expertise, experience, creativity, and passion to shake off the shackles
of their oppression and that they are best suited to do this. And so, I am drawn to the work of bell hooks (1994) in Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. I deeply understand when she exhorts the criticality of the “privileged standpoint” of the marginalized (p. 90). I deeply understand when she upholds experience as a valid way of knowing rooted in passion and remembrance. And so, I am drawn to the concept of positive deviance – a theoretical framework that enshrines and advocates the power and resourcefulness of communities in finding solutions to their own problems (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010; Sternin, Sternin, & Marsh, 1998).

I am a vice-principal in an urban, public school district. I have been an educator in all grade levels of urban, public schools in the United States for almost twenty-three years. I have experienced education on three continents – Africa, Europe, and North America. I have witnessed first-hand the struggles of low-income, African American and Latino/a students with a cycle of poverty, racism, academic disengagement, and low achievement. I have raged, wept, and questioned. I have witnessed first-hand similar students in the same schools who have fared better. And now, I seek, humbly, to go to them – the successful few – to learn from their privileged standpoint, borne of passion and remembrance, how they have shaken off the shackles of academic disengagement and low academic achievement and found solutions to this intractable and pervasive situation.

**Reflexivity and Bracketing my Subjectivity**

Subjectivities can cause a researcher to approve of, give more attention to, or attach more significance to data that reveal phenomena valued by the researcher while disapproving of, overlooking, or attaching less significance to data that reveal phenomena not valued by the
researcher (Peshkin, 1988, 1994). Peshkin (1988) warned that researcher subjectivities can “filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue what transpires from the outset of the research project to its culmination in a written statement” (p. 17). He therefore advocates that researchers should monitor their subjectivities through all stages of the research study so that they can strive to manage, contain, and prevent the subjectivities from intervening in the various stages of the research.

I have strived to monitor and bracket my subjectivities throughout all stages of this research study by actively reflecting upon and monitoring them; continually questioning my motives through all stages of the research, particularly during data collection, analysis, interpretation, and conclusion; paying close attention to all data; grounding the analysis, interpretation, and conclusions in the actual generated data; carefully formulating open-ended interview questions and probes that will generate thick descriptions and data; and utilizing follow-up interviews to cross-check initial data collection. For instance, as I explained above, I returned to QT High School and had a follow-up meeting with nine of the ten research participants to afford them the opportunity to cross-check their responses and fill in gaps in some of their responses. In this manner, I hope to substantially disable adverse influences of my subjectivities on the research study and ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of my research study.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter is presented in two parts. The first part presents the major findings of this study. The second part discusses the relationship between the emerging themes/subthemes.

The findings of this study consist of five major themes and appurtenant sub-themes emerging from this study as the essence of the phenomenon or process that helped to mediate the academic success of the research participants. Themes are the outcomes of codes, categories, and analytic reflection that distil emerging patterns and relationships from qualitative data and lend critical insight into understanding the phenomenon under study (Saldana, 2013, p. 14). Thus, these findings were derived from a) analyses of the qualitative interview transcripts of the research participants b) a range of pertinent documents relating to QT High School, and c) information, from the guidance counselors and administrators, relating to QT High School and the research participants. Verbatim excerpts from the interview transcripts are cited to illustrate each theme and the sub-themes it catalyzes. These personal narratives paint a rich portrait of the themes and sub-themes as well as the contexts, conditions, and processes that cultivated and activated them along a trajectory that resulted in the academic success of the research participants. These statements are intended to make accessible to readers rich, thick descriptions of the participants and their lived experiences so that readers can independently analyze, interpret, and distill insights into the factors, deconstructed by this study, as mediating the academic success of the participants. This lends authenticity and trustworthiness to the research study (Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Each of the five major themes is presented in three parts: First is a presentation of each theme along with the variances or nuances of the theme or the various external influences or ecological sources, contexts, or conditions through which the theme emerged. Next, with respect to the themes of high expectations, caring and supportive relationships, and racial socialization, is a presentation of the sub-themes catalyzed by each of these three themes. These sub-themes are, in effect, participants’ responses to the externally or ecologically-influenced themes. Such participants’ responses are grounded in participants’ active internalization of the ecologically influenced themes. These respond to the first two research questions of this study: What are the perspectives of African-American and Latino/a students from low-income families on factors that mediate their academic success? What are the perspectives of African-American and Latino/a students from low-income families on conditions and contexts that mediate their academic success? Finally, excerpts of verbatim statements of the research participants are utilized to illustrate and postulate about the pathways or processes through which the themes operate to mediate the academic success of the participants. This responds to the third research question of this study: What are the processes or pathways through which these factors mediate the academic success of these student?

**Emerging Themes/Sub-Themes**

The five themes emerging from this study along with their appurtenant sub-themes are: a) High expectations from others. This external influence internalized the following responses in participants: value for education; focus on future goals/clear sense of purpose; internal locus of control; and self-push b) caring and supportive relationships. This external influence internalized the following responses in participants: desire to make family or caregivers proud; sense of belonging; and clear sense of good versus bad choices and their implications c)
participation in positions of responsibility d) positive racial socialization. This external influence generated in participants a positive racial/cultural identity, and e) positive belief system.

**High Expectations**

While the key theme of high expectations from others embodies the external influences embedded in the three key ecological contexts of the participants – family, school, and community, the sub-themes embody participants’ internalized responses to the externally influenced high expectations. This key theme was found to generate or to be associated with four sub-themes: value for education, focus on future goals, internal locus of control, and self-push. These sub-themes were found to be explicitly as well as implicitly embedded in the communications of high expectations to the research participants as will be illustrated below.

**External Influence: High Expectations from Others**

All ten participants reported unequivocal experiences of high expectations from a range of external sources including parents, siblings, relatives, family friends, teachers, administrators, school staff, coaches, school friends, staff of school-based community agencies, job supervisor, and work place customers. These persons believed that the participants have the ability to, and expected that the participants will, excel academically, graduate from high school, enroll in a college and graduate, engage in a lucrative career, and achieve success in life. These external sources can be grouped into three key ecological contexts imbued with high expectations for the participants: the family, the school, and the community. These beliefs and expectations were communicated to the participants continuously. The participants were encouraged continuously to value their education and school work, to focus unwaveringly on these, and to work hard at them in order to meet these high expectations and beliefs. They were encouraged to set future
goals of attending college, graduating from college, and engaging in lucrative careers. They received continuous communication that they have the ability to achieve their set goals through hard work and that they possess the capability, agency, or internal locus of control to achieve their set goals. They also received communications that they needed to push themselves and struggle and strive in order to achieve their future goals. Thus, high expectations were socialized into and nurtured in the research participants from three key ecological contexts: the family, school, and community, with respect to high school education, college education, and meaningful careers (as illustrated below). The participants internalized these high expectations, became motivated by them, and continually strived to work hard at school and excel in their studies (as illustrated below).

**Parental/family high expectations.**

Illustrating parental high expectations that nurtured value for education, internal locus of control, and self-push in participants, KL stated:

> Even when I was too young to know education is everything, she [mother] always pushed it on me. Anytime I brought home anything lower than 80, she didn’t agree with. So, my mom said my grades have to be this high, so that kept me focused on everything. So, now that I am mature enough to know that education is everything, she doesn’t have to push me as much because I know that I need it. (KL, 2017, Interview Transcript, p.6)
Illustrating parental high expectations that encouraged participants to value education and set future goals of attending and graduating from college, LA stated:

> My parents give me advice about friends, my school work, my education,

> They say that I should continue to further my education outside of high school. They tell me that it’s good that I’m in college courses, that it helps with getting into better colleges and it helps your resume build and it helps you get ahead. (LA, 2017, Interview Transcript, p. 5).

Illustrating parental high expectations that encouraged participants to work hard and set goals about engaging in lucrative careers, BB stated:

> They [parents] expect me to do good. They expect me to study, work hard.

> Every parent wants more for their kids. I wanna become a doctor. Yea!

> They want me to do good! (BB, 2017, Interview Transcript, p. 7)

Illustrating participants’ internalization of these high expectations and becoming motivated by them to work hard at and excel in their school work, DS stated:

> They [parents and family members] tell me that education is important. That if I wanna make a living, that I should graduate high school, I should want to go to college, it’s not just something I can slack off on. It’s very important to our nation’s development. I personally want to. I’m very motivated about
education. So, with them motivating me, it helps me even more to know that education is something I need to take seriously. (DS, 2017, p. 5)

**Peer high expectations.**

LR reported that her mother whom she lives with is often absent from her life for long periods and does not care about her school work. But, she reported unwavering experiences of high expectations from a school friend. She stated;

I haven’t always had good grades. In ninth grade, I did really, really bad. I failed some classes. Then, the tenth grade year came around and I had this friend and he was telling me: You really gotta do better. You gotta pull yourself up. And I said: Okay. He would really get mad when I would be skipping. And now, I don’t wanna do that anymore. And each year, I got better. Now, I am on Honor Roll! He says you can really go places, you can do more. He says that I’m really smart. I mean, I downplay myself a lot and he will tell me: “Oh no! You’re really smart! You’re really good!” And then, he would boost me up, my confidence, and then I would be ready. He’ll talk about college and getting a career.

(LR, 2017, p. 3-4).

BB and MB also reported that their friends have high expectations of them.
**Teacher high expectations.**

All the participants reported experiences of high expectations from their teachers. Often, this was coupled with or embedded in teacher approval. The participants’ teachers liked them, approved of them, perceived them to be hardworking, encouraged them, gave them advice with respect to their school work, college choices, future careers, and personal lives, assisted them with their college applications and other needs, and communicated to them that they have the ability to excel in their high school and college education as well as in lucrative future careers. Illustrating these teacher high expectations, approval, encouragement and assistance, KL stated:

> My teachers think that I’m a great student! That I’m gonna be successful in life!

> That I’ve grown! That I’ve matured! (KL, 2017, p. 9-10). My teachers have been helping me with college stuff, so when it was time for me to make my decision,

> I wasn’t so stuck. (KL. 2017, P. 7).

Illustrating similar high expectations as well as advice about college, LA stated:

> They [teachers] tell me that I’m a pretty good student, I’m on track for college, that I’m pretty smart. I get a lot of advice about college applications, college essays. (LA, 2017, p. 5)

Illustrating the potency of positive teacher attention coupled with engaging instruction in building the self-esteem and confidence of students, LR stated:

> They’ve put a lot of confidence in me to succeed, especially my Engineering
teacher. I’m the only girl in that class. When we are building houses, it’s like you have to construct a house, you have to draw the blueprints. I honestly didn’t think that I’d be able to do something like that. But he definitely pushed me. He’ll say: “It’s okay. You can do it! You’ll figure it out.” And he put my picture on the wall. And I always look at the picture and I’ll say: oh my God!

Did I really draw that! (LR, 2017, p. 9).

JG’s teachers went even further with positive teacher attention and implicit and explicit high expectations by turning out regularly to watch him play basketball. Thus, JG proudly recounted:

All my teachers like me. Most of my teachers come out to watch me play basketball when we play at home. They always tell me how I had a good game and they’re just really cool. Some of my teachers tell me to make sure I keep up the good grades and to make sure I keep on top of my grades. They tell me to stay grounded because they want the best for me and I’m a smart kid. They say if I wanna become a basketball player and play basketball in college, grades matter and school always comes first.

They pressure me more. Talk to me more. On top of me more.

They want to see me do good and achieve my dream of going to the NBA (JG, 2017, P. 5).
Coach high expectations.

Participants on sports teams reported communications of high expectations to them from their coaches. MB reported high expectations and encouragement from her cheerleading coach. JG stated:

My coach is always talking to me about how I got to make sure I get good grades, make sure I pass the SATs because even though I can get scholarships to get into college and play basketball, I still have to get in with my grades.


Work place high expectations.

MB reported experiences of high expectations from the supervisor and customers at the local business where she works part-time.

School administrator high expectations.

MB reported experiences of high expectations from one of the assistant principals in her school who is African American.

Organizational high expectations.

All the participants reported that the various clubs, societies, and organizations to which they belonged such as National Honor Society, National Arts Honor Society, QT High School Honor Society, QT School Climate Team, On Point for College, Hillside Work Scholarship Connection and various clubs communicated to them expectations of the importance of working hard in
school, staying focused, maintaining good grades in their various school subjects, graduating high school, and going on to college. All participants visited various colleges through On Point for College, an organization which encourages students to believe in themselves and their abilities, to value their education, and to prepare for college and meaningful careers. The college tours and interactions with this organization was a motivational force for participants to excel in high school, attend college and graduate, and engage in meaningful careers. KL found his college visits to be very motivational. He stated:

They offer me chances to go to college for free. It is a great way for people to go to colleges and look so it can motivate them more. If you liked it, it will motivate you to work harder so you can get into that college (KL, 2017, p. 8).

For BB, college visits lent urgency to her desire and determination to work hard, achieve good grades, graduate from high school and begin the next phase of her life as a college freshwoman. She stated:

It’s a very good experience because you get to look at the dorms, you get to taste their food, you get to go in their classes, see the students and how college is. So different from my school! (BB, 2017, p. 11). It’s pushed me to like:


High expectations from advanced placement and college credit-bearing classes.

It is pertinent to note that inherent belief in the research participants’ ability with respect to academic achievement and excellence also emanated from staff and curricula of the various
advanced placement and college credit-bearing classes that participants were engaged in. These rigorous classes expected students to be organized, timely, focused, and committed to hard work and excellence and to be college-going.

Sub-theme: Participants’ Response – Value for Education

As illustrated above, communications about value for education were embedded in communications of high expectations that participants received from the various external sources in the three key ecological contexts explicated above: family, school, and community. Thus, statements of all the participants indicated unequivocal belief that education is valuable, inalienable, and is the key for achieving their future goals of graduating from high school, obtaining a college degree, engaging in a meaningful career, and attaining economic independence and social emancipation. Illustrating these effects, KL stated:


That’s everything! I know my education is gonna take me places. I know that if without it, I won’t get anywhere. I would be another African American that is uneducated, broke. I don’t wanna be like that. (KL, 2017, p. 4)

Succinctly explicating the inalienability of education once acquired, LA stated:

I value my education because no one can take your education away from you.” (LA, 2017, p. 3). No one can really steal knowledge from you. (LA, 2017, p. 4).

Explicating the utilitarian value of education as outweighing its onerousness, MB stated:
I don’t necessarily enjoy school. I see it as a step to get to where I need to be. So, I see it as something I need to do. (MB, 2017. P. 5).

For DS, her deep value for education emanated from a contradictory circumstance – the failure of her other family members to graduate from high school and obtain a college degree – she desired to beat the odds, to break the cycle of low educational achievement, and to socially and economically uplift her family. She stated:

I value my school, my education --- I take it seriously especially since my dad didn’t graduate from high school, my sister didn’t graduate from high school, and my brother ---I want to excel. I wanna be one of her children to have graduated from high school and with Regents Diploma. I want to go to one of the top schools. I want to go to SU [Syracuse University] and I want to get a degree in Sociology and Human Development (DS, 2017, p. 3).

Elaborating on the research participants’ clarity with respect to the critical role that education plays in shaping one’s life outcomes, and shedding light on the plausibility that such lack of clarity might be a factor undermining the positive educational outcomes of many of their peers, BB insightfully observed:

Some kids don’t really understand how important education is, I feel. They think it’s a joke. Especially in the high school. They don’t realize that after this, it’s the real world and you have to go to college and pay for school.
I don’t think they realize how serious it is, and usually, they’ll regret it later.

(BB, 2017, p. 8)

This observation begs the questions: What strategies are schools utilizing to facilitate students to understand the importance and relevance of education to their life outcomes? How effective are the strategies, if any, that schools are deploying to create relevance in curriculum, instruction, resources, and assessment for students? What are the connections between relevance and academic achievement?

**Sub-theme: Participants’ Response - Focus on Future Goals/Clear Sense of Purpose**

As illustrated above, embedded in the communications of high expectations were communications exhorting and urging the participants to set and focus on future goals of graduating from high school, obtaining a college degree, and engaging in a meaningful career.

All ten research participants indicated future goals and a desire to be successful in life. They expressed a strong desire for economic stability and social mobility. All participants expressed a desire to graduate from high school and obtain a college degree in a specific career area. All participants viewed education as the vehicle for achieving these future goals. This focus on specific future goals imbued participants with a strong focus on education as a pathway to the attainment of their future goals and determination or motivation to work hard and achieve these goals. It is worthy of note that inherent in participants’ focus on future goals was the belief that their hard work will facilitate the achievement of these goals. Illustrating these effects, for KL who indicated a desire to major in veterinary science, focus on his future as a whole lent urgency to his school work and education. He stated:
I value my education and my future. I really value my future a lot! I think about my future all the time. Any extra time I have, I’m always thinking about my future in my head. When I think about my future, it makes me more focused. It makes me more determined to get there. (KL, 2017, p. 3-4)

For LA focus on her desire to major in Veterinary Science lent relevance to her school work and education. She explained:

I have always wanted to be a veterinarian. And I have always wanted to be a good student in order to get me into those kinds of colleges that have good vet programs. And, recently, I have been accepted into Medaille College which has a very good vet program. (LA, 2017, p. 7)

For LR, who indicated that she wants to study Engineering at Syracuse University, concern about the quality of her college-entry transcripts kept her focused on her high school attendance and grades. She explained:

I wanted my grades to be high. I knew that if I missed school or I didn’t go to class – I didn’t want that going on my transcript. I didn’t want any failing thing so I stayed in class. For college, because they look at that. Because it will get me successful. It will get me more knowledge. (LR, 2017, p. 10)
For MB who indicated that she wants to major in Psychology, belief that she is destined to do great things in the future as well as a desire for personal and economic emancipation, gave her a rational for working hard at school and achieving good grades. She thus stated:

I don’t necessarily enjoy school. I see it as a step to get to where I need to be. So, I see it as something that I need to do. I want to be happy and be successful, make a difference, make something of myself, make money, take care of my family. That’s where I see myself. I see myself doing big things. (MB, 2017, p. 5)

Sub-theme: Participants’ Response – Self-push

Embedded in the communications of high expectations to participants, as illustrated above, were implicit messages of the need to push themselves, to work hard to achieve the high expectations. A critical element of this sub-theme is that it facilitated the participants to play an active role in pushing themselves to produce the academic effort that resulted in their academic success. To this effect, participants actively strived, struggled, and persevered to attend school consistently, attend and participate in their classes consistently, complete and submit assignments consistently, and cultivate good relationships with their teachers, guidance counselors, staff of school-based community agencies, and other persons who guided and supported them and provided them with opportunities that moved them towards achieving academic success. A second critical element of this sub-theme is that participants had omnipresent awareness of the need to push themselves in order to achieve academic success. They had omniconscious conviction that academic success can only be attained through focused
and strategic struggle that is continuous and consistent. They believed that good grades are earned through purposeful hard work. Thus these students evinced an innate belief in a growth mindset – that through hard work they can improve their knowledge, skills, and their grades. (Dweck, 2006). A third element of this sub-theme is that the research participants were cognizant of and highlighted a critical distinction between an external push by parents, teachers, or significant others and an internal push by oneself. Referring to this internal push as “I push myself”, they evinced a belief that the external push is important but insufficient and undependable while the internal push is imperative for the accomplishment of academic success and one’s future goals. Illustrating the purposeful mental and physical agency of self-push and the explicit awareness of its importance to the attainment of academic success, JG stated:

I put my mind to getting good grades. I put my mind to working hard.

Wake up in the morning. Go to school. Work hard to study for the test.

Make sure I get a good grade. (JG, 2017, p. 4)

Explicating motivation as a catalyst of self-push, DS stated:

I go to class every day. I don’t show up on the first day because I got dunkin donuts. But, I show up every day. I go to my classes. I work hard. Other students may skip a class. Math is one of my hardest subjects and I’m taking OCC (Onondaga Community College) Precalculus right now because I’m motivated to do better. (DS, 2017, p. 8)
Positioning her belief in struggle as a precursor for reward and as a catalyst for her self-push, SB stated:

I believe in struggle. Struggling before you see the beautiful parts of life.

Struggle. I believe you gotta struggle before you see it. You can’t expect yourself to take in a hundred before struggling to study for a test. (SB, 2017, p. 3)

For LR, self-push also entailed denial or deferment of immediate gratification in order to gain a future benefit – she stated:

I influence myself. I push myself. I work harder. So, like last year, I didn’t bring my phone to school at all. Not even once. It was home. So, it helped me to stay focused on my work. And I did all my work. Even when I did not have a class, I went to my friend’s math class and I go help there.

(LR, 2017, p. 3)

Illustrating participants’ awareness of a distinction between an external push and self-push, KL stated:

When I was too young to know education is everything, she [mother] always pushed it on me. Now that I am mature enough to know that education is everything, she doesn’t have to push it as much because I know that I need it.

(KL, 2017, p. 6)
Similarly, LA illustrated examples of external push from her parents and teachers juxtaposed with an internal push by herself of herself, stating:

I feel that my parents push me to be a strong academic student and with their help and with their permission has helped me, along with my teachers who have always been there for me and always have been flexible and always have tried to help me in some way, shape, or form. *And it’s not only them. It’s myself.*

I push myself to be a better student. And there are times when I procrastinate which is never good. I push myself. Sometimes, I say: Oh, I’ll wait till later.

But, I push myself to get it done and it’s out of the way and, ultimately, it is better for me. (LA, 2017, p. 8)

It is pertinent to note that participants are insightfully acknowledging the unreliability of an external push and, by implication, an imperative for educators to develop more effective interventions to imbue students with an internal self-push.

**Sub-theme: Participants’ Response – Internal Locus of Control.**

As illustrated above, participants’ verbatim statements with respect to self-push indicate that they internalized a high degree of internal locus of control – the belief that they are active agents in the achievement of their own academic success. This belief, as illustrated above, was embedded in the communications of high expectations received by the participants from the key
ecological contexts illustrated above: the family, school, and community. LA succinctly captured this belief, asserting:

I have always tried to be a good student in order to get me into those kinds of
Colleges that have good Vet programs and, recently, I have been accepted into
Medaille College which has a very good Vet program.” (LA, 2017, p. 7) I push
myself to be a better student. (LA, 2017, p. 8)

Echoing LA’s words and manifesting an active agency, LR stated:

I influence myself. I push myself. (LR, 2017, p. 3)

Similarly, BB stated:

In terms of school, in terms of education, if you wanna succeed, if you wanna do
something with your life, you’re gonna do it. (BB, 2017, p. 2)

Pathway: From High Expectations of Others to Academic Success

Foundational to the pathway or trajectory that catalyzed the participants to actualization of their academic success, is internalization. While external influences in the research participants’ myriad ecological contexts communicated high expectations and its various sub-themes to participants, the participants manifested active internalization of these themes. By so doing, a host of sub-factors were generated in participants which oriented them towards academic success. Participants’ statements indicate that participants’ internalization of the communications of high expectations from a multiplicity of persons, as illustrated above, imbued
participants with self-confidence, sense of self-efficacy, internal locus of control (belief that they can achieve their goals through active agency in the form of hard work and good choices), and determination to be active agents in the pathway to attaining their future goals. Illustrating these relationships, JG stated:

I believe that if you put your mind to it, you can do anything you want. If you work hard, you can do it. If you have motivation, you can do it.” (JG, 2017, p. 3)

“I put my mind to getting good grades. I put my mind to working hard. Wake up in the morning. Go to school. Work hard to study for a test. Make sure I get good grades.” (JG, 2017, p.4)

Illustrating how his belief in a bright future fuels his determination, KL stated:

The whole breakdown about me: KL. 17 years old. Senior. Trying to get into Medaille College. I have a bright future ahead of me. I’m very determined So I feel I’m going to get to where I want to in life. (KL, 2017, p. 10)

LA manifests how her internalization of her own intelligence contributes to her striving to be a good student. She thus stated:

I wouldn’t wanna brag but, I’m intelligent.” (LA, 2017, P. 3) “I have always tried to be a good student in order to get me into those kinds of colleges that have a good Vet program and, recently, I have been accepted
into Medaille College which has a very good Vet program. (LA, 2017, p. 7)

DS illustrates her belief in a strong correlation between her hard work and her grades:

I go to class every day. I show up every day. I go to my classes. I work

hard which other students may not. Other students may skip a class.

Math is one of my hardest subjects and I am taking OCC [Onondaga

Community College] Pre-calculus right now because I’m motivated to do

better. (DS, 2017. P. 8)

Participants’ verbatim statements also indicate that participants’ internalization of the value

of education oriented them towards education and academic achievement. This orientation

mediated intrinsic motivation, perseverance, and academic effort in the participants. This, in

turn, mediated their academic success. Illustrating this point, KL stated:

My GPA is 83%. It’s not the best for students. But that’s great for me because,

in my freshman year, I started off at 60% overall. My mom kept telling me.

That’s when I learned, at that age, that I have to keep my head straight. So, my

ninth grade was 68%. Tenth grade year, it rose to 70%, 75%. My junior year

was 77%. And now, it is 83%. And I give part of myself the credit for that

because I showed that I can grow. Just with some experience. That meant a lot

to me. (KL, 2017, p. 9).
It is pertinent to note that KL, here, explicitly manifests a growth mindset – the belief that intelligence or academic achievement is not inborn and static but can be developed or grown by an individual through hard work and perseverance (Dweck, 2006). Further illustrating this growth mindset, LR stated:

I have goals. I set a goal. I made a goal. I wanted to make Honor Roll because they give you a card that says: Honor Roll. So, I pushed myself. I pushed myself.

Last year, I didn’t bring my phone to school at all. Not even once. It was home.

So, it helped me to stay focused on my work. Even when I did not have a class,

I went to my friend’s Math class and I got help in there. (LR, 2017, p. 3)

Further illustrating this growth mindset, MO commented thus about his GPA:

I think it’s 84. I slacked off in Sophomore year ‘cos it was really my first year here and I didn’t really know the deal so I kind of slacked off. They brought it down and, last year, I really worked hard to kick it up and, this year, I definitely did and I’m really on track for a 90. (MO, 2017, p. 7)

Caring and Supportive Relationships

A second key theme found in this study to have mediated the academic success of the research participants is caring and supportive relationships. Three sub-themes emerging from this theme are: a) desire to make family or care givers proud b) sense of belonging, and c) clear sense of good and bad choices and their implications for academic success.
All ten research participants reported experiences of relationships and interactions with adults or peers in the course of which the participants received myriad forms of caring and support including guidance, counseling, advice, encouragement, praise, consolation, comfort, nurture, coaching, constructive discipline, tutoring, assistance, provision of learning, career or other opportunities, provision of necessities, social, emotional, academic, financial, or other support that fostered the wellbeing of participants. Such sources of nurture included parents, family members, teachers, guidance counselors, school staff, coaches, peers, and staff of school-based community organizations or agencies.

External Influence: Sources of Caring and Support

While the caring and supportive relationships embody external influences embedded in participants’ key ecological contexts – family, school, and community, the sub-themes – desire to make family or caregivers proud, sense of belonging, and clear sense of good versus bad choices and their implications - embody participants’ internalized responses to these external influences.

Parent/family caring and support.

All ten research participants unequivocally recounted numerous instances of caring and support from their parents and family members. Parents and families provided participants with stable care, support, and resources that enabled participants to thrive in school. This, in turn, generated gratitude in participants. To this effect, KL stated:

My mother. She’s a very strong, independent lady. She’s done a lot of things on her own. My father is also in my life but it’s her mainly. She carries a lot
of weight on her shoulders. She makes things happen out of nothing and I
appreciate everything she does for me. I won’t take anything she does for
me for granted. Like, I’m almost 18 and I’m trying to buy a car and she’s
helping me, teaching me all the financial stuff with that. (KL, 2017, p. 5-6).

Expressing similar gratitude, BB recounted provision, guidance, and assistance from her family:

My family. I feel very grateful to them ‘cos they’ve provided me with a lot
of stuff. They’ve taught me everything I’ve known. They’ve helped me
with everything. Even if they couldn’t at the time because of either money
problems or work problems, they still tried to somehow guide me in the
right direction. So, I feel very grateful to them. (BB, 2017, P. 4).

DS recounted her family’s cohesion, stability, encouragement, and assistance that have proved
invaluably motivational to her strong focus on her school work:

I have a very big family. We actually live in the same neighborhood.

Like across the street. My grandma lives across the street. One of my
cousins lives next to her in the same neighborhood, so we’re together all
the time. Even though most of them didn’t finish, education-wise, they
always say: “We’re proud of you”. They’re always motivating me to do
better. They always have my back. Like: “if you need something, if you
need a ride, if you need money, we’re here.” They give me money to buy books. So, they’re very involved in my education. (DS, 2017, p. 4).

Parents and families provided guidance and counseling to participants that enabled them to successfully navigate choices, distractions, and pitfalls that could have adversely affected their focus on their school work. To this effect, KL stated:

My mom, she knows that as a Black man, I’m gonna have challenges in my life. But, she tells me to keep my cool, and never to really focus on it, and to do what’s right and just focus on what I have to do and that is to keep good grades. And my mom says education is everything. Just keep away from trouble. (p. 3).

LA recounted similar guidance and advice from her parents on navigating potential and existing conflicts:

My parents give me advice about friends, my school work, my education. They advise on how to deal with issues with friends, like not to turn to violence, but just try to be more vocal and have more one-on-ones, and just not stop talking to that person, and try to be more communicating.

(LA, 2017, p. 5).
For MB, living with a single father, she turned to her grandparents for this critical navigation and she succinctly articulated the choices as: “what I wanna be and what I don’t wanna be”:

I’ve had a lot of ups and downs. Having someone guide me through that.

And I would say my grandparents, my family. I would say having someone guide me and help me decide the difference between what I wanna be and what I don’t wanna be – that was my push. (MB, 2017, p. 8).

SB recalled that in ninth grade, she became involved in an emotionally abusive relationship with a friend. She developed anxiety and depression. This caused her to lose interest in school, begin to skip school, and fail to hand in her assignments. Her parents and the school counselor counseled her through the “really dark time” till she emerged from the relationship, anxiety, and depression and refocused on school (SB, 2017, p. 9). She stated;

I feel it’s the support network that I have that is influencing my school success.

I have the parents that I’ve got. Really, it’s my support system. People that I go to when I feel down. Because there have been moments when I’ve wanted to get off school. I’ve talked to my mom. I’ve talked to friends. I see a school guidance counselor. Like my little support system there! (SB, 2017, p. 7).

BB recalled a similar situation with a broken relationship that made her lose interest in her school work. Recalling that her mother played a pivotal role in helping her overcome this obstacle and refocus on her school work, she stated:
My mom! My mom! I told my mom! She’s my best friend! I told her and
she took me to school. She helped me. When I was feeling down, she cheered
me up. She cooked me food. She helped me with my homework. Yea!

Just my mom. (BB, 2017, p. 9)

Elaborating on the critical role of such support system in mediating the mental and socio-emotional wellbeing of students and their academic success and reiterating insightfully that such support may come from various sources including mentors and books and not only from family members, MB explicated:

I would say it’s having that support system. Having someone to push you.

It doesn’t have to be a family member. Somebody like a mentor.

Some need more pushing than others. For me, that being pushed in my life,

I think, has influenced me in being successful.” (MB, 2017, p. 7).

“It’s always good to have somebody else because if it’s just you and you
are lonely and you need some reassurance and that you are doing the right
thing or even that you are doing the wrong thing. Support system can be
like a book or something positive that you can turn to and can guide you

Illustrating the friendship-monitoring quality of parent/family caring and support, MB stated:
They [family members] ask questions like: Why do you feel this person is your friend? Why do you call her your friend? Who are they?

What are their parents like? My grandmother says: “Tell me who you surround yourself with and I’ll tell you your future”. Dad says a lot about how who you are around will affect who you’re gonna be. (MB, 2017. p. 10).

Illustrating the disciplining quality of parent/family caring and support, BB recalled her mother’s reaction when she began to skip school in ninth grade:

My mom! My mom! My mom came to school! She had them call her every time I was late. She would check my grades. My consequence was that they took everything. They took my phone. They took my TV. They took everything.


Similarly but even more poignantly, TC recalled how her mother disrupted negative peer pressure that she was embroiled with in her freshman year at high school:

My friends from middle school all came with me to high school, to my ninth grade year. It was like a play around year. Like I didn’t have to do any of my work. I got caught up in the mix, not paying attention to the teacher, staying out in the hallways. My friends were all there so I thought it was cool. Some of my friends got pregnant and when my grades came in, it was bad. My mom
was like: “This is unacceptable. You’re not getting nothing for Christmas.

You gotta do better or there’s gonna be consequences”. So, basically,

I kind of like changed my whole motivation. I kind of like thought that I
gotta do better. And that’s when I started to do better in school. (TC, 2017, p. 6-7).

Indeed, accounts of several of the research participants pointed to high school freshman year as
being the most critical year of their high school experience. Fresh out of middle school,
struggling with immaturity, anxious about what high school would be like, concerned about
whether they are prepared enough to successfully engage with the work, worried about making
new friends or sustaining old friendships, bombarded by peer pressure, possessing inadequate
skills for withstanding negative peer pressure, several participants succumbed to the desire to fit
in with peers no matter the cost.

It is pertinent to note that this caring and support is not a gendered phenomenon with only
females providing this guidance and nurture. KL and JG recalled continuous communications of
advice and encouragement from their male basketball coaches. JG recalled such advice and
encouragement from his brother as well as his brother’s friend who was fatally shot later. MO
recalled such nurture from his father, and LR recalled similar caring, support, advice, and
encouragement from her male school friend as well as her male engineering teacher.

**Teacher caring and support.**

All ten participants recalled experiences of caring and support from teachers. Such nurture
assumed different forms including advice on academics, friendships, conflicts, racism, personal
matters, life, colleges, and careers; assistance with completing college applications; and provisions of learning and career opportunities. Illustrating these, KL stated:

My teachers are good. They love me. I get along great. These are some great teachers because they help me. They teach me life lessons and they help me with a lot of things that are school related. They teach me to always learn from my mistakes, see everything through, and always follow my goals. (KL, 2017, p. 6)

LA recalled her teachers’ provision with personal attention, advice, and strategies for navigating tensions:

They are pretty engaged with you. They are more one-on-one. They help you when you need help. You can stop by and speak to them. They give me advice about college essays, how to deal with conflicts with friends, what sorts of clubs to join, stuff like that to help with my academics and other stuff. (LA, 2017, p.5).

JG recalled his teachers’ approval of him, advice, and supporting him as avid spectators of his basketball games:

All my teachers like me. Most of my teachers come out to watch me play basketball when we play at home. They always tell me how I had a good game and they’re just really cool. Some of my teachers tell me to make sure I keep up the good grades and to make sure I keep on top of my grades. They tell me to stay
grounded because they want the best for me and I’m a smart kid. They say

if I wanna become a basketball player and play basketball in college, grades

matter and school always comes first. They pressure me more. Talk to me more.

On top of me more. They want to see me do good and achieve my dream of going
to the NBA. (JG, 2017, p. 5)

It is worthy of note that several participants spoke about teachers who do not care about
students and thereby engender student failure or poor academic achievement – a teacher who did
not know how to teach, had poor attendance, and simply refused to teach during the last period
and told students to do whatever they wanted (LR, 2017, p. 7); an English class that was “kind of
like a dead class. No one does anything.” (LR, 2017, p. 8); a teacher who continually ripped up
students’ assignments in front of the students when the assignments were late (TC, 2017, p. 8);
teachers who hurry on to teach succeeding topics or concepts when students had not mastered the
preceding topics or concepts taught (TC, 2017, p. 8); and teachers who have “given up on trying
to get students to act right” (SB, 2017, p. 5). Indeed, MB recalled:

I have other teachers who are very lazy or who are new, or what they’re doing,

they’re not sure. And you can tell that why they’re doing it, it is for a pay check.

(MB, 2017, p. 5-6)

Participants recount negotiating these ineffective teachers in various ways with more or less
success. For example, MB recalls failing an English class because the teacher was ineffective
and LR recalls going to a different Math class to receive more support. Participants however
recall that they enjoy most of their classes. Of course, my experience in schools has been that well-behaved students and high achieving students are usually placed in classes taught by the most effective teachers.

It is worthy of note, however, that the five key emerging themes and their appurtenant sub-themes, as illustrated in the verbatim statements of the research participants, were also facilitated by teachers whom the present research participants indicate as being effective and instrumental in participant’s academic success.

It is also worthy of note that the participants added the following statements as they expressed that their teachers approve of them or like them and assist them in various ways: “I get along great” (KL, 2017, p. 6); “I’m a pretty good kid. I don’t cause any disruptions” (LA, 2017, p. 5); “I’m not like a disruptive student” (DS, 2017, p. 5); I’m a very easy-going person” (SB, 2017, p. 5); “I just go to class and do my work. I’m not really a problem child so I don’t get really talked to” (TC, 2017, p. 4); “I think I’m a pretty likeable person” (MO, 2017, p. 6); They always say that I’m super nice” (LR, 2017, p. 7); They tell me I’m a smart kid”.

This seems to indicate participants’ perspectives that these qualities of the participants mediated such teacher approval, attention, caring, and support.

**Coach caring and support.**

JG recalled continual encouragement and advice from his basketball coach, stating:

My coach is always talking to me about how I got to make sure I get good

grades; make sure I pass the SATs because even though I can get scholarships
to get into college and play basketball, I still have to get in with good grades.
School counselor/administrator caring and support.

Several participants recalled experiences of assistance and encouragement from school counselors and administrators. Attesting to this, SB stated:

I feel it’s the support network that I have that is influencing my school success.

People that I go to when I feel down. Because there have been moments when

I’ve wanted to get off school. I’ve talked to my mom. I’ve talked to my friends.

I see a school guidance counselor. Like my little support system there! (SB, 2017, p. 7)

Recalling assistance and advice she has received from administrators, SB stated:

There is administration that do care – that offer help when it’s needed. (SB, 2017, P. 6)

DS recalled that a school administrator recommended and assisted her to become a member of the School Climate Team. This team is run by an administrator and faculty members and is charged with developing strategies and planning events and initiatives to create a robust culture and learning environment for the school.

Peer caring and support.

LR recalled experiences of caring and support from a school friend which mediated her academic success. She stated:

He actually showed me that he cared about my school work. I mean, my family,

they don’t really care. They just tell me: “Oh, you have a bad report card”.

They don’t actually do anything to help. He would come over to help me understand the work. He would actually be on me to make sure I did everything, make sure I understand everything. So I just changed.” (LR, 2017, p. 4).

They don’t actually do anything to help. He would come over to help me understand the work. He would actually be on me to make sure I did everything, make sure I understand everything. So I just changed. (LR, 2017, p. 4).

**Family friend caring and support.**

Caring and support that encouraged and motivated participants to focus on their school work also came from friends of the family. Thus, JG recalled:

One of my brother’s close friends, he was like a brother to me. His death really distracted me. Every day I see him, he’ll say: “What’s up?” He’ll ask about basketball. He’ll ask about how I’m doing in school. He’ll make sure that my grades are good and he’ll say: “Keep balling”, because that’s the way I will get out of this crazy city. (JG, 2017, p. 8)

**School-based community organization caring and support.**

Nine of the ten participants recalled advice, encouragement, and assistance provided to them by staff of school-based community organizations such as On Point for College and Hillside Work Scholarship Connection. On Point for College provided students with college visits and tours
while Hillside provided students with tutoring services, advice on academic subjects, organization, and time management as well as school supplies. DS stated:

I recently joined On Point for College. I heard that they help you out with things that you need for college. Like if you need a blanket or books. And they take us on field trips for college tours. They help you out if you need help with homework. They help you if you need help with anything. (DS, 2017, p.6).

**Sub-theme: Participants’ Response - Desire to make family or caregivers proud**

It is pertinent to note that the caring and support received by participants from their families and other caregivers illustrated above imbued participants with a deep sense of gratitude and a desire to make their family and caregivers proud and not let them down with respect to achieving academic success. This gratitude and desire acted as a motivational force that propelled participants to focus on their school work and work hard to achieve academic success. Illustrating this, LA stated:

At school, whenever I think I can’t get things done, I always think about my parents and how they have done so much for me and that my continuing on is more for them than for myself and, yea, like the thought of them helps me get through things. (LA, 2017, p. 3).

For MB this desire was fueled by knowledge that her family would support her in all circumstances: Thus she stated:
Me believing that my family always has my back helps me to stay focused or
to stay awake during class or make classes on time and get good grades

(MB, 2017, p. 5). My mindset is focused on doing what I have to do to get to
where I feel I need to be and making my family proud (MB, 2017, P.10).

For BB her parents’ sacrifices for her wellbeing fueled this desire:

My parents work really hard. They gave up a lot for me to be here. That’s why
I want to really do good. Make them proud or something. (BB, 2017, p. 2).

And for SB this desire was two-faceted – fueled for her parents and for herself:

I’m doing it for my parents really. For them. Because I wanna make them
proud and I wanna make myself proud in the long run. (SB, 2017, P. 7)

Indeed, this desire to make family/caregivers proud can act as a deterrent against negative
choices that may interfere with a student’s school success. Thus, recounting how she was able to
break away from negative experiences that were interfering with her education, MB explained:

They brought out a lot of pain and a lot of sadness and not for me necessarily
but for my family. And I seen how it affected them. And I had to make a
choice with: Do I wanna keep hurting them or do I wanna make it better?

Make them proud? I chose to make them proud. (MB, 2017, p. 8)
It is pertinent to note that nine of the ten participants expressed deep gratitude and love felt towards their parents and family members for the caring, support, sacrifice, encouragement, and guidance received from them. The participants unequivocally indicated that these elements have oriented them towards academic engagement. Eight of the participants expressly stated that they persevere with their school work and are motivated to achieve academic success because they desire to make their care givers proud and do not wish to let them down. One participant did not express this desire towards her family but expressed it towards the friend who actively supported, encouraged, and advised her with respect to her school work and oriented her toward academic achievement.

**Sub-theme: Participants’ Response - Sense of belonging**

The caring and supportive relationships that participants had with their teachers, school counselors, coaches, administrators, and staff of their school-based community organizations imbued participants with a strong sense of belonging in QT High School which helped to mediate their more successful academic outcomes.

All participants indicated that they like school, that they like many of their teachers, that many of their teachers like them, assist them, and advise them in various ways with respect to their school work, college choices and applications, career opportunities, family matters, conflict with friends, and socio-emotional needs. All participants also communicated that they belong to various school clubs and organizations, participate in various extra-curricular activities in school, have like-minded friends in school, take college credit-bearing or advanced placement subjects, and participate in college tours. Participants, therefore, manifested a sense that they are
comfortable in school, belong in school, and are accepted in school as valuable members of the school community.

Illustrating the sense of teacher approval felt by the participants as well as the reciprocal feelings of the participants towards their teachers, KL stated;

My teachers are good. They love me. I get along great. I’ve been in a lot of schools in and out of this state. These are some great teachers because they help me. They teach me life lessons and they help me with a lot of things that are school related. (KL, 2017, p. 6)

For LR, teacher approval was communicated through behavior, facial gestures, assistance, and verbally. LR thus stated:

They are nice. They help me a lot. They always say that I’m super nice.

They smile a lot. It’s like they know that I’m smart or something.

They just really care. (LR, 2017, p. 7-8)

JG’s teachers routinely watched him play basketball and commended his efforts:

All my teachers like me. Most of my teachers come out to watch me play basketball when we play at home. They always tell me how I had a good game and they’re just really cool. (JG, 2017, p. 5)
Illustrating participants’ feelings of comfort, acceptance, and bonding with their teachers generated by the assistance and advice they received from their teachers on myriad school and personal issues, LA stated:

I get a lot of advice about college applications and even advice about family and friends. They give me advice about college essays, how to deal with conflicts with friends, what sorts of clubs to join, stuff like that to help me with my academics and other stuff (LA, 2017, p. 5)

SB forged a bond with her teacher both inside and outside of school – her teacher became a personal confidante. She recounted:

I have a very strong bond with my teachers. Like I’ll text her if there’s anything going on at home. It’s just like all my teachers. But this teacher in particular. I can just talk to them about non-school related things.

(SB, 2017, p. 5)

Illustrating participants’ feelings of belonging to a vibrant school culture that represents them, engages them positively, and values their presence and contributions, LA stated:

QT is a pretty diverse school. We have a lot of cultural nights here.

There are a lot of cool classes like Technology. We also have a lot of nice college programs. (LA, 2017, p. 4)
LR, affirming that she likes school, stated:

Yea! Because my friends are here. I always get put in awesome classes.

Like my English classes. They have like the best teachers. I always like

the Math teachers. They are always awesome! (LR, 2017, p. 7) “All my

friends are in National Honor Society or Honor Roll. (LR, 2017, p. 11)

MB evincing similar positive feeling about school, stated:

I am in the National Honor Society and the Honor Society here in QT

High School and I do cheerleading. I’m captain of the cheerleading team.

(MB, 2017, p. 6)

Summing up these feelings, DS stated:

School is my safe place from home, from the outside world, from the

urban area I live in. I am here to get my education. I feel like I can be

myself here. I feel that I am accepted here. Not many people want to do

well in school and I feel that because I want to do well in school, people

will accept that about me. (DS, 2017, p. 8)

DS insightfully highlights a factor that may play a critical role in teacher approval of students
and the adjustment of students in school: a perception by teachers and school staff that a student
wants to do well in school. Does such teacher perception mediate teacher approval and
concomitant student sense of belonging and acceptance? On the contrary, does teacher perception that a student does not want to do well in school mediate teacher disapproval or inattention towards the student with concomitant overt or covert communication to the student that the student does not belong to and is not accepted in school? Such teacher inattention and disapproval would adversely impact a student’s wellbeing and academic performance. These are potential questions for future research.

Sub-theme: Participants’ Response - Clear sense of good versus bad choices and their implications

All participants indicated a clear understanding of what constitutes good or bad choices and the implications or potential impact of such choices with respect to one’s mental, emotional, social, physical or academic wellbeing, future goals, and life outcomes. It is pertinent to note, as will be illustrated below, that the caring and supportive relationships that participants had with a range of caregivers, as discussed above, facilitated this critical discernment in participants. This pivotal discernment mediated, in participants, an ability to learn from negative or positive experiences and to persevere towards a direction that aligned with participants’ future goals. This clarity proved critical when participants found themselves at confusing crossroads and facing dilemics or competing choices. It enabled participants to resist or break away from negative peer pressure and steer onto a trajectory oriented towards academic achievement. Illustrating this discerning quality, KL stated:

I always knew my right from my wrong, and I know what I need to do to get to where I wanna be at and trouble is not gonna help me to get to where I wanna be (KL, 2017, p. 1) I just know what’s right. I just know what to
do and what not to do. (KL, 2017, p. 2)

Succinctly illustrating her clarity with respect to the competing interests of negative versus positive peer pressure that often imbues this sub-theme, BB declared:

I made the right choice – either have friends, skip class, and be a failure or go to class and make friends who actually want me to do good and try to something with my life. (BB, 2017, p. 8)

This clarity enabled JG to identify and filter out distractions that sought to derail his focus on his school work:

I just keep distractions out. School comes first no matter what. Even if my friends want to hang out or I have to go to basketball, at the end of the day, school comes first ‘cos that’s what’s going to help me in the long run. (JG, 2017, p. 9)

SB described this clarity as a mindset, a conviction that supercedes potential obstacles on her trajectory to the attainment of her set goals:

I feel it’s a mindset. I feel that my mindset is different from that of anyone else. Like I know what I want. I know what I am going to school for and I’m not going to let anyone get in the way of that. (SB, 2017, p. 9)

In the same breath, these participants unequivocally attest to the critical role their caregivers have played in facilitating their discernment of good and bad choices and the implications of these for their academic outcomes. Capturing this nuance, KL stated:
My mom, she knows that, as a Black man, I’m gonna have challenges in my life. But, she tells me to keep my cool, and never to really focus on it, and to do what’s right, and just focus on what I have to do and that is to keep good grades. And my mom says education is everything. Just keep away from trouble and get good grades. (KL, 2017, p.3)

LA’s parents played a critical role in imparting this discernment to her by providing continual advice about friendships, her school work, and how to manage conflicts:

My parents give me advice about friends, my school work, my education. They advise on how to deal with issues with friends, like not turn to violence, But just try to be more vocal, have more one-on-ones, and try to be more communicating. (LA, 2017, p. 5)

BB credited her family with teaching her everything she knows and guiding her in the right direction:

My family ---they’ve taught me everything I’ve known. They’ve helped me with everything. --- They guide me in the right direction. (BB, 2017, p. 4)

JG recounted that his parents reinforced to him the importance of good grades in facilitating college acceptances and potential college basketball scholarships:

My mom and dad are a big influence on my school success. My mom and
dad, they always talk to me about how I have to get good grades because if I want to play basketball in college, I have to get good grades. Like, block all distractions out and do good. (JG, 2017, p. 7)

And SB recounted how her mom and school counselor have always pushed her to focus on and do her best in school and counseled her through bad relationships and choices (SB, 2017, p. 7-9)

TC explicating the stressful dilemma posed to the research participants by negative peer pressure, stated:

It’s like your friends want you to do one thing but you knew you had to go to class. But then, you knew if you go to class and you don’t go with your friends, my friends are gonna be mad at me and they won’t want to be my friends. But, if I don’t go to class, I won’t get my work done and my grades will be dropping.

You gotta choose which one is more important – your friends or your education.

(TC, 2017, p. 8)

With several participants, lived experiences with these competing choices facilitated critical comparisons that stripped the gloss off negative choices, revealed them as shallow and temporal, and rendered them undesirable to participants when compared to participants’ substantial and enduring future goals. Illustrating this nuance, KL recalled comparisons he drew between the deprivations of family members who were uneducated and the potential benefits of a good education:
I went through a lot of family issues before I was on track for school. But I think that that really helped me to know about how important school was because I do have family that do fall into the bad African American stereotype, you know – uneducated, broke. Me seeing that, I didn’t want that for myself. So, I do what I can to better myself to keep myself away from that. (KL, 2017, p. 8)

Further explicating this nuance, KL recounted comparisons he drew between experiences that helped him identify the kind of life he does not want for himself and yet reinforced to him the kind of life he wants for himself:

Seeing the good and the bad. I think that that’s very important. Cos if you see the bads, the negatives, you can really be like: I don’t want that for myself.

I don’t wanna be that. I don’t want people to see me like that. And if you see the goods, you can be like: I want that. I want my life to be something like that.

Yes! (KL. 2017, p. 11)

LR drew similar comparisons between the disadvantages of continually breaching school rules and the benefits of focusing on her school work:

I just know that I got a glimpse of how things can be in my freshman year and I just thought: I don’t wanna be like that! Like skipping, like always being in trouble. I just didn’t like that. I would always go to ISS [In School Suspension].
And it would be not just for a class. I would be there all day. I would talk to the wrong people. I never did drugs or drinking or stuff like that. I was just one of those crazy freshmen. I know I actually want to do something with my life. (p. 11)

For MB, both bad and good experiences became critical learning experiences that honed her choice selection and her future goals:

I’ve had a lot of ups and downs – bad experiences that have shown me that that’s not what I want to do with my life. Then, I’ve had good ones and I’ve seen good things and I’ve said: That is what I want. (MB, 2017, p. 8)

It is pertinent to note that for each of the participants, guidance and advice that occurred within caring and supportive relationships in the three key ecological contexts of family, school, and community, served a dual function with respect to this factor. They provided the definitions, guidelines, and wisdosms that imbued participants with the discernment inherent in this theme. They also provided the critical reflection in the participants’ moments of crisis that enabled participants to re-calculate and re-orient themselves towards their future goals. Illustrating this point, MB stated:

Having someone guide me through that. And I would say my grandparents, my family. Having someone guide me and help me decide the difference between what I wanna be and what I don’t wanna be – that was my push. (MB, 2017, p. 8)
LA explicating this “push” that enabled her to pull away from negative peer pressure she encountered in her freshman year which began to adversely impact her grades, stated:

My parents always told me that if someone is not going to impact you positively, then what are they doing in your life. They just want to drag you down.

They don’t want to see you successful and they just want people to be with them to be unsuccessful. [I had] my own idea of what I wanted to do with my life. (LA, 2017, p. 8)

**Pathway: From Caring and Supportive Relationships to Academic Success**

As illustrated above, caring and supportive relationships with myriad caregivers generated, in participants, a host of responses that helped to mediate their academic success. Such responses include: a sense of bonding and closeness with caring others; a sense of belonging to a vibrant and nurturing school community that represents and values them and meets their myriad needs; a sense of stability, safety, and trust in their lives; a strong sense of self-esteem, and a sense of gratitude and desire to make their families and caregivers proud by excelling in school. These effects, in turn, mediated focus, perseverance, and hard work in participants which helped to mediate their academic success. Capturing these effects, BB explicated succinctly:

I feel like every teacher I’ve had since I came to America has told me the same things. I have potential. And my mom – cos she’s been there for me every day. My family, of course. And I wanna do better for myself. I feel
that this is a really big influence on how I’m doing. People believe in you, have high expectations for you, and you don’t wanna let them down.

(BB, 2017, p. 6)

Furthermore, as illustrated above, guidance and advice that occurred within caring and supportive relationships as well as participants’ lived experiences and observations of good and bad choices and their impact on one’s wellbeing, imbued participants with critical discernment with respect to choices and their implications. This factor mediated in participants an ability to resist negative peer pressure and distractions. Participants were thus able to focus on their school work and produce the academic effort that mediated their academic success.

**Participation in Positions of Responsibility**

This is a third key theme found by this study to have helped to mediate the academic success of the research participants.

Eight of the ten research participants work part-time at local businesses. Eight of the ten participants, including one of the two participants who do not work part-time, belong to clubs, organizations, or sports teams in QT High School and engage in extra-curricular activities. Such participatory roles include cheerleading, band, drama club, basketball, volleyball, football, tennis, soccer, swimming, gymnastics, track, medical assistance program, Link Leadership, School Climate Team, National Honor Society, National Art Honor Society, On Point for College, and Hillside Work Scholarship Connection. As indicated by verbatim statements of participants, participating in these various roles prompted various responses from participants. Such participation developed, in the participants, practical skills such as responsibility, time
management, organizational skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, and decision-making and problem-solving skills. They acquired useful information for navigating school and career and had opportunities for networking. They developed emotional capital such as bonding with members of the group, sense of belonging, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and motivation.

Illustrating the role of this factor in imbuing participants with motivation and a sense of responsibility, MB stated:

To be in the National Honor Society---and being on the cheerleading team, you have to have good grades or they kick you out. Being in these clubs keep me in check and I have to make sure I know what I’m doing to stay in those things.

(MB, 2017, p. 6-7)

DS drew a connection between her school success and her transference, to her school work, of competencies she acquired in her part-time job such as responsibility, effort, attendance, and a desire to improve:

I’d say that the fact that I have a job has influenced my school success.

It teaches me responsibility and that I have duties as a person. I am a advisor at DS carwash. Being an advisor is a promotion from being a technician.

I showed the effort and want to do better. I have the responsibility of showing up for my shift. Being there, it showed me that I’m responsible for myself.

(DS, 2017, p.8).
It is pertinent to note that such a supervisory position would entail all the skills enumerated above – time management, punctuality, responsibility, communication, interpersonal, organizational, decision-making, and problem-solving skills.

Recalling the functions of the School Climate Team to which she also belongs, DS stated:

I’m part of the School Climate Team. It’s a club. It’s not like any club

because there aren’t students in it. It’s more like teachers and administrators

and it’s about how we can better the school and how we can honor students

that excel in school. Students who have a GPA of 90 or above. We might do

a high honor breakfast, or we can buy them ice cream or something. We like

to motivate students to get high grades and better. We talk about events that

happen in the school and how to better them. (DS, 2017, p. 6).

Membership of this team would also equip the DS with the skills enumerated above. Echoing MB’s insights, narrated above, on the influence of teams and clubs on students with respect to striving for academic success, DS stated:

In sports, you get to be around your team members. You have to keep up

your grades or you’ll get kicked off the team. So, having obligations is


Participants in clubs and on sports teams recounted that maintaining good grades was a criterion for acceptance into and sustained membership of such organizations. Such membership
criterion, therefore, motivated participants to work hard at school to maintain good grades. To this effect, JG credited basketball with motivating him to sustain good grades:

I think basketball has been like the main influence because if I didn’t have basketball, I don’t know if I would have the great grades that I have now because basketball has been pushing me to be a better person and always get good grades. (JG, 2017, p. 7).

Participants also served in various job internship positions. SB credited her internship with providing her with valuable real life experiences that she effectively applies to her school work:

I’m in the Medical Assistance Program. And we’re doing our internship over at the Syracuse Community Health Center. I feel that that has influenced me a lot because it gives me experience that I wouldn’t find at school like dealing with real life scenarios, dealing with real life patients. (SB, 2017, p. 6)

TC recounted work as well as leadership positions in school that have nurtured responsibility in her:

I’m in Hillside Work Scholarship Connection. I’m a Library Assistant. And I’m in Link Leadership. Link Leadership is basically where seniors go into freshman classrooms, get them comfortable with school, make sure they’re passing all their classes. So, it’s just like another Big Brother, Big Sister.
Naming Band Club as a key factor mediating his academic success, MO stated:

Definitely, I think Band because Band is my passion, wanting a career in music.

If I’m failing, I can’t be in Band. So that’s terrible! (MO, 2017, p. 8).

Illustrating the role of this factor in exposing participants to role models that imbue participants with motivation and high expectations for themselves, KL recalled a visit to Medaille College through On Point for College, an organization that he belongs to and the effect of the visit on him:

I want to major in Veterinary Technology and I want to get my doctorate in it.

They have a great veterinary program and I just love how a section of the school is just animals! As I was on the trip, going through the veterinary area – Animal Sciences – I saw a lady, she was in there, sitting with the cats, doing her homework, and she was rubbing and playing with the cats, and I loved it! I want to be around that kind of environment! (KL, 2017, p. 8).

Echoing a similar experience, LR recalled her summer job at the Syracuse University Bookstore:

I want to go to SU because it’s close. And when I worked there, all the kids I worked with went there. I had a friend there and she was studying something crazy smart like Biomedical Engineering. She was saying how good a school
it is and how I can personally go there. (LR, 2017, p. 9)

Similarly, BB recalled her college visits with On Point for College:

It’s a really good experience because you get to look at the dorms. You get to taste their food. You get to go in their classes – see the students and how the college is. So different from my school. It’s pushed me to like: GET OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL! I feel like I go to school with kids! (BB, 2017, p. 12).

Such experiences also imparted to participants cultural capital in the form of wisdom and useful information that would help them to navigate college and career choices. Thus, LR shared conversations she had with students she met while working at the Syracuse University Bookstore:

Even if it’s not in your price range, there are easier ways to go there. Like, you could go part-time or go to OCC [Onondaga Community College] for two years and then go there. (LR, 2017, p. 9)

Illustrating the role of this factor in imbuing students with a sense of belonging and bonding with the group, DS stated:

When you are on a team, you feel neat. You feel like a family ‘cos you are so close to them. You see them every day. And you work together so you influence each other (DS, 2017, p. 9).
Illustrating the role of this factor in imbuing participants with self-esteem, DS stated:

Being on the School Climate Team influences me because I was told about

it by an administrator. It makes me feel neat because it wasn’t even generally

meant for students. So, to have my impact on the Climate Team because they

want to see what a student has to say about that is very special to me. (DS, 2017, p. 9)

Participating in these various roles also served to keep students busy with meaningful pursuits

and away from idleness and negative activities that would portend the potential of impeding

participants’ mental, physical, and socio-emotional wellbeing and academic success. Illustrating

this nuance, KL stated:

The city I grew up in was terrible. Especially the neighborhood. I’ve moved

away from it. But I grew up in a lot of gang-related neighborhoods. Sports

and my job kept me from that. I kept myself focused. Sports and my job kept

me focused. They kept me away from the streets, kept me more in school. So,

I stayed in school more. (KL, 2017, p. 5)

**Pathway: From Participating in Positions of Responsibility to Academic Success**

As illustrated above by the verbatim statements of participants, participating or serving in

various roles of responsibility cultivated in the participants a host of practical skills and

emotional qualities, as explicated above, which imbued the participants with competence, focus,
and motivation. These latter generated effort and perseverance in the participants which helped to mediate their academic success.

**Positive Racial Socialization and Racial Identity**

This is a fourth key theme found by this study to have assisted in mediating the academic success of the research participants. This external influence was embedded in participants’ three key ecological contexts – family, school, and community. A novel and unique component of the community in which this external influence was also embedded, as will be illustrated below, is social media. It is pertinent to note that a positive racial identity was socialized into the participants through racial socialization. Racial socialization consists of messages, statements, or communications from parents, family members, teachers or other adults or sources to the research participants about race, racial discrimination, how to respond to racial discrimination, or other issues relating to race. Six of the ten participants stated that they have received or experienced racial socialization communications. These communications, while acknowledging the reality of racism and racial discrimination, encouraged participants to react positively to such racialized micro-aggressions, to feel positively towards other races, and to focus on the critical task of striving for academic excellence and achievement of participants’ future goals. Such positive racial socialization messages were received by participants from a range of sources including parents, family members, teachers, and social media.

**External Influence: Sources of Positive Racial Socialization**

**Parent/family member racial socialization.**
Seven students reported this form of racial socialization. KL recounted his mother’s advice on how to deal with racism – to refrain from reacting rashly, to stay calm, and focus instead on his school work and getting a good education:

My mom, she knows that as a Black man, I’m gonna have challenges in my life.

But she tells me to keep my cool and never to really focus on it and to do what’s right and just focus on what I have to do and that is to keep good grades. And my mom says education is everything. (KL, 2017, p. 3)

SB, MO, and TC recounting incidents of racial discrimination and micro-aggressions, stated that their parents or grandparents urged them to ignore these hostilities, to refrain from responding to or escalating them, and to focus on persevering with their school work and future goals. SB recounted an incident in a store when her parents were speaking in Spanish and a customer yelled at them: “Go back to your country!” Recounting her rage at that moment and her parents’ intervention, SB stated:

My parents told me that they’re just a miserable person. If they gotta take time out of their day to talk about your race, then they’re just miserable and they have nothing else to do with their lives. They’re not happy with themselves.

My parents said just to ignore it. Just don’t pay no mind to it. I’ve learned to just walk away. I’ve learned throughout the years that if you feed into their energy or their vibe or whatever they have going on, that will just fire them up
so you just gotta treat them with silence. (SB, 2017, p. 2)

Reiterating the self-destructive effect of anger as a response to racial discrimination and micro-aggression, MB explicated:

My grandmother says the way we were treated can never be forgotten and that’s why a lot of Blacks have hate and that’s why they can’t come to peace with that. So we just have to accept the fact that that’s basically how it is.

You don’t have to necessarily agree with it because you know what’s wrong. Don’t fight back. Don’t react violently. Just keep doing what you’re supposed to do (MB, 2017, P. 2-3)

**Teacher racial socialization.**

Two students reported this form of racial socialization. KL stated:

My teachers tell me the same thing as my mother said! That I am classified as a Black male and things will be harder for me. I just have to work harder than others. (KL, 2017, P. 7)

JG recounted conversations with his teacher on race, discrimination, and identity:

My sociology teacher. We talk a lot about race and racial socialization in that class. How colored people get treated and how Hispanics and different people get treated. How even some races want to be a different race.
**Social media racial socialization.**

One student reported this form of racial socialization. JG recounted how a video posted on social media has taught him strategies for dealing with daily racial micro-aggressions:

I’ve seen a video on social media about a good way to deal with racial discrimination and racial slurs. I’ve learned that the best way is to just ignore it because, at the end of the day, you got to be happy. You can’t just let that deter you. At the end of the day, you got to be proud of who you are and not let no one take that away from you. (JG, 2017, p. 2)

**Feelings towards other races.**

All participants indicated positive feelings towards other races, reported that they have friends from other races, and indicated that all races are equal. LR who is African American stated:

My best friend is Guatemalan. My other best friend, she’s mixed. And then, I have friends that are White. My really close friend, she’s Mexican. I have my tennis friends, some of them are Asian. (LR, 2017, p. 2)

And JG expressed feelings that all races have intrinsic similarities:

I have friends of every race. I feel they are the same. I don’t feel they are different than I am. (JG, 2017, p. 2)
Sub-theme: Participants’ Response - Positive Racial/Cultural Identity

This sub-theme which was found to have assisted in mediating the academic success of the participants in the present study was found to have been cultivated in participants through the external influence of racial socialization. Indeed, positive racial/cultural identity embodies participants’ internalization of the racial socialization embedded in four key ecological contexts in which they interacted – family, school, community, and the novel context of social media. Positive racial/cultural identity is comprised of four critical components: a) participants’ positive sense of belonging to or having pride in a racial or cultural group b) participants’ awareness of negative stereotypes of their race or ethnic group or discriminatory or derogatory attitudes or behavior towards their race or self c) participants’ positive responses to racial discrimination, and d) participants’ positive feelings towards other races. With these four critical components cultivated into participants’ consciousness, the participants developed self-pride, self-esteem, a positive attitude, and a desire to represent their races positively and uplift their races by working hard at school and achieving academic success. Illustrating racial pride, an awareness of racism, and a desire to uplift one’s race through academic achievement, KL stated:

I am African American, Native American, and I have some Hispanic origin.

I am proud of my race because though there are other stereotypes based on my being a Black man – I am supposed to be lazy, either in jail or dead – but I beat the stereotypes. I have good grades in school, I’m on my way to college, and I’m very successful right now and I’m proud. (KL, 2017, p. 1)

KL continued:
We have a great history! We have a lot of bad things that happened. But we have a lot of great history. We have a lot of people that stood up for what they believed in, that achieved great success until this day, and I look back on that and I’m proud of it. But, it is my job to keep it going. I feel like I can benefit it. (KL. 2017, p. 3)

Echoing similar sentiments of pride and empowerment, MB stated about African Americans:

It means strength, like in empowerment, because of our past. The African American past has been them fighting a lot. Strength, bravery, a lot of pain, definitely victory. But I think there will always be a lot of strength.”

(MB, 2017, p. 1) “Oh yes! I’m proud of it! Because of what it stands for:

Strength. And I want to continue that legacy of strength! (MB, 2017, p. 2)

LA, declaring unequivocally her feelings of pride about her race and comfort with her uniqueness, stated:

My race is Hispanic or Latino. I don’t hide my race. I don’t hide our culture, our practices. I don’t hide our dishes, and I am proud of it because it makes you unique. Your race makes you unique and different from everyone else. (LA, 2017, p. 1)

Echoing similar sentiments of pride in her identity, BB declared:
I am Cuban. I was born in Cuba. I am very, very proud of my identity!

I love it! I love identifying with another country! I love Cuba! I love my
Culture! I love the music! I love my language! I love how happy we are
all the time even though we don’t have a lot. I’m very proud of being from
Cuba! (BB, 2017, p. 1)

Yet, clearly recognizing the systemic racism against her race, LA stated:

Too many people are discriminating against it and too many try to hide
because they are scared of what could potentially happen to them and I
want to be proud of mine to show people that being Hispanic is good for
you and nothing to be ashamed of. In today’s society, being Hispanic has
bad stereotypes. (LA, 2017, p. 2)

Buttressing this awareness of racism in society and pride in his race despite this obstacle, JG explicated:

I’m African American. African Americans went through hard times for
a long time. We still go through hard times with cops and stuff. African
Americans go through battles every day. They’re discriminated against
every day. It first started with slavery and they are discriminated against
today. But, we are no different than any other race. I’m proud of being an
African American I wouldn’t change for no one. Being African American is a good thing! (JG, 2017, P. 1)

Despite participants’ awareness of racism, the participants recounted positive responses to encountered racial discrimination, expressed positive feelings towards other races, and did not manifest debilitating anger that could impair their mental health and academic outcomes. Recounting positive responses to racial discrimination or daily racist micro-aggressions, JG stated:

I don’t let the discrimination or the dirty looks because of my color get to me. I’m proud of it since I was born (JG, 2017, P.1) I’ve learned that the best way is to just ignore it because, at the end of the day, you got to be happy, you can’t just let that deter you. At the end of the day, you got to be proud of who you are and not let no one take that away from you.

(JG, 2017, P. 2)

Shedding further light on this positive response, SB insightfully explained the rationale for her strategy of silencing daily racial micro-aggressions with silence:

I’ve learned to just walk away. I’ve learned throughout the years that if you feed into their energy or their vibe or whatever they have going on, that will just fire them up, so you just gotta treat them with silence.

(SB, 2017, p. 2)
TC similarly explicated her strategy of dealing with racial micro-aggressions by taking the high road:

Basically, you’re sometimes gonna get thrown racial sayings and you’re gonna just like go, not like feed back into it but be the bigger person and just ignore it. (TC, 2017, p. 2).

Expressing the critical need to persevere with focus on and pursuit of one’s goals despite potential or perceived racism or daily racist micro-aggressions, MO stated:

If something bad happens in my life, I can’t really just say that that’s because I’m mixed. I have to persevere through life even though I might not have the same opportunities as everyone. (MO, 2017, p. 1)

Finally, participants expressed positive feelings towards other races. LR, who is African American, stated:

My best friend is Guatemalan. My other best friend, she’s mixed. And then, I have friends that are White. My really close friend, she’s Mexican.

I have tennis friends. Some of them are Asian (LR, 2017, p.2)

MO who is biracial stated:

I feel that [all races] are equal. I’m not against anyone. Anyone can do anything!

So! (MO, 2017, p. 3)
And JG expressed his belief that all races have similar capabilities and potential for achievement:

I have friends of every race. I feel they are the same. I don’t feel they are different than I am. They can do what I can do and I can do what they can do. They’re no different! (JG, 2017, p. 2)

Pathway: From Positive Racial Socialization and Positive Racial/Cultural Identity to Academic Success

Enhancing participants’ racial identity, the positive racial socialization experienced by the research participants cultivated in them a positive attitude and positive response towards racial discrimination and the daily micro-aggressions in their racialized environment. This socialization also cultivated in them positive feelings towards other races. One may postulate that these two effects, in turn, seem to have nurtured in students an absence of racial hatred, resentment, and concomitant self-destructive behavior or reaction that could impede participants’ focus on their school work. It is pertinent to note that while four of the participants did not recall any specific or overt racial socialization, in the absence of negative racial socialization experiences, it is unsurprising that participants were able to develop positive feelings towards other races which thus became part of their arsenal of positive attitude that helped to facilitate their academic success.

Participant’s statements also indicate that a positive racial/cultural identity in the participants mediated, in the participants, a host of qualities such as self-pride, self-esteem/self-confidence, positive attitude and a desire to uplift one’s race through academic achievement. These qualities
generated motivation and academic effort in the participants which, in turn, mediated academic success. Illustrating this trajectory, KL stated:

I feel that if you accept yourself more and who you are, if you are both confident, confidence will contribute to a bit of everything. It will contribute to better friendships, career path of school, it will really contribute to help you do anything you put your mind to. You get a good feeling about yourself.

You’re more out there. This is who I am and you accept it. It’s a great feeling!

(KL, 2017, p. 10)

Elaborating upon this sentiment, LA explicated a correlation between racial pride, self-pride/confidence, positive attitude, and academic success:

Being proud of your race makes you proud of yourself and being proud of yourself can give you a positive outlook on everything and potentially help in your academic success and give you more insight into things. (LA, 2017, p.

Positive Belief System

This fifth theme was found by this study to have assisted in mediating the academic success of the participants. All the research participants manifested resilience-building beliefs that helped them to maintain a positive attitude in the face of challenges or obstacles and believe that persistent, difficult situations will resolve themselves favorably. These beliefs, therefore, prevented the participants from succumbing to stress, anxiety, and destructive mental or
emotional states or behavior, imbued them with patience and perseverance, and allowed them to focus on future goals and to persevere with their academic engagements. This, in turn, mediated their academic achievement as illustrated below.

**Religious Beliefs**

**Christian: Belief in resolution of problems by a Christian God.**

Six participants reported that they believed that problems, challenges, or obstacles they encounter in their personal lives or with friends or school work will be resolved by a Christian God who will work things out in accordance with his perfect plan for them. To this effect, KL stated:

> I’m a Christian and I believe that God does everything for a reason. If something good or something bad happens, I always know it’s for a reason.

> And I don’t think about it. I just go about other stuff and I know that somehow it’s gonna be for a reason. (KL, 2017. P. 4)

LA expressed a belief in God’s plan for her and rightful resolution of any problem she may encounter. This helped her to persevere through difficult circumstances:

> I believe that there is a positive in everything, no matter how difficult things may be and I believe that things do go right in the end. No matter how bad things may seem that they are. My parents are Christian and I just follow that, in their footsteps. And I do believe in God. I believe that God has a
plan for everyone. (LA, 2017, p. 3)

MB expressed a similar attitude of persevering through tests because she knows that she will receive divine assistance in every circumstance:

I do believe in God. I was raised in the church. I believe that He is the base of everything. He’s what makes certain things to happen.”

(MB, 2017, p. 4). “Believing that Jesus is always here, helps me that I pass this test. (MB 2017, p. 5)

**Buddhist/Hindu: Belief in vindication or retribution by karma.**

Two participants expressed that they refrain from responding in kind or negatively to injustices, inequities, or hostilities they encounter in their school, community, or personal lives because they believe in karma and that karma will work retribution or vindication in their favor. To this effect, BB stated:

I believe in karma. Karma really does come back for you. What goes around comes around. So what you do will some way, somehow, sometime in your life, come back for you. Something like that will happen to you.

You’ll get your Karma for it. The good and the bad. When people do certain stuff to me, whether it’s good or bad, I react differently because I know that their Karma is going to get them. So, I don’t have to do anything. I have
learned that over the years ‘cos I used to be spiteful and take revenge in my
own hands. It makes me wanna do good to people so I can get good back.
I just know that they don’t have to do anything good for me because Karma
has me. Something good will come along the way. (BB. 2017, p. 3)

Philosophical Beliefs

Belief that failure or mistake is a learning opportunity.

Two participants expressed beliefs that failure or mistakes they encounter in their lives are
learning opportunities that will nurture their inner strengths and wisdom and mediate their future
competence and success. To this effect, KL stated:

I feel like if I really work hard at something and I fail at it, it is for a reason.

So, if I fail, I learned something and I feel like God put me through that so I
can be stronger and I’ll know what to do and how to deal with it next time.

(KL, 2017, p. 4)

Subscribing to a similar belief, MB stated reiterated the importance of moving on from mistakes
and freeing oneself from the burden of dwelling on them:

When you make a mistake, learn from it. Don’t constantly tear yourself
up about it. You learn from it and you move on. (MB, 2017, p. 4)
One may postulate that these beliefs imbued participants with resilience and perseverance in the face of failure or mistakes and prevented them from succumbing to despair and hopelessness that could inevitably result in dropping out of school.

**Belief that hard work brings rewards.**

All participants unequivocally stated and evinced the belief that their hard work will reward them with the attainment of academic success and their future goals.

LR reiterated the importance of sustained and consistent hard work:

> I feel like if you continue to work hard, you’re gonna get to where you wanna go. But, if you start slacking or if you start missing school or if you stop caring, you will miss a lot of good stuff in the future. (LR, 2017, p. 11)

JG articulated a belief that an intentional and strategic mindset focused on achieving a goal, coupled with hard work, does achieve goals.

> I believe that if you put your mind to it, you can do anything you want.

> If you work hard, you can do it. (JG, 2017, p. 3)

SB reiterated a commitment to hard work as a precursor to reaping benefits:

> I believe in struggle. Struggling before you see the beautiful parts of life.

> Struggle. You can’t expect yourself to take in a hundred before struggling to study for a test. Without struggle, you won’t see the beautiful outcomes.
Belief in the pointlessness of worry (no-stress attitude).

MO evinced an attitude that intentionally refused to dwell on daily micro-aggressions and stressful incidents but, rather, focused on persevering with school work and moving ahead. He stated:

People stress a lot about school. I’ve had a lot of stress but it’s nothing I can really control so I understand that I shouldn’t really stress about it. If I have a bunch of tests coming up, I’m gonna have to do them so there’s no point in stressing about them. I keep chill and I go along with it. Little things that affect someone and cause someone to be frustrated, I’m not really affected by it. I don’t take anything to heart. I don’t hold grudges or anything. I kind of keep going. Little things, I just brush it off. (MO, 2017, p. 4)

Pathway: From positive belief system to academic success.

As explicated above, the research participants’ myriad resilience-building beliefs enabled them to maintain positive attitude and behavior in the face of challenges and obstacles, seeing these challenges as learning opportunities that will help them grow stronger, wiser, and more competent. They were, thus able to focus on their future goals, persevere with their academic engagements, and achieve academic success.
Relationship between the Emerging Themes/Sub-themes

An analysis of the verbatim statements of the research participants, as presented in this chapter, reveals both explicitly and implicitly that the different emerging themes or factors did not operate in isolation to mediate the academic success of the research participants. On the contrary, the factors operated closely together in interlocking chains to mediate positive outcomes for the participants. These interlocking relationships are presented below.

Firstly, the interview data generated by this research study indicates that all the emerging factors which have been found to mediate the academic success of the research participants were cultivated or mediated within the context of caring and supportive relationships in which the research participants were immersed. These relationships were with parents, family members, teachers, school administrators, staff of school-based community agencies, coaches, and peers. Thus the caring and supportive relationships mediated the constellation of divergent factors and sub-factors which converged in a dynamic synergy that mediated second and third tier effects that, in turn, mediated the academic success of the research participants. The generated second and third tier effects critical to the academic success of the participants include positive attitude, positive behavior, positive feelings towards one’s own and other races, self-pride, self-esteem, sense of self-efficacy, sense of stability, safety and trust, motivation, ability to resist negative peer pressure, focus, patience, resourcefulness, perseverance, and academic effort.

Secondly, the interview data indicates that communications of high expectations to the research participants by parents, family members, family friends, teachers, coaches, guidance counselors, peers, and staff of school-based community organizations and workplace supervisors and customers, as presented in this chapter, mediated, in the research participants, effects such as
value for education and academic identity, focus on future goals, internal locus of control, self-push, and participation in positions of responsibility. These effects were explicitly as well as implicitly embedded in the communications of high expectations. They were communicated to the participants as what they possessed the ability to do and needed to do in order to attain the high expectations. Illustrating this, LA recounted her parents’ urging to enroll in college credit-bearing courses and further her education beyond high school as a means to economic upliftment:

They [parents] say that I should continue to further my education outside of high school. They tell me that it’s good that I’m in college courses, that it helps with getting into better colleges, and it helps your resume build, and it helps you get ahead (LA, 2017, p. 5)

JG recounted his parents’ encouragement to work hard, persevere with his school work, and obtain a college degree:

They believe I should go to college, get a degree in whatever I choose to study, and never give up even when school gets hard and you always have to push yourself – like block out all distractions (JG, 2017, p. 7).

Thirdly, emerging factors/sub-factors such as positive belief system, positive racial/cultural identity, and positive racial socialization mediated, in the research participants, a well of positive attitude in the face of challenges, obstacles, and micro-aggressions that was critical to their ability to focus on and persevere with their school work, extra-curricular activities, and future
goals and, thereby, produce the academic effort that mediated their school success. Illustrating these continuum of effects, LA drew a connecting thread between racial pride, self-pride, positive outlook, and academic success:

   Being proud of your race makes you proud of yourself and being proud of yourself can give you a positive outlook on everything and potentially help in your academic success and give you more insight into other things  (LA, 2017, p. 2).

KL recounted the critical role his mother played in arming him with positive strategies and positive perspective for countering daily racist micro-aggressions:

   My mom, she knows that as a Black man I’m gonna have challenges in my life, but she tells me to keep my cool and never to really focus on it and to do what’s right and just focus on what I have to do and that is to keep good grades. And my mom says education is everything  (KL, 2017, p. 3).

KL explicated a positive belief system that facilitates him to refrain from dwelling on problems and, thereby, frees him to focus on important goals:

   I believe that God does everything for a reason. If something good or something bad happens, I always know it’s for a reason. And, I don’t think about it. I just go about other stuff, and I know that somehow it’s gonna be for a reason”  (KL, 2017, p. 4).

And LA evinced a positive perspective that facilitates her to persevere through difficult circumstances:
I believe that there is a positive in everything, no matter how difficult things may be, and I believe that things do go right in the end no matter how bad things may seem that they are (LA, 2017, p. 3).

Fourthly, the interview data indicates that participants’ sense of internal locus of control propelled them to push themselves (self-push) and to seek out and participate in various positions of responsibility in and outside their school as well as to take advantage of myriad learning and college and career opportunities as they assumed active agency in mediating their academic success. Illustrating this, LA stated:

I have always tried to be a good student in order to try to get me into those kinds of colleges that have good vet programs (LA, 2017, p. 7). “I push myself to be a better student. And there are times when I procrastinate which is never good. I push myself---and, ultimately, this is better for me (LA, 2017, p. 8).

JG drew a connection between his good grades and an intentional mindset focused on achieving good grades:

I put my mind to getting good grades. I put my mind to working hard. Wake up in the morning. Go to school. Work hard to study for the test. Make sure I get a good grade (JG, 2017, p. 4).

Fifthly, the participants’ positive racial identity which was embedded with an academic identity mediated in them a value for education as a key to social and economic emancipation, a
focus on their future goals, internal locus of control, and added to their arsenal of positive attitude and a positive belief system. In tandem with this, KL stated:

We have a great history! We have a lot of bad things that happened. But we have a lot of great history. We have a lot of people that stood up for what they believed in, that achieved great success until this day and I look back on that and I’m proud of it. But it is my job to keep it going.--- I’m a portion of it and I feel I can benefit it (KL, 2017, p. 3).

Sixthly, positive racial socialization helped to mediate a positive racial/cultural identity – an identity that is both proud of one’s race and able to navigate racism with a positive attitude that yields positive outcomes. Illustrating this, KL recounted positive racial socialization from his mother and his teachers that helped to focus him more on his school work:

My teachers tell me the same thing as my mother said! That I am classified as a Black male and things will be harder for me. I just have to work harder than others (KL, 2017, p. 7).

JG recounted learning strategies for dealing with racial micro-aggressions, from a social media video:

I’ve seen a video on social media about a good way to deal with racial discrimination and racial slurs. I’ve learned that the best way is to just ignore it because, at the end of the day, you got to be happy. You can’t
just let that deter you. At the end of the day, you got to be proud of who
you are and not let no one take that away from you (JG, 2017, p. 2).

Seventhly, the desire to make family and significant others proud helped mediate, in participants, value for education, focus on future goals, and self-push. Thus, participants strived to push themselves to do well in school, in college, in future careers, and in life in order to fulfill the high expectations and dreams of their parents for them and to reward their caregivers for the selfless caring and support provided to the participants. Illustrating this, LA stated:

Whenever I think I can’t get things done, I always think about my parents
and how they have done so much for me and that me continuing is more for
them than for myself and the thought of them helps me to get through things
(LA, 2017, p. 3).

Echoing similar sentiments about working hard to attain her future goals in order to make her family proud, MB stated:

My mindset is focused on doing what I have to do to get to where I feel I need
to be and learning as I go, and making my family proud. That’s what I say every day –
Make my family proud. They are a priority in my life (MB, 2017, p. 10).

And for BB, sacrifices made by her parents for her wellbeing fueled her desire to do well in school and in life in order to make her parents proud:

They work really hard. They gave up a lot for me to be here. That’s why I want
to really do good. Make them proud (BB, 2017, p. 2).

Further, the clubs, organizations, National Honor Society, Honor Roll, and sports teams that the research participants engaged with at school – thus participating in positions of responsibility – had high expectations of participants, provided the participants with caring and support, required the participants to work hard at school and maintain proficient grades, and thus mediated participants’ sense of belonging, value for education, academic effort, internal locus of control, self-push, and a clear sense of good versus bad choices and their implications (MO, 2017).

Finally, value for education/academic identity mediated motivation and self-push in participants. Thus, participants were motivated to push themselves to produce the academic effort that mediated their academic success. Illustrating this, LA stated:

I have always tried to be a good student in order to get me into those kinds of college that have good vet programs --- I push myself to be a better student (LA, 2017, p. 8).

LR recounted intentionally and consistently pushing herself to attain her set goals:

I have goals. Last year, I set a goal. I wanted to make Honor Roll. They give you a card that says Honor Roll! So, I pushed myself. I pushed myself in order to get that card. I made the goal! (LR, 2017, p. 3).

In summary, this study deconstructed a reciprocal interaction between the research participants and their ecological contexts (family, school, community and social media) that oriented the research participants towards academic success. Communications of high
expectations made to participants from their ecological contexts facilitated an active, internalized response from the participants that manifested as a value for education, focus on future goals and clear sense of purpose, an internal locus of control, and an intentional and strategic pushing of themselves to attain their set goals. The caring and support received by the research participants from their ecological contexts, facilitated in them an active, internalized response which manifested as a desire to make their families or caregivers proud by working hard at school and obtaining good grades as well as college acceptances, a sense of belonging, and a clear sense of good and bad choices and the critical implications of such choices. And the positive racial socialization that participants received from their ecological contexts facilitated in them a similar active, internalized response that imbued them with a positive racial/cultural identity. It is also pertinent to note that these five key themes and their sub-themes were facilitated or nurtured within caring and supportive relationships and worked together to imbue the research participants with dispositions, perspectives, motivations, and behavior that oriented them towards a trajectory of academic success.
CHAPTER 5

Summary of Findings, Implications, Limitations of Study, and Areas for Future Research

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to uncover and understand the factors that this study’s sample of African American and Latino/a low income students believe to mediate their academic success, the contexts and conditions that nurture these factors, and processes through which these factors mediate their academic success. Utilizing a phenomenological theoretical orientation, this study seeks to distill and deconstruct these factors through a qualitative examination of the lived experiences of a sampling of such students who are achieving academic success in an urban high school. Chapter four a) presented five emerging factors with appurtenant sub-factors that the students believe have mediated their academic success, derived from analyses of the verbatim statements of the research participants and b) examined the relationships between the emerging factors or themes. This present chapter a) examines and discusses the emerging factors or themes within the context of empirical research literature findings pertinent to the factors, b) discusses emerging insights or implications of this study and c) discusses limitations of this study and makes recommendations with respect to areas for future research studies.

Summary of Findings: Links between Emerging Factors or Themes and Empirical Research Literature Findings

All of the emerging factors and sub-factors uncovered by the present study as mediating the academic success of African American and Latino/a low income students, with the exception of three sub-factors, have been similarly found by empirical research literature to be mediating
factors of the academic success of low-income, minority students. The three exceptions (sub-factors) are: desire to make family/caregivers proud, clear sense of good versus bad choices and their implications, and self-push. This section summarizes these findings and highlights the links between the findings of empirical research literature and the findings of the present study with respect to these factors and sub-factors.

**High Expectations**

High expectations has been defined in various yet similar ways by empirical research scholars. Benard (1991) defines this factor as the act of expecting or believing that a child or adolescent will achieve high behavioral or academic goals. He refers to this factor as an orientation toward high achievement; an aspiration to achieve high educational goals (p. 6), and as “an academic emphasis” (p. 14). Garmezy (1991) defines it as setting high standards and expecting children to live up to them (p. 423). Wang (1997) defines it as “expressing high expectations for academic success” (p. 4). Mills (1990, cited in Benard, 1991, p. 9) explicates parental high expectations as an attitude that “sees clearly the potential for maturity, commonsense, for learning and wellbeing in their children”. Parental high expectations may or may not be realistic or based on concrete evidence of a child’s actual or proven capabilities. To this effect, Yamamoto and Holloway (2010) distinguished between parent expectations and parental aspirations. They defined parental expectations as “realistic beliefs or judgments that parents have about their children’s future achievement as reflected in course grades, highest level of school attained, or college attendance” (p. 191). On the contrary, they defined parental aspirations as “desires, wishes, or goals that parents have formed regarding their children’s future attainment” (p. 191).
The present study found that high expectations and aspirations were deeply embedded in the lived experiences of all ten participants. High expectations can emanate from parents, school staff, and, indeed, the students themselves. O’Neill (1991, cited in Benard, 1991, p. 15) defined this factor as “the expectation among staff, parents, and the students themselves that they are capable of high achievement”. Similarly, the present study found that the research participants experienced high expectations from parents, teachers, school administrators and guidance counselors, and also from novel sources such as family members, family friends, coaches, staff of school-based community agencies, workplace supervisor, workplace customers, and peers. This suggests that high expectations can emanate from anyone and mediate positive outcomes in recipients.

Benard (1991) asserted that the establishment of college-level course curriculum in schools comprises a context and climate of high expectations that communicates to students that they are expected and believed to be able to excel in college-level rigorous subjects and attend college successfully. He also asserted that such curricula have been found to reduce academic failure among students and increase the number of students who graduate from high schools and enroll in colleges (p. 14-15). It is pertinent to note that this present study found that all ten participants have undertaken college-level courses during high school. Yamamoto and Holloway (2010) found that the child’s internalization of the parent’s valuation of achievement increases the child’s motivation and consequent striving to achieve the parental expectations or aspirations. Thus, the authors implicate that in order to influence academic achievement, high expectations or aspirations must first be communicated to the child or adolescent and must next be internalized or believed by the child or adolescent. Benard (1991) affirms these findings, asserting:

What appears to be the dynamic here is the internalization of high expectations
for oneself. When the message one consistently hears from family members, from teachers, from significant others in one’s environment is, “You are a bright and capable person”, one naturally sees oneself as a bright and capable person, a person with that resilient trait, a sense of purpose and a bright future. (p. 5).

Concurring with the above findings, Reed, McMillan, and McBee (1995) found that:

Parent expectations have to be communicated to their children and accepted by them in order for them to have an effect in children’s internal standards and self-perceptions --- [as well as] children’s perceptions of academic self-efficacy.”

(p. 210)

Benard (1991) unequivocally concluded:

From research in social and educational psychology, it is clear that adult expectations influence in a major – and all too negative – way the subsequent thoughts and behavior of children. (p. 20)

A perusal of the verbatim statements of the ten research participants as cited in chapter four of this study, evinces clearly that all ten participants deeply internalized the high expectations they experienced, they unequivocally believed themselves to be smart and capable of high achievement. Thus the participants spoke of having a bright future ahead (KL, p. 10); being intelligent and smart (LA, p. 7); being on Honor Roll and desiring to go to Syracuse University to study engineering (LR, p. 1); seeing oneself doing big things in the future (MB, p. 5); desiring
to become more, learn more and go to a good college (BB, p. 2); believing that they can do whatever they put their minds to do (JG, p. 3); desiring to graduate from high school with an Advanced Regents Diploma (DS, p. 2); knowing what they want, knowing what they are in school for, and not allowing anyone to get in the way of that goal (SB, p. 9); focusing on getting a good education (MO, p. 3); being bright and intelligent (TC, p. 2).

Thus, the present study found that high expectations were communicated to participants by various sources, were internalized by the participants, imbued participants with a sense of self-efficacy and internal locus of control, nurtured in them a focus on future goals and a clear sense of purpose, and motivated them to work hard and push themselves to achieve academic success.

All ten participants in the present study were found to have a clear and unwavering focus on future goals and a clear sense of purpose which, in effect, constituted their internalized active response to communications of high expectations that they received from their external or ecological contexts. Each participant evinced an unobscured vision of a prospective state that mediated purposeful and strategic choices and actions in the present. Thus, participants made choices with respect to high school subjects, advanced placement and college credit-bearing subjects in high school, extra-curricular engagements that would enhance their skills and resumes, seeking out tutoring assistance and assistance with college applications, seizing opportunities to go on college visits, staying out of trouble and maintaining good behavior, and cultivating strong relationships with teachers and school staff, and persevering with their school work. The ultimate goal of these actions was to achieve academic success in high school and embark upon the next stage of participants’ journeys towards their future goals. Illustrating the potency of this factor in catalyzing action necessary to mediate academic success, KL expressed his deep desire to have a great career in life, attend college, obtain excellent grades, and become
a veterinarian or veterinary technician (KL, 2017, p. 3). Similarly, LA explicated that she has always worked hard in school because she wants to obtain good grades and get into Medaille College to study to become a veterinarian (LA, 2017, p. 7). MB stated emphatically that she does not really enjoy school but regards school as a stepping stone to her future career success, happiness, and economic and social emancipation for herself and her family (MB, 2017, p. 5).

Benard (1991) referring to this characteristic as “a sense of purpose and future”, asserted that it is “a most powerful predictor of positive outcome” (p. 6). Benard found that this attribute is possessed by resilient children and adolescents and mediates related attributes that, in turn, mediate positive educational and life outcomes. Such related attributes include: “healthy expectancies, goal-directedness, success orientation, achievement motivation, educational aspirations, persistence, hopefulness, hardiness, belief in a bright future, a sense of anticipation, a sense of a compelling future and a sense of coherence” (p. 6). This trait also mediates in the individual a willingness to subjugate fleeting or short term desires or comfort to long-term, lasting benefits – a willingness to work hard in the present for a future advantage (Cameron-Bandler, 1986). Analysis of the qualitative data for the present study found that this factor mediated, in the participants, belief in a bright future, value for education as a pathway to future goals, focus, and motivation. These, factors, in turn, generated perseverance and academic effort which mediated participants’ academic success.

All ten participants in the present study manifested strong internal locus of control, as analyzed in chapter four of this study, as a reciprocal response to their internalization of the high expectations communicated to them from their external ecological contexts. Internal locus of control is a sense or belief that one is in control of one’s life outcomes and achievement and can determine these through one’s actions (Benard, 1991; Messer, 1972; Wang, 1997). Rotter (1954)
first articulated the concept of internal locus of control within the framework of his social
learning theory (Frank, 1980). This concept occurs along a continuum. At one end of this
continuum is high internal locus of control which represents a belief that outcomes result from
one’s actions, skills, and efforts. At the opposite end of this continuum is high external locus of
control which represents a belief that outcomes of events depend on factors that are outside of
one’s control. Such factors include destiny, chance, and other compelling influences. (Frank,
1980, p. 4). Internal locus of control has been found to positively influence academic
achievement. Messer (1972) found that children who perceived their academic achievement to
depend on their own effort and abilities had higher grades and test scores than their peers even
when IQ and cognitive impulsivity were statistically controlled (p. 1456). Hashway, Hammond,
and Rogers (1990) found that students with a high degree of internal locus of control actively
engaged in “planning, monitoring, and revising” their own learning which made them more
independent and efficient learners (p. 45).

These skills are manifest in the research participants’ statements relating to the emerging
factor: self-push (presented in chapter four of this study). The research participants do not leave
their academic outcomes to destiny or chance. They manifest active agency in influencing their
own academic outcomes. Galejs and Hegland (1982, p. 293) asserted that a series of empirical
research studies have found that internal locus of control correlates with children who are
instrumental or active agents in their own learning (Mischel, Zeiss, & Zeiss, 1974), goal-oriented
(Dallinger and Taub, 1977), achievement-oriented (Gordon, 1977); and task-oriented (BAR-Tal
& Bar-Zohar, 1972). As illustrated in chapter four, these are all traits that are manifested by
participants in the present research study.
Of critical importance to note is that internal locus of control has been found to be cultivated by teacher perceptions and expectations of students (Bryant, 1974; Buriel, 1981; Galejs & Hegland, 1972). Galejs and Hegland (1982) asserted that Buriel (1981) indicated that “teachers are instrumental in the development of children’s beliefs about the causes of behavioral outcomes and therefore teachers’ socialization practices are important determinants of children’s locus of control conceptualization” (p. 299). Indeed, a perusal of the statements of participants in this study evinces strong approval, high expectations, caring and support, and positive racial socialization of the participants from at least some of their teachers. It may thus be plausibly postulated that these teacher beliefs and actions towards the participants cultivated a sense in the participants that they possess the power to influence their academic success through hard work.

Galejs and Hegland (1982) also found that children with internal locus of control engage teachers more in task-related interactions and elicit more information from teachers than children with external locus of control (p. 299). Bryant (1974) found that teachers’ interactions with children was based on teachers’ perceptions of the children’s attributes and that teachers more easily interacted with children evincing internal locus of control. Thus it seems that when teachers perceive a child to be a more independent and able learner, they evince higher expectations of the child and engage the child more in task-related interactions. This process is then more likely to develop the child’s competence, sense of self-efficacy, and internal locus of control. This, in turn, can mediate, in the child, academic effort, perseverance, and academic success. Illustrating the verity of these findings and postulations, LR shared that her Engineering teacher likes her and always attends to her questions and needs while largely ignoring similar needs of her class mates who are perceived by the teacher to be uncaring about their work. Illustrating how this teacher belief and action towards a student can foster a sense of self-
efficacy, self-esteem, and internal locus of control, LR recounted that her engineering teacher fostered these effects in her by encouraging her, praising her work, facilitating her to believe in her own intelligence, and providing effective instruction, feedback, and coaching that scaffolded and advanced her learning (LR, 2017, p. 9).

The present study uncovered the novel sub-factor of self-push which, similarly to focus on future goals and internal locus of control, appears to be a response by the research participants to communications of high expectations from their various external ecological contexts. This sub-theme does not appear to have received distinct attention in existing research literature. The qualitative interview data from this present study reveal that this factor facilitated the participants to play an active role in pushing themselves to produce the academic effort that has resulted in their academic success. To this effect, the participants actively strived, struggled, and persevered to attend school consistently, attend and participate in all their classes consistently, consistently complete and submit assignments on time, and cultivate good relationships with their teachers, guidance counselors, staff of school-based community agencies, and other adults who guided and assisted them and provided them with opportunities that moved them towards accomplishing their future goals. Thus, this self-push mediated academic effort, perseverance, and resourcefulness that, in turn, mediated participant’s academic success.

**Caring and Supportive Relationships**

Copious empirical research studies have found that a caring and supportive relationship is the most critical factor that fosters the wellbeing – positive behavioral, social, emotional, academic, and life outcomes – of a child or adolescent (Benard, 1991, p. 8). Components of caring and supportive relationships include: stable care, adequate and appropriate attention, warmth,
affection, and absence of criticism (Benard, 1991). Garmezy (1991) affirmed the strategic
importance of this variable to the robustness of a child or adolescent. He determined
components of this variable as including: parental concern for the child’s wellbeing, a caring
adult, and external support such as learning and socio-emotional supports from a caring teacher,
church, or institution (p. 421-422). Werner (1997) highlights similar nuances of this variable as
a close bond with a competent, stable, caring adult or older sibling, and caring and supportive
role models such as friends, parents of friends, teachers, youth workers, or other adults who
listen to children and challenge them, and believe in them (p. 104).

All ten participants in the present study provided thick descriptions of such relationships with
a variety of persons including parents, older siblings, family members, family friends, teachers,
guidance counselors, administrators, coaches, staff of school-based community agencies, school
friends, and peer members of clubs and sports teams. These persons counseled, advised, praised,
encouraged, provided learning and career opportunities, assisted and supported the participants
in myriad ways including provision of basic needs, assistance with completing college
applications, provision of college tours, tutoring, and financial assistance.

Benard (1991) found that such relationships establish basic trust, meaning, and sense of
coherence and order in the life of the child or adolescent.

Wang (1997) asserted that families foster “motivation to master the environment”,
“competent development”, “self-esteem”, “models of behavior”, and “social and functional
connections to the larger community” (p. 5). Similarly, in the present study, participants’
narratives attest to these findings. To this effect, participants recounted: being continually
encouraged and motivated by their family members to do better in school (DS, p. 4); being
taught everything they know and assisted with everything by their family members (BB, p. 4); being able to talk to their parents about anything going on in their lives, believing that their parents always have the right answers to their questions or solutions to their problems or concerns, and trusting the points of view of their parents (MO, p. 6); being able to stay focused on school, stay awake during class, get to classes on time, and get good grades because they know that their families are watching out for them and are always there to assist them (MB, p. 5).

Similarly, Wang (1997) found that teacher caring and support comes into operation as teachers perform roles of confidants and positive role models to students and provide guidance, counseling, and assistance to students with respect to myriad student needs including academic, social, emotional, and career-related needs. Wang (1997) found that such support reduces stress and anxiety in students and encourage students to develop values, attitudes, and stamina for persevering with their school work, to engage in new experiences, and to develop a sense of self-efficacy and internal locus of control (p. 7). Attesting to these, KL expressed belief that her teachers are good, love her, teach her valuable life lessons, give her myriad assistance with school related matters, teach her to learn from her mistakes and to follow through with her goals (KL, p.6). Similarly, LA recounted that her teachers give her advice about college essays, dealing with conflicts with friends, and advice about her academic and other matters of concern to her (LA, p. 5).

Thus, as illustrated in chapter four, the caring and supportive relationships provided the participants with guiding, counseling, encouragement, assistance, and provision of basic needs and learning and career opportunities. These imbued participants with a sense of stability, safety, trust, coherence, and gratitude as well as self-esteem and self-efficacy, values, positive
behavior, positive attitude, and motivation. These sub-factors, in turn, mediated, in participants, perseverance hard work that resulted in their academic success.

This present study found that the caring and support received by the research participants from their external, ecological context – their school - imbued participants with a critical sense of belonging to their school environment which oriented them towards a trajectory of academic success. Numerous empirical research studies have found that a sense of belonging in school is a variable that mediates student academic success (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Wang, 1997). Goodenow and Grady (1993) defined students’ sense of belonging in school or the classroom as: “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others – especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment” (p. 61). They found that a sense of belonging in students mediates academic motivation, academic engagement, self-efficacy or expectancy of success, value for school work, academic effort, and school participation especially among at-risk students (p. 61). Maslow (1962) underlined a deep need in human beings to feel that they are accepted as part of and belong to a group or community. Benard (1991) similarly articulated the need to belong to, bond with, and participate in a group as fundamental to an individual’s existence. Referring to this need also as an attachment or connection to a group, Benard (1991) asserted that it mediates self-esteem in the individual” (p. 21). Benard (1991) asserted that the opposite of this sense of belonging is alienation. He explicated alienation as a “lack of bonding to social institutions like the family, the school, and the community” (p. 16). He emphasized that this detachment poses “a major risk factor for alcoholism, drug addiction, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school failure, depression, and suicide” (p. 16). Wang (1997) found that a student’s involvement in school “reduces feelings of alienation and disengagement” (p. 6).
All ten participants in the present study reported a strong sense of belonging to their high school. This sense of belonging emanated from their close bonding with teachers, guidance counselors, an administrator, coaches, and peer members of the various sports teams, clubs, and organizations that participants belong to. A perusal of the school’s colorful monthly newsletters evinced photos of the research participants participating in the various extra-curricular activities of the clubs, sports teams, and organizations that participants belonged to as well as in myriad school events. From the participants’ accounts, this sense of belonging mediated self-esteem, a sense of self-efficacy, and motivation in the participants. These, in turn, mediated the participants’ academic effort and engagement which mediated participants’ academic success.

The present study uncovered the novel sub-factor of desire to make family or caregivers proud which, similarly to sense of belonging, appears to be a response of the research participants to the caring and support that they received from various caregivers in their external ecological contexts. This sub-theme, just as with the sub-theme of self-push, does not appear to have received distinct attention in existing research literature. The interview data from the present study reveal that this factor was generated from a deep sense of gratitude and love felt by participants towards their parents, family members, teachers, or significant caregivers for the caring, support, sacrifice, encouragement, and guidance given to the participants. This sub-factor mediated motivation in the participants. Such motivation, in turn, mediated academic effort and perseverance which, ultimately, mediated the participants’ academic success.

The present study also uncovered a third novel sub-factor – clear sense of good and bad choices and their implications – which appears to be another response by the research participants to the caring, support, advice, and guidance that they received from myriad
caregivers in their various ecological contexts. Once again, this sub-theme does not appear to have received distinct attention in existing research literature.

A clear sense of good and bad choices and their implications was self-evident in the verbatim statements of all ten participants in the present research study. The participants manifested a clear understanding of the constituents of a good choice of action and a bad choice of action. They also evinced an equally unclouded understanding of the implications of each kind of choice with respect to their wellbeing. This factor remains largely unexplored in the empirical research literature that contextualizes the present study. In tandem with this factor, all ten participants in this study evinced the ability to make rational, competent judgment about what constitutes a good healthy choice, what constitutes a bad or harmful choice, and the potential effects of such choices on participants’ wellbeing. The qualitative interview data reveals that this factor mediated an ability to resist or break away from negative peer pressure and other destructive pathways, an ability to learn from negative (or positive) experiences of oneself and others, and perseverance towards a direction that aligned with focus on one’s education and future goals, academic effort, and academic success. Participants’ statements also revealed that this critical wisdom was often imparted to participants by the passion of experience. Illustrating this clarity of judgment, KL recounted that she was facilitated to maintain focus on her school work and obtain good grades because she had witnessed the economic deprivation of some family members who dropped out of school and she did not want to fall into similar circumstance (KL, 2017, p. 8). BB (2017, p. 10-11) and JG (2017, p. 9) recounted similar comparisons that imbued them with determination to focus on school and obtaining a good education. Thus, the interview data reveals that this factor mediated an ability to resist negative peer pressure and other
impeding behavior as well as an ability to avoid distractions. These dispositions, in turn, mediated focus and academic effort which resulted in participants’ academic success.

**Participation in Positions of Responsibility**

A child’s or adolescent’s participation in positions of responsibility has been found by numerous empirical research studies to build high levels of resilience in children and adolescents which result in academic success and positive life outcomes (Benard, 1991; Perez et al., 2009; Werner, 2012, p. 104). Being entrusted with responsibilities in such positions acknowledges to the child or adolescent that he or she is a valued contributor of useful services in the given context. The child or adolescent thereby internalizes the message that he or she is worthy and capable. This mediates self-esteem, self-efficacy, and competence in the child or adolescent which, in turn, generates effort that mediates academic success. (Benard, 1991, p. 9-10; Werner & Smith, 1989). Such roles of responsibility include domestic chores, care of younger siblings, part-time work, extra-curricular activities, and service or helping others in the school or community (Benard, 1991; Rutter, 1979).

All participants in the present research study were found to participate actively in various positions of responsibility ranging from sport teams (basketball, volleyball, track, gymnastics, tennis, swimming) and cheerleading club to Band Club, Drama Club, National Honor Society, National Arts Honor Society, QT High School Honor Society, School Climate Team, Link Leadership, Medical Assistance Program, All Star Band, and part-time employment at local businesses. Indeed, eight of the ten participants worked part-time. LA also engaged in volunteering at the VA Medical Hospital and RSPCA Health Accounts. She has been accepted
at Medaille College to study Veterinary Medicine. All the participants also belonged to On Point for College and/or participated in their college tours.

Participants’ verbatim statements illustrate that their participation in these extra-curricular activities raised the levels of participants’ self-esteem, sense of self-efficacy, and motivation to work hard at their studies and do well in school, graduate from high school, and pursue a college degree (BB, 2017, p. 12; DS, 2017, p. 9; JG, 2017, p. 7; MB, 2017, p. 6-7); generated in participants, feelings that they are valued members of their community and school environment and useful contributors to these contexts (DS, 2017, p. 9); and generated in participants a sense of bonding with others in their environment and belonging to their environment (DS, 2017, p. 9). The fundamental dynamic at the core of the potency of this factor is the provision of a range of opportunities for children and adolescents to find interest in and succeed at “roles involving problem-solving, decision-making, planning, goal-setting, and helping others” (Benard, 1991, p. 16). This participation fulfills in young persons the human need for bonding, belonging, and having control over one’s life. This lies in contrast to alienation from one’s context which is a precursor to disengagement from one’s context (Benard, 1991, p. 16; Wang, 1997, p. 6). To this effect, Sarason (1990) asserted:

> When one has no stake in the way things are, when one’s needs or opinions are provided no forum, when one sees oneself as an object of unilateral actions, it takes no particular wisdom to suggest that one would rather be elsewhere

Thus, similar to the findings of empirical research studies, this present study found that participation in various positions of responsibility mediated, in participants, a sense of bonding, belonging, self-esteem, self-efficacy, competence, internal locus of control, and motivation. These factors mediated effort and perseverance with respect to participants’ school work which, in turn, mediated participants’ academic success.

**Positive Racial Socialization and Positive Racial/Cultural Identity**

Racial socialization is the transmission to children or adolescents from racially or culturally marginalized groups, by their parents, family members, or other significant adults, of values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior they need to help them successfully navigate and achieve their goals in the racialized, hostile and inequitable environment in which they live (Miller & Macintosh, 1999, p. 61). Sanders (1997) defines positive racial socialization as “that which is positive towards one’s racial or ethnic group membership, and that promotes a healthy racial identity as well as an awareness of and constructive responses to racism without promoting hatred or discrimination towards members of other racial or ethnic groups” (p. 90). Stevenson, Cameron, Herrera-Taylor, & Davis (2002) define it as “a set of behaviors, communications, and interactions between parents and children that address how African Americans ought to feel about their cultural heritage and how they should respond to the racial hostility or confusion in American society” (p. 33).

As articulated in these definitions, all ten participants in the present research study evinced positive connectedness to their racial or cultural groups. All participants evinced awareness of issues of racism and racial discrimination in the society in which they live. Eight of the ten participants reported that they have received racial socialization messages from their parents.
about racism and strategies for navigating racial discrimination. Such strategies include ignoring the racialized behavior to prevent its escalation. Refraining from dwelling on the behavior to prevent becoming bitter and distracted, and focusing unequivocally on one’s education and future goals and working doggedly to attain academic, career, and life success. All ten participants indicated positive feelings towards other races and having friends from other races. It is pertinent to note that while Miller and Macintosh (1999) and Stevenson et al., (2002) point to parents as sources of racial socialization, participants in the present study reported other sources of racial socialization such as teachers, coaches (KL, 2017, p. 7; JG, 2017, p. 2) and social media (JG, 2017, p. 2).

Racial socialization includes: “modeling of behavior, specific messages, exposure to specific context, objects or environments” including books, texts, artifacts, materials, and resources relevant to the cultures of the children or adolescents. (Brown, 2008, p. 33). As found in the present study, positive racial socialization has been found in empirical research studies to correlate with positive racial identity and academic achievement in children and adolescents (Brown, Tanner-Smith, & Lesane-Brown, 2009; Caughy, O’Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002; Miller & Macintosh, 1999). The present study found that positive racial socialization mediates positive attitude, positive reaction or response to racial discrimination, and positive feelings towards other races. These factors, in turn, mediate an absence of or low levels of anger and resentment towards other races as well as absence of destructive behavior that impede focus and academic emphasis. These effects, in turn, mediate academic success.

The present study found that positive racial socialization received by the research participants from their external, ecological contexts imbued them with positive racial or cultural identities. The possession by a child or adolescent of a positive racial or cultural identity that integrates an
academic identity or value for education has been found to positively correlate with academic achievement by the child or adolescent (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Flores-Gonzales, 1999; Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007; Wright, 2009). Copious empirical research studies on the influence of racial identity on academic success have found that high achieving African American and Latino/a students in urban schools maintain a strong and positive racial or cultural identity while embracing education as a choice vehicle for upward mobility into the middle class and its socio-economic benefits. Such students did not see academic success as being a characteristic exclusive to the White race or as ‘acting White”. Rather, their racial or ethnic identity had an “embedded achievement” or academic identity component representing their belief that education and academic achievement are valuable and integral parts of themselves – rights and opportunities to uplift and advance themselves and their families (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Flores-Gonzalez, 1999; Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001). Similar to these findings, all ten participants in the present study evinced pride in their racial or cultural identity as well as a fundamental value for education as the critical pathway to their future goals. In line with this academic identity and value for education, all ten participants were taking or had taken college credit-bearing subjects in high school. All ten participants had already selected a college degree major. All ten participants had engaged in several college visits. All ten participants evinced a strong desire to excel in school, graduate from high school, enroll in a college, obtain a degree and engage in a meaningful and lucrative career. This laser-like focus on education imbued the participants with motivation. This mediated academic engagement and effort which, in turn, mediated participants’ academic success (KL, 2017, p. 4).
Racial or cultural identity is the “accurate and consistent use” of a racial or cultural label “based on one’s perception or conception” of oneself as belonging to a racial or cultural group (Ford, Harris, Webb, & Jones, 1994, p. 14). Wakefield and Hudley (2007) defined this state as “the sense of belonging that an adolescent feels toward a racial or ethnic group as well as the significance and qualitative meaning that the adolescent assigns to that group membership” (p. 48). Wright (2009) defines a positive racial or cultural identity as one whereby “the individual is aware of and able to negotiate and navigate racism and discrimination positively, and can at the same time demonstrate ethnic pride in oneself and one’s ethnic group” (p. 124). In tandem with this definition, racial or cultural identity has been found to be comprised of three components which positively correlate with academic achievement: positive in-group identification or connectedness, awareness of racism, and embedded achievement.

**Positive in-group identification or connectedness** entails a positive sense of belonging to a group or pride in the history, traditions, and ways of being of one’s group (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995; Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001; Quintana & Segura Herrera, 2003). All ten participants in this study evinced this connectedness to their racial or cultural groups as illustrated in Chapter 4.

**Awareness of racism** is defined as: “being aware that others are likely to define oneself negatively and see the self only as a member of a negatively valued group” (Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001, p. 380). All ten participants in this study evinced this awareness in their accounts of their lived experiences with respect to encounters with racial discrimination and micro-aggressions. Yet, in tandem with Wright’s (2009) definition of positive racial identity, all ten participants had learned, particularly through positive racial socialization from parents, teachers, and others, to navigate such racism with positive strategies such as ignoring racial
incidents thereby denying such incidents the attention that would escalate them or lend significance to the offender. A follow-up strategy that participants utilized was to become more deeply focused on working hard at school and seeking out and engaging with learning and career opportunities in order to achieve academic success and attain their future goals of obtaining college degrees and pursuing lucrative careers. Such pathway, they believed, would mediate social mobility and economic independence that would prove critical to overcoming the debilitating effects of racism and discrimination on them and their families. Illustrating these strategies KL recounted that his mom told him that he would have challenges in life as a Black man but he must remain calm, refrain from reacting with violence but, rather, focus on his education and maintaining good grades (KL, 2017, p. ). SB recounted that she has learned to refrain from feeding into the negative energy of racial microaggressions but, rather, to respond positively with silence (SB, 2017, p. 2).

**Embedded achievement** has been defined by Oyserman, Harrison and Bybee (2001) as “the extent that academic achievement is viewed as integral to or embedded into one’s racial-ethnic group” (p. 380). Thus the child or adolescent possessing this quality views education as an integral part of himself or herself or his or her racial or cultural group and does not regard education or academic achievement as being exclusive to the White race or as “acting White” (Flores-Gonzales, 1999). All participants in this study evinced a fundamental value for education and an unequivocal orientation towards academic achievement.

Thus, all ten participants evinced a strong racial/cultural identity integrated with an academic identity. The participants’ accounts revealed that this positive identity mediated self-pride, self-esteem, and positive attitude in the participants. These effects, in turn, mediated a sense of self-efficacy and motivation which generated the academic effort that resulted in the academic
success of the participants. Illustrating this chain of effects, participants explicated that having a positive racial identity – accepting yourself and who you are – makes one feel better about oneself, increases one’s confidence, contributes to better friendships, generates richer and happier experiences in school and better grades, and helps one to achieve one’s goals. (KL, 2017, p. 10; LA, 2017, p. 2).

**Positive Belief System.**

A belief is a persons’ religion, religious conviction, or firm opinion (Oxford American Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2003, p. 123). An examination of factors that mediate the academic success of African American and Latino/a low income students cannot be complete without an examination of the belief systems of these students since beliefs shape and mediate values and attitudes that actively influence action (Wolcott, 1999, p. 97). Stern and Porr (2011) asserted that beliefs are “rules for action” (p. 28). Saldana (2013) asserted that “a belief is part of a system that includes our values and attitudes, plus our personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions of the social world” (p. 11). Beliefs shape positive attitudes, mental dispositions, and actions that enable individuals to be resilient in the face of adversity, hardship, or challenge and achieve positive academic and life outcomes. Such beliefs imbue individuals with faith that obstacles will be overcome, hope for a better future, commitment to hard work, and perseverance and patience as a means of actively overcoming obstacles (Benard, 1991, p. 9-10; Greeff & Loubser, 2008; Lee et al., 2010; Masten et al., 1990, p. 432; Werner, 1997, p. 104). Werner, 1997 asserted that religious beliefs “provided stability and meaning in times of hardship and adversity” (p. 104). Emphasizing the influence of beliefs on attitudes, Shaw and Wright (1967) defined attitudes as “a relatively
enduring system of evaluative, affective, reactions based upon and reflecting the evaluative concepts or beliefs which have been learned” (p. 3).

All ten participants in the present study evinced strong beliefs that shaped their values, attitudes, mental dispositions, affects, and emotions. These, in turn, influenced their actions. All participants believed that a good education is critical to their future goals of gaining admission into their college of choice, graduating with a degree in their desired college major, engaging in a lucrative career, attaining middle class status with accompanying economic independence, uplifting their families, and living a fulfilling life. These beliefs motivated and propelled participants to focus on their school work, work hard, and seek out and take advantage of curricular and extra-curricular as well as college and career preparation opportunities offered in their high school. Five of the participants expressed the belief that “everything happens for a reason”, that God has a plan for everyone, and that problems will be divinely resolved in the finality of events in a manner that will be best suited for oneself. These beliefs alleviated participants from high levels of anxiety and stress as well as destructive patterns of thought and action that would impede their academic success. On the contrary, these beliefs mediated positive attitude, positive behavior, patience, focus, and perseverance which, in turn, mediated participants’ academic success (KL, 2017, p. 4; LA, 2017, p. 3; LR, 2017, p. 5; MB, 2017, p. 4, 5).

While belief systems uncovered in empirical research literature tend towards religious beliefs (Benard, 1991; Greeff & Loubser, 2008; Masten et al., 1990; Werner, 1997), this present study uncovered a belief in Karma and its potency to reward goodness and punish injustice through retribution. Two of the ten participants expressly stated that they believe in Karma. This belief worked in a similar way as the belief, explicated above, that everything happens for a reason.
The belief in Karma imbued participants with a calming sense that injustice inflicted on them by other persons or by racial discrimination or microaggressions will be addressed fully and appropriately by Karma. This freed participants, they believed, from spitefulness, vindictiveness, resentment and anger or bearing corrosive grudges and allowed them to move on from problems and negative encounters to focus positively on their school work and future goals (KL, 2017, p. 4; BB, 2017, p. 3). The present study also uncovered an explicit belief in struggle. A fundamental belief that struggle lies at the foundation of all achievement. This belief fostered resilience and perseverance, in the participant, in the face of challenge, hardship, and adversity (SB, 2017, p. 3).

**Implications of Study**

The findings of this research study implicate several critical insights. These are broad themes that cut across all the more specific ones discussed above.

**The Power of Preponderance: A Possible Mesh Effect**

Seven of the ten participants in this research study evinced all five emerging key factors and all eight sub-factors found to have mediated their academic success. Three participants who are Latina reportedly did not experience any racial socialization. They, however, evinced pride in their cultural heritage as well as all the other four key factors and eight sub-factors. The three participants stated that they did not recall discussing race issues or racial discrimination with their parents or others. This seems to suggest that the more of these factors a minority student from a low income family experiences and internalizes, the more likely the student is to achieve academic success. Further research, both qualitative and quantitative, may be needed to explore this postulation. In tandem with this finding, one may postulate that all the factors and sub-
factors may be acting as protective factors that nurture resilience in the participants and enable the participants to counteract or overcome the risk factors and adversity they encounter daily in their racialized environment. Indeed, scholars of resilience have found that successful outcomes for children and adolescents encountering adversity depends on a perennial battle of balance and preponderance between risk factors and protective factors and whichever of them outweighs the other determines if the child or adolescent will prove to be resilient and overcome the adversity to achieve successful outcomes or will prove to be vulnerable and succumb to the adversity with concomitant negative outcomes (Benard, 1991; Garmezy, 1991; Howard et al., 1999; Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 1979; Wang, 1997). It is also worthy of note that being a member of a disadvantaged minority group as well as being of low income status have been found to be, of themselves, risk factors (Sameroff et al. 1987). All participants in this study are members of disadvantaged minority groups – African American and Latino/a. All the participants are also from low-income families. Other risk factors that the research participants revealed in their rich accounts of their lived experiences include: single parent households (n = 5); substantially absent mother who was also head of the household (n = 1); displacement from home and diversion of mother’s attention to infant niece and nephew due to premature death of mother’s sister (n = 1); English language learner status/language barrier (n = 1); fatal gun violence leading to death of role model (n = 1); violent neighborhood (n = 2).

While the data from the present study are consistent with this “preponderance” argument, they do go further to suggest that it may be the interaction among the factors and sub-factors that is critical to mediating the academic success of the research participants.

Every one of the participants reported that they experienced every one of the five factors associated with their academic success, and nearly every one of them experienced nearly every
one of the sub-factors. This is not likely to be an accident. As explicated above, verbatim statements of the research participants reveal explicit and implicit relationships between the various emerging themes or factors. The verbatim data shows that these factors did not operate in isolation but, rather, worked closely together in interweaving strands to mediate the positive outcomes of the research participants. What emerges then, from the interconnections of the emerging factors and sub-factors and their impact on the research participants’ academic success is a possible mesh effect of protective factors - a network of interweaving, interlocking, and tightly connected strands. Alone, each strand might be delicate, vulnerable, and susceptible to breakage, damage, or distortion. But woven together, all the strands appear to form a grid that is strong and durable and more competently withstands pressure and adversity. As each strand in a mesh reinforces all the other strands and is, in turn, reinforced by them, it is plausible that the emerging themes in this study reinforce and are, in turn, reinforced by each other to mediate the positive academic outcomes of the research participants. As the strength, durability, and integrity of the mesh depends on the number and quality of each strand composing the mesh, it is likely that the number and quality or degree of the emerging factors in this study, when cultivated in a student, impact the likelihood of the student’s academic success. Buttressing this line of thought, it is pertinent to note that seven of the ten research participants manifested all of the emerging factors and sub-factors while the remaining three participants manifested all but one of these – positive racial socialization. Empirical scholars in the field of resilience have found that a child or adolescent’s resilience and concomitant positive outcomes depend on the preponderance, duration, frequency, and intensity of the risk versus the protective factors encountered or experienced by the child or adolescent (Benard, 1991; Masten et al., 1990;
Howard et al., 1999; Rutter, 2006, 2007, 2013). My own study extends this argument, emphasizing that the relationship among factors may be important.

**The Power of Socialization**

All the factors and appurtenant sub-factors were socialized into the ten research participants through various external sources including parents, family members, family friends, teachers, school staff and peers, coaches, staff of school-based community agencies, and workplace supervisor and customers. The criticality of this socialization is that it points to the paradox that these factors though internalized by the research participants did not originate internally, but, rather, from external sources. This strongly suggests that these factors can therefore be cultivated and nurtured in students to produce positive outcomes for them. This also highlights the imperative that the absence of these factors in students cannot be blamed on the students but, rather, on the ecological contexts that failed to socialize and nurture these factors in the students. Further qualitative and quantitative research studies may explore this hypothesis.

**The Power of Caring and Supportive Relationships**

The qualitative interview data reveal that all the factors found to have mediated the academic success of the research participants were socialized or cultivated within the caring and supportive relationships in which the participants were involved. These relationships were with parents, family members, teachers, school staff, coaches, staff of school-based community agencies, and peers. Communications, actions, and interactions that the research participants experienced within these relationships such as guidance, counseling, advice, encouragement, assistance, support, comfort, and praise mediated the divergent variables that the research participants experienced. These factors and sub-factors then converged their influences in a dynamic synergy
that mediated the academic success of the research participants. Further, qualitative and quantitative research may explore possible correlations between caring and supportive relationships and the other factors/sub-factors emerging from this present study.

**The Power of Ecological Contexts**

It is critical to note that all the caring and supportive relationships within which all the emerging factors uncovered by this study were socialized, cultivated, and nurtured in the research participants comprised the three key ecological contexts of the research participants: family, school, and community. For all the participants, the caring and support they received in these contexts have important parallels but are not identical. The power of these ecological contexts to mediate positive outcomes in children and adolescents cannot be overstated. Empirical research scholars have found these three ecological contexts to be critical to the development of protective factors that mediate resilience in children and adolescents (Benard, 1991; Garmezy, 1991; Howard et al., 1999; Masten et al., 1990; Paat, 2013; Perez et al., 2009; Wang, 1997; Wang et al., 1997). Bronfenbrenner (1974, 1979) articulated that four environmental or ecological contexts impact the development of a child or adolescent: a) the microsystem – which is the immediate environment of the child or adolescent and includes the home, school, and community; b) the mesosystem – which consists of the interaction between two or more microsystems; c) the exosystem – which consists of external contexts or systems that impact the microsystems and, therefore, indirectly impact the child or adolescent; and d) the macrosystem – which comprises the society, culture, belief systems, norms, values, policies, and laws that indirectly impact the child or adolescent. Buttressing this pivotal line of thought, Wang (1997) asserted that “healthy development and learning success occur in interactive contexts of a multitude of environmental, dispositional, and circumstantial influences, not as a
result of a single precipitating event or innate personal characteristic” (p. 262-263). These lines of thought reinforce the criticality of caring and supportive relationships in the ecological contexts of the child or adolescent as mediators or catalysts for developing and nurturing in children and adolescents the academic success-mediating factors uncovered by the present research study. These findings also reinforce the criticality of an intentional, strategic, and sustained partnership between the family, school, and community to nurture the emerging themes in all children and adolescents with the goal of more competently mediating their academic success. Further qualitative and quantitative research may examine effective strategies that the ecological contexts of children and adolescents such as families, schools, and communities may develop and implement to socialize and nurture the emerging factors into children and adolescents. Such research may also examine policies and laws that may be developed to support such strategies.

**The Criticality and Interactivity of Human Agency**

This study suggests that external supports do not make children resilient with absolute certainty but, rather, offer children greater chances or opportunities to be resilient. Bronfenbrenner’s (1974, 1979) theory of transactional-ecological model of human development maintains that human personality and development or life outcomes are negotiated between an individual and the individual’s environment through the individual’s interaction with his or her environment and that human beings are thus engaged in an on-going adaptation to their environment. In tandem with this line of thought, the ten participants in this study evinced a powerful sense of agency in three important ways: a) They actively internalized the high expectations, the guidance, advice, and support imparted to them within their various caring and supportive relationships, the racial socialization, and the positive belief, all of which were
socialized into the participants from their myriad ecological contexts b) They actively responded to the external or ecological socialization they received, by maintaining personal high expectations, value for education, self-push and perseverance, focus on future goals/clear sense of purpose, internal locus of control, positive beliefs about their future, and a clear sense of good versus bad choices, their implications and how best to navigate these choices in order to realize their future goals c) They actively sought and participated in various positions of responsibility in three key ecological contexts – their families, their school, and their community.

This active agency of the participants which helped to orient them towards academic success was neither autonomous nor mechanical. The participants were neither independent agents who influenced their own actions entirely of their own volition nor mere mechanical conduits or channels of external influences completely devoid of motivation, self-reflection, self-responsiveness, self-innovation, or self-direction. Rather, each participant’s orientation towards academic success was interactively negotiated between the participant and the external influences that socialized, into the participants, the academic success-orienting themes noted in this study (Bandura, 1986).

Bandura (1986), postulating a social cognitive theory of interactive human agency, asserted:

Persons are neither autonomous agents nor simply mechanical conveyors of animating environmental influences. Rather, they make causal contribution to their own motivation and action within a system of triadic reciprocal causation (p. 1175).
Bandura (1986) thus explicated that a person’s cognitive, affective, and environmental experiences all act as “interacting determinants” of human agency (p. 1175). Thus it is likely that environmental or ecological experiences or contexts can facilitate or undermine the agency of children or adolescents with respect to their achievement of academic success. This lends relevance and urgency to the need for families, schools, and communities to partner together to develop, implement, and sustain strategic interventions that will build critical agency in urban students which will, in turn, orient them towards academic success.

The Binary Power of the Classroom Teacher and School Staff

Teacher perceptions and expectations of and interactions with students play a fundamental role in shaping and influencing students’ beliefs about themselves as human beings and as learners (Galejs & Hegland, 1982). The qualitative interview data from the present study reveal that the research participants were influenced by the perceptions and expectations of and interactions with their teachers with respect to a constellation of beliefs that mediated the academic success of the research participants. Such beliefs include high expectations and self-efficacy (what outcomes the participants were believed to be capable of achieving), beliefs about the locus of control of participants’ academic outcomes, beliefs about education and its value, beliefs about racial identity and how participants should respond to racial discrimination, beliefs about the value or necessity of participating in extra-curricular activities and taking advantage of learning, college, and career opportunities offered in the school, beliefs about future goals and their attainability and utility, beliefs about good and bad choices and their potential pathways with respect to the wellbeing of participants, and beliefs about belongingness and participants’ value to the school community. LR (2017, P. 9) recalled how her engineering teacher encouraged her, coaxed her, coached her, and scaffolded her with respect to her class projects
which she did not believe that she could successfully construct. He praised her, told her that she is smart and can do it, and he displayed her project on the wall. She unequivocally stated that he built up her confidence to a level that facilitated her eventual success in the class. The rich narratives of the research participants thus illustrate the potency of teachers and school staff in shaping the learning and behavioral outcomes of students.


teachers are instrumental in the development of children’s beliefs about

the causes of behavioral outcomes and therefore teachers’ socialization practices are important determinants of the children’s locus of control

conceptualization (p. 299).

One may postulate that students, as all human beings, can discern perceptions, can perceive expectations, and can infer meanings from interactions. They can figure out what teachers and school staff think and feel about them and they can construct deep meanings of these. Thus, through their perceptions, expectations, and interactions with respect to their students, teachers have the power to uplift or demoralize, to encourage or discourage, to motivate or defeat, to inspire or dispirit, to engage or alienate, to empower or disempower and unnerve. Future research may examine correlations or other relationships between teacher perceptions, expectations, and interactions with respect to students on the one hand and the presence or absence in the students of the academic success-orienting factors uncovered by this study.
**Contributions to Understanding Success “Against All Odds”**

This section discusses the contributions of this research study to the existing body of empirical research literature with respect to factors that mediate the academic success of minority students from low-income families.

The findings of this study affirm similar findings of empirical research studies discussed above with respect to academic success-orienting factors. Such factors which have been found in both empirical research studies and the present study to assist in mediating the academic success of minority students from low income families include: high expectations, caring and supportive relationships, positive racial socialization, participation in positions of responsibility, positive belief system, value for education/academic identity, positive racial identity, focus on future goals /clear sense of purpose, internal locus of control, and sense of belonging.

This study, however, adds further knowledge to the body of existing empirical research literature in a number of ways:

a) This study uncovers three novel academic success-orienting factors that have not received distinct attention in empirical research literature: the desire of students to make their families or caregivers proud; a student’s clear sense of good versus bad choices and the implications of such choices; and self-push.

b) This study highlights the idea that there are two sets of academic success-orienting factors whose reciprocal interaction work together to mediate the academic success of students. The first set of factors which are the five key academic success-orienting factors found by this study (high expectations, caring and support, positive racial socialization, participation in positions of responsibility, and positive belief system) were found by this study to have emanated from
external influences and positively impacted the students while the second set of factors (sub-factors – value for education, focus on future goals/clear sense of purpose, internal locus of control, self-push, desire to make family or caregivers proud, sense of belonging, clear sense of good versus bad choices and their implications, and positive racial identity) were found by this study to be the internalized responses of the students to the first set of externally generated factors.

c) This study reveals myriad, novel sources or contexts/conditions that cultivated the academic success-orienting factors in the research participants. As illustrated above, the rich qualitative data derived from the research participants evinced that high expectations, caring and support, and value for education were communicated to and nurtured in participants not just by parents and teachers, as found in past research literature, but also by family members, family friends, peers, coaches, staff of school-based community agencies, workplace supervisor and workplace customers; positive racial socialization was communicated to the research participants not just by parents as noted in empirical research literature but also by family members, teachers, coaches, and social media; and the positive belief system of the research participants did not consist only of a belief in divine resolution of problems by a Christian God but also belief in vindication or retribution by Karma, belief that failure or mistake is a learning opportunity, belief promoting attitude of gratitude, belief that hard work brings rewards, and belief promoting a no-stress attitude.

d) This study highlights the idea of preponderance – that the greater the number of academic success-orienting factors a student possesses the greater the likelihood of the student’s achievement of academic success and deconstructs the idea of a mesh effect – that the academic success-orienting factors do not work effectively in isolation but, rather, more effectively work
together with each other as a tightly woven mesh of multiple, interlocking strands of supportive protective factors. This underscores the criticality of a student’s possession of a preponderance of these factors.

e) This study highlights the idea of internalization and active agency by students – that internalization of the key factors by students is necessary in order to trigger the active agency-imbued sub-factors that work to mediate the students’ academic success.

f) This study highlights the idea of socialization – that the academic success-orienting factors are actively socialized into students. This idea is encouraging for educators and policy makers who can work to develop effective strategies for socializing these academic success-orienting factors into students.

g) This study highlights the criticality of the ecological contexts of students as fertile spaces for cultivating academic success-orienting factors in students. It highlights the importance of a strategic and intentional partnership between families, schools, and communities for the purpose of forging critical actions to nurture the academic success-orienting factors in students.

h) This study highlights the criticality of caring and supportive relationships – the idea that all the academic success-orienting factors and sub-factors were generated and nurtured within caring and supportive relationships.

i) Most importantly, this study centers and validates the voices of adolescent students as experts of their own lived experiences in this decades long discourse about factors that facilitate the academic success of minority students from low income families. This study localizes the discourse on the topic of this study and gives primacy to the voices of students themselves, as those most qualified to interpret their own experiences.
The critical “so what?” of this study is that educators and policy makers as well as families, schools, and communities can utilize the implications and insights uncovered by this study to inform the development of strategies and interventions that will effectively cultivate the academic success-orienting factors in minority students from low income families to assist in facilitating their higher academic achievement.

In summary, while this study affirms the five key factors which have been found by prior empirical research literature as mediating the academic success of minority students from low-income families, this study also finds novel academic success-orienting sub-factors, novel sources that cultivate the academic success-orienting factors in students, and uncovers critical insights with respect to the relationships among these factors.

**Limitations of Study and Areas for Future Research**

a) The participant sample for this study is limited to African American and Latino students from low-income families, in grades 9-12 in one urban, public high school. Thus the narrow demographic characteristics of the students constrain the findings of this study and may limit its generalizability to a wider, more diverse population. There is need for studies with more diversity in the demographics of participants such as: a wider range of grade levels, particularly middle and junior high school students (Nine of the ten participants in this study were in grade 12); a wider range of races/ethnic groups; a wider range of high schools including suburban and rural high schools. This would deepen insights into the topic of this study as well as enhance the generalizability of the research findings to a more diverse population of students.
b) The small sample size of this study may also constrain the ability to generalize from the present research findings to all students even within the same population. There is need for studies with a larger sample size. This would also deepen insights into this topic and enhance the generalizability of the studies.

c) The use of traditional Grade Point Average (GPA) criteria for identifying “success” rather than using markers of exceptional success in a particular subject area delimits a narrow definition or criteria for school success. This criteria limits the idea of school success to students who conform to traditional or conventional measures of school success. This criteria thus does not capture students who may evince excellence and giftedness in a singular subject area or discipline such as music, theater arts, dance, sports, fine arts, or science, technology, engineering, and math disciplines. There is need for similar studies with a more expanded criteria and definition for school success. Such criteria could encompass students who achieve academic success in specific subject areas or disciplines. This would shed light on factors that mediated such success as well as interventions that can facilitate the replication of such success to other subject areas.

d) The students in this study are easily likable to teachers and acknowledge this in their narratives. This is possibly because they conform to rules, regulations, and expectations of the school. Future research studies may focus on students who are gifted in ways that educators do not expect or value. It would be pertinent and insightful to understand what patterns or relationships such studies may uncover.
e) The self-reporting nature of qualitative interviews render them susceptible to factors that may cause inaccuracies or distortions of information by the research participant, including personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics, lack of awareness, memory loss, recall error, or self-serving (Patton, 2002, p. 306). While it is critical to center the voices of students and afford them opportunity to speak for themselves, a research design that allows for a mix of studies with a variety of perspectives would allow deeper insights into the phenomenon examined in the present study. Such perspectives would include those of the participants’ parents, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, and other significant adults.

f) Interviews are also susceptible to leading questions posed by the researcher that may elicit expected responses.

g) This study did not delve into other critical factors that facilitate the academic success of students such as effective teachers. In future similar research, it would be pertinent to inquire about the percentage of effective versus poorly trained, ineffective teachers assigned to minority students from low income families who achieve academic success in urban public schools as compared to their peers who achieve poorer learning outcomes. Copious empirical research have found that the highly qualified, effective teacher is the strongest factor that facilitates student academic success in schools (Brophy & Good, 1986; Chall, 2000; Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2009).
h) The above limitations undermine any suggestion that this study has “proven” any of the implications enumerated above. The purpose of phenomenological studies is not to establish the objective truth of any set of conclusions, but to build understanding of how subjects experience their own realities. This is particularly pertinent because individuals do not necessarily base their actions upon objective truth but, upon their personal perceptions of that truth. Further research is needed to test the verity of the implications of this study enumerated above.

Conclusion

This present study sought to deconstruct and understand the factors that mediate the academic success of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families, the conditions and contexts that nurture these factors, and the processes through which these factors operate to mediate the academic success of these students. To achieve these goals, this study centered the traditionally marginalized perspectives and voices of a sampling of such students, from an urban high school, on their lived experiences, acknowledging the students as experts of their own lived experiences. These students have shared compelling and inspiring narratives of boldness, resourcefulness, wisdom, perseverance, loyalty, faith, and resilience in a world that too often explicitly and implicitly denies these qualities in them.

An analysis of the students’ narratives uncovered five key factors with appurtenant sub-factors that mediated the academic success of the students as well as the conditions that nurtured these factors and the processes through which these factors mediated the academic success of the research participants. These findings implicated (although it cannot prove) several critical
insights including: a) that the higher the preponderance of these factors possessed by students, the more likely they are to attain academic success b) that all factors and their sub-factors were externally socialized into the research participants by their ecological contexts c) that all factors and their sub-factors were experienced by the research participants within the context of caring and supportive relationships d) that classroom teachers (and school staff) wielded critical influence in socializing these factors into the research participants e) that participants negotiated an interactive agency with myriad external influences that socialized academic success-orienting factors into the participants and f) that radical and critical partnership is necessitated between families, schools, and communities to develop and implement coherent and seamlessly coordinated strategies to provide effective caring and supportive relationships for all students in their three key ecological contexts or microsystems with the goal of socializing the emerging factors into all students and, ultimately, mediating their robust academic outcomes. It may indeed be postulated that the most important contribution of all the external influences to the academic success of the participants was in imbuing them with confidence in themselves that critically and strategically counteracted a racialized environment that tends towards eroding the confidence of urban students from low-income families.

The present research study contributes and lends insights to the body of empirical research literature on the factors that mediate students’ academic success in various ways: a) It centers the voices and perspectives of the students themselves, acknowledges them as credible experts of their own lived experiences, and infuses the body of literature with the cogency and unique vantage point of persons who have directly experienced the phenomenon under study b) It deconstructs three novel sub-factors or sub-themes that have not received distinct attention in empirical research literature: desire to make family proud, clear sense of good versus bad choices
and their implications, and self-push c) It uncovers five key factors with appurtenant sub-factors
that have received distinct attention in empirical research literature but goes further to
deconstruct how these factors/sub-factors as well as the three novel ones originate, interact, and
operate to mediate the academic success of the research participants – the conditions and
contexts that nurture these factors/sub-factors and the processes through which they mediate the
positive outcomes of the students d) It exposes the external origination of factors that orient
students towards academic success and highlights the fact that these factors can be cultivated and
nurtured in students to facilitate their academic success e) It reveals the interconnections between
the mediating factors and how they mediated the academic success of the participant students
through a mesh-like relationship of protective factors (the mesh effect) f) It utilizes a positive
deviance framework to examine the lived experiences of a sampling of few students who are
achieving academic success amidst the less successful outcomes of many of their peers with the
goal of eliciting insights into solutions to the pervasive reality of urban school failure g) It posits
a number of postulations and areas for future research studies. Indeed, this study calls for
follow-up studies to examine the lived experiences of students who are failing to achieve
academic success to determine if and to what extent the success-orienting factors uncovered in
this study are present in or absent from their lived experiences and what might account for the
differences between different populations of students.

The Children We Are Leaving Behind: A Social Justice Reflection

The interview data from the present research study indicate that the ten participants of the
study experienced caring and supportive relationships in three key ecological contexts – family,
school, and community. The data also indicate that the academic success-orienting factors and
sub-factors emerging from this study were socialized into the research participants in all three of
these ecological contexts within the nurturing circle of caring and supportive relationships. These relationships nurtured internalization and robust agency in participants which oriented them towards academic success. This emerging insight mandates radical reflection that must, of necessity, be grounded in a critical conscious and social justice pedagogy if it is to effectively deconstruct, understand, and address the needs of our oppressed students in a racialized and marginalizing society – a society whose racialized systems and structures often undermine the agency of children who live in poverty. This transformative pedagogy begs the questions: How are the other children? How are the other children who do not experience high expectations? How are the other children who do not experience sufficient or meaningful caring and support? How are the other children who are not allowed to participate in sports teams, associations, clubs, advanced placement or college credit-bearing courses and more rigorous curricula because their grades are too low? How are the other children who do not dare to value education or to have an academic identity because they have learned that these opportunities are not for the likes of them? How are the other children who neither possess a positive racial or cultural identity nor receive positive racial socialization but, rather, are overwhelmed by an unrelenting cycle of systemic and structural racism and daily, racialized micro-aggressions and disapproval which entrap them in a downward spiral of anger, resentment, defiance, opposition, destructive choices, and a dispassionate justice system? How are the other children who never did or no longer believe in themselves or the utility of struggle, or in the schools entrusted with their education but, rather, have learned to be helpless and hopeless? How are the other children who never did or no longer believe in the purpose of setting future goals because they do not believe that such goals are attainable by them? How are the other children who see no sense in distinguishing between good and bad choices because they consciously or subconsciously believe that neither
would make a meaningful difference in their lives or to their immediate needs for survival? How are the other children who have no manifest desire to make anyone proud because no one is proud of them? How are the other children who do not push themselves because no one believes they can? How are the other children who do not feel a sense of belonging in school because the school neither understands them nor meets their needs? How are the other children who do not believe that they can? Whose tragedy is this?

The poor academic outcomes of children and adolescents living in poverty can neither be validly nor conscionably divorced from the racialized, systemic social problems that plague their families and communities (Noguera, 2008). An egregious number and “overwhelming pattern of risk factors are associated with impoverished families living in the ghetto” (Children’s Defense Fund, 1986, p. 416). Indeed, scholars in the field of resilience have found that racial minority status and socio-economic disadvantage, particularly being of African American descent, are risk factors. They have found that accompanying such status are debilitating “daily experiences of discriminatory behavior from individuals and institutions as well as political, occupational, and residential restrictions motivated by race” (Borman & Overman, 2004, p. 179; Rutter, 2013; Sameroff et al., 1987). Explicating succinctly the challenges faced daily by families and communities living in poverty, which severely impact their ability to provide robust caring and supportive contexts for their children, Freiberg (1993) asserted:

Poverty, underemployment, and unemployment, crime and drugs have destabilized inner city communities. Many inner city parents who are employed work more than one job, during the night shift, or weekends, and have little time or energy to support school programs that occur
during the evenings or weekends. Unemployed parents have few
resources to support their children’s school activities. These and other
factors have shattered the resilience of inner city families and diminished
their ability to focus on and support the education of their children (p. 366).

The present research findings bear testimony to how important it is that schools and communities
effectively empower students and their families with the infrastructure and supports that orient
students towards and mediate their academic success. An imperative, therefore, for future
research studies and for educators and policy makers would be to examine strategies for building
critical partnerships between families, schools, and communities that will a) provide effective
caring and supportive relationships for all students and b) empower and build the capacity of
such relationships to socialize the academic success-orienting factors uncovered by this study in
children and adolescents.

At the beginning of this research study, the positive deviance framework was utilized to
critically orient the research purpose and questions of this study by focusing on a few students
who are achieving academic success. This framework pertinently reiterates the need to
purposefully and intentionally utilize the insights from the few, successful students studied to
inform and develop policies and interventions that can facilitate the increased academic
achievement of the generality of students who are not yet finding such success. Finally, within
the context of educational research, it may be prudent to amend the term “positive deviance” to a
more robust terminology such as “successful exceptions”. This would remove the negative
connotation of deviance from the achievements of these students.
Appendix A

Interview Guide

Tell me about yourself.

Tell me about your beliefs and how they influence you.

Describe what is important to you.

Tell me about your values and how they influence you.

Tell me about your family.

Tell me about experiences in or with your family and how they affect or influence you.

Tell me about your school and the schools you have attended.

Describe your typical day in your school.

Tell me about your teachers.

Tell me about your community or neighborhood.

Tell me about any religious or spiritual beliefs you have and if and how they influence you.

Tell me about your race, how you feel about it, and your experiences relating to it.

Tell me about what your parents, family members, or other persons tell you about or do in relation to your race and racism and how these affect you.

Tell me about people, things, experiences or environments that could have negatively affected your school work and what you did about them.

Tell me about people, things, experiences, or environments that have positively affected your school work or contributed to your school success.
Appendix B

Research Participant Demographic Questionnaire

Name: _____________________________________ School: _________________________

Grade: ____________ Race: ______________________ Gender: ________________

GPA: _______________ SAT SCORE: _______________ ACT SCORE: _______________

AP/COLLEGE CREDIT COURSES Taken in Grades 9-12:

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Honors/Awards: _____________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Work: ______________________________________________________________________

Projected College Major: ______________________________________________________

Extra-Curricular Activities: _____________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Head of Household: ________________________________

Number of Persons in Household: ________ Free/Reduced Lunch: Yes  No  (Circle One)
Appendix C

Demographic Information of Research Participants

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<th>LR</th>
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<td>Yes</td>
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Appendix D

Informed Consent / Assent Form Log

Consent Form 1 - Parental Consent

Consent Form 2 - Adult Participant Consent (Person 18 years or older)

Assent Form 1 - Child Assent (Person under 18 years old)
Appendix E

Informed Consent Form (Parent)

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

TEACHING AND LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS
150 Huntington Hall • Syracuse NY 13244 • 315-443-2685

INFORMED CONSENT FORM (PARENT)

Title of Research Study: Pathways to School Success: An Examination of Perspectives of African American and Latino/a Low-Income Students on Factors That Facilitate Their School Success

My name is Uzo Unobagha and I am a Doctoral student at Syracuse University. I am currently in the process of writing a research dissertation for a Doctorate in Educational Leadership (Ed. D). My Syracuse University Professor and Advisor is Dr. Joseph B. Shedd who is the Head of the Educational Leadership Program at Syracuse University.

I am hereby requesting your consent to the participation of your child, __________, in my research study. Your child’s involvement in this study is voluntary so you and your child may choose to participate or not to participate. This letter will explain my research study to you and please feel free to ask questions about my research study if you have any. I will be happy to explain anything or any part of my study to you in detail if you so wish. You may contact me by phone at ________, by email at ________ or by mail at the address listed above.

The purpose of my research study is to find out and understand practices, behavior, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, or experiences that enable African American or Latino/a students from low-income families to achieve successful academic outcomes or to do well in school. I will need to interview your child on two separate days. Each interview will last for about one hour. Each interview
will be audio-recorded. The purpose of the audio-recording is to maintain accuracy in data collection and analysis. The audio-recorded information will be transcribed, coded, analyzed, and such analysis will be reported in the dissertation. The audio-recording will be erased at the completion of this research study. Dr. Joseph Shedd and I are the only ones who will have access to the audio-recording and transcripts of it. Your child is one of ten students selected for this research study. Your child has been selected because your child is African American or Latino/a, is from a low-income family, is at an urban high school, and has been identified by his/her school counselor as a very strong student, with a B average or better on his or her report card.

I will do everything I can to protect your child’s privacy and the confidentiality of the information that your child shares. Your child will not be identified by name or description, anywhere in the research documents, notes, or in the dissertation. I will not identify your child’s school and school district by name or description anywhere in my research documents or dissertation. The only persons who will have access to my study documents shall be myself, your child as participant, and Dr. Joseph B. Shedd. No personal information will be made public that would allow your child, yourself, your family members, or your child’s school to be publicly identified. We will keep your child’s study data as confidential as possible, with the exception of certain information that we would be required to report for legal or ethical reasons, such as situations of abuse, and/or intent to harm himself/herself or others.

Although I will do everything I can to keep all these promises, you and your child should know that there is always a small risk that your child might be publicly identified with some of his or her comments or information. There is a chance that he or she would be embarrassed if that happened, but that chance is not too great, because the questions I will ask and information I will obtain will not be really sensitive, and he or she may decline to answer any question I ask. If you do not want your child to take part in this research study, you have the right to refuse without penalty. If you decide to consent to your child’s participation in this research study and later no longer wish your child to continue, you have the right to withdraw from this research study at any time, without penalty.

The benefit of this research is that your child will be helping me as well as future researchers, teachers, and administrators to understand the factors that facilitate the academic success of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families. Too often researchers focus only on students who struggle or fail in school. My study will focus on students who are successful and what we have to learn from their experience. Such insights or understanding would help school districts and educators to develop and implement interventions, programs, and policies that could increase the academic learning outcomes of a greater number of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families. Finally, your child will not be paid for this study, but this study will not be at any cost to you or your child. I, too, am not receiving any payment for this study.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this research study, contact Dr. Joseph B. Shedd at _______ or __________. If you have any questions about your child’s rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at ___________. 
If you hereby consent to your child’s participation in this study, please sign two copies of this letter as a declaration of your consent, keep one for your own records, and return the second copy in the enclosed envelope. I thank you for your kind cooperation.

_____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

All my questions have been answered, I am 18 years of age or older, and I consent to my child’s participation in this research study. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Name of Child: _______________________________________  

[ ] I agree that my child may be interviewed and his/her interview may be audio recorded.

[ ] I agree that my child may be interviewed, but I do NOT agree for the interview to be audio recorded.

________________________      ____________________________      ______________
Signature of Parent/Guardian      Printed Name of Parent/Guardian                  Date

___________________________         __________________________      ____________
Signature of Researcher                    Printed Name of researcher                  Date
Appendix F

Informed Consent Form – Adult participant (Person 18 years or Older)

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

TEACHING AND LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS
150 Huntington Hall ● Syracuse NY 13244 ● 315-443-2685

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Study: Pathways to School Success: An Examination of Perspectives of African American and Latino/a Low-Income Students on Factors That Facilitate Their School Success.

My name is Uzo Unobagha and I am a Doctoral student at Syracuse University. I am currently in the process of writing a research dissertation for a Doctorate in Educational Leadership (Ed. D). My Syracuse University Professor and Advisor is Dr. Joseph B. Shedd who is the Head of the Educational Leadership Program at Syracuse University.

I am hereby requesting your consent to your participation in my research study. Your involvement in this study is voluntary so you may choose to participate or not to participate. This letter will explain my research study to you and please feel free to ask questions about my research study if you have any. I will be happy to explain anything or any part of my study to you in detail if you so wish. You may contact me by phone at ______, by email at __________ or by mail at the address listed above.

The purpose of my research study is to find out and understand practices, behavior, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, or experiences that enable African American or Latino/a students from low-income families to achieve successful academic outcomes or to do well in school. I will need to interview you on two
separate days. Each interview will last for about one hour. Each interview will be audio-recorded. The purpose of the audio-recording is to maintain accuracy in data collection and analysis. The audio-recorded information will be transcribed, coded, analyzed, and such analysis will be reported in the dissertation. The audio-recording will be erased at the completion of the research study. Dr. Joseph Shedd and I are the only ones who will have access to the audio-recording and transcripts of it. You are one of ten students selected for this research study. You have been selected because you are African American or Latino/a, are from a low-income family, are at an urban high school, and have been identified by your school counselor as a very strong student, with a B average in your report card.

I will do everything I can to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of the information that you share. You will not be identified by name or description, anywhere in my research documents, notes, or in my dissertation. I will not identify your school and school district by name or description anywhere in my research documents or dissertation. The only persons who will have access to my study documents shall be myself, yourself as participant, and Dr. Joseph B. Shedd. No personal information will be made public that would allow you or your family members, or school to be publicly identified. We will keep your study data as confidential as possible, with the exception of certain information that we would be required to report for legal or ethical reasons, such as situations of abuse, and/or intent to harm yourself or others.

Although I will do everything I can to keep all these promises, you should know that there is always a small risk that you might be publicly identified with some of your comments or information. There is a chance that you would be embarrassed if that happened, but that chance is not too great, because the questions I will ask and information I will obtain will not be really sensitive, and you may decline to answer any question I ask. If you do not want to take part in this research study, you have the right to refuse without penalty. If you decide to consent to your participation in this research study and later no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from this research study at any time, without penalty.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping me as well as future researchers, teachers, and administrators to understand the factors that facilitate the academic success of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families. Too often researchers focus only on students who struggle or fail in school. My study will focus on students who are successful and what we have to learn from their experience. Such insights or understanding would help school districts and educators to develop and implement interventions, programs, and policies that could increase the academic learning outcomes of a greater number of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families. Finally, you will not be paid for this study, but this study will not be at any cost to you. I, too, am not receiving any payment for this study.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this research study, contact Dr. Joseph B. Shedd at _____ or _______. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at __________.
If you hereby consent to your participation in this study, please sign two copies of this letter as a
declaration of your consent, keep one for yourself, and return the other in the enclosed envelope. I
thank you for your kind cooperation.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

All my questions have been answered, I am 18 years of age or older, and I wish to participate in this
research study. I have received a copy of this consent form.

[   ] I agree that I may be interviewed and my interview may be audio recorded.

[   ] I agree that I may be interviewed, but I do NOT agree for the interview to be audio recorded.

__________________________    ____________________________     ______________
Signature of Participant                 Printed Name of Participant                     Date

_______________________    _______________________________   _______________
Signature of researcher                 Printed Name of Researcher                        Date
Appendix G

Informed Consent (Assent) Form – Child (Person Under 18 years)

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

TEACHING AND LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS
150 Huntington Hall • Syracuse NY 13244 • 315-443-2685

INFORMED CONSENT (ASSENT) FORM (CHILD)

Title of Research Study: Pathways to School Success: An Examination of Perspectives of African American and Latino/a Low-Income Students on Factors That Facilitate Their School Success.

My name is Uzo Unobagha and I am a Doctoral student at Syracuse University. I am currently in the process of writing a research dissertation for a Doctorate in Educational Leadership (Ed. D). My Syracuse University Professor and Advisor is Dr. Joseph B. Shedd who is the Head of the Educational Leadership Program at Syracuse University.

I am hereby requesting your assent to your participation in my research study. Your involvement in this study is voluntary so you may choose to participate or not to participate. This letter will explain my research study to you and please feel free to ask questions about my research study if you have any. I will be happy to explain anything or any part of my study to you in detail if you so wish. You may contact me by phone at ______, by email at _________ or by mail at the address listed above.

The purpose of my research study is to find out and understand practices, behavior, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, or experiences that enable African American or Latino/a students from low-income families to achieve successful academic outcomes or to do well in school. I will need to interview you on two separate days. Each interview will last for about one hour. Each interview will be audio-recorded. The purpose of the audio-recording is to maintain accuracy in data collection and analysis. The audio-
recorded information will be transcribed, coded, analyzed, and such analysis will be reported in the dissertation. The audio-recording will be erased at the completion of the research study. Dr. Joseph Shedd and I are the only ones who will have access to the audio-recording and transcripts of it. You are one of ten students selected for this research study. You have been selected because you are African American or Latino/a, are from a low-income family, are at an urban high school, and have been identified by your school counselor as a very strong student, with a B average in your report card.

I will do everything I can to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of the information that you share. You will not be identified by name or description, anywhere in my research documents, notes, or in my dissertation. I will not identify your school and school district by name or description anywhere in my research documents or dissertation. The only persons who will have access to my study documents shall be myself, yourself as participant, and Dr. Joseph B. Shedd. No personal information will be made public that would allow you or your family members, or school to be publicly identified. We will keep your study data as confidential as possible, with the exception of certain information that we would be required to report for legal or ethical reasons, such as situations of abuse, and/or intent to harm yourself or others.

Although I will do everything I can to keep all these promises, you should know that there is always a small risk that you might be publicly identified with some of your comments or information. There is a chance that you would be embarrassed if that happened, but that chance is not too great, because the questions I will ask and information I will obtain will not be really sensitive, and you may decline to answer any question I ask. If you do not want to take part in this research study, you have the right to refuse without penalty. If you decide to consent to your participation in this research study and later no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from this research study at any time, without penalty.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping me as well as future researchers, teachers, and administrators to understand the factors that facilitate the academic success of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families. Too often researchers focus only on students who struggle or fail in school. My study will focus on students who are successful and what we have to learn from their experience. Such insights or understanding would help school districts and educators to develop and implement interventions, programs, and policies that could increase the academic learning outcomes of a greater number of African American and Latino/a students from low-income families. Finally, you will not be paid for this study, but this study will not be at any cost to you. I, too, am not receiving any payment for this study.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this research study, contact Dr. Joseph B. Shedd at _____ or _______. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at __________.
If you hereby assent to your participation in this study, please sign two copies of this letter as a declaration of your assent, keep one for yourself, and return the second copy in the enclosed envelope. I thank you for your kind cooperation.

All my questions have been answered and I wish to participate in this research study. I have received a copy of this assent form.

Name of Child: ____________________________________________________

[ ] I agree that I may be interviewed and my interview may be audio recorded.

[ ] I agree that I may be interviewed, but I do NOT agree for the interview to be audio recorded.

__________________________    ____________________________     ______________
Signature of Participant (Child)       Printed Name of Participant (Child)               Date

_______________________    _______________________________   _______________
Signature of researcher                 Printed Name of Researcher                        Date
Appendix H

IRB Approval Letter

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
MEMORANDUM

TO: Joseph Shedd

DATE: October 20, 2017

SUBJECT: Expedited Protocol Review - Approval of Human Participants
IRB #: 17-282

TITLE: Pathways to School Success: An Examination of Perspectives of African American and Latino/a Low-Income Students on Factors that Facilitate Their School Success

The above referenced protocol was reviewed by the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) and has been given expedited approval. The protocol has been determined to be of no more than minimal risk and has been evaluated for the following:

1. the rights and welfare of the individual(s) under investigation; 2. appropriate methods to secure informed consent; and

3. risks and potential benefits of the investigation.

The approval period is October 19, 2017 through October 18, 2018. A continuing review of this protocol must be conducted before the end of this approval period. Although you will receive a request for a continuing renewal approximately 60 days before that date, it is your responsibility to submit the information in sufficient time to allow for review before the approval period ends.

Enclosed are the IRB approved date stamped consent and/or assent document/s related to this study that expire on October 18, 2018. The IRB approved date stamped copy must be duplicated and used when enrolling new participants during the approval period (may not be applicable for electronic consent or research projects conducted solely for data analysis). Federal regulations require that each participant indicate their willingness to participate through the informed consent
process and be provided with a copy of the consent form. Regulations also require that you keep a copy of this document for a minimum of three years after your study is closed.

Any changes to the protocol during the approval period cannot be initiated prior to IRB review and approval, except when such changes are essential to eliminate apparent immediate harm to the participants. In this instance, changes must be reported to the IRB within five days. Protocol changes must be submitted on an amendment request form available on the IRB web site. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB within 10 working days of occurrence.

Thank you for your cooperation in our shared efforts to assure that the rights and welfare of people participating in research are protected.

Katherine McDonald
IRB Chair

DEPT: Teaching & Leadership, 150 Huntington Hall

STUDENT: Uzo Unobagha
References


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Tatum, B. (1997). Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria. New York: Basic


Curriculum Vita

Uzoamaka C. Unobagha

Objective: To nurture and equip students with knowledge and competencies to live robust and fulfilling lives as global citizens.

Work Experience:

2007 – Present: Vice-Principal, Syracuse City School District
2006 – 2007: Teacher: Career Specialist, Syracuse City School District
1993 -1995: Lecturer II, Commercial Law, University of Nigeria
1989 – 1990: Corporate Attorney, Icon Limited (Merchant Bankers), Lagos, Nigeria

Education:

9/1/2006: NYS School District Administrator Certificate (Permanent)
6/05 – 7/06: Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, MA. G.P.A. 4.00
6/96 – 5/98: NYS Elementary Education Certification (Pre-K-6)
  SUNY College at Oneonta, NY, G.P.A. 3.96
9/79 – 6/83: B. A. History/Archaeology, University of Nigeria, Nigeria
9/73 – 7/78: West African School Certificate (First Division),
  Federal Government College, Enugu, Nigeria

Published Works:

  (Contributing Author).
(2004). The milestones project. CA: Tricycle Press (Contributing Author),
  (Winner of Children’s Book Council Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People).
Awards:

Girl Scouts Foothills Council Woman of Courage, Confidence, and Character Award, 2006

Community Service:

2009 - Present – Member, LeMoyne College, Education Department Advisory Council.
2007 - 2008 – Founding Member, Onondaga County Community Coalition for Literacy
2003 - 2007 – Member, Board of Directors, YWCA of the Mohawk Valley, Utica, NY.
2005 - 2006 – Member, Board of Directors, Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees, Utica, NY.