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The presence and implications of societal, institutional, and personal influences on African American male achievement in school was examined in this study. Through in-depth qualitative research strategies, the researcher sought to ascertain the perceptions of 5 African American male students, who are struggling academically and behaviorally in school, regarding the influences they believe are impacting their school experiences. The data confirmed that no single factor is solely responsible for these students' struggles in school. However, there are factors stemming from the societal, institutional, and personal influences that collectively impact their school success. At the institutional and personal levels of influence, factors consist of the lack of engaging instruction, the absence of significant connections to school adults, a limited role of parental support with education, and the negative influence of peers to misbehave in school. Although only one student acknowledges the influence of societal factors related to his surroundings and the cost of success for African American students as a contributor to his lack of success in school, the societal influence lurked beneath the surface of all of the participants' experiences and beliefs.

THROUGH THEIR EYES: A LOOK AT ACHIEVEMENT AND SUCCESS
OF SELECTED AFRICAN AMERICAN
MALE STUDENTS

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends who encouraged and supported me through this journey. Particularly, to my mother and father who taught me that I can accomplish anything I want because the will and desire to succeed are within me. The pseudonym for the school in this dissertation is named after my father who died just before I switched my major from accounting to education. His values of hard work and commitment were instilled in me early in life and they continue to guide me today. I am thankful for my mother and the daily encouragement she provides me to persevere and reach my goals. To my special friends and colleagues who shared their thoughts and questions, for they helped true understanding to emerge out of this endeavor. Without the support from family and friends, the pursuit of this degree would have been nearly impossible. For their love, concern, and patience, I am forever grateful.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

“Reality depends on one’s perception of the world. Thus, although there is one school, each student perceives his or her experiences in that school differently. Reality exists in that individual perception” (Marcus, Gross, & Seefeldt, 1991, p. 364).

Ensuring social justice and opportunities of achievement for all students, especially historically underrepresented groups, has been my mission in life for many years. Concerned with issues like equal opportunity and treatment for all students, regardless of students’ social class, ethnicity, or family structure, I have always attempted to be cognizant of students’ perspectives. The purpose of this study was to listen to selected African American males who were not demonstrating success in school to see what could be gleaned from their perspectives. Examining their perceptions of the causes of this phenomena and understanding how they experience school was critical in identifying the issues and influences on their educations.

Students’ failures to learn and succeed do not occur out of thin air. More specifically, African American boys’ failures to achieve do not occur out of thin air. A review of literature on Black male achievement shows that not only do they lag behind their White counterparts in America, but also in Britain and Canada (Graham & Robinson, 2004; Smith, Schneider, & Ruck, 2005). Attention must be given to examining policies, practices, attitudes, and experiences that create such failure in schools (Christle,

Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Kagan, 1990; Nieto, 1999). Educators have many responsibilities. One of those responsibilities is to examine the reasons for the failure of students. Marian Wright Edelman (1992) sums up the purpose of education and echoes my belief of the responsibility of educators: “Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it” (pp. 9-10).

The decision to study African American males in middle school arises from personal interest in equity and social justice issues. Tied to that is my experience in inner city middle schools where I have been witness to struggling students, particularly African American males from low socioeconomic neighborhoods, who have demonstrated a lack of success in school. One cannot help but wonder why being Black and male puts students at risk for school failure (Davis, 2003; Noguera, 2003). For these reasons, my research is focused on a group of African American males who are struggling academically, demonstrating inappropriate behavior at school, and not putting forth effort to meet their academic potential. The research will seek to identify the influences, or the lack thereof, impacting these students’ success.

When factoring in other issues that potentially result from a lack of educational attainment, such as involvement in illegal activity and incarceration of African American males, it is easy to see that we cannot afford to gamble on whether or not these students will make it on their own. Winston-Salem, although not a huge metropolis compared to New York or Los Angeles, has its fair share of activities that compete with education for youth’s attention. The temptation of drugs, crime, gang membership, and other seductions lure individuals from any race or age group and offer alternatives to education.

Alarming statistics create a sense of urgency and responsibility for educators in reaching African American students in particular. Predictions based on steady incarceration rates reveal that 32% of African American males will likely serve time in state or federal prisons during the course of their lifetimes (U. S. Department of Justice, 2002). We are living in a country where twice as many African Americans live below the poverty line than Caucasians and where 40% of jail inmates are African American (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2002; U. S. Department of Justice, 2002). African Americans have held the lead in the percentage of people unemployed for three years consecutively (U. S. Department of Labor, 2003). Such statistics, when coupled with economic consequences of failing to adequately educate all students, paint a bleak picture for a large segment of our population. Gibbs (1988) goes so far as to say that African American males are an “endangered species.” She uses a dictionary definition to define this term as “a class of individuals having common attributes and designated by a common name [which is] in danger or peril of probable harm or loss” (p. 1).

It is critical that struggling African American students are identified early to help avoid the dismal scenarios. The implications of failing to identify and assist struggling students at the earliest point possible not only have an immediate effect on students but also carry long-term consequences for students, communities, and the nation (Gibbs, 1988; Lee, 2002; President’s Committee, 1997). The educational and societal implications of not reaching this group of students are worthy of great concern.

The lack of both academic progress and motivation to learn are symptoms of a larger problem. Speaking as an educator, it is not uncommon to get caught up looking at

behaviors children exhibit and failing to see the real problems. Conversations may take place between the teacher and the student or the student and an administrator on a superficial level inquiring as to why they are misbehaving or failing, but the deliberate search for the root causes is often set aside to deal with the immediate problem of behavior or unwillingness to learn. Students who are not succeeding academically often become “casualties of the educational systems that cannot see them because their problems remain invisible” (Nieto, 2004, p. 17). Classroom interventions, parent contacts, disciplinary consequences, counseling, and tutoring are a few of the strategies educators have implemented to improve student learning and chances of success. However, with some students it does not appear that we have scratched the surface of the underlying issues.

Without getting to the root causes for the underachievement of African American males, another year goes by and they fall further behind their academically excelling peers, lowering their chances of passing their grades or scoring at proficiency on the required yearly standardized tests. On a larger scale, this “silent catastrophe,” as a member of the London Parliament refers to the underachievement of Black male students, lays the foundation for impediments to quality of life, earned income, and other obstacles in these individuals’ lives, as well as implications for the greater society (Graham & Robinson, 2004, p. 654).

For these reasons, I chose to study the influences, if any, impacting young African American men’s educational experiences. Selecting students within my own school served the dual purpose of examining influences from the perspective of students while

also benefiting from the identification of influences at Wilson Andrew that are impacting students' educational experiences.

No easy solutions have prevailed to get these students back on track. Also, no information is readily accessible of how, where, and why they veered off course. Not setting out to place blame on the school or the students themselves for their lack of success in school, insight into the influences impacting their educational experiences is the desired outcome.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Why is it that being Black and male increases one's chances of underachievement in school? Is it coincidental that there appears to be a connection or is it the result of overt or covert practices, policies, and perceptions that bring together two unrelated characteristics and cause them to appear connected? Many factors and theories exist that attempt to explain the phenomenon of underachievement among African American males. Whether they relate to race, culture, family, school, or personal factors, there is no easy or adequate response to this phenomenon.

A search of the literature shows a preponderance of quantitative research on topics of equity and social justice in relation to student achievement and success. Much of this literature is from the perspectives of educators and the researchers. Existing literature as it relates to the underachievement of African American males will be examined. Three theories found in the literature will be described as existing explanations. However, the bulk of the chapter will address the impact of societal, institutional, and personal influences on student achievement.

The Missing Student Perspective

Literature discussing teacher practices, treatment, and perceptions (Babad, Bernieri, & Rosenthal, 1991; Nieto, 1999), the achievement gap (Lee, 2002; North Carolina Commission, 2001; North Carolina Justice, 2000; Viadero & Johnston, 2000),

and basic structural components of schools (Kozol, 1991; Nevine, 2001; Nieto, 1999; Wood, 1992) suggests links to student achievement from the adult point of view, not students'. Quantitative studies analyze student survey and observational data and make predictions about student-perceived support and treatment in school (Baker, 1999; Ma, 2003; Marcus et al., 1991; Voelkl, 1995; Wentzel, 1997) and teacher expectations (Babad et al., 1991; Weinstein, Marshall, Sharp, & Botkin, 1987).

Often relying on quantitative methods, the collective student voice in much of this literature is all but silent even though the impact of each of these issues weighs heaviest on students. By studying the issue from the students' perspectives, other areas of needed research can be exposed. Although much of this existing literature does not come from in-depth qualitative research from students' perspectives, it does provide a foundation on which to launch an exploration into the influences on students' educational success.

Theories of African American Male Underachievement in School

Also revealed in a search of the literature are three interesting models that attempt to explain African American underachievement and student disconnection. The *frustration-self-esteem model* (Finn, 1989), the *attitude-achievement model* (Mickelson, 1990) and a *theory of voluntary and involuntary minorities* (Ogbu, 1990; 1992) use different theories and approaches to explain the lack of achievement of students.

Self-esteem is an important predictor of student belonging and attitude toward school (Ma, 2003). Thus, models that attempt to explain the connection between self-esteem and achievement are important contributors to educational research. The frustration-self-esteem model is one model that explains students' withdrawal from

school and the resulting effect it has on achievement (Finn, 1989). The pattern of events begins with a lack of achievement or academic success earlier in a student's school career followed by the student's questioning his own abilities resulting in an impaired self-view. Often blaming the school, the student begins to demonstrate oppositional behavior distancing him from schooling. The lowered self-esteem manifests in coping mechanisms that cause the student to withdraw from education to avoid further frustration or embarrassment. The coping mechanisms are a cover for the student's decreased self-esteem due to previous achievement shortcomings and may come in the form of disruptive behavior or skipping class. The symptoms of the students' problems get treated while the initial problems go unnoticed due to the time spent disciplining the students' behaviors. The downward spiral of student disconnection from school is perpetuated by little positive reinforcement from teachers due to the behaviors they exhibit.

Another model attempts to explain African American students' lack of achievement in school by examining the discrepancies between their abstract and concrete attitudes toward education (Mickelson, 1990). Mickelson suggests that all students hold two sets of attitudes toward schooling. These attitudes, abstract and concrete, vary according to race and class. Abstract attitudes, as defined by Mickelson, are reflections of the dominant ideology of the link between education and opportunity. In this realm of thinking, education is the ticket to success. Concrete attitudes, on the other hand, are dependent upon the individual's lived experience and reality of seeing that opportunities are not equal for all individuals. Women, people of color, or those from low socioeconomic classes, may have discrepancies between their abstract and concrete

attitudes based on their perceptions of unequal rewards and opportunities being tied to race, gender, or class.

Mickelson (1990) critiques existing literature due to its heavy emphasis on students' abstract attitudes toward school, resulting in a paradox of underachievement. By comparing African American students' abstract attitudes of the importance of education to their underachievement in school, the paradox seems significant. In her study, a substantial difference existed between African American students' abstract attitudes and concrete attitudes, which brings up the question of how African American students can believe education to be so important yet they are not achieving. Mickelson's research suggests the comparison should take place not between students' abstract attitudes and achievement, but between concrete attitudes and achievement.

A smaller difference existed between White students' abstract and concrete attitudes toward school (Mickelson, 1990). One can assume that the smaller difference is due to White students' reality being closely aligned to their abstract attitudes that education leads to promising opportunity and success. If studies focused on the comparison between African Americans' concrete attitudes and achievement, instead of comparing abstract attitudes and achievement, Mickelson (1990) suggests that the so-called attitude-achievement paradox would disappear.

John Ogbu offers a third model found within a review of the research. Ogbu (1990; 1992) proposes that racial minority students' learning and school experiences are affected by their type of minority group, as defined by Ogbu. He identifies three groups of minorities: autonomous, voluntary, and involuntary.

Autonomous minorities, such as Jews and Mormons, are minorities in numbers only and were not the main focus of Ogbu's discussion (Ogbu, 1990; 1992). Voluntary or immigrant minorities are those who came to the United States by choice. Possibly moving in search of a better life, more opportunities, or political freedom, voluntary minorities strive to maintain their group identity while accommodating the new country and its mainstream ways in order to succeed. Involuntary minorities are those who did not come to the United States by choice, but were forced through slavery, colonization, or conquest. As a result, they are more distrustful of Caucasian people and to systems such as schooling, which operate within White, middle-class ways.

Differences between voluntary and involuntary minorities provide reasoning for the different outlooks the two groups have with regard to education and achievement. One difference exists in the type of pressure placed on individuals by their peers and community groups (Ogbu, 1992). Voluntary minorities are encouraged to make good grades. In contrast, involuntary minorities may hear encouraging words to make good grades; however, they receive less pressure from the community and their families to do so (Ogbu, 1992).

Involuntary minorities experience sustained problems in school, whereas voluntary minorities initially struggle but overcome the problems through accommodation and hard work. Ogbu (1990; 1992) asserts that some involuntary minorities are unwilling to accommodate the behaviors associated with White culture and refuse to pay that price for success for fear of peer or social isolation. Ogbu (1990) is careful to state that these patterns do not hold true for each racial minority person.

However, he affirms that patterns have emerged through his research of voluntary and involuntary minorities' responses to schooling.

Accusations of acting White or not remaining loyal to their race work to distance some involuntary minorities from schooling in order to maintain their collective identity (Ogbu, 1990). Ogbu (2004) discusses African Americans' responses to the burden of acting White and grounds his discussion in the historical context of acting White as compared to a more modern view. Years ago during the days of slavery, the burden of acting White consisted of the expectation for Black individuals to behave and talk as "defined for them by the Whites," which was different from how Whites actually behaved and talked (p. 14). A more modern definition of acting White consists of the abandonment of "Black cultural and dialect frames of reference to behave and talk primarily according to White frames of reference" (p. 21). Ogbu asserts that some African American individuals see this as necessary to successfully navigate White controlled establishments, such as educational institutions (pp. 21-22). Opposing the notion of adopting White attitudes and behaviors is considered resistance.

Each of these theories, in addition to the other factors seemingly connected to the underachievement of African American males, can be sorted into three categories, or influences as framed by Nieto (1999; 2004). These categories, societal, institutional, and personal, provide background information and the contextual framework that guided the research and provides the mechanism through which to analyze and interpret the data collected in this study.

Influences on Education

“The way students are thought about and treated by society and consequently by the schools they attend and the educators who teach them is fundamental in creating academic success or failure” (Nieto, 1999, p. 167). This statement summarizes three levels that influence education. Societal, institutional, and personal levels of influence affect policy, practice, perception, and daily interaction between educators and students. One of the initial purposes of the study was to identify the connection, if any, between the selected students’ performance in school and the presence of these three influences.

Societal Influence

The societal level of influence targets racism in general, as well as inequitable funding practices that increase the likelihood of academic failure (Nieto, 1999). Schools and school systems are a microcosm of society. Unfortunately, societies have a history of distributing rewards and privileges inequitably among different races, genders, and classes (Finn, 1989; Kozol, 1991; Nieto, 1999). The same history of discriminatory practices and opportunity can be found in the educational system. Their presence may be seen in society’s failure to provide racial minority students access to a quality education or in missed opportunities and unequal rewards because of job ceilings or other discriminatory mechanisms (Finn, 1989; Fordham, 1996; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1992; 2004). As a result, African American students may put forth less effort due to their internalization that hard work will not pay off due to their race (Mickelson, 1990).

Other societal influences lead to discrimination due to tainted perceptions of African Americans where the mere mention of race paints a picture of inferiority and

superiority, with assumptions regarding ability and intelligence (Fordham, 1996; Noguera, 2003; Ogbu, 2004). Decades of societal discrimination issues lay the foundation for unequal treatment, perceptions, and prejudices that trickle over into schools and into the relationships among students and relationships between students and teachers.

Although progress has been made in the 50 years since *Brown v. Board of Education* imposed integrated schooling, more work is required to change the practices, attitudes, and beliefs within the walls of schools and in society in general.

Such societal discrimination has resulted in finger pointing in the past and to some extent, in the present. These views espouse that school failure is due to students' cultures or characteristics the students lack. Certain factors have been associated with an increased risk of failure such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, family structure, and background (Ford & Harris, 1996; Noguera, 2003). Although these factors may have an impact on student achievement in various ways, they alone are not the causes of student failure (Nieto, 2004). Commonly referred to as deficit theories, these explanations for students' struggles in school are an attempt to place blame on students, their families, or their cultures for lacking certain qualities, characteristics, or experiences and do not consider the roles schools or educators may play in contributing to educational inequities (Nieto, 2004).

Status problems created by the marking or labeling of a group of people as different from the remainder of society causes the inferior group to be a "distinct segment from the rest of the population" (Ogbu, 2004, p. 4). In the United States, African Americans, considered involuntary minorities under Ogbu's (1990; 1992) classification,

were created as a distinct group through slavery (Ogbu, 2004). Unfortunately, this distinction has persisted over time and is still alive in today's society, although it has weakened. The inferior groups' responses may consist of conforming to the ways of the dominant group, which are accompanied by accusations of acting White. Although considered a societal influence, its presence is also seen at the institutional and personal levels.

Expectations of students fitting into a mold and knowing the rules of the game in school, as well as understanding the ramifications of doing well in school through the eyes of their African American peers, the institutional portion is the offspring of the influence born in the greater society. Without understanding the concept of acting White and locating the roots of the expectations of holding true to one's cultural identity and the significance it has in the community, one cannot begin to understand the psychological and social pressures placed on African American students (Ogbu, 1990; 2004).

At the personal level, depending on students' peer groups, pressure is placed on students to either seek out achievement in school or resist doing well in school in order to maintain the connection to their racial groups, communities, and peers. Although stemming from the influence of society, the manifestation of the accusation of acting White is played out in the institutional and personal levels of influence.

Inequitable funding practices are another form of the societal influence on schools. The prevalence of low socioeconomic schools, serving mostly students of color and receiving less than equitable resources, is a common thread in the literature. Jonathan Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities* and Nevine's (2001) production of *Lalee's Kin*

portray how inequitable school facilities plague many lower socioeconomic communities, which also typically consist of a minority enrollment. Kozol paints vivid mental illustrations of inadequate facilities in an East St. Louis school system, where stories of raw sewage flowing through the kitchen, science labs without running water, restrooms without doors, toilet seats, or tissue, are not uncommon.

In the HBO documentary, *Lalee's Kin* (Nevine, 2001), an economically deprived community and school system in the Mississippi Delta suffers from the long-lasting effects of generational poverty caused by the mechanization of the cotton industry. Inadequate funding for the schools in and around the Delta compounds the problem, leaving the playing field less than level for this community. The disparity issues in school funding and socioeconomic status of the communities are not only present in the examples from Kozol and Nevine; they can be found in many school systems across the United States. Fortunately, such extreme conditions do not exist in the research site or county.

Institutional Influence

The institutional level of influence on students' educations encompasses biased school policies and practices that result in the exclusion and alienation of some students (Graham & Robinson, 2004; Nieto, 1999; Ogbu, 1992). Schools operate within established policies and practices, some of which may promote failure of marginalized groups. Institutional discrimination occurs when students are excluded or deprived of opportunities within the normal operations of the school. Whether intentional or unintentional, the effects of such practices are equally detrimental to students.

Common themes in the literature are the inequitable distribution of funds at the school system and school levels, lack of opportunity for some populations of students, and a curriculum not representative of African American contributions or influences (Ford, 1993; Ford & Harris, 1996; Fordham, 1996; Nieto, 1999). Literature is full of statements regarding minority students attending mostly urban schools, receiving less financial support, less qualified teachers, fewer chances of taking advanced courses, and facing harsher disciplinary action, which constitutes an embedded pattern of institutional racism (Christle et al., 2005; Crosby, 1999; Hunter & Donahoo, 2003; North Carolina Justice, 2000; Viadero & Johnston, 2000).

Schools primarily function within a middle-class culture of rules and procedures (Delpit, 1995; Fordham, 1996; Nieto, 1999; Ogbu, 1990). This “culture of power” sets the stage for some students to automatically fit in while others are at a disadvantage due to a lack of knowledge, experience, or willingness to conform to middle-class norms (Delpit, 1995; Ogbu, 1992). “Some students reach the schoolhouse door with the officially sanctioned language, culture, and background experiences and they are therefore more privileged from the very outset to succeed in the school setting” (Nieto, 1999, p. 33).

These students, who come to school with the officially sanctioned language, culture, and experiences, may be said to possess cultural capital. Often stemming from one’s belonging to the dominant social group, cultural capital includes the “acquired tastes, values, languages, and dialects, or the educational qualifications” some students possess (Nieto, 1999, p. 54). Based heavily on students’ exposures outside of the

classroom, some students arrive at school with a “built-in privilege” that others unfortunately do not possess (p. 55).

Students’ responses to this uneven playing field may come in the form of resistance. Resistance theory indicates a conscious resistance to that which reflects White culture or behavior. Concerned with having to give up their own cultural frames of reference, resistance is a strategy some African Americans use to maintain their collective identity and resist against adopting ways associated with White individuals (Brophy, 1997; Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1992, 2004).

Resistance to school may manifest in inattention in class, refusal to do work, and misbehavior (Nieto, 2004). Fordham’s (1996) study of resistance at Capital High School in Washington, D.C. found two responses to resistance. The high-achieving students resisted through conformity and the underachieving students resisted through avoidance. In general, the African American students at Capital High School reported the existence of the idea that they are still looked upon as less intelligent than White individuals and Fordham suggests they have internalized that belief.

High-achieving students at Capital High School resisted the dominant ideology through conformity, which sometimes meant disproving other’s beliefs of African Americans by outperforming them and exceeding their expectations. The students realized that their pursuit of the American dream might be compromised by their racial identity. However, their desires to achieve and give credit to their ancestors helped them overcome their doubts. They acknowledged the accusation of acting White and responded by asserting that they are defying the expectations of the mainstream society. They

attempted to live in both worlds, the world of school achievement with dominant group norms while remaining rooted in the African American community of peers and fictive kinship (Fordham, 1996).

The underachieving students at Capital High School resisted the dominant ideology through avoidance. They resisted compromising their “Black Self” because of its high value in their fictive kinship (Fordham, 1996). In their opinions, academic achievement compromises this “Self” and kinship.

Although still resisting that which reflects White culture, some students choose to go along with it for the sake of being successful. Students adopting this stance, accommodation without assimilation, attempt to live in two worlds simultaneously (Ogbu, 2004). Adopting what they believe to be White ways of talking and acting in situations where it is deemed necessary to get ahead while maintaining their identity and ways of talking and behaving in their own communities, some African American students choose to accommodate White ways without assimilating to them or forfeiting their collective identity. Price (2000) refers to this as accommodation and critique. In his study, critique came in the form of students’ realizations and disagreement with the school’s lack of attention to African American history, however each student in the study was accommodating in that he remained committed to earning good grades on his route to a high school diploma.

With such emphasis placed on middle-class norms, some students are at a disadvantage (Ladson-Billings, 1994). It has been suggested that when African American students assimilate to or accommodate these middle-class norms, they put themselves at

risk of being ostracized from their same race peers and lose their sense of community (Ford, 1993; Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1990; 1992; 2004). Minority students must often choose between maintaining their identities and connection to their peers and pursuit of academic success. Accusations of acting White place additional pressure on African American students and often encourage them to fall short of their abilities to save face with their same race peers (Ford, 1993; Nieto, 2004; Noguera, 2003; Ogbu, 1990; 2004).

In Price's (2000) study of the lives of 6 male African American high school students, one student admitted that he would act White and talk properly to get ahead. This belief held by some that African American students must give up friends of color and associate within circles of White students to succeed shows the manifestations of societal and institutional pressures of assimilation to White, middle-class ways, as the road to success.

Another example of an institutional influence is access to courses and quality instruction. Inequitable practices of course selection that group students by ability and often leave African American students with less access to higher-level courses is an institutional influence on students' educations (Bireda, 2000; North Carolina Commission, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Ogbu, 1992; Reed, 1988). Darling-Hammond (1997) insists that this practice of grouping students has created a form of "education apartheid" in integrated schools (p. 267). Beginning early in one's career, a student's chances of exiting the lower track classes for higher course placement dwindle. In schools that have attempted to dismantle the tracking systems, little progress has been made in increasing the number of African American students in higher-level courses.

Instruction for African American students in predominantly African American schools is often found consisting of low-level instruction by the least well prepared teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Terms such as “watering down” the curriculum are tossed around to imply that because of students’ race or backgrounds, some students are not capable of achieving much beyond a simplified curriculum that focuses on basic instruction (Nieto, 1999; Nieto 2004). Some schools and teachers do not believe that all students can benefit from curriculum and instruction that engages students to think, reflect, and explore which often leaves African American students to basic instruction and curricular offerings (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Although these factors exist at the institutional level, their presence is visible at the personal level through interactions between teachers and students and in teachers’ expectations of students’ capabilities as interpreted through the cultural lens of teachers. Entrenched in a system that has altered their perceptions of their abilities, students begin to question their own intelligence and capabilities and when given the opportunity to escape, elect to stay in their current tracks and comfort zones (Viadero, 2000; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002).

Personal Influence

The personal level of influence plays a major role in education on the part of both students and teachers. The personal influence represents relationships and beliefs (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 1999; Reed, 1988). Relationships between students and between teachers and students are significant in their influence on students’ educational experiences. Beliefs and attitudes of the teachers toward students as well as students’ attitudes toward the teachers are a part of the personal influence. Various characteristics influence these

relationships and attitudes, such as race and socioeconomic status (Gibbs, 1988).

Students' home lives, family structure, and support network are also factors in the personal influence on the students' education but are beyond the scope of the current study.

Involuntarily and without conscious awareness, adults and children interpret information through their cultural lenses (Brantlinger, 1994; Delpit, 1995). These lenses filter what is seen based on individuals' backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs. Unaware of the lens, these unconscious views are simply dismissed as the way it is. Initially, it may be difficult for individuals to see inequities or discriminatory practices imposed on others, especially for those in a culture of power and entitlement (Darling-Hammond, 2002). Educators may not even realize that their actions or beliefs toward certain student groups are differential or even noticeable.

Two of the common themes in the literature regarding the personal level of influence on education are perceived teacher treatment and student belonging. Babad et al. (1991) examined the link between teachers' expectations and students' performance with fourth, seventh, and tenth grade students. Their findings strongly suggest that students are capable of perceiving differential teacher treatment and teachers' expectations of students. Without witnessing overt teachers' actions, students were able to accurately predict teacher caring and teacher expectancy from teachers' body language and facial expressions while they talked to and about high and low-achieving students.

A study conducted in an urban, low-income, all African American elementary school found that students were aware of and impacted by the presence of a supportive,

caring environment and by interactions with teachers (Baker, 1999). Students, who were sorted into two categories, those satisfied with school and those dissatisfied with school, gave accounts of differential school experiences, teacher-student relationships, and social support. The highly satisfied group perceived a more positive, caring environment and more social support than the less satisfied group.

Some studies suggest that African American males perceive lower expectations from their teachers and receive more negative feedback than other students (Marcus et al., 1991; Simpson & Erickson, 1983). Others suggest that students in general are motivated to do well in the classroom when they perceive their teachers are caring (Nieto, 1999; 2004; Wentzel, 1997).

Realizing the weight of educators' impact on the personal and institutional influences, educators are in a prime position to ensure that the impact is positive. Steele (1992) cites James Comer's work on building relationships in schools as "establish(ing) valuing optimistic atmospheres in which a child can 'identify' with learning" (p. 20). A negative experience in a classroom or a negative comment by a teacher can have a substantial impact on a student's motivation to learn. Personal experience proves that years later, negative comments or experiences harbor in the mind casting shadows of doubt on one's competence and potential. These "paralyzing experiences" can influence individuals throughout their adult lives (Armstrong, 1994, p. 23). Research on motivational factors with hard to reach students cites quality relationships between adults and youth as the most important component of successful programs (McCombs & Pope, 1994).

Belonging or involvement in school is a factor commonly cited with student success in school. Goodenow and Grady (as cited in Ma, 2003) define sense of belonging as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported in the school and social environment” (p. 340). Within the body of research on student belonging, Xin Ma’s (2003) survey of 13,000 middle school students found that students’ sense of belonging was more influenced by school climate, which is largely controlled by the school staff, rather than by school size and socioeconomic status of the students. School climate was defined as teachers’ and students’ value of academic success, the expectations they held, student compliance to school rules, and parent involvement.

Price (2000) pointed out a disturbing omission from the student interviews in his study of 6 young African American men. The students did not mention positive relationships with teachers in high school. The noticeable absence of quality relationship with teachers in the lives of the young men he studied is troubling. These students fondly recalled elementary and middle school teachers, but saw high school teachers only as the deliverers of instruction and the distributors of grades. Stronger relationships with their teachers may have enhanced their connections to the curriculum and to school in general.

Particularly important for middle-level educators is Anderman’s (2003) finding that middle school students’ sense of belonging declines during their stay in middle school but is somewhat tempered by prior school achievement and the presence of a supportive classroom environment. None of this research suggests that school climate alone directly impacts achievement. However, it does influence other factors that affect

student achievement. Although a weak link exists between academic achievement and the presence of a warm, supportive school atmosphere, evidence does exist regarding the connection between this atmosphere and students' willingness to participate in school (Voelkl, 1995). The atmosphere present in schools is connected to student participation, influences students' sense of belonging, and in turn impacts student achievement.

In order to teach for social justice, the weight of educators' attitudes and beliefs about students on students' feelings of self-worth and intelligence must be acknowledged. Additionally, the creation of a positive atmosphere is essential in establishing relationships between teachers and students, enhancing students' sense of belonging to school, and willingness to participate in school and has a direct impact on academic achievement. What takes place in schools between educators and students is on the front line and can have the most immediate effects on students' achievement and experiences in school.

Interviewing students and ascertaining their school experiences and perceptions helped identify some of the factors impacting their academic achievement and sense of belonging in school. Varying degrees of societal, and especially institutional and personal influences were found to be contributors to students' challenges in school.

We must continue to tap into students' experiences and consider the realities within the walls of schools from the perspectives of students. With this in mind, this study investigated the following questions:

- I. What are the causes of the apparent lack of school success for selected African American students?
 - A. How do the selected African American students experience school?
 1. What are the school experiences that may have contributed to their lack of success in school?
 2. Do they feel disconnected from school? Why?
 - B. What are the societal, institutional, and personal factors that impact these students' lives?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The focus of the study is to understand the participants' experiences in school through their perceptions. Therefore, qualitative research methods that allow participants the opportunity to share their stories were used. Maher (2001) frames the need for this study by stating, ". . . perhaps it is worth taking the time to look beyond an adolescent's immediate reaction to a situation, person, text, or discussion to see what underlying factors may be contributing to this social posturing" (p. 208). In order to conduct a study to access the lived experiences and socially created perceptions of the identified African American boys, in-depth qualitative principles were used (Chafetz, 2004; Cooper, 2003; Mertens, 1998).

Qualitative research puts a face on participants' experiences when the researcher interacts one-on-one with students and searches for entry into understanding their relationships and world of lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Janesick, 2000; Mertens, 1998). In such research, individuals' experiences, as understood through their words and their eyes, constitute the backbone of the study and are thus empowering to them (Chafetz, 2004; Janesick, 2000).

By design, qualitative research can explore the presence of relationships and the individual's construction of reality. Both qualitative and quantitative research provide valuable data; however, qualitative research comes closer to capturing the participants'

perspectives through interviews and observations (De Groot, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Key Concepts

When conducting a study on school success, it is critical to understand what constitutes school success and disconnection. Additionally, when examining such a concept from students' perspectives, the researcher realized that students might hold a different definition of school success. Therefore, a preliminary definition was used at the outset of the study. However, students' definitions of success, which will be discussed in the analysis section, matched the researcher's initial definition.

Apparent school success in this study refers to the participants' demonstration of academic and behavioral achievement through evidence collected on report cards, standardized test data, and daily class participation. Underachievement in this study is defined by discrepancies between yearly standardized test scores and students' grades, implying that participants are capable of earning passing grades but are not performing up to their potential.

The participants in this study may be described as disconnected from school. The characteristics used to describe the disconnection, or lack of school success, were used as selection criteria for the student sample. Student disconnection in this study refers to students' lack of academic progress, visible signs of diminished academic effort, and difficulty in meeting school and classroom behavior expectations.

During the course of the study, data collected from students challenged this view of disconnection. The researcher acknowledged the potential that a student could say he

feels connected to school despite his lack of academic progress and ability to successfully navigate the behavioral expectations of the classroom and school. Attention is given to this discrepancy in the data analysis and findings sections.

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in an inner city middle school in Winston-Salem, North Carolina that serves 540 students in grades 6-8. The pseudonym, Wilson Andrew Middle School, will be used to identify the school to further protect the confidentiality of the students and the research site. The student makeup of Wilson Andrew is 61.5% African American with African American males accounting for just under one-third of the school's student body. The remaining students are 20% Hispanic, 14.5% Caucasian, and 4% multiracial or other. Serving a majority of low socioeconomic status families, 82% of students receive free or reduced meal prices under the federally subsidized meal program, which is based on family income.

As a result of the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced meal prices at Wilson Andrew, the school is identified as a Title I school, a federal classification, and an Equity + school, which is a local classification. As a result, the school receives an additional allocation of funds to be used for tutoring, professional development, and the purchase of instructional materials.

As a whole, the school has struggled academically to perform up to state and national standards. Each year since 2000, the number of students scoring at proficiency and the school's overall composite score has increased. However, the school has not met the expected state growth standard in 6 years.

End-of-grade test data (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2005) show that the African American males in the school lag behind the state average for African American males in reading and math. Within the school, African American male students have the lowest percentage of passing scores on the reading and math end-of-grade tests compared to all other subgroups, except for students in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program. In 2005, just over half of the African American males passed their end-of-grade tests in reading and math compared to 73% of White males and 65% of Hispanic males. Although still not achieving at levels equal to their male counterparts of other races, the percentage of African American males passing their end-of-grade tests has increased over the last two years.

Student Selection

As opposed to targeting all African American males in the school, a subgroup of African American males was identified using selected criteria. The criteria identified African American males who have demonstrated some of the following variables: little academic motivation, poor grades in core classes such as language arts and math, nonproficient score on end of grade standardized tests, and behaviors resulting in office referrals. To increase the likelihood of identifying school characteristics within Wilson Andrew that have impacted these students' disconnection from school, only students who had attended the school for at least one full year were eligible for the sample.

The selection process began with all African American males in the school and eliminated sixth grade males due to the researcher's role as an administrator within the school assigned to work with sixth graders. Next, the seventh and eighth grade African

American males who had not attended Wilson Andrew for at least one year were eliminated. Students were then eliminated if they had a clean discipline record. Of the students who remained, students were eliminated if they scored proficient on the previous year's state end-of-grade standardized tests and maintained at least a 2.0 grade point average in their four core classes. The core classes include language arts, math, science, and social studies. This reduced the sample to 33 African American male students in seventh or eighth grade who had attended Wilson Andrew for at least one year. These students either did not pass the previous year's end-of-grade tests or held below a 2.0 grade point average in their core classes and had received disciplinary referrals to the office.

Consent forms were mailed to the homes of the 33 students and an identical copy was given to each student by a third party. To eliminate the possibility of students feeling pressured to participate because of the researcher's position as a school administrator, a third party was given the responsibility of distributing and collecting assent and consent forms from students. This individual signed a confidentiality agreement that she would not disclose any information pertaining to students who were invited or selected to participate in the research. Signed consent forms were returned by 22 students. After reducing the sample to 22 students, academic motivation was assessed based on students' self-report surveys and conversations with teachers regarding student effort toward meeting work and behavior expectations.

The self-report survey consisted of eleven statements to which students responded (see Appendix A). Students responded to each statement by indicating that they strongly

agree, somewhat agree, strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, or do not know. To ensure student understanding of the eleven survey statements, the survey was piloted with students not affiliated with the study. Their feedback resulted in changing the wording of statements to accommodate reading abilities, comprehension, and age-appropriate terminology. The 22 students in the initial sample completed the survey individually to protect their anonymity. The data collected by these surveys were analyzed by the researcher to identify participants who could offer valuable and relevant data and to ascertain students' perceptions of societal, institutional, and personal influences on their schooling.

Teachers of the 22 students were asked for their input on each student's effort toward meeting academic and behavior expectations. Teachers also provided an idea of each student's frequency of work completion. To prevent teachers from knowing exactly which students were included, names of other students not in the study sample were included in these discussions.

Using the survey data in conjunction with teachers' records and input, the study group was narrowed to 13. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select students who would best help understand the problem of underachievement among identified African American male students and its connection, if any, to the three aforementioned influences. All except one of these students had responses on their surveys that piqued the researcher's interest. Examples of such responses were answers that alluded to dislike of school or teachers or that pointed to a lack of effort or success. In each case, teachers' input also pointed to these students' lack of effort in reaching academic and/or behavior

expectations. Additionally, these students showed evidence of failure to turn in work and low grade point averages (GPA) ranging from 0 – 1.75 at the end of the first nine weeks of school. The one student who was the exception responded in agreement to all survey statements; however, he showed questionable academic effort in class and had a 1.25 GPA at the end of the first quarter.

The teacher input on 5 of the 13 students caused them to stand apart from the rest of the group. These five students demonstrated a more consistent lack of effort toward meeting behavioral and academic expectations of teachers, whereas the others showed inconsistent effort. These five students became the study group, leaving the remaining eight students as alternates who would be called upon to offset such occurrences as students withdrawing from the study, transferring, or not yielding data relevant to the purpose of the study.

Near the end of the study, students were asked to select pseudonyms to protect their identities. Previously being referred to as student #1, student #2, and so forth, students were excited to be able to select their own names and were able to do so rather quickly. They seemed to take pride in choosing their new names.

Data Collection

Methods and Considerations

Data collection took place from the fall of 2005 through the spring of 2006 and consisted of interviews, observations, and an examination of participants' records. The majority of data came from student interviews and totaled just over 27 hours. Eighty-five student interviews were conducted, so each student was interviewed approximately 17

times. The average length of student interviews was 20 minutes. Each student was also observed once by the researcher during class and interviewed afterwards to ascertain his perceptions of the events and interactions that took place in class. Observations lasted an average of 20 minutes.

Interviews and observations. The structure of the interviews must fit the type of study and the researcher's desire for the collection of rich data. Consideration was given to establishing trust and rapport, selecting neutral interview locations, and using open-ended questioning techniques to allow participants to share their stories in a comfortable environment.

Two issues that can impact participants' feelings and the overall quality of the interview are offered by Elwood and Martin (2000). The "relationship of the researcher with the interview participant and the participant with the site" can influence the data collected and the rapport and trust established with participants (p. 650). To enhance trust between participants and the researcher, the researcher should enter a prolonged engagement with the research site and return to the participants over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mertens, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 1991).

Acknowledging that interview sites can impact participants' willingness and comfort in divulging their feelings, sites that could negatively impact participants were avoided. The selection of neutral sites provided an environment conducive to collecting quality information and enhancing the development of rapport between the researcher and participants. Neutral sites, which avoided my position as an administrator, were identified and then negotiated between the participants and the researcher (Elwood &

Martin, 2000; Sartain, Clarke, & Heyman, 2000). The media center and a conferencing room in an adjacent facility were the two most-used interview sites.

Cooper (2003), Fordham (1996), Valenzuela (1999), Price (2000), and MacLeod (1987) demonstrated the principles of returning to participants over time, becoming recognized as part of the setting, and conducting interviews in places considered neutral territory. They also demonstrated some of the principles of establishing bonds and developing rapport with participants, as well as the influence of the interview site on participants, as mentioned by Elwood and Martin (2000). Their data, collected by empowering research methods, gave participants a voice and allowed the investigator and reader a peek into participants' lived experiences and realities (Holt, 2004).

Cooper (2003) studied African American mothers' experiences and beliefs about teacher bias with regard to their children. The women in her study were provided with the avenue to share their perceptions through open-ended and conversational interviews. Cooper attended parent nights at the school and spent time in the neighborhoods around the school to get a feel for the context in which the mothers lived and interacted with the school.

Valenzuela (1999) studied immigrant and U. S. born Mexican youth's school experiences in an inner city Houston high school over the course of three years. She conducted open-ended interviews with Mexican youth to shed light on their school experiences. Interviews were conducted in social, non-structured atmospheres, such as the school cafeteria and hallways to enhance students' feelings of comfort.

Fordham (1996) immersed herself in the culture of the Capital community and Capital High School in Washington, D. C. to examine African American students' school experiences. Walking to school with students, attending community and church functions, and living in the school over a period of 2 years allowed Fordham an insider's view of student-teacher relations, family expectations, and a deeper understanding of the Capital community.

Price (2000) also demonstrated the principles of qualitative research. Studying the lives of 6 African American male high school students, he used open-ended questions to tap into the experiences that shaped these students' views of school. In order to minimize the influence of interview location on the interviews, Price chose to use public places away from school and students' homes. Additionally, by spending time in conversation with students and returning to students over time, he established trust with his participants.

Moving into the research setting of Clarendon Heights, MacLeod (1987) was completely entrenched in the field. He believed that this total immersion granted him acceptance in the community and access to a group of boys' lives and aspirations. Living within the community that was the focus of the study, MacLeod slowly became an accepted part of both the White and African American youths' lives. Demonstrating the principles of prolonged engagement and establishing rapport with participants, MacLeod's qualitative study yielded a wealth of information otherwise inaccessible in the absence of these principles.

In the current study, a topic-focused interview structure was used. The interview structure included topics that focused on (a) participants' experiences within Wilson Andrew Middle, (b) participants' experiences in previous schools, (c) participants' lives, and (d) participants' reactions to an event or time period which was simultaneously observed by the researcher. Flexibility between the four topic-focused interview sessions allowed for semiformal and informal follow-up interviews. The aim of the follow-up sessions was to seek additional understanding and clarity of information that had emerged in previous interviews or on the student survey (Seidman, 1991). Additionally, students were interviewed after receiving their nine-week report cards at the end of the second, third, and fourth quarters of the school year. As more time was spent with participants, a deeper level of trust and comfort developed between the participants and the researcher confirming the value of returning to participants over time. For this reason, previous interview topics were often revisited later in the process, which sometimes resulted in participants sharing new information.

Interviews were conducted during school hours. A flexible interview schedule minimized the loss of instructional time by alternating days and class periods. Meeting with students while they were assigned in-school suspension or period detention also protected instructional time.

An interview protocol was used as a guide, not a script (see Appendix B). The protocol contained (a) key questions, (b) probes for key questions, (c) space to record notes and thoughts for follow-up questions, (d) a space for the researcher's notes and reflection after the interview, and (e) space for observational notes. Most of the

interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Summaries of the interview sessions were shared with participants to ensure accuracy of data collected and to establish trust that what was shared was accurately reported. Brief, informal interviews involving a few simple questions or questions for clarification were not audio-taped.

Student observations constituted a portion of the data collection. The researcher observed participants during class once during the study. Observations lasted an average of 20 minutes and the data were collected on an observation form created by the researcher (see Appendix C). The form allowed space to record setting information, the student's interactions with peers and teachers, the student's behavior, and a space for questions or ideas for follow-up interviews.

Although participants were aware of the possibility of observations, they did not know when they were being observed. Informal classroom visits by the administrator-researcher are conducted daily and are considered routine to students. Since students saw the researcher as a school administrator who visited their classrooms regularly, observations were unobtrusive by both participating and nonparticipating students.

Although observational data does not yield information from participants' perspectives, the data did offer information for follow-up interviews and insight into students' perceptions of their lives in the classrooms. After each observation, a follow-up interview was conducted with the participant to ascertain his take on the events and interactions observed by the researcher.

Examination of student records. Other sources of data included an examination of school-collected information, which provided a multifaceted view of each participant.

Examination of participants' records showed prior and current academic achievement, discipline history, and teachers' concerns, which built a foundation of school-collected knowledge about each subject. Specific pieces of information, such as report cards, teachers' notes, discipline referral information, and other pertinent information collected in students' school cumulative folders over their school careers were reviewed.

The researcher spent time reviewing the cumulative folders with each participant. None of the five students had seen their folders, full of school-collected information and documentation. The contents in these folders typically include the student's school pictures since kindergarten, family and medical information, standardized testing results, yearly report cards, and work samples, in addition to other miscellaneous items. Thumbing through the documents one by one lent itself to rich conversations with participants about their recollections from previous years of school. Laughing together about pieces of work from elementary school to looking at their yearly school pictures was a bonding and learning experience. Two points of interest came out of these conversations. The first was that not one of the students remembered seeing their school pictures from their early years in school. The second interesting point was that students did not recall their elementary teachers. When asked to name their teachers, students could not name them. Even when looking at their report cards and seeing and hearing the names of previous teachers, students seldom remembered their elementary teachers.

Although reviewing their school folders did not necessarily relate to subjects' perceptions, information was uncovered to guide questions in follow-up interviews. More importantly, reviewing students' school folders with the students was a bonding

experience and was referred to by both participants and the researcher in subsequent conversations.

Creativity in data collection. Not taking for granted that rapport and relationships would pave the way to accessing participants' perceptions, creative ways to open up the lines of communication were considered. Altschuler (as cited in Sartain et al., 2000) suggested providing a "mechanism that allows the individual to express things they are afraid or unable to articulate" (p. 916). In a study of children with chronic illness, researchers had children draw pictures illustrating what it was like being in the hospital (Sartain et al., 2000). The exercise offered the children easy entry into the interview questions and helped them articulate their experiences by explaining their pictures. Sartain and colleagues (2000) shared that the activity also helped establish rapport between the interviewer and the children.

In the current study, students were offered the opportunity to share their school or life experiences and feelings in alternative ways. Students were told they could write, draw, or share their feelings and experiences in other ways, if they so chose. One student took advantage of this offer and expressed his feelings about school and life in two raps, which he described as "metaphorical representations" of his feelings about school and his frustrations. This proved to be insightful not only about his feelings but for the researcher to see another side of this student. The opportunity to share his work also seemed to enhance the rapport between the researcher and the student. After sharing his first rap, he was eager to share another 2 weeks later. Numerous conversations ensued about his recordings and love for rap.

In this study, emphasis was placed on accessing students' experiences and perceptions in a comfortable, non-threatening way. Having worked at the study site and possessing a philosophy of the importance of knowing students, the relationships and trust previously established with participants helped provide the foundation of positive relations for quality research. The time spent with students in interviews and casual conversations enhanced the existing relationships and rapport.

Data Analysis

Organizing and analyzing data was an ongoing process throughout the research study with an end goal of reducing the data “into a compelling, authentic, and meaningful statement” (Janesick, 2000, p. 388). From a comparison of methods among various researchers, six steps were identified for the purpose of data analysis and presentation. The steps were (a) organizing and preparing the data for analysis, (b) reading the data and getting a feel for the meaning, (c) coding the data, (d) identifying themes and categories, (e) assembling the data in each category, and (f) interpreting the findings and deciding how to present them.

The first step was to get the data organized and ready for analysis (Creswell, 2003). Before analysis could begin, interviews had to be transcribed. Although known as a tedious and time-consuming process, transcribing interview tapes helped the researcher become more familiar with the dataset. Due to the time investment in transcription, the researcher was very familiar with the data and could easily access it, recalling specific comments or topics that were discussed.

Once transcription was complete, the collected data was read to begin getting a feel about the meaning of the information (Creswell, 2003). Questions were asked such as, “What are the general ideas?” “What is the underlying meaning?” “What is the tone?” MacLeod (1987) suggests “insight comes from an immersion in the data, a sifting and resifting of the evidence until a pattern makes itself known” (p. 173).

Coding was the next step. Tesch (as cited in Creswell, 2003) suggests starting with one document and making a list of the topics seen in the data. After completing this for several of the documents, similar topics were clumped together. Organizing the data in this manner began the process of taking raw data and clumping it into smaller units (Creswell, 2003; Mertens, 1998).

Next, the codes were used to identify themes, patterns, and categories (Creswell, 2003; Mertens, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once again, the researcher’s familiarity with the data from the time investment of transcription proved helpful in identifying themes. Additional data were still being collected while themes were being identified. As more data were collected, prepared, and analyzed, the refinement of categories and themes was taking place. New data were sorted into either existing or new categories that emerged, which involved testing the categories already in use.

Miles and Huberman (1994) remind researchers to not only look for patterns but also for data that does not fit into the pattern and stands in opposition of previous themes. Janesick (2000) refers to these as “points of tension” (p. 388). These outliers, or points of tension, were used to refine the emerging themes and hypotheses. This form of negative

case analysis aided in establishing trustworthiness in the study and findings through continuous refinement.

Member checks and peer debriefing sessions helped the researcher stay grounded in the data. Realizing that spending numerous hours immersed in the data can result in not being able to see it, these strategies helped avoid what Kleinman and Copp (1993) label “reader’s block” (p. 24). Member checks consisted of sharing summaries of the student interviews and the researcher’s analyses with student participants. Taking into account participants’ reading abilities, students were given the option of reading the summaries independently or having them read aloud to them. Each student chose to have the information read aloud. These sessions, like the interviews, were conducted at times that minimized the loss of instructional time. Students were encouraged to share feedback, make suggestions, or request changes if they did not agree with the researcher’s summaries and analyses. Only one student requested a change in how something was worded because he said it made him sound like a punk. His request did not change the context of the material.

For the purpose of peer debriefing, peers and colleagues were identified with whom to discuss emerging themes and to pose questions to help clarify the direction of the study and the findings. The group was also asked to read the descriptive summaries which contained the introductions of the 5 participants. The members provided feedback on whether or not the introductions painted clear pictures of each of the participants (Wolcott, 1994). Members of this group included two veteran educators who are faculty members of Wilson Andrew and Ph.D. recipients, and one retired school administrator

from Wilson Andrew. Interaction with this group was varied. The school faculty members were more readily accessible at the study site and were easier to engage in frequent, casual conversations about the research process. The third member was available through phone conversations, e-mails, and periodic casual meetings.

Additionally, conversations about the study were held with an African American minister from the community and an African American male educator who did not work at the research site.

After coding the data and identifying categories, the specific data that belonged to each category were reorganized and sorted, accordingly (Creswell, 2003; Weiss, 1994). The first attempt in doing this involved making a copy of the original data documents and cutting up the duplicate copy to re-sort the data into appropriate categories (Weiss, 1994). Found to be a time-consuming and counter-productive process, the researcher chose to use word processing software to accomplish the reorganization of data.

Lastly, the findings and interpretation are presented herein. Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Creswell, 2003) refer to this as presenting the lessons learned from the study. The presentation of the data and findings are grounded in Harry Wolcott's (1994) work on description, analysis, and interpretation as a three-part approach to transforming qualitative data.

Wolcott (1994) suggests using three sections to describe, analyze, and interpret qualitative data. The first section, description, lets the data tell the story. In this study, description tells the stories of 5 participants based on the data with minimal analysis. The analysis section identifies themes that exist in the data. This section remains heavily

grounded in the data and summarizes what was counted or measured (p. 30). The last section, interpretation, explains the meaning and significance of the findings. Based on Wolcott's three-part approach, Chapter IV is the description, Chapter V is the analysis, and Chapter VI is the interpretation.

Researcher Subjectivities

Conducting a study in one's own worksite is filled with potential. This potential contains both positive and negative aspects of either enhancing the study or inhibiting it by prior affiliation with participants. The same is true for the differences in race, gender, and socioeconomic status between the researcher and the participants. The potential for power issues existed in this study given the researcher's position as a school administrator in the study site. Each of these factors resulted in the possibility of either the researcher influencing the study or the study influencing the researcher (Creswell, 2003; Mertens, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Attempting to avoid these biases is critical to conducting a quality study.

Doing a Study in Your Own Building

Many have talked about doing a study in one's own backyard. Associated risks include issues of subjectivity and confidentiality. Conducting research within my own building revealed pros and cons that should be mentioned to assist others in deciding whether or not to conduct research at home or travel elsewhere. Fortunately, other researchers have been willing to open up a behind the scenes look to allow readers to see more than is provided in the typical methodology section (Lareau, 1989; MacLeod, 1987). It is helpful for young researchers to learn about the "traps, delays, and

frustrations” that occur during research and what was learned or gained from them (Lareau, 1989, p. 187).

The three pros to doing this research at my current worksite include convenient access to students, access to school-collected data on students, and a pre-established relationship with each student prior to the study. The cons of research in one’s own setting include dealing with the possibility of influencing students’ responses due to the researcher’s position in the school and battling obstacles that arise as a part of the job.

The positive aspects of conducting research at home outweighed the negative aspects in this study. Students were easily accessible to the researcher, assuming they were at school on the days interviews were to be conducted. Saving on travel time and having to coordinate with another school to schedule interviews or observations, working on site was convenient. Additionally, after the bulk of data had been collected, quick follow-up questions could be handled simply as opposed to traveling to another location for one or two clarification questions.

Although it was on the researcher’s calendar that an interview would be taking place, students were not informed ahead of time of the interviews. Interviews were set up by the researcher and were sometimes changed on the spur of the moment due to various obstacles. An irate parent, a discipline referral demanding immediate attention, or the principal being out of the building were impediments to remaining on schedule with interviews, which caused this first pro on convenient research in one’s own setting to also be listed as a con.

Having convenient access to the school's data on students was another positive aspect of the convenience of working in one's own site. Students' cumulative folders, including yearly report cards and testing information, were less than 20 feet away. Students' current year report cards, discipline profiles, and attendance summaries passed through the office as a normal part of the job and did not require trips to other schools or the system's central administration building to acquire.

Each of the 5 participants in the study had attended Wilson Andrew since sixth grade. Therefore, when each was a sixth-grade student, I interacted with them as their grade level administrator. Outsiders could consider pre-existing relationships with each student as a negative impact on the collection of data since this role often involved disciplining these students. However, only the participants and the researcher know and can attest to the fact that the relationships they shared contributed to the study in a positive manner. Time was not wasted during the initial stages of the study to establish rapport and build trust. Although the researcher and the participants had pre-existing relationships, the relationships strengthened even more as a result of the study.

Near the conclusion of the study, a final interview was conducted with each student to ascertain his feelings of participating in the study. Each student responded that it was an enjoyable experience and they would eagerly participate in another study in the future. References to having someone listen to them and trusting that what they said would remain confidential were common responses and contributed to students' sharing valuable information.

The negative aspects of conducting research in one's backyard dealt with remaining aware of the potential influence of the researcher-administrator and the unpredictable nature of the job, more than anything else. As an administrator in the school where research was being conducted, students had to feel comfortable and free to express their thoughts without fear of judgment or breach of confidentiality. The positive rapport established with students during their careers at Wilson Andrew was a factor in this. Secondly, students continued to deepen their comfort and trust over time. Confessing illegal activities or negative feelings about teachers, students seemed to feel comfortable confiding in the researcher.

The largest obstacle in the study was dealing with the nature of the researcher's administrative position in the school as it pertained to unscheduled events arising in the course of the day. These unpredictable occurrences seemed to occur when interviews or observations were scheduled to be conducted. Students were not aware of when interviews would be conducted so they were unaware that a scheduled interview had to be put on hold because of Jarrod's upset mother in the office, a fight in the hallway, or the principal leaving for a meeting.

Early in the data collection phase, I envied fellow doctoral candidates for conducting research at locations other than their worksites. Hearing others describe taking 4 or 5 days off to conduct research and completing their data collection on those days, I believed I had made a grave mistake. Their simple and clean approach to data collection was neatly contained in a few days in the research setting.

After completing the data collection in my own backyard and dealing with the pros and cons, I feel confident that staying at home to collect data was the best choice in this case. Many times I returned to participants for clarification of an answer or to ask a follow-up question and was able to do so rather freely. Additionally, regularly seeing and interacting with study participants strengthened the relationships and enhanced the experience for both the students and the researcher. Four days or 10 days in the setting could not touch the quality of the data and rapport obtained in the current study by having daily contact with the study participants.

Issues of Race, Age, Gender, and Class Status

Issues of race, age, gender, and class status must be taken into consideration between the researcher and the participants (Seidman, 1991). Understanding that a researcher's subjectivity is "like a garment that cannot be removed," it must be acknowledged and accounted for in a way to minimize its effect (Peshkin, 1991, p. 286). As a White female in her mid-thirties from a middle class background, the researcher was aware that these issues could come into play while conducting a study of African American boys from low socioeconomic neighborhoods.

The researcher and participants' positionalities played a role in this study. Positionality, as defined by Cooper (2003) refers to "how one is socially located (or positioned) in relation to others, given background factors such as race, class, and gender" (p. 107). Cooper goes on to state that positionality also relates to an individual's power and privilege in the dominant social structure. As a result of an understanding of how my positionality and the students' positionalities could influence the data and

findings, careful consideration was used during the planning, implementation, and analysis stages of the research.

Understanding that everything we see and hear is filtered through a cultural lens, the story must be told through the students' words for they are the only experts on their lives (Delpit, 1995). "There is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lens of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19). Using student interview excerpts allows the reader to hear the students' voices and avoids burying their experiences in the words and simple translations of the researcher.

Compounding these issues of race and class were other variables, such as having extensive experience with these students and positional power within the school. It was the researcher's responsibility to acknowledge the presence of such issues and plan and implement a study that would benefit from and remain sensitive to each one.

Issues of Power

Issues of power surface in a variety of ways in society, as well as in schools (Elwood & Martin, 2000; Fordham, 1996; Sartain et al., 2000). Race, class, gender, age, and position influence expectations, experiences, and accepted norms and values (Delpit, 1995; Nieto 1999; 2004). Within the world of research, issues of power are very likely to influence research, data collection, relations between participants and the researcher, and, as a result, the quality of the study and its findings.

A power issue could be based on differences in gender between participants and researchers. Some may view an adult male interviewing young girls as a gender issue

based on society's labeling of males as the dominant gender. Hints of females not being able to control the focus of interviews, male participants' dismissive attitudes with female researchers, and the influence of sexist attitudes are all possibilities within research (Seidman, 1991).

When determining the impact of gender difference between the researcher and the participants, the area of focus should also be taken into consideration. Although the gender difference in this study is obvious, the topic of study did not necessitate a male interviewer. If the topic happened to be a gender-focused area of study, gender would have likely played a more important role.

What is important is the willingness to enter meaningful conversations with participants and give them the opportunity to tell their stories (Mertens, 1998).

Differences in age, race, and class were likely to play a larger role than gender in influencing the student participants in this case.

Holt (2004) draws attention to the difficulty in separating the researcher as an adult from the role of an adult, which is often infused with power when relating to children. In her research, she reflected on her identity in the eyes of children and monitored how she presented herself in interactions with students. Avoiding a hierarchical relationship with children, she sought to be accepted as more of an equal to children by being included in their games and discussions, which took place in their social worlds. Not free from slippages, Holt found herself almost forced back into an adult role, which ultimately impacted the children. Such unavoidable slippages describe the difficult and delicate nature of research and the role of the researcher.

In an effort to minimize the chances of being forced back into the adult role as described by Holt (2004), I was never involved in anyway in disciplining the participants. Risking the trust that had been established would have been a blow to the study and the data. To further separate my role as a researcher and administrator, the age-old rule of “no candy allowed” was often violated. Many conversations took place between the participants and the researcher while sharing a candy bar. Additionally, a silly ritual I followed at the beginning of each student interview was removing my school identification tag and placing my phone on vibrate. The items were placed to the side as a means of separating the time spent together as a participant and researcher from student and administrator.

Adults may assume that because they were once children, they know how children feel and will be able to relate easily to children (Holt, 2004; Sartain et al., 2000). Any teacher, particularly a middle school teacher, is likely to say that it is not nearly that easy with this age group. Adults’ thinking and children’s thinking are, fortunately, separated by life experiences, age, world knowledge, and other factors. Fine and Sandstrom (as cited in Holt, 2004) describe adults’ inability to cross over to children’s views as “being limited by their adulthood” (p. 18). Therefore, research strategies were selected that would access the students’ experiences and perceptions.

Intersection of Race and Class

Not only does my “adulthood” contain power issues but skin color and perceived class status also contain issues relating to power. Seidman (1991) states that due to our country’s history of racism, positive interviewing relationships between Whites and

African Americans may be difficult to establish, but not impossible. In this situation, considering my passion for the students and the topic, in addition to the rapport previously established with this pool of students, this was not seen as a grave concern; however, nothing is ever foolproof. Just when the researcher feels the most comfortable with the established rapport and feeling that participants are going to tell all, is the very time when she must be on guard (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). Constant attention was given to remaining sensitive to the influence of the differences in race and class between the researcher and the participants.

Although raised in and living a middle-class lifestyle, the majority of the researcher's work experience has been in inner city schools and organizations serving predominantly African American youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Working as a teacher and administrator for thirteen out of fifteen years in inner city middle schools, volunteering at an inner city recreation site, and directing one chapter of the city's inner city youth tennis program, have provided the researcher with a wealth of background experience with inner city students.

Seidman (1991) gives credence to individuals' exposure to social class structures outside their own backgrounds. Researchers who have had little exposure to individuals and classes from different backgrounds may have greater difficulty in accessing the inner thoughts of these individuals and establishing a rapport, which would strengthen the quality of the study. To remain aware of personal subjectivities, a number of precautions were taken. Remaining conscious of how I was viewed by students, using a conversational tone and language set void of educational jargon, and remaining open to

hearing and understanding students was critical in limiting the influence of my race and class status.

Trustworthiness

Researchers in general have to work to establish trustworthiness in their research endeavors. Combating accusations of soft or sloppy research, qualitative researchers are charged heavily with the responsibility of proving their methods and credibility of findings. Substituting alternate terms for traditional terms, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose the following as the beacons of research trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Establishing credibility requires ensuring design decisions and procedures contribute to uncovering credible information resulting in the participants verifying that the researcher's interpretations of the data are valid. To increase the likelihood of uncovering credible information, the researcher spent a prolonged period of time in the research setting, built trust with participants and those within the setting, and followed principles of triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mertens, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Being an accepted member in this research setting and having prior relationships with the students enhanced the study. Although working in the setting seemed to be an advantage, it could, in some cases, be a disadvantage. Guarding against preconceived ideas and biases due to over familiarity with the study context and students' histories within the school was critical to remaining objective. Additionally, looking for

indications of participants wanting to please the researcher by conjuring up “acceptable” responses was a consideration of which I remained conscious.

Another strategy used to enhance credibility of the study was triangulation. Triangulation, or the use of a variety of sources and data collection methods, enhances the credibility of findings (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mertens, 1998). Instead of triangulation, Richardson (as cited in Janesick, 2000) uses the term crystallization. Providing a multifaceted view of the object of study is the crux of crystallization. Students’ thoughts and perceptions about their school experiences provide one view. Accessing additional sources, such as observations and examination of students’ cumulative school folders, provides information for follow-up interview questions. In this study, crystallization occurred through interviews, observations, and examination of student records.

Additionally, three strategies were used to corroborate the researcher’s interpretations of data and findings. Member-checking, peer debriefing, and negative case analyses all served as check and balance systems to enhance the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mertens, 1998).

Transferability, the naturalist’s version of external validity, consists of providing enough description of the research context and findings to allow someone to make a judgment about the chances of the findings holding true in another setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In qualitative research, it is the researcher’s responsibility to provide thick description for the reader to make a determination of the transferability of the findings.

However, the reader is responsible for determining the aspects of the study that can contribute to other settings.

In order to certify that the data collected in this process and hence, the findings, are confirmable and dependable and not influenced by researcher bias, an audit trail was kept (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mertens, 1998). Audit trails consist of documentation, including raw data, write-ups of notes, interview schedules, and interview questions. The audit trail provides the burden of proof on which the findings rest. Transcripts, recordings of interviews, and observation notes are examples of information available for review.

Risks, Benefits, and Significance of the Study

The foreseeable risks to the participants in this study were minimal. The positionality of the researcher as an administrator in the study site and the use of students as participants could have posed a concern if precautions were not taken to protect this relationship. Issues of power and the protection of students' identities were factored into the methodology of this research.

The researcher's dual role of also serving as a school administrator was addressed in the study. The researcher did not have disciplinary responsibility over any students who were eligible to participate in the study. Additionally, what was shared between the researcher and participants was confidential. Information collected during the study was not used to punish students or inform fellow school administrators of students' admissions.

Students and parents were advised as to the purpose of the study and were given the choice of participating or declining participation. Students and parents were also

informed that they could talk to the researcher about questions or concerns or withdraw from participating at any time throughout the study. Neither students nor parents raised questions or concerns.

Participants' identities were protected by the use of pseudonyms. Personally identifiable information was removed from documents available for external review. Documents such as interview transcripts, copies of report cards, and observation forms are in the sole possession of the researcher and will remain locked in the researcher's home files.

During student interviews, it was likely that students and teachers saw the researcher with the participants of this study. However, because observing and meeting with students is a normal part of my duties as a school administrator, these interactions were not necessarily linked to participation in the research study. Additionally, selecting interview sites away from high traffic areas provided additional protection for students' participation. Care was taken to protect the purpose of the time spent with participants.

Although minimal risks were identified in association with this study, there were intended benefits of the research. The study provides an insider's view to educators who are working diligently to reach all students. It is anticipated that information gleaned from this study will be used to evaluate and inform school and classroom practices and facilitate understanding of students' lack of achievement in school.

At some time, every teacher and principal will encounter students who seem to have given up. Determining what can be learned from this study's participants may yield valuable information to teachers and administrators. Without analyzing students'

experiences from their own perspectives, educators are not using all of the facts to find ways of helping. Rich description of these particular students, the context, and the findings are provided to allow readers to determine if the findings are generalizable to their own settings.

It is hoped that one outcome of this research is that these participants' lives and experiences have been positively impacted. Seidman (1991) discusses the guilt of researchers leaving the site with the feeling that they are taking more away from the study than the participants. My goal is that the representation of their voices is empowering to these students and the reciprocity that I offered them through my attention to their stories, the honorable representation of their experiences, and insight into their worlds is accepted.

Limitations of the Study

The findings in this study cannot be generalized to other populations due to such a small and limited sample. The student sample in this study served a dual purpose of examining the underachievement of African American males from low socioeconomic backgrounds while exploring potential influences of Wilson Andrew Middle on their school experiences. The reader must determine if the findings of the current study are applicable to other students or settings.

Although these students' experiences both inside and outside of school are thought to be the influences on their educations, other students who have similar experiences and influences perform well in school. Other students at Wilson Andrew who live in the same neighborhoods, are exposed to the same influences, and are from families

of the same socioeconomic level and circumstances are demonstrating success in school. For future research, a comparison study in which the findings of the current research are compared to a similar sample of students who are achieving in school would support literature on resiliency and the current findings or identify additional components necessary to promote young African American men's achievement in school.

CHAPTER IV

THEIR STORIES

What follows are the stories of five young African American men. Their lives in school and outside of school, depicted by information obtained from student interviews, observations, and a review of school-collected data, are chronicled here full of their own words, experiences, and beliefs. Utilizing Wolcott's (1994) three-part approach of description, analysis, and interpretation to transform qualitative data, Chapter IV constitutes the description portion. This chapter will share the participants' stories with the reader with a minimum of analysis and interpretation. Chapter V will follow with a theme-based analysis of the data and Chapter VI will be the researcher's interpretation.

The decision of what data to include in the students' introductions was based on the purpose of the study. Setting out to examine the influences that impact the educational experiences of the 5 participants, related themes that emerged during the study were included in each student's introduction. Additionally, uniformity in interview topics and questions guided the selection of content for the introduction and sought to provide a well-rounded account of each student. Excerpts from interviews are included throughout their introductions. Ellipses within the excerpts indicate that one statement was not said immediately after another.

Although the 5 participants in this study are unique individuals with their own set of experiences and opinions on the interview topics, they share some commonalities in

their backgrounds. Each of the 5 students is on the free lunch program, a government subsidized program for families living at or below the poverty level. Each lives with one biological parent, has struggled with grades and/or behavior since early in their school careers, and continues to struggle with them to date. Four of the students live with their mothers and one with his father. Two of the students live with their mothers and stepfathers. Four of the students have been retained in their school careers. Two students have been referred to the School Assistance Team (SAT) for behavior and academic concerns and one qualified for the Exceptional Children's program and receives services for his disability. One student is a member of an athletic team and is the only participant in the study involved in an extra-curricular activity.

Chris

Chris is thirteen years old and in the seventh grade. He gets along with most other students and claims he knows almost everybody in the school. Chris has struggled with his grades and attendance, has been retained once, and is often referred to the office for disciplinary reasons. Not typically an aggressive student but continuously off-task and frequently tardy, teachers tire of his misbehavior and lack of work in class, which typically lead to disciplinary referrals.

Life Outside of School

Chris lives with his mother, two younger sisters, two younger brothers, his 17-year-old adopted sister, and his mom's boyfriend. They live in a government housing area, known as the Gardens, where drug dealers and fights are all too common. "Some of them are drug dealers. Because like you can tell like when people come and they'll stop

them at the car or whatever. And then they run from the police and stuff.” Chris likes the neighborhood because he enjoys seeing the fights but liked his old neighborhood better because there were more kids, a basketball court, and swimming pool. The presence of police is not uncommon and Chris has been approached by the police in his neighborhood.

One time we was sitting down at the top of the road and then the police, they, it was just like three of us, me and my friends. Well, it wasn't even my friends, it was little people. And we was just sitting down and then some police stopped and like they jumped out on us and they was checking us and stuff for no reason . . . Like checking my pockets and stuff. Seeing if I had something on me . . . I don't know. I was kind of scared.

Chris does not mention a relationship with his mom, his siblings, or his mom's boyfriend, who has been around for the past couple of years. He makes several references to his mom's boyfriend, with whom he does not get along “cause he thinks he my daddy.” He accuses his mom of allowing her boyfriend to take over and taking his side on issues, like his decision on consequences for bad grades. Talking about his mother Chris states,

She nice sometimes and sometimes she be mean. Because her boyfriend be trying to take over and she let him . . . It's like, when we get report cards, like if we get a F, he'll give us two weeks a F on punishment, like and mom she'll say, she'll say like no, I'm not going to have much time, but if he say something then she'll agree with what he say.

Chris is placed on punishment for bad grades and misbehavior and his mother talks to him about doing well in school. Sometimes she offers incentives for him to make good grades on progress reports. “Like she says she going to give me some more fronts on

Valentine's Day if I can bring a progress report home and show that the class I got an F in I had brought it up to at least a C."

His real father has been in jail for most of Chris' life; in jail since Chris was born until he was about 10 years old and recently returning to jail. Chris has had little time to see or get to know his father, but hears that he and his father act just alike. "He in jail. I don't really get to see him 'cause he was in jail. He was in jail every since I was a baby. He had got out and then, I mean he was nice." The one wish he has for his father is to get out of jail. Although he did not have his father around while growing up, he believes his life was "regular" and that he and his sister got everything they wanted.

Hanging out with his friends, playing games, and riding dirt bikes are some of Chris' pastimes. His fondest memory was when he and his two friends rode dirt bikes on the street at 3:00am. Although he spends a great deal of time with them, he says his friends often influence him to do bad things, like taking someone's bike, hitting somebody walking down the street, or occupying a store clerk while they steal items from the store.

Like if I have some money and then they'll be there with me, they'll be like, 'Talk to him while I go take this' or something like that . . . Sometimes I don't do it. Sometimes I do . . . Like if I have some money, then I might do it but if I don't got any money, then I'll be like, 'Nah, I ain't going to do it.' Like, we'll go in the store and they'll be like, 'Just talk to 'em while I go get something' and I don't want to talk to 'em and I don't buy nothing. So I buy something I guess.

The worst memory he has is when he and a group of friends were going to Wal-Mart. "Like I had a bike and my friend had a bike but the other people didn't have bikes. So they was like taking people's bikes out they garages and then one person started

chasing. And then like everybody ran but I didn't run 'cause I didn't take it. But I had got in trouble still."

Chris is very forthcoming with his activities and experiences that stem from societal influences, such as his surroundings and peer affiliations in his neighborhood. However, Chris does not believe he has been affected by them. When asked if his life would be any different without such experiences, he asserts that his life is not impacted by them. "I'd be the same. Like you just see it and walk off. . . It don't faze me like that."

Life in School

Chris was retained in fourth grade, partly due to his mother's request. "My mom had held me back in the fourth and I was still bad...She said she felt like I hadn't learned enough." He claims she is not pleased with how he is doing in school currently. "She don't like it. She be mad. If I get in trouble or if she sees my progress reports and I got Fs, she like will put me on punishment or something." Other than people asking him his age, retention only affects him when he thinks of his friends moving on to high school next year while he remains in middle school.

Even though he says school is not that important to him, he believes that success in school is based on completing schoolwork and staying out of trouble with the payoff of a good job later down the road. Being successful in school is "to do good and do your work and don't get in trouble . . . 'Cause when you get older, you have to have a good job and you got to go to college like if you want to play basketball or something." When asked if he is living up to this definition of success, he replied,

No, because like today. I left all my stuff at home and like, sometimes I just go to class and be joking on people and playing around. . . . Just like my mama said, if she'd send me to a school where I don't know nobody then I'd do better 'cause I know, like everybody at this school. That's probably why.

Acknowledging his misbehavior in school such as fighting, skipping classes, bullying, talking back to teachers, and refusing to work, Chris admits that these incidents, as well as low grades, have been recurring issues throughout his school career.

Chris believes he will finish high school and is sure his mother will not let him drop out anyway. College is not in his future unless he gets a scholarship to play basketball. Working for the city building and painting houses or possibly working in a restaurant are in his near future, according to Chris. He dreams of being rich so that he can buy clothes and shoes. "Cause if you have more clothes and shoes, the girls will like you more."

He feels comfortable at Wilson Andrew especially because he knows everyone. He recalls not being comfortable at one elementary school where he was one of a few African American students and says he is more comfortable where there are more African American students. Although he claims attending the predominantly White school did not leave him with a negative impression of Caucasians, he recalls not fitting in. "I don't know, it seemed like I didn't fit in that good. . . . I had to try to act like them. . . . Like, talk like them."

At Wilson Andrew, Chris believes students have the same privileges and opportunities. He believes that students are treated the same; however, he says it depends on whether or not students are passing. "Like, all you have to do is have good grades and

you can do anything in school.” He gives examples of teachers who let students go to their lockers and the restroom if they are passing. “She’ll let you go to the bathroom when you want or stuff like that if you’re passing her class. But if you’re not then, she’ll make you stay in class.” Chris believes this is a fair practice.

Chris thinks teachers and principals hold the power in school. He offers two examples of when he believes students are involved in decision-making. “Like when we about to get in trouble, she, she’ll be like, you can go sit in the hallway or she’ll write us up.” He also says students can choose whether or not to do their work.

Unequal treatment surfaced as he talked about how he is treated when he goes to sleep or comes unprepared versus how others are treated for similar behaviors.

I don’t think Mrs. Love likes me because I’ll ask to go to the bathroom and she’ll say ‘no’ and start yelling, but if somebody else asks, she’ll say ‘go ahead you can go use the bathroom’. . . I think Mrs. Sauls too sometimes. In class, if I go to sleep, she’ll wake me up and make me stand up or go in the hallway. But, if somebody else go to sleep, then she’ll tell them to get up and that’s it.

Chris offers another example, “I think it’s not right, ‘cause just like today, she asked me. . . she was like ‘Where’s your textbooks and stuff?’ and I said I left it at home and somebody else in class didn’t have their books and she had wrote me up.”

When discussing positive influences, Chris could not name anyone who had positively impacted or influenced his life. He also could not name a teacher or school employee with whom he has had a positive relationship. With probes, rewording, and even returning to the question of positive influences and role models at the end of various

interviews, he still had no answer. After being encouraged to not say anything for at least thirty seconds and just think about it, he responded, “I don’t know.”

At the close of the third quarter of the school year during which the interviews occurred, he has all failing grades on his report card in math, science, and social studies but is passing language arts with a D. Chris likes his gym, drama, and math classes. “I like gym because we play basketball and stuff and I like drama because we can act and get to watch movies and stuff. And I like math because it’s one of my favorite subjects.”

As of April of the data collection year, he has been tardy 36 times and absent 28 days, including 18 days of out-of-school suspension. He has served 19 days of in-school suspension, not including numerous days of time out and after school detention, which are not reflected in his discipline record. See Table 1 for a summary description of Chris.

Terrell

Terrell is 13 years old and in the seventh grade. Always seen joking around or rapping, this often leads to Terrell getting into trouble. He lives in a quiet neighborhood with his father and his sixth grade sister; the latter of whom he claims does not listen to him. His hobby is rapping and hanging out with his friends to write and record raps. Terrell has struggled behaviorally and academically in school since his elementary years, including being retained in second grade.

Life Outside of School

His family lived together until he was about six years old when his father moved out, leaving Terrell and his sister with their mother. In fifth grade, he and his sister moved in with their dad, where they remain today. He and his mother continue to have a

Table 1*Summary Description of Chris*

Societal	Institutional	Personal
- Exposure to violent/illegal activity in neighborhood	- Instruction is not interactive	- Differential treatment by teachers - No role models - No significant relationships with school adults - Negative influence through affiliation with peers who steal, skip class, and misbehave in school - Lacks close supervision at home with schoolwork + Chris believes his mother cares if he does well in school and will not let him drop out. + Mother gives rewards and consequences for grades

Summary

The negative influence of Chris' peers affects his life inside and outside of school. Instruction that does not engage him, combined with a lack of relationships with school adults and little, if any, close supervision at home with regard to schoolwork leaves Chris solely responsible for his progress in school.

strong relationship similar to a brother-sister relationship. "I can tell her anything, everything, whenever, whatever, personal, school, whatever." One bad memory from his childhood is of his mother and younger sister arguing and fighting. Although he does not know what started the fight, it still affects him when they are all together. "And for some reason every time that they together, I feel like I got to be the referee of it. If they sitting in the same spot, I gotta sit between them."

His relationship with his father is “a regular father and son connection.” The relationship has changed from one of fear when he was younger into one where they get along. “I was scared of him. Now, it’s more of a thing where it’s just like, if you do it, I do my part and it’s over with.” He acknowledges that his father wants him to finish school, have a good career, and often does things to help him become a better person. His father stays informed about how he is doing in school by looking at his progress reports and report cards. “That lets me know that he at least cares that I’m doing something and if it’s an F or whatever, he helps me by taking my stuff away so that I can learn.”

Life in School

A life like a movie, full of give and take, is how Terrell describes his life. He comments that he rarely has a good day at school and when one seems to be going well, he knows something will happen to change it. He echoes this trade-off in his rap lyrics, “For every smile that last a while would basically turn to a frown.”

Finishing high school is on his agenda but Terrell is unsure if he will attend college.

I know I’m finishing school. That’s the only real thing I know of right now. I don’t know about, if I, I mean I would go to college but right now it ain’t a big door for me. ‘Cause rap, it really has, it don’t got that much to do with college. But if I get the opportunity I’ll go.

He feels he is more focused on music and often puts school aside. “It’s not the fact that I don’t want to succeed, I don’t want to do my work, it’s just that I got so many people, well so many things that I want to do at one time and I can’t do it. So I feel that I got to lay one of them off for a while, which was school.”

Terrell says his family encourages him to finish school, follow his career goals, and live his own life. He claims that it has helped him to see others who have not lived a good life. “The majority of people that I’ve seen in my life, most of them in my family, ain’t lived a good life. They, you know, don’t have a job, living with somebody else, you know, something like that.”

Terrell thinks that his teachers believe he can be successful but he realizes he is not meeting their expectations and often does not get along with them. “They think I can do it.” Talking about his math teacher, Terrell says, “It’s because I could see it, she wants me to be a better person as far as school goes. And she can see so much in me that she gets frustrated. So mad to the point where she wants me to do it on my own.” Being successful in school, he says, has to do with going to class, completing schoolwork, and knowing whom to hang around.

If you know what time, when, where to be at, it’s a way that you can make yourself successful or a way that you can hurt yourself in the long run. If you’re always around fights, laughing, picking, mad at the teacher, not agreeing with her, basically you’re going to the wrong road and if you aren’t in class all the time. Got all your homework, all your work done whatever, basically, you’re being successful in school, which I’m not doing right about now . . . It’s because of the fact of what I do. Like what I want to be, a rapper, it just doesn’t have that much to do with school, but then again, it’s important to have that just in case I don’t make it into the music business or whatever. That way I have something to fall back on.

Staying focused on the teacher and sitting quietly in class is difficult. He admits that he is not doing the best he can academically or behaviorally and is not trying. Terrell confesses that he was also not successful behaviorally or academically in part of his

elementary years. He was retained in second grade but at the time did not understand what it meant.

Terrell recalls a change in his behavior around fourth or fifth grade but cannot give an explanation. When looking at his school pictures, he even sees a different child in his kindergarten through third grade pictures than he does in fourth through sixth grade pictures. He points to his pictures starting with fourth grade and states that he just looks like a troublemaker. "I was known as, I was the baddest kid in my class in fourth grade . . . I knew the world was against me at the time. Like, the world wasn't against me, but I knew in my mind that nobody cared about me and that's how I took it." In fifth grade, he began feeling like he had to make people like him, so he acted out in class.

A review of Terrell's school cumulative folder shows that he received gradually declining grades each year. Beginning with good academic marks in kindergarten, he regressed to Ds by fourth grade. His grades improved in fifth grade but dropped again in sixth and seventh. Each year, teachers commented on his report cards about his lack of self-control and silly behavior.

Unequal treatment surfaced in the interviews with Terrell. He admits to possessing a questioning nature that has often ended up being taken as disrespect.

I ask questions because I want to know how come I got wrote up for chewing gum, but then again this other person gets silent lunch for three days for chewing gum. Why did they get a different punishment than me and they take that as me being disrespectful and then I get even longer for that and that makes me even madder and then I'll just start talking again for no reason again and I'll get in trouble even worse.

He also gets frustrated for being falsely blamed for things with which he was not involved and hates to hear teachers warn other students to stay away from him. He reports that a teacher warned a new student to steer clear of him. According to Terrell, the teacher introduced him to a new student in front of the class as, “Now this is the troublemaker and I wouldn’t be around him that long ‘cause he can get you in trouble real fast.”

Describing how he feels about the attention he receives from his math teacher, he states,

All eyes on me. That’s how I feel. That’s like, yesterday in that class, Chris said something and like, she’ll call me down and I’ll be like, but I’m not the only one talking. I see that as her eyes are always watching me . . . You gotta watch the rest of the people, too. Like passing notes, talking, giving answers, stuff like that. But then again, as soon as I sit in my chair the wrong way, ‘Terrell, turn around.’ And that aggravates me the most because why does it matter how I’m sitting? I’m doing my work . . . Fifty percent of the time, I do be doing what she be saying. And I’m a person who’ll admit up to it . . . But when I’m right, that’s the thing, teachers have that power. They got the power to make you wrong even when you have evidence that you’re right. You’re still wrong, no matter what.

Terrell likes to prove a teacher wrong about him, especially when they repeatedly make statements about him in front of the class.

It’s a thing where if you give me a ‘I can’t’ factor, that’s when I do my best. When you tell, it was a period of time when I wasn’t doing my homework and she would always say every time, ‘Oh well, I don’t know why I go past Terrell, he not going to have his.’ And for one day, I just wanted to shut that up ‘cause I hate hearing it. I hate people telling me what I’m doing wrong.

Although he gets along well with most other students, he only has a small circle of friends he trusts. He believes he fits in at Wilson Andrew but is not popular, which to

Terrell is a good thing. Although he admits that he would not be considered a leader to his teachers, he believes he is a leader to some of his peers who understand him.

I'm successful, like my kind of success would be, people, like if I was to say to a teacher that I'm a leader, they would laugh . . . They think of the wrong kind of leader, see they think I won't be the leader that's going to college and live the just perfect life. No, I'm talking about the leader of the real things in life . . . Me, in a way I feel as if, well, being that so much stuff is not going right at times right about now and people are agreeing with me and that's what makes me feel like a leader in a way because people actually can understand what I'm saying and being that I'm such a young age and people understand what I'm actually saying I feel that if I'm not going to be a leader, I'm going to have something to do with leadership.

Terrell believes students have the same opportunities and privileges at Wilson Andrew but says that students' behaviors dictate those opportunities and privileges. When discussing student voice at Wilson Andrew, he says teachers get the last word. He believes students should have input, which would make school better and give students a chance to be themselves. Terrell offers an example of when the teacher questioned his work and did not let him make the decision on what to include on his assignment.

We had to do a thing about a country that's in poverty. And I put a tombstone as my picture. And she told me to take it off and I felt like you know, why? That's what's happening right now. People are dying because of poverty. What? . . . I would hate to look at a brochure that's telling me how everybody's dying but the whole thing is full of happiness.

Terrell mentions one positive relationship with a teacher in fifth grade and states that he does not have a strong connection to any of his current team teachers. "It was the teacher I had in fifth grade, Mrs. Sink. She was the person that if something didn't go right, I would go tell her because I knew she would stop it like that." During the current

school year, Terrell feels he cannot be himself. “It’s a thing where it’s just student, like I can’t be me worth nothing. If I was to be me, I would get wrote up more than I have this year.”

At the end of the third quarter of the data collection year, Terrell has earned failing grades in math and science all three grading periods. In language arts and social studies, he has made Fs for two of the grading periods and one C. Three quarters into the school year he has missed 7 days of school and has been tardy fourteen times. He has served 3 days of in-school suspension, which does not include numerous days he has been placed in time out or after school detention that are not reflected in his discipline record. See Table 2 for a summary description of Terrell.

Corey

Corey is a 14-year-old seventh grader. Although he is larger than most seventh graders, he exudes a quiet nature. Corey speaks very maturely and is respectful to most school adults. He lives in a quiet neighborhood with his mother, 16-year-old sister, 6-year-old brother, and his uncle. Basketball is his favorite pastime and his participation on the school team has temporarily helped Corey regain his comfort in school and willingness to complete his schoolwork. During his school career, Corey has been retained once and there is evidence of academic and behavior concerns that began early in elementary school.

Life Outside of School

Corey describes himself as a “normal 14-year-old kid . . . with a wide variety of personalities.” He spends very little time with his siblings, although he says they get

Table 2*Summary Description of Terrell*

Societal	Institutional	Personal
	- Difficulty fitting into the mold of behavioral expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cannot be himself with his teachers - Differential treatment by teachers - Negative influence of peers to misbehave in class + Some students help Terrell get caught up in class + Feels like a leader to his peers - Does not feel like a leader to his teachers - Lacks close supervision at home with schoolwork + Terrell believes his father cares if he does well in school and will not let him drop out. + Father gives consequences for poor grades - No significant relationships with school adults - Labeled as “troublemaker” by some teachers + Two non-school peers are a positive influence

Summary

Terrell admits to not being able to be himself at school and his difficulty meeting behavioral expectations. He does not see a connection between his passion for rap and school and does not have any positive relationships with school adults. Although his father provides some feedback regarding his school progress, he lacks close supervision at home with his schoolwork.

along. Instead, he enjoys going to the local recreation center to play basketball and spending time with his uncle, who has been the biggest positive influence on him, and his 26-year-old cousin. His family cares about his progress in school and they support him by purchasing his school supplies, occasionally helping with homework, and communicating with his teachers. Corey stated initially that he does not have a relationship with his mother but later said they get along.

Well, well, we don't have no relationship. I mean, you know, if I'm at home, I do the chores and all that, then I go in the living room, sit on the couch and chill. And she's probably in her room asleep. And when she wakes up, she has to go to work. She comes back home and sleeps.

They have disagreements when Corey does not complete his chores to meet his mother's standards. His mother enjoys cooking and trying new dishes she sees on Food Network. Even though he enjoys watching her cook, he thinks it is funny when she messes up.

He has not seen his father since he moved out of the house when Corey was four or five years old. Since then he remembers talking to him on the phone once. "Well, he never really talked to me. He didn't like me, he liked my sister. Oh! Yeh, I talked to him on the phone on my thirteenth birthday. And the last time I saw him, I was about four or five, somewhere around there."

A few years after his father left, Corey's stepdad came into the picture, which has not been a good fit for Corey.

Everything was going good. Then he came and married my mom . . . I don't really have no relationship with him. I don't try to. To me, he's just some guy that married my mom. I don't consider him a dad or anything . . . He thinks I should spend more time around the family . . . Yeh, well actually, he calls it his family.

Although still together, his stepdad has been living and working in Ohio for the past year. Near the end of the study, Corey and his family moved to Ohio to join him.

While living in Winston-Salem, Corey spent most of his time with his uncle or 26-year-old cousin. He believes his uncle has had the biggest positive influence on his life because he has tried to keep him on the right path and gives him advice about keeping his mouth shut and staying out of trouble. When talking about friends, Corey mentions his neighborhood friends and school friends, although he does not describe any close relationships.

Life in School

Corey's elementary years involved several moves back and forth to Ohio with his family, which causes him to recall very little about these early years. "Nothing bad, nothing good. I can't recall." Completing only kindergarten, fourth grade, and sixth grade in the same school for the entire school year, the other years were broken up by moves between Winston-Salem and Ohio due in part, he thinks, to his mother seeking employment.

Although he spent brief amounts of time in any one place throughout much of elementary school, Corey does not believe it affected him. He never found it difficult to reenter school in Ohio or North Carolina because he already had friends in each school. One of his few elementary school memories is of Grove Park Elementary, an African American school in an African American neighborhood. He recalls that the school tried to simulate middle school in fifth grade by switching classes and he believes this helped prepare fifth graders for middle school. He also recalls positive relationships with two

fifth grade teachers and explains why Mrs. Hart was one of them. “Well she was pretty fun. She made the classroom environment exciting. You know, she joked around with us, gave us free time and all that. But she was also very hard on us. She got all her fifth graders ready for middle school.”

Overall, he recalls making decent grades in elementary school. Elementary report cards contain mostly Cs and Ds and he attributes the downhill slide in middle school to his laziness.

I came in thinking that middle school was going to be just like elementary school. 'Cause in elementary school, well, actually, in elementary school, you have a lot more people pushing you. But in middle school, it's like if you're not going to do your work, it's on you. I guess teachers here think that you're mature enough to do your own work at your own time.

Elementary report cards contain teachers' comments about lack of self-control and holding grudges. His memories of elementary school include cursing at teachers, getting into fights with students, and running away from school.

Continual behavior and academic concerns prompted testing in fourth grade to see if he qualified for exceptional children's services. He was certified with a learning disability in math and written expression. Three years later when reevaluated, his certification changed from learning disabled to behaviorally and emotionally disabled.

Corey's middle school years have been spent at Wilson Andrew since he transferred in during the second semester of his sixth grade year. His first retention came at the end of that school year, but he claims he never thought much about it. “I've never really thought about it . . . It's like being in the same grade again . . . Well, actually, I felt

kind of comfortable. Pretty comfortable. Having the same teachers two years in a row.” Being retained changed his thinking somewhat about what it takes to pass. “I used to think that I could, you know, just pass every test, I could just go to college and do alright . . . I got held back. Well, since I passed the EOG test and still got held back I thought well, if I pass every test, it still doesn’t say that my grades are that good.”

To him, the adults at Wilson Andrew are helpful to students and knowledgeable about their content. He has never seen teachers treat students differently.

Because they handle your problems and they don’t turn anybody down . . . You have some really good teachers and a really good teaching core and they know a lot about what they’re teaching in their field . . . I get along with the teachers pretty good. I’ve had my ups and downs, but so far, so far so good.

Corey gets along well with his teachers and believes that they care about him and believe he has the potential to be successful. One of his current teachers, in particular, stands out in his mind simply because he likes the subject matter and believes that helps him get along with her.

In general, he likes school, feels safe, and believes he fits in at Wilson Andrew. A few times in the interviews, Corey reported not feeling comfortable because of some students who do not get along with him. Corey believes other students see him differently and that there is something about him they do not think is normal.

Well, there’s always something about me that they dislike, they don’t think is normal, they don’t think, lives up to the hype of what a student who goes to this particular school is supposed to be like . . . I don’t have a problem with the students, they have a problem with the way I look.

He believes students have a mental power over other students. “Somehow kids scare other kids.” Although he says he is not being bullied, bullying does exist.

A lack of motivation and hanging around others who behave similarly, are the reasons for his school behavior and low grades.

Laziness, being lackadaisical. Just not, not wanting to do the work. Maybe I need to start doing my work, but maybe I’m trying to hang around the wrong people. You know, I guess if I hang around people who make honor roll, then maybe I’ll start making honor roll.

Observations of Corey do not show signs of strong connections to other students. Other than an occasional conversation with a few students, Corey is typically seen keeping to himself. At times, Corey visits the office to report that someone is bothering him. At these times, he is reluctant to go to class or lunch.

When asked about the power of student voice in school, he comments that students have it but do not use it. “Well, they don’t ever speak up for themselves.” Corey believes all students have a voice and the same privileges and opportunities but do not take advantage of them. He says that kids have the opportunity to “go to high school, get an education, go to college . . . Most of them don’t use it. They play around in class.”

Corey acknowledges that he is not performing up to his own measure of success, which consists of doing one’s work, being quiet, and accomplishing goals. He believes that the system of education is the government’s way of helping to better the lives of people. He has strong feelings about people who do not take advantage of free education.

In my book, success should never come before work. I think I’m smarter than most students who make honor roll, I just don’t use, I don’t use my head . . . I sit

in class the whole time, don't do no work, just sit and talk to other people, sometimes I might be distracted, just get into whatever conversation they're into, most of the time it's on a daily basis. I have my moments, but, I might make an A one day, but the next three days, I make zeros, which turn into Fs . . . No self-discipline, probably just didn't have the energy or encouragement nothing like that, I didn't have no push, no strive to try and make honor roll . . . Most people don't take advantage of a free education and then when they get older, they don't know what to do with their life and they become poor and homeless...But if you go through eighteen years, acting up and being bad in school, not unleashing your talents, not having enough self-discipline to do that, and you're homeless, I have no pity for you.

Knowing he will finish high school and go on to college, Corey believes he might attend Winston-Salem State University, North Carolina Central University, or North Carolina State University. Although he would like to attend Duke University, tuition is too costly without a scholarship. He hopes to play football or basketball in college and dreams of playing in the NFL or NBA. If those dreams are not fulfilled, he might become a Language Arts teacher.

Corey believes he is compliant with his teachers even when he gets into trouble. Unlike several of the students he hangs around, when his teacher tells him to do something, he does it.

The teacher'll tell them to do something, they'll backtalk and tell them they don't have to do it and all that. I don't do that, but I'm more quiet. The teacher'll tell me to get up and go in the hallway, I don't sit there and say 'I don't have to go in the hallway.' I go in the hallway.

Two major school events that stick out in his mind are winning his one and only award in third grade and being on the school basketball team.

Major, the biggest event that has happened, I was in Ohio, I was in the third grade, this is the last time I was in Ohio. The only, the first and only award I've gotten, academically, was an award in visual arts. Third grade. Yep, that's the only time I've been on stage. Something good. I won the award for leadership . . . Like, I'd be in art class, I'd help people out, you know, I would keep the class quiet, you know, just little things.

The basketball team brought about a positive difference in Corey's life, especially pertaining to his work and feeling comfortable at school. He considers his teammates as his friends and enjoys spending time at practice and games. "Basketball has forced me to stay in class 'cause I have to do all my work. Can't have no Fs."

Basketball is a big part of his life. Not only a hobby but a source for role models, Corey looks up to certain individuals who play the game. A hero is "somebody with a lot of strive and doesn't give up. Does great things, does something very hard very well in times of need," according to Corey. Clyde Drexler, Sebastian Telfair, and Shaq are a few of the players he claims to respect. On a local level, Corey initially stated that no one he knows could be a hero but then thought of his cousin who played basketball for a local university until an injury limited his ability to play the game. He admires his cousin for staying in school after losing his spot on the team and graduating on the Dean's List.

Influences such as peer pressure are real, according to Corey. He asserts that people who do not go along with the crowd are called punks. Although he claims he has not fallen into it, he acknowledges that peer pressure causes people to do things they do not want to do.

When asked to share his worries in life, without hesitation he confesses that he worries about girls. "Does she like me? Will she go out with me? Normal worries. I'm

fourteen years old, nothing really to worry about.” Immediately following this response, he shares that he also has a fear of dying. “Well, it’s, well, you know, I think dying is always painful. It’s like when you hold your breath, it’s painful.” He fantasizes that if he dies, the school will hold a large ceremony chronicling his life with pictures and a slide show.

The third fear he has is of people. “I have another fear. From, well, sometimes I be afraid of people . . . Well, I can’t go into crowded places without breaking out in a nervous sweat, a real heavy nervous sweat.” He is afraid people will talk about him and embarrass him. He describes his fear of the mall and the school cafeteria even though restaurants and playing basketball in front of people do not bother him. Sometimes he can go into a crowded room if he feels comfortable beforehand, like the YMCA dance he recently attended with a friend. Corey believes this fear began in third grade when he was called on stage to receive the art leadership award and his zipper was unzipped. Students ridiculed him for the remainder of the year.

On a related note, after a fight on the bus in sixth grade, Corey displayed significant paranoia about entering the cafeteria, riding the bus, and frequently refused to go to class. After a second incident where he assaulted a student within weeks of the previous fight, he was placed on homebound instruction until the beginning of his seventh grade year. The beginning of his seventh grade year was full of occasions where he refused to ride the bus for fear that people would talk about the fight from the previous year. He spent most of the first quarter in the office for fear of going to class and skipping lunch because of his lack of comfort entering the cafeteria. Many of these days ended in

Corey being picked up by his mother or being counseled by administrators, teachers, and school counselors. In addition to counseling provided by the school, he receives ongoing counseling from a psychologist through an outside agency.

Corey left Wilson Andrew just before the end of the third quarter of the data collection year to move with his family to Ohio. At that point, his report card reflected all passing grades for the second consecutive quarter. He made Ds in Science, Language Arts, and Social Studies, but improved to a B in Math. He was absent eighteen days, including three days of out-of-school suspension, and tardy to school thirty-four times. He had not served any days of in-school suspension but was in time out on numerous occasions, which was not reflected in his discipline record. See table 3 for a summary description of Corey.

Michael

Michael is 14 years old and in the eighth grade. He is an extremely popular student because of his looks and cool personality. Michael is a quiet young man and is always seen with his cousin, who could pass for his twin. Michael quietly sneaks in and out of school, skipping classes or skipping school for the whole day. His lack of work completion dates back to his early elementary school years and is well documented throughout his school career. Michael was retained in fourth grade, partly due to his mother's request.

Life Outside of School

Michael is from a large family and is one of ten children ranging in age from four to twenty years old. Michael lives with his mother, who works for a local hotel, and his

Table 3*Summary Description of Corey*

Societal	Institutional	Personal
	+ Participation on basketball team	+ Likes his teachers - No significant relationships with school adults - Negative influence of peers to misbehave in class + Positive influence of uncle - Lacks close supervision at home with schoolwork + Mother talks to him about doing well in school + Corey believes his mother cares if he does well in school and will not let him drop out.

Summary

Corey likes his teachers overall but does not have a significant relationship with any of them. His participation on the basketball team provided temporary gains in his achievement and behavior in school. Corey is negatively influenced by peers in class to talk and not pay attention.

two youngest brothers. The other siblings live with his father in the same city. He claims that he and his siblings are like best friends and considers himself friends with his parents as well. Two of his fondest memories are of family trips to Miami, Florida and to Emerald Pointe. His oldest brother attends Shaw University and another is on his way to join him on a football scholarship. His 16-year-old brother recently served time in jail for dealing drugs. All of his other siblings are in public schools and doing well.

The whole family lived together until 2 years ago when his mother and father split up. Although still separated, Michael's father visits regularly and maintains a friendship with his mother. His dad works for a pool manufacturer and is everything Michael wants to be.

'Cause my dad like, he a hard worker, he own a nice house . . . he got a nice car . . . like that's the kind of person I think successful and he always be telling us he already got everything he wanted in life. He got everything he need . . . But I don't want that many kids like he got.

Other than looking up to his father, he does not have any heroes and does not recall heroes from his childhood. He also does not recall any specific childhood dreams other than being rich. "I just thought about when I grow up, I want to be rich and stuff like that. That's what I used to think all the time. I want to be rich and have a whole bunch of cars and stuff." Presently, Michael's dream is to play in the NFL.

A friend he considers as one of his closest has had a positive influence on him.

I've got a friend that's in high school. Like, I consider him one of my closest friends 'cause he like to do positive things. Like, he'll be there for me if I do something bad. He'll be there. Like, I know he just, he a real good friend. He gets straight As, he the captain of the baseball team, and he like, he like, he do like after school activities, stuff like that . . . Like, he'll influence me, like, do good in school, like, he'll tell me like, if I show him my report card he'll be like, sometimes he'll be trying to help me with my work and stuff like that.

Negative influences in his life stem from family and friends and have resulted in trouble not only at school, but in the community. School-related offenses include skipping, smoking, and stealing. Outside of school, societal influences stemming from activities that take place in his neighborhood have resulted in run-ins with the police. He

is also affiliated with peers involved with theft and drugs. He claims his brother, currently serving time in jail for selling drugs, is the reason he started down this path.

Like when I was little, like up to the age of like, like, up to the age like twelve, I used to be good all the time until I started hanging with my brother. Like, my mama used to call him the black sheep 'cause he always, he was the bad one of the family, the baddest . . . And so like, every time I used to go with him I used to get in trouble. And then when I come home I used to have to face my mama, you know, and get a whipping. I used to always hate going with him. Then like, if I would have never started hanging with him, I wouldn't ever be bad as I am today.

When he was approximately twelve years old, Michael felt he had to prove himself to others.

When I first got here in sixth, I was shy, so I wasn't hardly playing around or nothing. But then, when I got to seventh, when I got to seventh, I like grew out of that shyness or whatever you want to call it and I started being bad and stuff . . . The people I used to hang with, to prove them wrong, they're like, I don't know, they used to be like, 'you scared to do this, you scared to do that.' I used to just show them that I'm not scared so I'd just do that, so I could make myself look good in front of them.

Run-ins with the police resulted from hanging out in an area known as "the Gardens," which has its share of trouble, including fights and drug dealers, and outrunning the police while riding dirt bikes in the streets. The Gardens, a government-subsidized housing area, is within walking distance from Michael's house and is where he chooses to hang out. After getting picked up, Michael's friends follow-up to be sure he has not snitched on them because he always seems to get released.

Like, in the Gardens, the Gardens used to be real bad. So like, and now, you'll get chased like for, they'll call the police on you like if you're fighting or like, like some of my friends have guns. So, people will see them with guns and call the

police. We'll have to run. Or like, if you just be standing, the police will try to chase you 'cause they'll think you're selling drugs.

Life in School

School success, as he defines it, is “getting all your work done, honor roll, passing EOGs . . . and not playing around.” He states that he has not been all that successful during the current or previous year because of getting suspended and not taking his schoolwork seriously. “Well, I was always like, I was like playing around, I was like bad. ‘Cause sometimes we be trying to skip periods but we would never get to come back in time.” When discussing the importance of school, he says,

It's alright to me. I know I need my education but sometimes, I don't really care. I don't even be wanting to come to school...Like I be tired. Like, sometimes I be tired and I don't be feeling like coming to school. So, sometimes my mama let me stay home sometimes. Then when I come to school, it be a little bit of fun. The reason why I don't be liking coming to school is it's boring.

Michael remembers that he never did homework in elementary school. “I remember that I ain't never used to do my homework. ‘Cause like I was smart so I always liked to play outside and I didn't think homework was important.” Michael continues to not do his homework. “Like, in class, I do my classwork. But if I don't do it in class then, she'll be like do it for homework. And I don't ever do my homework. I don't know, I just don't do homework.”

Michael was referred to the School Assistance team in third grade because of his teacher's concerns about his behavior and academic progress. The team suggested

interventions to try with Michael and chose not to pursue testing for the exceptional children's program. He was later retained in fourth grade.

My mom put me back 'cause she felt like I wasn't doing the best I could do . . . Like, when I first, when I got there, I almost wanted to cry 'cause I didn't want to be with those little kids. I wanted to move up a grade . . . I was sad because I knew, like, it was boring 'cause I had to learn the same stuff over and over again . . . But I made a lot of friends though. It ended up to be fun 'cause I made a lot of friends.

Language arts is his favorite class because he loves to read. In sixth grade, Michael led all other sixth grade students in the number of Accelerated Reader points for answering questions correctly after reading books from the library. Science used to be one of the classes he liked but has decided he no longer likes that class. "I used to like science but I don't like it now. It's hard. I used to like it 'cause we used to do a whole bunch of experiments and stuff but now all we do is like, write stuff down, stuff like that, just look in the book and stuff. It's boring." He said he would love to be dissecting frogs and conducting experiments.

He plans on finishing high school but is unsure about attending college unless he can play college football. He does not have any plans for his life after high school but says he might work at a fast food restaurant while still in school.

Michael is comfortable at school, although he does not always like school and all the work. He has a lot of friends at school and has good relationships with the students. He appears to be very popular with all students, especially the girls.

According to Michael, students receive the same privileges at Wilson Andrew and teachers treat students the same. However, he says students do not have power "'cause

they don't get to do what they want." He believes it is unfair that students cannot wear hats and flip-flops. "They should let us wear hats and stuff like that. 'Cause it's fashion. We should get to wear hats and stuff just like we wear clothes."

He likes some of his teachers, especially those who act friendly towards him. These teachers will "put anything out of their way to help you on your work." However, no relationship with a teacher compares to the one with Mr. T., the elementary computer teacher. "He was like, he was still like young, he was African American, he was still like, young, and he was cool." Michael thinks his current year teachers believe in him and care for him but there is no bond like the one with Mr. T. Realizing that he sometimes gets caught up playing around and talking in class, he knows he is not living up to their expectations of academics and behavior.

Michael remembers being a quiet student in sixth grade but that a change occurred soon afterwards. Referring to his seventh grade year he says,

I was bad last year. I always got put out of class for talking and stuff, playing around, talking back to the teachers . . . Like, some of the times, I don't be knowing why I do it. 'Cause I used to be trying to play the cool role in front of my homeboys. Now I don't really be caring about that.

When asked what could have made his life different he mentions two things. First, he brings up being retained in fourth grade. "If I, like I got put back in fourth 'cause I never used to do my work so, if I would've never got put back then I would've never met the people I met and know today . . . I'm glad I got put back 'cause I like, like 'cause I wouldn't have met the people I know now."

The second thing Michael believes could have changed his life was never starting to hang out with his brother or trying to prove himself to others. He acknowledges the fact that his peer affiliations influence his behavior both inside and outside of school.

If I wouldn't never hang out with my brother, I wouldn't ever . . . made people think that, dang, I tried to make people think that, you know what I'm saying, I'm down with everything . . . Like they used to always tell me I'm scared to do this or I'm scared to do that. I was tired of them saying that.

Michael's worries consist of passing eighth grade and his mother smoking cigarettes. "Right now, I worry about not passing. That's what I worry about. I hope I pass and stuff like that. I don't worry about nothing else. And I worry about my mama 'cause she smoke a lot. She smoke cigarettes. She's been smoking for a long time. A real long time."

Late in the year, Michael thought he was leaving Wilson Andrew when his family moved outside of the school's residential district, but Michael never left. Instead, he stayed with a friend so he could continue attending Wilson Andrew. During an exit interview, he shared that his favorite things about Wilson Andrew were the Family Fun nights and dances and he never missed a single one.

At the end of the third quarter grading period of the data collection year, Michael has earned straight Fs in math, science, and social studies. He is passing language arts with a D, an improvement over the Fs he received the first two quarters. He has 27 absences, including 5 days of out-of-school suspension, and five tardies. He has served 19 days of in-school suspension, not including days in time out that are not reflected in his discipline record. See Table 4 for a summary description of Michael.

Table 4*Summary Description of Michael*

Societal	Institutional	Personal
- Exposure to violent/illegal activity in neighborhood	- School is boring; class needs to be exciting	- No significant relationships with school adults
- Influence of peers in neighborhood to not want to do well in school	- Teachers could be more strict	- Negative influence through affiliation with peers inside and outside of school who participate in drug use, drug trafficking, and skipping school
		+ One non-school peer is a positive influence
		- Lacks close supervision at home with schoolwork
		+ Parents talk to him about doing well in school
		+ Michael believes his parents want him to do well in school and will not let him drop out.
		+ He looks up to his father

Summary

Michael's association with peers outside of school is luring him away from school. Combined with a lack of close supervision at home with schoolwork and the absence of any significant relationships with school adults, Michael's disconnection to school is perpetuated by his belief that school is boring.

Octavious

Octavious is 14 years old and in the eighth grade. At school, he is most often seen joking around with his friends and laughing. He lives with his mother, stepfather, and 15-year-old brother in what he calls a "bad neighborhood." Octavious has never been retained but has struggled academically and behaviorally since kindergarten.

Life Outside of School

Octavious' mother has recently married his stepfather, a cab driver, after dating him for about 3 years. He has a good relationship with his mother and stepfather, whom he calls Uncle. His stepfather is "like a regular dad" because he keeps him disciplined and buys him things when he is good. His grandfather has also been a role model to him every since he was about 6 years old.

Octavious does not know much about his real father and has not talked to him since he was 5 or 6 years old. He recalls his life growing up without his father as "normal."

I really don't know much about my dad. Like, I seen him before, I lived with him for like 3 months before but I really don't know anything about him. And I really don't know, even know where he at right now . . . I'm glad he wasn't around. No one can break the bond between me, my brother, and my mom.

He recalls being beaten by his father and hearing about his father beating on his mother but never witnessed it.

Just talking to him was kind of good, like he always kept me on task and he always made me do my work. But, he used to discipline me too hard. Like he would whip me too hard and I would have stuff on my back or whatever. And that's the only thing I never liked about him. Like, he was a good father but like he was never there for me that much.

According to Octavious, one of the best things he has is his family.

Some kids don't realize, they at least have a house and stuff over their head and stuff to eat but they don't have everything they want. Like, with me, I don't have everything I want, but I have everything I need. So with me, that's what I'm happy about. That I'm not living out on the streets or something.

Octavious worries about losing his mother and what will happen to him should that occur.

When is she going to die? And if she does, what am I going to do? Or is she going to die when I'm at a young age or is she going to die when I'm moved out or whatever. That's something every child is going to worry about at some point in their life. Because I like, I don't know what I would do without my mama and plus I don't have a dad like, I don't know what family member I could go to if my mom died right now . . . I really don't know what I would do.

He reports having a good relationship with his mother even though they sometimes disagree, which often ends in Octavious bringing his stepfather into it, hoping he will support his stance over his mother. One day, Octavious mentioned attending church and said one of the things he has learned in church is that one should honor thy mother. He says that a child is of the mother's blood and body and believes this is why some fathers leave the family. "That's why I think fathers turn their backs on their children so much because they're not, they don't know how it feels to be that child because like we're not their blood." Upon further reflection, he stated that he knew many people whose fathers have left but has met only one classmate whose mother left.

Like almost every person I hang out with or child I know, their father was never there for them. Their father is paying child support. My father never paid child support and I haven't seen him in a long time . . . I mean, as a father, I wouldn't do it but it's just how other men think . . . If your son, if you do that to your son, he's going to do it to his children. And it's just going to be like that. That's how it's going to be.

Although currently not spending much time with his brother, Octavious looks forward to next year when they will hang out more because they will be attending the

same school. His brother helps him with his homework and getting him ready to play high school football. More importantly, he credits his brother for being there through all of the family's struggles.

Cause like he's the only one who has been there through everything that's happened to me and my mom and like, he helped me get through all that. If it like weren't for him, I don't know where I'd be right now 'cause like he just helped me with everything. Like through the struggle of my family like when we was about to get put out on the streets and when we was about to, when our lights was about to get turned off . . . Like it's not a good time in your life to be going through stuff like that. But like sometimes it's just like when the family worry about get put out or when the lights about to get turned off, they get together and they start being with each other. Like they act like they really care about each other and stuff like that. And I just think like it need to be like that all the time . . . It shouldn't be like in the important moment where they just think, 'Dang, I've got a good family' and just want to be there for them at that moment. They should do that all the time.

Living in a large neighborhood where Hispanic families outnumber African American families, he refers to his neighborhood as a "somewhat bad neighborhood." "Not a whole lot of African Americans live over there. It's like, it's a Hispanic neighborhood . . . People get shot over there. There are gang-related people. They spray paint all over the neighborhood. They do stuff like that for no reason." Although he does not want his friends walking to his house, he does not mind walking down the street because the Hispanic people leave him alone.

Life in School

The best thing that has happened to Octavious was getting passed to the eighth grade. Octavious was in an automobile accident and out of school for several months in

seventh grade. He recalls feeling miserable not being able to come to school for three months and believes he was promoted because the teachers felt sorry for him.

Being successful in school to Octavious means “having good grades, being able to comprehend, having good scores on EOGs . . . passing all your grades and not being held back, being a good role model, good person, and a good friend to other people.” He acknowledges not taking school very seriously and letting his friends easily influence him.

I would say right now, I’m not taking it as important as I should . . . because I don’t make an effort to do my work. Because I just try to be cool, I guess . . . ‘Cause my mom always nagging at me about ‘do your homework, blah blah blah and if you don’t do it, you’ll see how it is ‘cause you’re not going to be able to make it’ or whatever. I was like, I’m thinking, well, it’s whatever happens. But I shouldn’t be thinking like that. . . Sometimes I get in trouble and have a bad day and sometimes I go to school, do my work, hang out with my friends and have a good day . . . Like, I get into hanging with my friends too much and I be late for class or something like that or either I just, just get on the teacher’s nerves to where she’ll put me out and tell me to go to the office.

His peers influence him in class but Octavious accepts responsibility for it. “But it’s me too because I get in trouble a lot. And I don’t want to be like most kids and be like, ‘Oh, it was his fault. It was his fault. I won’t blame it on nobody else but myself.”

Octavious believes that students have a small amount of power in school that does not go beyond turning down a teacher’s request to run an errand. He feels comfortable at Wilson Andrew and believes if he would put forth more effort, he could be smart like some of his friends.

The other thing that I think messed me up in school was instead of trying to, I used to hang with the smart group and I used to be smart. But I started, tried to

start hanging with the cool group and like the stuff they teach us in class, I know but I don't want to do it 'cause everybody makes me think that's cool or whatever.

Other than one teacher with whom he has concerns, Octavious believes his teachers are fair.

By teachers, it's how you act in they class. That's the way they going to treat you. If you act, if you act stupid in they class, they going to be mean to you. If you act great and do your work in they class, they're going to treat you like an angel . . . I think it's just behavior and work 'cause I don't think a teacher would do that if they don't, I mean, I don't think they should teach if they don't like Hispanic kids or if they don't like African American kids or if they don't like Caucasian kids.

Throughout various interviews, Octavious mentioned how he is treated in his social studies class. He does not do the work in her class because of this treatment.

I get along with most of my teachers, but there's this one that every time you do something wrong or you act out in her class she starts yelling at you and she just talks about you and everything, but I don't let that ruin my day. Like, I was in class one day and I forgot, she was like, she said something, and then she was like, "Octavious, I know you know this answer because you like to eat a lot" and I was like, 'Yeh, I guess.' I mean, I felt kind of bad but I didn't want to say nothing back to her cause I knew she was going to write me up and I just, when it got to the end of class, I just left without saying nothing.

Another incident with the same teacher occurred when she told him not to talk to her anymore after accusing him of writing his name on the door.

I didn't know where the name was and when she showed me the name, I was like that's not even how you spell my name. She was just like, 'I know you wrote it on my door.' I was like 'I swear to God I didn't write that on your door!' . . . She was like, 'Don't talk to me no more. I'm going to write this up.' So I didn't say anything else to her.

His childhood dream of being a police officer or a construction worker has been replaced with becoming a dentist. College tuition, however, may dictate his opportunity to attend. “I know I’m going to finish high school, especially if I’m living in the house that I live in now. Nobody in my house has dropped out . . . And my mom, she wouldn’t let us drop out. If we drop out, she’s putting us out.”

At the end of the third quarter of the year data were collected, Octavious had failed language arts, science, and social studies two out of three quarters. He has maintained a passing grade in math all three quarters. He has been absent 16 days, tardy to school seven times, and has served 15 days of in-school suspension, not including the days he was in time out or suspended from the bus that are not reported here. See Table 5 for a summary description of Octavious.

Table 5*Summary Description of Octavious*

Societal	Institutional	Personal
- Neighborhood (vandalism, violence, racial tension between Hispanics and African Americans)	- Instruction needs to be engaging	- Differential treatment by one teacher + Likes most of his teachers - No significant relationships with school adults - Negative influence of peers to misbehave in class - Lacks close supervision at home with schoolwork + Octavious believes his mother cares if he does well in school and will not let him drop out. + Mother gives consequences for failing grades + Grandfather was a role model during his childhood + One nonschool peer is a positive influence

Summary

Octavious' behavior and participation in class are influenced by his peers and the absence of interactive instruction. Although he claims he likes most of his teachers, he does not have a significant relationship with a school adult. He cites differential treatment from one teacher that affects his willingness to complete work. Minimal supervision at home with schoolwork allows Octavious to not put forth his full effort.

CHAPTER V

A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Representing the second part of Wolcott's (1994) three-part structure on transforming qualitative data, the analysis chapter presents recurring themes and ideas gleaned from the time spent with participants. What they shared, in addition to ideas inferred by the researcher from the data, is discussed in this section. The research questions guiding this study seek to identify the causes of the lack of school success for these 5 participants. Furthermore, understanding how the participants experience school is critical in detecting the influences impacting their educations.

Participants' responses are primarily located within the institutional and personal levels of influence with little reference to societal influences. Students fail to mention various topics that are present in a review of literature from the social justice perspective. Their omissions include racism, inequitable funding, biased curriculum offerings, lowered teacher expectations, unequal opportunity or access to courses, and withdrawal from school as a result of the frustration-self-esteem model (see Table 6, p. 137). In this chapter, topics related to their educational backgrounds, interactions with teachers and peers, thoughts regarding instruction and connection to school, educational support from home, and others will be examined to confirm the presence or absence of societal, institutional, or personal influences on their educations.

The Recognition that School is Important, But . . .

Each of the five young men states that school is important for their futures.

Although they acknowledge the importance of school, their effort and daily participation do not reflect their stated beliefs in education (Mickelson, 1990). There is disconnect between what they say and what they do. Their underachievement is characterized by low grades, a lack of effort, and not fulfilling their potentials (Ford, 1993).

The 5 participants define school success as completing work, passing end-of-grade tests, staying out of trouble, and making good grades, which match the researcher's definition of school success in this study. All of the participants admit that they are not currently demonstrating success in school. Including such answers as skipping class, not using one's brain, failing to complete work, and misbehaving, their answers reflect that their decisions to behave are contrary to their reported definitions of school success and its importance.

Chris and Michael believe education is important for getting a job in the future. Chris shares what he believes to be the goal of attending school and its importance. "Get smarter and being good so you can get a good job when you get older . . . Like, it's important but I don't really like it. Not that much . . . It's important to other people but not that much to me." The behaviors he exhibits at school that land him in the hallway or the office are sleeping in class, playing around, and reporting to class unprepared. When asked what he is getting out of school, he replies, "Nothing."

Michael knows he needs his education to be able to pass his end-of-grade tests and get a job but says he simply does not care at times. "I know I need my education but

sometimes I don't really care. I don't even be wanting to come to school." Along with claiming school is boring, Michael mentions skipping classes, failing to do homework, and daydreaming in class as impediments to doing well in school. On numerous occasions during the study, Michael would come to school but leave shortly after the school day started.

Corey and Octavious offer similar answers but from a wider perspective. Corey states,

I think the purpose of education is more, you know, the government trying to help better life for other people. Most people don't take advantage of a free education and then when they get older, they don't know what to do with their life and they become poor and homeless.

Corey mentions having no pity for people who waste their time in school "acting up and being bad in school, not unleashing your talents, not having enough self-discipline."

However, when describing his current success in school, he does not measure up to what he claims to believe.

I sit in class the whole time, don't do no work, just sit and talk to other people, sometimes I might be distracted, just get into whatever conversation they're into, most of the time it's on a daily basis. I have my moments, but, I might make an A one day, but the next three days, I make zeros, which turns into Fs.

He points to laziness, a lackadaisical attitude, and simply not wanting to do the work as the reasons for the type of daily effort he puts forth in class.

Octavious believes the purpose of school is to get an education while learning important life skills to prepare him for the future.

To learn to be successful, to get you not sitting at home when you get older without a job, so they can teach you how to pay your bills, they can teach you how to be on your own. 'Cause a lot of children nowadays say, 'I can't wait 'til I get of age, I can't wait 'til I move out. I can't wait 'til this, I can't wait 'til that, but they don't know how hard it is to pay your light bill, your cable bill, your rent and everything.

After confessing that he does not believe he is being successful in school, Octavious admits to allowing his friends to distract his attention from school and letting negative interactions with one teacher contribute to his unwillingness to complete work.

My environment, the people around me, but I can't put all the blame on them, I guess it's myself, somewhat half them and half me . . . Because I choose if I want to do my work or not and I choose if I want to make good grades and do good on the EOG, not them. But still, when they're around me, it's hard for me to choose which one, my work or my friends . . . I don't make an effort to do my work. Because I just try to be cool, I guess.

All 5 students take responsibility for their current progress in school. Although they mention the influence of peers and one incidence of not wanting to work because of the teacher, neither the school nor the teachers are blamed for students' academic standings.

Chris names the behaviors that impede his success in school. Playing around with friends, going to class unprepared, getting put out of class, or simply not feeling like working are some of the reasons behind his current status in school. "It's important, but, yeh, it's important but I just be playing a lot . . . 'Cause I be getting, like sometimes I don't be like wanting to do nothing." He states, "I can do my work but I just don't be acting good." When asked who or what is responsible, he states, "Me, I guess. 'Cause I

be getting in trouble, nobody else. I be getting in trouble. It's not the teachers or anything. I be doing something stupid and get caught.”

Terrell also accepts responsibility for how he is faring in school. When looking at his report cards, he acknowledges that not turning in work has cost him and has resulted in failing grades. Terrell is confident that he could have done better if he had tried.

I'm not forced to go to school. I don't have a choice, really. Nobody forces me to you know, get up, not skip. Because it's my choice if I want to sit here every afternoon and skip class every day. It's my choice to make bad grades. And I choose to do that but I'm going to choose to stay in school no matter . . . It's not the fact that I don't want to succeed, I don't want to do my work, it's just that I got so many people, well so many things that I want to do at one time and I can't do it. So I feel that I got to lay one of them off for a while, which was school . . . I feel there's more important things than school.

On a similar note, Michael acknowledges not doing homework, which is a substantial part of his class grades. He states that he did not do homework in elementary school and the pattern has continued each year. “Cause I want, like, if I do good in class, like, in class, I do my classwork. But if I don't do it in class then, she'll be like do it for homework. And I don't ever do my homework. I don't know, I just don't do homework.” Looking back at elementary report cards, beginning in kindergarten, teachers commented about Michael not doing homework. When going through his school folder together, Michael was asked about his elementary grades. He could not recall his grades but clearly remembered never doing his homework.

In the current school year, Michael mentions missing assignments due to skipping class, missing class for disciplinary consequences, and being influenced by others. In later interviews, he shared his experiences hanging out with guys who have dropped out

of school and admits to trying to impress them. Michael knows he would be ridiculed if he were to do well in school or do his homework. “They make fun of you when you say you’ve got to do your homework and stuff like that. I be like, ‘Man, I’m not gonna do no homework’ to make them think I’m cool or something like that.” Michael owns up to his shortcomings in school because of the decisions he makes. “Ain’t nobody else trying to get me in trouble but myself. I can say no. I just be letting them talk me into it.”

Michael was disappointed to see his third quarter report card because he thought it would show improvement. Before receiving the report card, he stated that he had done some homework and made up zeros, which gave him some optimism that his effort would be reflected in the grades. Visibly disappointed, Michael received his report card and saw that he maintained failing grades in three of his four core classes. Although he completed make-up work, it was not enough to offset the zeros he had already accumulated.

Each student remains confident that improvement is down the road. Michael promises that his fourth quarter report card will be better so he can go to high school and adds that he may begin staying after school for tutoring. Terrell looks forward to “making history” with grade turnarounds on the upcoming final report card.

It’s like at the end of the year, you take it more seriously because you’re thinking man, if I don’t pass this test, I’m getting held back . . . but when it comes to that last quarter, it’s nobody that’s stopping me when it comes to grades, EOG, studying, whatever, that last quarter is like the last time that I’ve got to live.

Chris did not see a difference between his third quarter report card and the previous one. He knows he must earn good grades the final quarter to be promoted. After

commenting that his grades are poor because of sleeping in class, playing around, and being in class with friends, he remains optimistic that he will complete his work fourth quarter to avoid retention.

Each student knows what it will take to pass; however, their day-to-day actions do not measure up to what it takes to receive the payoff at the end of the quarter. They acknowledge the behaviors that are preventing them from experiencing success but do not make the adjustments in their daily behaviors and efforts in order to see the changes they claim to be seeking. They give into the temptations of the moment and fail to see the implications for their futures.

The Prevalence of Early Problems in School and Retention

Four of the 5 students in the study have been retained. Two students were retained in fourth grade, one in second, and one in sixth grade. Chris' upcoming retention in seventh grade will be his second retention. Although the boys' initial reactions about retention range from not knowing what retention meant to recalling their peers laughing at them, none of the students share any negative long-lasting implications of their retentions. Other than the realization that they could be in high school or about to go to high school, not one of the students voiced a residual effect of being retained. Michael claims he is glad he got to know the people he did as a result of his retention.

Two of the students' parents contributed to the decision to retain them in elementary school. According to Chris, his mother felt that he had not learned enough even though he earned proficient scores on both of his reading and math end-of-grade

tests in fourth grade. After repeating fourth grade, his end-of-grade test scores improved as well as his grades and behavior ratings.

Michael says his mother also wanted him to repeat a grade and thus was retained in fourth grade. "My mom put me back 'cause she felt like I wasn't doing the best I could do." His fourth grade report card contained Ds, one B, and one F, and a passing score on the math portion of the end-of-grade test. The second time in fourth grade, his reading score improved and he passed both the reading and math end-of-grade tests while earning mostly Cs and Ds on his report card. Although improvement was noted in his grades and test scores, his behavior ratings dropped from satisfactory to ratings suggesting his behavior needed improving.

Elementary report cards for all 5 participants indicate behavioral as well as academic concerns by their teachers in the early grades. Fights, disrespect, lack of self-control, and failure to complete work were teachers' concerns as noted on their elementary report cards. For each of the students, behavioral issues have persisted since elementary school (Mendez, 2003; Spivack, Marcus, & Swift, 1986). Skipping, misbehavior in class, and incidents of disrespect are the common infractions during their middle school years.

Concerns about Octavious' progress in school began with his first grade teacher commenting that he needed to put forth more effort in his schoolwork. Throughout elementary school, he earned mediocre grades and behavior ratings accompanied by concerns of talking in class, not listening, and lack of work completion. He recalls an increase in misbehavior in fifth grade when he transferred schools and saw a drop in his

grades but is unsure what caused the change. “In fifth grade at Garden Elementary School, I started getting wrote up like every other week.” He recalls playing around in class more that year and the teacher commented that he was more concerned with his peers than his work. “I don’t know what happened ‘cause like I started playing more than I started learning. And then, after I left Garden Elementary School, that’s when I went to sixth grade and I just kept playing until now.”

Corey’s elementary school experiences involved several moves with his mother and siblings between Ohio and North Carolina, but he does not believe the moves impacted his progress in school. Not able to recall much about his overall elementary experience, Corey can recall specific incidents. Other than two teachers he liked in fifth grade and winning an award in third grade, the school experiences he recalls are behavior-related. Teachers’ comments on his elementary report cards regarding behavioral and social concerns point all the way back to kindergarten. Behavioral concerns such as lack of self-control and respecting school personnel are included on his very first report card with average grades. The third-grade report card contained Cs and Ds, unsatisfactory behavior ratings, and concerns such as holding grudges and worrying about others.

A review of Corey’s school folder sparked his memory about numerous incidents occurring in elementary school. In Kindergarten alone, he recalls punching a girl on the bus for getting an attitude with him, eating plastic chips at school for attention, and a couple of incidents where he cursed out the school counselor but does not remember why. In third grade, he walked to the neighboring junior high school and demanded to

meet with the principal. He asked the principal to find the student who had beaten him up earlier in the day and bring him to the office. In fourth grade, he ran away from school because of a bad report card and the teacher broke her leg chasing him. According to a letter in his file, Corey was referred to a youth center for counseling that year because of daily discipline issues. The counselor summarized the weekly appointment sessions commenting on Corey's low confidence and lack of facial expressions and her belief that he had unresolved feelings about his father. His final report card of the year reflected improvement in his behavior ratings and grades of Cs and Ds, which was also when he began taking medication to help his behavior. The teacher commented on his lack of focus but noted improvement in the last nine weeks of the school year.

Michael's habits with schoolwork also began early in his school career. Beginning in kindergarten, there was a trend of teachers commenting that he did not complete his work, which has followed him to the present. Behaviorally through third grade, his report cards contain comments about the need for him to improve his behavior, as well as his effort. Michael's third grade teacher referred him to a school assistance team because of her concerns about his behavior and academic issues. The team suggested interventions, such as tutoring and increased parent contact but saw no indication of a learning difficulty. His grades fluctuated with slight changes for a few years until they fell in seventh grade where they remain to date.

Each of the participants has positive and negative experiences from their educational careers. However, from the students' perspectives, except for Corey, the experiences they share have not had lasting negative effects that could be

considered as critical incidents that initiated the enactment of the frustration-self-esteem model (Finn, 1989). Although retention and negative experiences with peers and school adults could be thought to be significant events impacting students' feelings toward school, except for Corey, the other participants do not see them that way. For Corey, he does allude to receiving an award in front of the school with his zipper down as the event that initiated his fear of crowds of people in large places.

The interesting thing to note is that although all 5 students' records and recollections are riddled with behavioral and academic concerns accompanied by a variety of school experiences, each of them earned proficient scores on at least one of their end-of-grade tests every year since fourth grade. Intelligence and ability are not the issues with these students. Instead, participation and daily effort are at the forefront of the list of issues to be examined.

The Importance of Student Engagement in Instruction

Students can name what they like about school. Responses of a social nature such as talking with friends during class, class change, and sitting with their friends at lunch are answers students mention. The participants in the study are also aware of changes that could be made in instruction and classroom management, which would improve time spent in class. Their insight can give teachers and administrators an inside view of what students like with regard to instruction, as well as improvements that could be implemented in class.

Michael stated several times that to him, school is boring. "The reason why I don't be liking to come to school is it's boring. 'Cause we be doing the same thing over

and over. And so I be tired of it.” Science was once his favorite class because he enjoyed conducting experiments but he has since changed his mind. “I don’t like science. I used to like science but I don’t like it now . . . It’s hard. I used to like it ‘cause we used to do a whole bunch of experiments and stuff but now all we do is like, write stuff down, stuff like that, just look in the book and stuff. It’s boring.” Michael says he would rather be dissecting frogs and conducting experiments.

Chris was observed during science. In the follow-up interview he shared that the class would be better if the teacher were stricter and if the students could have fun during class. Watching movies and conducting lab experiments would make the class more fun. Additionally, he asserts that splitting up some of the students in the class would improve the overall class behavior.

I wouldn’t say nothing ‘cause it be fun ‘cause she don’t do nothing. But if I had wanted her to teach more, then I’d probably like change it up. Like change up the classes and split like all the people up . . . ‘cause I know like when I’m by myself and I don’t know nobody else in the class, if I’m like the only one, I ain’t going to act bad.

Octavious gave feedback on a strategy the school emphasizes, interdisciplinary units. Although his teachers do not utilize the approach often, he asserts that it helps students learn the material.

I think Mrs. Reed and Mrs. Harper got something going on good. ‘Cause what we’re learning in Mrs. Harper’s class is the same thing we’re learning in Mrs. Reed’s class. So they get it done faster and we can go ahead and go on to something else . . . I mean, it’s the same thing so if we in Mrs. Harper’s class and we talking about presidents, we go to Mrs. Reed’s class last period and she says something, I’ll be like, Oh, I know that answer, such and such, such and such,

Mrs. Harper was talking about that today. So that's a good thing they got going on.

In his opinion, Language Arts is an easy class to pass because the teacher does not assign homework. Octavious contends that all students have to do to pass the class is complete their worksheets. Although crediting Mrs. Reed with occasionally teaming with Mrs. Harper to teach similar material, Octavious believes she reads to the class too often, which does not engage students.

Mrs. Reed reads and it be kind of boring. 'Cause she'll read for a real long time and she'll like ask us a question that she read like fifteen minutes ago so we really won't remember what happened, what like actually happened. And then she'll try to explain something to us and then she'll just start reading over again. And she don't stop reading.

It is unclear whether the students' disinterest in instruction is a result of boring lessons that do not challenge them or if teachers have "watered down" the curriculum or lowered their expectations because they perceive students' inability to keep up based on their lack of effort and poor grades. Regardless which came first, students must be presented with lessons that engage and challenge them without overwhelming them (Brophy, 1997; Nieto, 2004).

The Perception of Treatment by Teachers

Students are perceptive in detecting differential treatment (Babad et al., 1991; Baker, 1999). In this study, differential or unfair treatment by teachers was detected by three of the students. Participants cite examples of instances where they feel they have been treated unfairly or differently than other students. According to their testimonies,

these students have, at least on occasion, received different consequences than other students who committed the same offenses.

Chris believes he has been treated unfairly at times during the current school year, even though he claims it does not bother him. Once when he fell asleep in class, he was told to stand up or go into the hallway. He asserts that when other students fall asleep in that class, the teacher simply wakes them. He believes he was also treated differently than other students when he reported to class without his materials. "I think it's not right, 'cause just like today, she asked me, she was like 'Where's your textbook?' and stuff and I said 'I left it at home' and somebody else in class didn't have their books and she had wrote me up. She wrote me up and sent me to in-school suspension."

Chris also states that he has had teachers make statements about how he will look dumb repeating seventh grade next year but claims it does not bother him to hear that. "It don't be hurting me. They probably think they do . . . when they say that it makes me not care." On another occasion, he asserted that even when he feels his teachers are treating him differently, it does not affect him.

Terrell echoes Chris' claim of unfair and differential treatment. Terrell recalls being referred to the office for chewing gum once while another student was assigned silent lunch. "Why did they get a different punishment than me and they take that as me being disrespectful and then I get even longer for that." He gives two additional examples that he also believes to be unfair treatment.

Like yesterday and today. Yesterday, I got wrote up because somebody ripped my paper and I got mad and I started yelling at them and I got kicked out of class . . . And today, somebody fell out of their seat and for some reason, she thought I did

it . . . The person who fell was on this side of the room and I was by the pencil sharpener and she said, 'Terrell, get out of class' . . . And the person who fell told her that it was him and she still kicked me out of class.

Examples from his elementary school experiences are in alignment with what he describes about the current school year. Being blamed, even when he had evidence to the contrary, Terrell sometimes feels like everything is against him. "Because everybody always pointed the finger at me . . . No matter what, if they said I did it, I did it. And whether I even had evidence that I didn't do it, I'm still wrong. So I felt like the world was against me."

Just like Chris, Terrell claims the treatment he receives from some teachers has not affected his overall school experience and believes for him at least, it has been motivational.

It gave me a reason to keep trying. It gave me a reason to look forward to doing stuff . . . when they say I can't do something that boosts my confidence. Sometimes it makes me feel like I don't want to do anything when they treat me like that. But I usually end up doing my work. I don't hate school because of it.

Although describing a teacher's behavior toward him that he believes to be unfair, Terrell justified her behavior.

It's a big difference with behavior. Like, with me, I can see from everybody's way. I can see from Mrs. Saul's way. That's why I say I can't get mad at her for being the way towards me because it's my fault, too. Some of the students, they do what she says. That's why, she says her sixth period class used to be so good until me and some more students came.

Octavious gave examples of unfair treatment by his social studies teacher. He shared concerns in several interviews about the treatment he has received from this teacher. Being blamed for writing his name on the door even though it was spelled incorrectly and being teased about his weight are two of his concerns. He alleges that the teacher calls the students names and puts students out of the room for missing answers to questions.

I ain't never done her work 'cause she be talking about people too much. She'll ask us a question and you not going to know every question and she'll yell at you and call you a dummy. Sometimes she'll put us out the classroom. Like the other day, we were talking about the federal government and state government. She asked if I wanted to build a library here who would I go see? I told her the state and city. She made me get out. The answer was the federal, state, and the city. And she put me out just because I said that.

Chris and Terrell claim that the differential treatment they receive is not significant in affecting their attitudes toward school. Octavious is the only student who says a teacher's treatment has affected his days at school. Octavious refuses to do his social studies work because of not liking the teacher and at times lets it affect his willingness to work in other classes. "It almost affected everything . . . I have her third period. That's the first class I go to on my team. She used to argue and yell at me. So when I would go to other classes, I used to not do my work . . . I used to feel bad."

Students had their own reasoning to justify teachers' treatment of students after acknowledging their awareness of differential treatment. Whether a direct correlation existed between student behavior and teacher treatment or work completion and teacher

treatment, students reported that these were fair practices. Race or gender was never mentioned as reasons for differential treatment from teachers (Casteel, 2000).

Absent from the data is the presence of lowered academic expectations from teachers. Literature from the standpoint of social justice mentions the prevalence of teachers' lowered expectations of African American students and of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds; however, the participants do not mention it. In fact, all 5 participants state that their teachers believe they could be successful even though they are not currently demonstrating success. Although Chris contradicts his earlier claim that his teachers' comments do not bother him, he says he feels better when they tell him, "I know you can do better." Terrell realizes his teachers believe he can be successful. He says his math teacher gets especially frustrated with him because she sees his potential. "She wants me to be a better person as far as school goes. And she can see so much in me that she gets frustrated." Octavious agrees that teachers care about him and want to see him pass his yearly-standardized tests and be promoted to high school. Each student insists their teachers want them to succeed and none detect lowered expectations from teachers.

The Expectation that Students Fit into a Mold

As noted by educational researchers and scholars, schools operate within the rules of the middle class (Delpit, 1995; Fordham, 1996; Nieto, 1999; Ogbu, 1990). This notion sets up some students for automatic success by the mere cultural embeddedness of knowledge of the rules of the game and others for likely failure due to cultural knowledge that is incongruent with the middle class norms of schooling. In addition to this, students

express their difficulties with fitting into the molds that teachers expect of them. Sitting quietly in class, facing the front, and completing assigned work are not behaviors these students have mastered. Thompson and Cress (as cited in Taylor, 1991) coined the term “goodness of fit” to characterize the behaviors that teachers seek from students in their classrooms.

If there is a mold of the traditional student, the participants in this study certainly would not fit into it. The teachers’ expectations that these young men fit into this mold are unrealistic and out-of-touch with the students’ world. A traditional student would be one who attends school regularly and on time, completes assignments at school and at home, and keeps to himself in class while attending to the teacher at all times. For various reasons, the participants do not meet these expectations. Missed instruction due to absences, tardies, and disciplinary consequences resulting in in-school or out-of-school suspensions most likely account for part of students’ difficulties in keeping up with schoolwork. Combined with students’ admissions of not regularly completing their homework, the passing grades they earn cannot overcome the zeros they accumulate for missing assignments.

The 5 students admit having difficulty demonstrating appropriate behavior in class and paying attention. Chris, Michael, and Octavious express their desires for instruction that is interactive. The bulk of the instruction they receive comes from lectures and reading assignments, coupled with taking notes and answering questions in the book. Students acknowledge not paying attention to the teacher or to the lesson and admit to talking and playing with their friends instead.

Chris' teachers are often heard complaining about his attendance and tardiness to school. They couch it under their beliefs that he simply does not care. Chris admits that school is not very important to him and that he does not put forth much effort. However, when discussing one class in particular, Chris was able to suggest ways in which the class could improve. Chris believes that with increased teacher monitoring of students' behavior, separating some students from others, and presenting lessons in which students could be active participants, the class would be better. He says he would never share his thoughts with the teacher because students usually get to do what they want in class. "It be fun 'cause she don't do nothing."

Terrell was the most vocal about his inability to fit into his teachers' expectations of classroom behavior. "People expect me to sit there with a straight face, look at them the whole year, not saying nothing to nobody . . . I cannot sit in class, keep a straight face, and just look at the teacher the whole time." Terrell feels that he cannot be himself in class and does not have the opportunity to express himself. "It's like a choice of being the student, the one who learns and listens and then being me . . . It's a thing where it's just student, like I can't be me worth nothing. If I was to be me, I would get wrote up more than I have this year." Terrell admits possessing a questioning nature that is often mistaken as disrespect and cites several examples that have landed him in trouble. Overall, Terrell perceives that in order to get in the least amount of trouble, he must be a "student" and not himself.

The Significance of Positive Relations with School Adults

All but one student recalls having a good relationship with an elementary school teacher. When students describe their best relationships with adults in elementary school, they mention characteristics of a personable nature. Students describe teachers who act like family and relate to students. “Acting like a second mother,” “she will reason with you,” “he was acting like he was our family or something,” and “she joked around with us” are examples students offer.

Michael names an elementary school technology teacher. He describes this young African American gentleman as young and cool.

Like, you know how some teachers be wearing suits and stuff to school? Like, he used to come to school, he’ll wear some like Tims like regular clothes . . . He acted like somebody you knew all your life . . . He was acting like he was our family or something, like he’d been knowing us. He always treated us like we was one of his brothers or something.

Four of the students make positive statements about teachers in middle school but none indicate a strong connection with a school adult (Price, 2000). According to the students, it does not require much to begin getting to know students. Basically, simple conversation may just be the tool. Although Octavious has several examples of how his African American social studies teacher treats him unfairly, before the conclusion of the school year Octavious was referring to her as one of his best teachers. Moving from not doing his work in this class and feeling inferior because of how he perceived her treatment towards him to considering her one of his best teachers was a drastic shift. Based on his testimony, this evolution came about simply by talking with her. “I just

went in there during her planning one day and I apologized to her. Then we just started talking then I started doing my work in there.”

An interesting correlation surfaces in a couple of students’ stories when examining the school year in which they report having a connection to a teacher and their progress in school that same year. For Terrell, his fifth-grade teacher is his favorite because she could reason with her students and take care of problems, such as fights, when others would turn their heads. Terrell’s grades improved to As and Bs, an improvement from the Cs and Ds he was earning in previous years. There were behavior-related comments on his fifth-grade report card but his teacher acknowledged his improvement.

Octavious smiled when recalling his favorite teacher. His third-grade teacher acted like his mother and is the only elementary teacher he recalls. Just like Terrell, Octavious’ grades were better during his third-grade year but have dropped steadily since then. Although the teacher commented on his misbehaviors, she made positive comments about Octavious each quarter and noted his improvement in behavior at the end of the year.

For both students, improvements noted in their grades and behavior were not coincidentally linked to the year each reports having a strong relationship with a teacher. Wentzel (1997) and McCombs and Pope (1994) corroborate the significance of a positive relationship with a teacher as positively impacting students’ motivation to do well. This provides further proof of the importance of the school and educators initiating positive relationships with students.

At the close of the student interviews, students were asked what it was like to be a part of the study. Although quick to mention getting out of class as a benefit to participating in the study, one young man's comment spoke volumes. Throughout the study, Chris could neither name a person he knew outside of school that had influenced him positively nor a teacher with whom he had a great relationship. His comment near the close of the study reinforced the importance of students connecting to a caring adult within the school (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Wentzel, 1997). "It's made me feel like somebody's like interested in how I am. That you want to get to know about my life and stuff . . . Like, I don't be talking to grown-ups at school . . . I never had that."

The Negative Influence of Peers

The influence of peers on the 5 participants' classroom behaviors was apparent through observation and interviews with each student. Talking and clowning during class, as well as encouragement to skip classes, were a daily presence at school and successfully competed for students' attention. The participants, however, do not blame their peers for their progress in school and accept responsibility for their own behaviors.

Although each of the 5 students claims they often play around with their friends in class, which sometimes prevents them from learning and working, two of the students have stronger negative influences at play outside of school stemming from societal factors. During the student selection process, both of the boys' teachers commented about the competition between school and influences outside of school luring their attention. These 2 students are the most likely to drop out of school, according to their teachers. Chris and Michael affiliate with peers who are engaging in illegal activities, such as drug

use, trafficking, and assisting with theft. Both students often hang out together outside of school in a government-subsidized housing area known for drugs and violence (Brody, Ge, Conger, Gibbons, Murry, Gerrard, & Simons, 2001). Chris lives in this area and Michael once did but now walks to the area to hang out with his friends.

Michael attributes the initiation of his involvement with his peers to his older brother, who has just recently served time in jail for selling drugs. Hanging out with his brother has led to Michael being associated with individuals involved in delinquent behavior. While in middle school, he has been caught stealing, skipping, and smoking at school. These behaviors are a drastic change from the student who first walked into Wilson Andrew in sixth grade. A quiet, shy student, who led the school in Accelerated Reader points in sixth grade for reading the most books, Michael began displaying different behaviors over the next 2 years in middle school. Claiming that his brother started his life heading down this path, Michael hangs out with a crowd that sells drugs and carries guns. Even though he claims he does not participate in those activities, he admits to feeling as if he has to prove himself to this group.

Normally, I was hanging with the bad, the wrong crowd. The crowd that was like, I never really hang around them to sell drugs but I just hang around them 'cause they was cool like. They was good people. They like to do sports. They like to do stuff positive but they was selling drugs, too . . . They ain't never really care, they ain't never really care what I did so I didn't have to do that but I wanted to show them. Like they always used to tell me I'm scared to do this or I'm scared to do that. I was tired of them saying that.

Chris is involved in mostly class misbehavior during the school year and skipping class on occasion. He chooses to hang around his friends who are involved in theft and

skipping school. When asked if his friends influence him to do good or bad things, he answers, “Bad things . . . Like if somebody’s walking down the street, they’ll be like ‘Go hit ‘em, bro’ and then I’ll go hit ‘em or they’ll be like ‘Go take their bike’ or something like that.”

Chris shared an incident where the police questioned him after being with friends who stole some bikes. Although Chris insists only his friends took the bikes, he did not run like the others and was interviewed by the police. He has been with his friends when they were stealing from a local store. “Like, like steal something, like if I have some money and then they’ll be there with me, they’ll be like, ‘Talk to him while I go take this’ or something like that.”

Michael acknowledges the influence of his friends and his brother on his activities outside of school, as well as at school. He admits that not doing homework is in large part due to how it would be looked upon by his friends (Brody et al., 2001). Michael does not want the peers he aims to please to see him as a nerd or geek and therefore chooses not to do his schoolwork. “I can do well but people in my neighborhood be calling you nerd and stuff like that.” When discussing the consequences of doing well in school, Michael claims that he has been told, “I hope you’re not turning White on us, bro.” To him, that comment alludes to the assumption that White people do all of their work and that African American students do not. He adds that comments like this make it seem like African American people are ignorant. Michael disagrees with that line of thinking because “all Black people are not like that, just like Whites . . . Not all Black people are

ignorant, some be doing their work.” He also added that all White students do not do their work. Nonetheless, Michael chooses not to do his schoolwork.

To some extent, Michael realizes the impact of societal influences on his education. Chris admits to the negative influence of peers but does not relate their influence to his progress in school. He also does not make a connection between his neighborhood and what he sees going on around him to his performance in school. Watching fights, drug transactions, and people running from the police, Chris believes he would be no different if he had missed out on these incidences in the neighborhood. “I’d be the same. Like you just see it and walk off . . . It don’t faze me like that.”

Connectedness to School through Peers (But Not Adults)

As previously mentioned, students’ peers groups are a strong influence on students’ lives inside and outside of school. Peers serve as both a measure of connecting students to the school and a distraction to students’ attention in class and following rules. When framing the research question related to student connection to school, the researcher acknowledged the possibility that students’ accounts of connection to school could vary from the researcher’s initial definition. Despite the initial definition of disconnection to school consisting of a lack of academic progress, diminished academic effort, and difficulty in meeting behavioral expectations, the participants attribute their connection and comfort in school to the influence of their friends. Citing such examples as having a lot of friends, being well liked, and being known by other students, peers play an important role in students’ comfort and connection to school. Although teachers are often recognized in the literature as contributing to students’ sense of belonging and

connection to school, participants in this study do not link teachers to promoting connection to school at Wilson Andrew. Additionally, except for one example of a positive influence of an extracurricular activity, school-sponsored clubs and teams are not recognized as a means of connecting the participants to school which stands in opposition to other research (Ma, 2003). For the participants in the current study, peers are the overriding contributors to students' connection and comfort in school.

Chris describes the importance of peers in establishing his comfort in school. At a predominantly White elementary school he attended for a short time, Chris felt he did not fit in and believed that in order to get along with the White students, he had to act like them. He asserts that the experience has not negatively affected his feelings toward Caucasian people but it made him aware of the fact that he feels more comfortable in a school where there are other African American students and where he knows many of the students.

Corey provides another example of the strong influence peers have in establishing students' feelings of comfort in school. Corey contradicted his reported feelings of comfort and connection to school on occasion. In one interview, he mentioned not always feeling comfortable because of some students who attend Wilson Andrew. At other times, he claimed he fit in at the school and felt comfortable with his peers. Corey's inconsistencies with his feelings have been ongoing during his tenure at Wilson Andrew. Battling his fear of people and being talked about is something Corey admits, which at times affects his school and class attendance as well as his comfort level in school. His involvement during the current year on the basketball team has helped him get back on

track in class and regain his feeling of comfort at school. Other than his participation on the basketball team, no other instances of involvement in extracurricular activities were mentioned as promoting connection to school.

The Privileges and Opportunities at Wilson Andrew

The participants believe that all students are afforded the same privileges and opportunities but often do not take advantage of them or they allow their behaviors to get in the way. Corey believes students are offered the same privileges and opportunities because he does not see teachers treating students any differently. However, although students are afforded equal opportunities he states that, “most of them don’t use it. They play around in class and don’t obey the teacher.”

Chris believes all students at Wilson Andrew are offered the same privileges and opportunities. He believes that with good grades and behavior students can do anything in school. Without that, students are not allowed to play sports or participate in after school activities. It is unclear as to the expectations Chris holds with regards to student decision-making at school. The two examples he gives of the types of decisions he believes students are allowed to make consist of low level decision-making and include choosing to step into the hallway or getting a disciplinary referral to the office when in trouble and the student’s choice of deciding whether or not to complete schoolwork.

Terrell also believes students have the same opportunities and privileges but students’ behaviors can cause those privileges to be taken away, which he believes is fair. He says all students have the opportunity to do their best.

Me? I have the right to do nothing. I couldn't go to the bathroom if I wanted to. Mostly, it's all about, but I'm not going to say it's for the fact of how teachers like people, it's for a good reason why most people don't have privileges. It's for the behavior. If you're a good student and you do good things, you get the most privileges of all. If you're somebody that talks a lot, doesn't make a lot of good decisions, you have no privileges whatsoever.

All 5 participants believe their teachers' decisions to allow certain students to visit the restrooms or their lockers are fair. Although this contradicts a few students' earlier reports of unfair treatment, students seem to accept these practices. Students claim to see that teachers' decisions are based on work completion or behaviors demonstrated in class and are not inconsistent or subjective.

The Minimal Presence of Positive Influences from Adults and Peers Outside of School

Four of the students name an individual they know as being a positive influence on them, in addition to their mentioning of Shaq, Tupac, and others. Fathers, friends, and extended family members are considered heroes or positive influences. Although four of the students name an individual they admire, there is little evidence of the strength of the influence. In other words, although the participants report having a positive influence, it is difficult to determine the impact these individuals have on the lives of students.

Terrell's fifteen-year-old cousin is his hero and Terrell compares him to an angel. He claims his cousin is a positive role model because he does well in school and does not get into trouble. He often gives Terrell advice on how to react to teachers and how to treat his friends. Terrell and his cousin are the best of friends and enjoy rapping together.

He's like an angel in my mind. I have never seen nobody do what he does and I mean, to be my family, you wouldn't expect, now see that's the only way you can get what I'm saying, if you knew my family. For him to be in my family and not get in trouble at all, it's so crazy to know that he hasn't got wrote up one time in life yet.

Michael admires his father who he describes as a hard worker. He sees his father weekly and considers his father to be successful because he has a nice house and car. "My dad is like one of my best friends. He's one of my homeboys. I can talk to him about anything. He'll do anything for me . . . My other homeboys' parents be all strict and don't let them do nothing." He and his father have always been close but when he does wrong, his father gets on him. His father occasionally tells him to get his schoolwork done but school is not a common topic of discussion. Additionally, Michael says his father's influence does not carry over into how he performs at school.

One thing that was glaringly obvious in the study was the absence of a positive influence or role model in Chris' life. Throughout various interviews, he was asked about the positive influence of others in his life. Whether these questions were phrased referring to these people as role models, heroes, or someone he looks up to, the response never wavered. "I don't know," coupled with a shrug of his shoulders was his unchanging response.

Chris does not cite any strong influences within his family. He claims he has a "regular" relationship with his mother. Although he reports they are not very close, he says he respects her, which he defines as using manners and not talking back. Chris does not know his father well because he has been in jail for all but approximately 3 years of

Chris's life. The only other adult in Chris's life is his mother's boyfriend and Chris is very quick to remark that he does not like him.

In one of the last interviews with Chris, he was asked if not associating with a role model or positive influence has affected him. "My mama said it would. She said if there was a man, every time I get in trouble, he'd hit me and I wouldn't want to do it no more." When asked what he thought he replied, "I don't know 'cause it never really happened, so I don't know." Not associating with a role model thus far in life, Chris was at a loss in answering this question, possibly for lack of a comparison. One could possibly fantasize what it might be like to have something never had before, but Chris was not one to venture beyond his own world to answer questions.

The Absence of Close Supervision or Support with Schoolwork at Home

Parent support in the case of these students' lives was limited and mainly consisted of their parents talking to them about doing well in school. Each of the students acknowledges that their parents will not allow them to drop out of school, while also acknowledging that their parents fail to stay on top of their progress in school. Corey mentions his mother meeting with his teachers. Terrell shares that his father looks at his school report cards and progress reports to stay informed. Chris describes punishments and rewards dealt out by his mother for his progress in school. Although Chris and Terrell indicate their parents expect improvement, little or no change is visible on their report cards.

Terrell describes how his father helps him by looking over his report cards and progress reports. If Terrell is not doing well in school, his father takes away privileges.

“By checking on me and other ways, like I can see if he didn’t care to look at my report card or my progress reports but he does that. That lets me know that he at least cares that I’m doing something and if it’s an F or whatever, he helps me by taking my stuff away so that I can learn.” Although Terrell says his father punishes him for doing poorly in school, his father does not supervise his daily work completion or provide him with help with his schoolwork. Terrell’s father does visit the school following phone calls from teachers and administrators regarding behavior or academic concerns.

Educational support from Corey’s family consists of purchasing school supplies, talking to him about doing well in school, and conferencing with his teachers. Other than one instance of his uncle and cousin assisting him with a PowerPoint presentation, Corey’s family does not assist him with his schoolwork. “Oh, nobody knows the things I’m doing at school . . . They buy me school supplies. They don’t really help me, they can’t.”

Frequently called by teachers, Corey’s mother also checks in with administrators when she has concerns or needs assistance. For example, when Corey was refusing to get on the bus, she called and scheduled a meeting with the grade level administrator to encourage him to ride the bus because she was missing too much time from work bringing him to school and picking him up. Although Corey did not mention his mother’s attendance at his Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings as a sign of support, she typically attends.

Unsure if his family helps him do well in school, Chris says his mother talks to him occasionally about doing well but does not stay on him to be sure he is doing his

work. “My mom wants me to pass my grade and wants me to do my homework and stuff. I get in trouble if I don’t do it.” Chris claims he is put on punishment for each instance of failing grades or reports of misbehavior. His mother also offers incentives to encourage him to improve in school. If he can produce a progress report showing he has pulled up a failing grade to a C, she will buy him new gold fronts. “She said the only way she going to get my fronts is if I show improvement in school.”

The Universality of Hopes, Fears, and Dreams

Although some in society may view the 5 participants in this study as “angry Black men” (Gause, 2004), they are not unlike other students of their same ages. Although their levels of reflection vary, the students possess aspirations for their futures and their share of worries. Whether communicating lofty aspirations of playing in the NFL, a fear of death, or the dream of being promoted, each student shared his thoughts. Tapping into students’ minds and discussing their dreams and fears is an important part of connecting with students just by letting them know someone cares to listen.

Chris, Michael, and Corey dream of playing professional sports. Chris and Michael also share that getting rich is a part of their dreams. Chris believes the best part about being rich is buying anything he wants, which would consist of shoes, clothes, and cars. Admitting to his desires of wanting to impress others, especially girls, Chris enjoys spending his money on clothing and shoes.

Chris and Michael worry about being promoted to the next grade. Both students have previously been retained and do not want to be held back again. Michael also worries about his mother’s health because of her longtime history of smoking cigarettes.

Terrell began dreaming of being a rapper when he was eight years old. He claims his love of rap started one day when he was bored and decided to write something. He considers his uncle, who is a disc jockey, the most successful person in his family. Being around his uncle growing up exposed him to rap and planted the seed that has grown into an all-consuming passion for Terrell. Terrell is heavily involved in rapping with his cousin and best friend with whom he gathers in the afternoons after school to write and record their raps to the beats they have created. Terrell admits that rap is the reason his grades are suffering because of devoting a significant amount of time and energy to rap as opposed to school.

His concern of being well liked by his peers is Terrell's worry. He compares adults' worries to children's worries in an attempt to say that although the concerns may be on different levels, children's worries are just as important.

Ya'll worry about the fact of your house being gone, your car being gone, you losing your job. Us? We worried about if our friend will sit with us at lunch. If somebody would walk beside me in the hallway . . . Well you thirteen, twelve, and you know, eleven, that's the biggest problem. Friendship and finding a way for people to like you.

Octavious has possessed several dreams for his future from his early days to the present. Beginning with wanting to be a construction worker and a policeman, his current dream of becoming a dentist comes from his visits to the orthodontist when he had braces. Intrigued by the dental equipment and his love of being around children and seeing them smile, Octavious started thinking of becoming a dentist. Another one of his dreams is to pass his grade, do well in school, and go to college. He worries that high

tuition costs may prevent him from attending college. Other than wanting to be a rapper one day, Octavious laughs when he mentions the dream he shares with his brother of buying a fast food franchise, such as McDonalds or Waffle House. In addition to his fear of not being able to afford college, Octavious also fears losing his mother. “Because I like, I don’t know what I would do without my mama and plus I don’t have a dad like, I don’t know what family member I could go to if my mom died right now. I really don’t know what I would do.”

Corey shares three fears that are real to him. The first fear Corey admits is worrying about girls, like most boys his age. “Does she like me? Will she go out with me?” The next two fears he has run a bit deeper than the fears shared by the other 4 participants. Corey fears dying and people.

Corey fears dying because he believes it will be painful. He dreams of a school wide celebration of his life when he dies, further proof of the importance placed on being well liked by peers.

When you can’t breathe and your heart stops and your blood stops pumping, I think that’s painful . . . It just, one day it just became a fear . . . Well I had, well, I always thought about when I die, that Wilson Andrew is going to hold a big thing and have pictures of me and have a little song playing, have a slide show of the things that I did, the pictures I took, team pictures, and all kinds of stuff.

Corey’s third fear is a fear of people, which often affects him at school. He is afraid of large crowded places, like the mall and the school cafeteria. Claiming that he breaks out into a heavy, nervous sweat, Corey has demonstrated this fear on numerous occasions by his refusal to go to the cafeteria, attend class, or ride the bus. His paranoia

often stems from the fear that people will talk about him, which he attributes to a traumatic experience in third grade of being on stage in front of the whole school with his zipper unzipped. When at its peak, his paranoia becomes so strong that he will accept disciplinary consequences or demand to go home to avoid having to go to class or the cafeteria. Unlike the four other students in this study, Corey has received counseling for several years and continues to see a physician for emotional problems that have persisted since his early years.

Only when students are comfortable and engaged in true dialogue do they allow entry into their innermost fears and lofty aspirations. Regardless of their chances of making it to the NFL, or the disconnection between their dreams and academic performance, their dreams and fears were given life and credence through this research. Taking time to see and hear from the person that lives inside each of these students is important in connecting to them, building relationships, and letting them know someone cares.

CHAPTER VI

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Concluding Wolcott's (1994) three-part structure of transforming qualitative data, this chapter presents the interpretation of the study's findings. Along with what was gained from the research, the significance of the findings will be shared. In this study, the presence and impact of societal, institutional, and personal influences were explored. Through the data collection and analysis phase, additional factors identified from students' perspectives that were not included in Nieto's (1999; 2004) initial conceptualization of the three influences were added. The three influences maintained their original concepts, as defined by Nieto, but added related factors pertinent to each influence.

The societal influence was expanded to include the influence of students' surroundings. The need for engaging instruction was added under the institutional influence category. Two additional themes, the lack of parental involvement with schoolwork at home and the negative influence of peers, were added to their personal influences impacting students' school experiences.

Societal influences refer to embedded stereotypes and beliefs, inequitable funding, practices that lead to discrimination, and the influence of students' surroundings. Biased school practices, policies, and structures that lead to the marginalization of some students are considered institutional influences. The personal influence on students'

educations is represented by students' relationships with teachers and peers, as well as the influence of students' families.

When conducting a study examining such influences, one cannot completely isolate the boundaries or predict the overlaps of influences. For example, influences that are considered to be institutional may also overlap into personal or societal influences. This study did not seek to study a precise division between influences and thus acknowledges that each behavior and experience students described may have represented factors confounded by the blurring and overlap of more than one influence. The important issue is to identify the influences on students' educations that negatively impact their chances of school success and seek to interpret them in ways that allow schools and educators to minimize or abolish their effects.

At times, what students perceived had to be balanced with awareness that these students' experiences and exposures have been limited. Students' responses were grounded in their life experiences and they did not speculate much beyond them. One could stop at the examination of their words and accept them at face value. However, deeper understanding comes from the search of true meaning beyond the concrete. One must also take into account that the students' levels of reflection on their lives, both inside and outside of school, were not as well defined as they might become as they get older. Therefore, inferences about the presence and significance of influences were drawn from their perceptions, their words, and their silences.

This research was designed to answer questions regarding the causes of the African American male participants' success in school through an understanding of how

they experience school, their connection to school, and the influence of societal, institutional, and personal factors. The findings of the study confirm that no single factor is solely responsible for these students' struggles in school. There are no indications of critical incidents early in their school careers that could be pinpointed as the impetus for their paths in school. Stated simply, school is not an important part in the lives of the 5 participants. Whether they do not see the payoff of hard work in school as suggested by Mickelson (1990) or they are simply uninterested in school, the bottom line is school is not important to them. Directing their attention toward their peers or hobbies, school does not attract their time or attention.

Even though each student struggles behaviorally and academically, intelligence or academic ability is not the issue at hand. Instead, the issue is more about daily effort and participation in school. Based on input from their teachers and their previous end-of-grade test scores, all 5 participants are capable of doing well in school but none are performing up to their potentials. Attempting to unravel the reasons for the lack of importance placed on school is not an easy task. Students never came right out and said they are unsuccessful in school because of their teachers or their families or some other reason. Students blame themselves and report that school is not important with little thought about the reasons why.

Instead of one simple answer as to the factors that impact their achievement or success in school, the culmination of several factors is the most plausible explanation for their status in school. Table 6 represents all of the factors from the societal, institutional, and personal influences that were revealed in a review of the literature or from the data

collected in the study. From the social justice perspective, themes were present in the review of literature that were absent from students' testimonies of the influences they

Table 6

Comprehensive List of Factors

Factors within Societal, Institutional, Personal Influences	Found in the Literature	Found in the Study
Frustration-self-esteem model	X	
Attitude-achievement paradox	X	X
Involuntary minority group	X	X
Racism	X	
Inequitable funding practices	X	
Lack of opportunity	X	
Curriculum not representative	X	
Middle class culture of school/ "fitting in"	X	X
Acting White	X	X
Resistance	X	X
Unequal access to courses	X	
Teacher-student relationships	X	X
Differential treatment by teachers	X	X
Student connection to school	X	X
Lowered teacher expectations	X	
Lack of family involvement with schoolwork		X
Lack of interactive/engaging instruction	X	X
Negative influence of peers		X
Influence of students' neighborhoods/surroundings		X

see impacting their educational experiences. Students failed to report inequitable funding, racism, unequal access to courses, lack of opportunity, a curriculum not representative of African American contributions, and lowered expectations from teachers. Although Corey mentioned one critical incident in third grade as affecting his comfort of large places with crowds of people, he did not make a connection between that incident and his lack of academic achievement in school. None of the other students report critical incidents that cause them to question their self-esteem as reasons for initiating a withdrawal from school. In addition to making sense of these omissions in the discussion section, other factors have been inferred from the data as possible influences in their school experiences, although not directly reported by students. These factors are woven into the fabric of the discussion section and include: an involuntary minority frame of reference and related responses to schooling, such as resistance and the burden of acting White; the enactment of the attitude-achievement paradox; a curriculum not representative of African American contributions; and the influence of students' surroundings.

Each of the participants' stories and experiences are unique. Although there are different factors and influences at work in each of their lives, there are some commonalities. The participants report that in general, school is important but for whatever reason they are not taking it as seriously as they should. Each says their families care if they do well in school but are unsure how their families help them. For each of the 5 participants, affirmation comes from outside of education and none report significant connections to school adults during middle school, further widening the disconnect

between the students and school. Whether their peers or the lure of the streets, other factors are competing and winning over their attention that should be directed toward school. The next section explores the comprehensive host of factors impacting these students' achievements broken down into societal, institutional, and personal influences.

The Societal Influence

Stopping at the concrete level of their words, students do not believe societal influences are impacting their lives and experiences in school. Wilson Andrew Middle, located in the inner city and serving predominantly African American students from low socioeconomic neighborhoods, was built in the 1940's. Although its facilities are nowhere near the extent of Kozol's (1991) or Nevine's (2001) accounts of schools that have been neglected or overlooked, Wilson Andrew's facilities pale in comparison to other local suburban schools. Dark, dimly lit corridors and classrooms do not boast state of the art equipment or modern facilities like its competitors in the same county. However, not one participant mentioned the facilities of Wilson Andrew at any time during the study. Except for one mention of costly athletic attire sported by one affluent, predominantly White middle school in the county and three participants' experiences in their neighborhoods, societal influences were not a factor in these boys' eyes. For Chris and Michael, watching drug deals, seeing fights, and observing the police chasing individuals through the area are common occurrences but neither student believes they have been fazed by these types of activities.

Chris and Michael briefly mention race in their student interviews. After attending a predominantly White elementary school for a short time, Chris realized that he felt

more comfortable in a school where there were other African American students and where he knows many of the students. His experience at the predominantly White school and interactions with the students do not negatively affect his opinion of Caucasian people or his ability to get along with them.

The second mention of race came from Michael, who shared a comment made by one of his peers. In the crowd in which Michael hangs out, if someone says he has to go home to do homework, he would be called a nerd. Michael claims he was once asked if he is turning White. To Michael, the racial comment does not hold true because it implies that all Whites do their work and African Americans do not. Although near the end of the study, Michael claims that he no longer hangs out with the crowd in the streets, the thought of not doing well in school to please his peers has to be lingering in his mind.

Other than Michael, none of the participants report intentionally not completing schoolwork to save face with peers. For Michael and possibly the others, the decision of doing well in school with the risk of losing friends or forfeiting good grades in order to maintain a sense of collective identity is required (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1990, 1992, 2004; Yonezawa et al., 2002). The influence of society, although almost completely silent in the words of the students in this study, lurks below the surface of their lives. Its presence is acknowledged by the researcher and is supported in the literature.

African American youth are torn between pursuing academic success with its inherent cost and resisting school achievement as a means of maintaining identity and membership within their communities and with peers (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 2004). Michael's response to this dilemma could be considered as "camouflaging," a way of

hiding to do schoolwork so that achievement in school would be considered natural ability instead of hard earned through work completion or studying (Ogbu, 2004). In the neighborhood, he wants to give his peers the impression that he refuses to do his schoolwork. However, at school, Michael typically completes his work in class. Although combating peer pressure and one accusation of acting White, these factors do not constitute the sole explanation for Michael's refusal to put forth more effort in school. As in each of the 5 participants' lives, there are multiple pressures and factors to be considered for the lack of effort and participation in school.

Going beyond the words of Chris and Michael to examine the meaning behind what they shared, the researcher acknowledges that these students have not experienced life in any other way. Because this is the life they know, they do not see that such exposure has had an influence on their lives and is, at the least, their cultural lens with which they view life. Their experiences, including exposure to illegal activities and being surrounded by violence in their disadvantaged neighborhoods, are what they consider normal. This lack of comparison must be considered as a plausible reason that they do not believe societal influences have impacted their lives and educations. For the purpose of examining and addressing factors that are more readily controlled at the institutional and personal levels, more time will be devoted to the examination and implications of these two influences on students' educations (Nieto, 2004).

The Institutional Influence

Students were asked to share what was good and bad about school and how the school could have helped them be more successful. None of the participants had

suggestions for this question and Michael questioned the notion altogether. “How could the school have helped? I don’t know how they could’ve helped me do better.”

Interestingly, participants do not point blame at anything at the institutional level, such as unfair practices or policies that discriminate or value the worth of some students over others, as contributing to their difficulties in schools. When discussing students’ privileges and opportunities at Wilson Andrew, all 5 participants assert that all students have the same privileges and opportunities but often do not take advantage of them. Their examples include instances when some students are allowed to go to their lockers or to the restroom when others are not allowed. These types of decisions, according to the participants, are based on students’ behaviors and work completion, which participants believe to be a fair practice.

Although they do not point blame, three areas were identified at the institutional level as influences on their educations. First, students mention the need to be actively involved in learning and claim school would be more fun with this change. Going beyond their words when examining their school experiences leads to the identification of two additional factors at the institutional level. The lack of quality relationships with teachers is obvious when discussing the personal level of influence on their educations but it may be a result of a lack of structure in place at the institutional level that fosters relationship building. A third area is the lack of successful interventions early in students’ school careers when they initially demonstrated academic or behavioral concerns.

The Need for Engaging Instruction

The participants want to be engaged in classroom instruction and complain of boredom in class and citing, for example, that conducting experiments in science and hands-on activities in other classes would make learning fun for them. Unlike other research findings that point to students' awareness of a curriculum not representative of all racial and ethnic groups' contributions, the students in the current study only express their desires of engaging instruction that incorporates fun with learning. Along the same lines as previous discussion, the researcher recognizes the possibility that students responded in this manner because they have never experienced a more inclusive curriculum. Without exposure to the idea that the curriculum may not be representative of all people, it is feasible that these students are unaware that there are alternatives to the curriculum they are being offered. The other possible explanation, although unlikely, is that students are actually satisfied with the curriculum content, just not the presentation and opportunities for engagement.

Student engagement is an important construct. Without engagement, there is little participation by students in academic endeavors, which impedes learning. When students withdraw from participation, they are in a sense forfeiting their exposure to curriculum and to learning (Finn & Voelkl, 1993). Geneva Gay (2000) calls for culturally responsive teaching that acknowledges the cultural influences that affect students' attitudes and approaches to schooling. Accompanied by a wide variety of instructional strategies, culturally responsive teaching makes connections to students' experiences to enhance the meaning of learning activities.

Terrell is the perfect example of a student whose interests have been untapped by teachers. Given Terrell's talent of writing rap songs, a teacher could tap into his talent by incorporating rap into a lesson. Whether Terrell is given an opportunity to share his work during a unit on poetry or allowed to write his class reflection in the form of a rap, Terrell would benefit from making a connection between his love of rap and daily instruction. Additionally, teachers see Terrell's obsession with rap as a distraction. Only by engaging Terrell in conversation and glancing through his collection does one get a real sense of his talent and how easily it could be incorporated into his assignments.

Participants in the study share their feelings of boredom and disinterest with classroom instruction. Their desires to be engaged are consistent with what appears in effective teaching material. Hands-on activities, varied instructional strategies with appropriate pacing to keep students engaged, and consistent monitoring of student behavior are strategies of effective teaching (Brophy, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Gay, 2000; National Board, 2001; Wood, 1992).

A study of schools considered to be ineffective and inefficient found that students in these schools received mostly whole group instruction with over half of their class time spent watching or listening (Waxman, Huang, Anderson, & Weinstein, 1997). Informal observation at Wilson Andrew, along with students' accounts, supports this finding. Students are often seen in class watching and listening to the teacher, unless they have already tuned out the lesson. Not constituting true engagement, a student's chance of being involved in the lesson dwindles with such teacher-centered instructional strategies.

Finn and Voelkl (1993) found differing levels of participation between successful students and less successful students. Including behaviors such as school attendance and behavior inside and outside of the classroom, their conclusion that less successful students do not demonstrate a strong degree of participatory behaviors holds true in the current study as well. The basic level of participation Finn and Voelkl describe includes attending class and school, paying attention to the teachers, and participating in class activities by following directions and completing assignments. Of the 5 students in the current study, only one student could be classified as occasionally demonstrating these basic participatory behaviors. None of the participants demonstrate participatory behaviors at a higher level, which include spending extra time in class or initiating dialogue with the teacher (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Each of the participants is enrolled in regular level courses. At Wilson Andrew, math is the only subject with two levels, advanced and regular. Terrell began his seventh grade year in advanced math but was moved back to regular math after failing to keep up with his assignments. Corey was in advanced math in sixth grade but was moved back to regular math in seventh grade after failing the course. Although four of the students consistently pass their math end-of-grade tests, their report card grades do not reflect their abilities. Their test scores place them on the borderline for taking advanced math classes, but effort and participation prevent their teachers from recommending them. Unfortunately, the emphasis placed on daily effort and participation trumps intelligence and ability and leaves students who are capable of achieving at higher levels in regular level courses.

The days of lecture and rote, independent seatwork have been replaced. The “banking” model in education where the teacher deposits the knowledge into the empty minds of students is outdated and ineffective (Freire, 1993; Nieto, 2004). More specifically, these practices no longer exist in the research on effective instruction; however, they still have a strong presence in schools and classrooms. A more modern view of instruction consists of cooperative learning, authentic instruction, the integration of multiple intelligences, and other strategies aimed at promoting student engagement. Schools and teachers alike must revisit how instruction occurs in classrooms and how that instruction serves to promote or inhibit students’ willingness to participate and learn.

Relationships

Another factor to consider is relationships between teachers and students. The influence of these relationships between teachers and students exists on the personal level as well as at the institutional level. Although direct interaction between teachers and students and the development of quality relationships seem like a personal influence, they may very well be impacted by an institutional influence. Getting to know one’s students, treating each student equitably, and valuing what students bring with them depend heavily on teachers’ perceptions of students and their commitment to forging bonds (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 1999). However, if the structure is not in place at the institutional level that values the development of relationships and allows the opportunity for students and teachers to get to know one another well, the institutional influence would impede the development of such relationships (Darling-Hammond, 1997; McCombs & Pope, 1994).

Debate has focused on the effectiveness of the middle school model, adolescence, and the timing of the intersection of the two (Eccles et al., 1993; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). The decline in student achievement between elementary and middle school has been well documented and is thought to be due in part to the timing of the transition to middle school and changes occurring as a part of adolescence. To ease the transition into middle school, schools have attempted various strategies including creating opportunities to promote time for student-teacher relationships to develop. Teaming in middle schools is one strategy to limit the number of teachers with whom students come in contact in hopes of easing the transition from elementary to middle school. Ideally, students will get to know a few adults very well. Each of the participants in the study is on four-teacher teams. With the addition of their four elective teachers, who teach physical education, business courses, and courses in the arts, each student comes into contact with eight teachers per year. With the upcoming transition to high school, having a different teacher for every subject may prepare students for high school. However, the chance of establishing close relationships when coming in contact with so many teachers for short class periods decreases the likelihood of students and teachers getting to know each other well.

Advisories are another strategy to provide a chunk of time for students to meet in small groups with a teacher in hopes of fostering relationships between faculty and students (Darling-Hammond, 1997). In its first year of implementation at Wilson Andrew, a weekly class is scheduled to allow for just that. An hour-long class meets each Friday in which students participate in activities to develop leadership and interpersonal

skills, with utilization of multiple intelligences (Armstrong, 1994). The classes are taught by all instructional staff, counselors, support personnel, and the curriculum coordinator so that class size can be kept to an average of 12 students in hopes of fostering relationships between the students and each teacher. Interestingly, not one of the 5 participants mentioned this class or a connection with an adult as a result of the class.

For the administrators and school leadership team at Wilson Andrew, time must be spent examining the opportunities in place that facilitate relationship building between teachers and students. Whether a decision to return to two and three teacher teams or offering after school activities that give extended time for teachers and students to interact, the school must examine the impact that enhanced relationships could offer. Creating the opportunity for teachers and students to engage one another in dialogue is a basic yet critical part of relationship development.

Early Problems in School

Another factor that must be considered under the umbrella of institutional influences is what schools do for students who are struggling academically or behaviorally. Identifying the root causes of students' difficulties in school is the critical first step needed in order to provide appropriate interventions to address the issues. Determining whether the issues are related to learning difficulties, students' behavior choices, or responses to societal or peer pressures, guides the necessary interventions.

Each of the 5 students in the current study demonstrated academic and behavior problems early in their school careers that persist today. Students acknowledge their awareness of these problems all the way back to elementary school, which is

corroborated in their school folders. When a pattern of misbehavior is established early in students' careers, it is likely to remain consistent over time without early and appropriate intervention (Finn & Rock, 1997; Mendez, 2003; Spivack et al., 1986). Students' middle school discipline profiles confirm that their misbehaviors have persisted.

Four of the 5 students have been retained and all five demonstrate behavior problems, such as disrespect, lack of self-control, and inattention in class. However, only two students' school records contain interventions. Documented interventions taking place in elementary school consist of School Assistance Team (SAT) referrals for Corey and Michael and a second intervention for Corey involving counseling in an after school program. No other efforts of early interventions are noted in students' school folders.

The importance of early intervention is found in the literature on early classroom misbehaviors as predictors of future behavior (Mendez, 2003; Spivack et al., 1986). In Mendez's study, third through fifth-grade teachers' ratings of student behavior on items such as lack of attention, attitude toward school, and behavior in class were found to be predictors of students' future misbehavior. Students receiving negative ratings on these items as early as third grade were more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions in sixth grade than students who received positive ratings in elementary school. Spivack and his colleagues found similar results in their longitudinal study of teachers' reported ratings of student behavior in kindergarten through third grade. Their ratings of student behavior in early elementary school were strong predictors of students' contact with police and school misbehavior through adolescence. Such research confirms the urgency

of identifying students' issues contributing to misbehavior and lack of school success before the problems have a chance to snowball.

“Fitting in” to School

As for accepting students as they are, schools and educators must be conscious of school expectations that suggest all students must think and act alike. Because the participants do not fit the mold of a traditional student, one could conceivably state that they become overlooked or invisible to their teachers. When teachers spend time dealing with the behaviors students demonstrate, behaviors that may be misunderstood, teachers are less likely to see the students as individuals (Taylor, 1991). Instead, the student becomes a label, such as “troublemaker” in Terrell’s case. With the acknowledgement that schools operate within the codes of the middle-class, one could question whether or not the participants’ initial demonstrations of difficulties arose out of their unfamiliarity with the rules of school or their resistance to those rules. Chris and Terrell allude to their difficulties living up to what their teachers expected, such as sitting quietly in class, completing work, and following school rules. Regardless, acts of labeling students and overlooking students who frequently misbehave or fail to complete their work cause educators to miss the root causes of their behaviors.

Nonetheless, teachers and schools must reevaluate their expectations of students and realize that each student is unique and different from all others. Each student comes to school with his own set of feelings, habits, actions, and needs that are different from all other students. Educators must get to know the person living inside of each student and not stop at the superficial level of dealing only with the behaviors each demonstrates in

class. It is important to attempt to understand the underlying issues, such as those that are impacting students' school attendance and habits of work completion.

The notion that some African American students respond to schooling through approaches, such as assimilation, accommodation without assimilation, resistance, and other strategies, implies that students must decide how to receive and participate in the process of schooling (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1990; 1992; 2004). Valenzuela (1999) suggests that schools utilize a subtractive process, stripping students of their identities and connection to their heritages, through expectations that students must assimilate to the culture of school in order to be successful. Resistance to assimilating to the mainstream culture in schools may be interpreted as disrespect or apathy by teachers.

It is not enough to deal with the behaviors that students exhibit and assign consequences to deter the occurrences of future misbehaviors. Educators must dig to search for the root causes of the behaviors. Talking to students, understanding their frames of reference, and looking for their choice of responses to the process of schooling may provide insight into students' behaviors.

The Personal Influence

The personal influence focuses on interactions and relations between individuals. Whether focusing on peers, school adults, or families, the personal influence is a strong factor. The personal influence generates the most insight into what influences or does not influence students' behavior and thinking towards school. Students are aware of factors that contribute to their behavior and status in class, even though each takes full responsibility for their school success and does not shift blame to an external source.

Students discuss teachers' classroom management skills in relation to making classes run more smoothly and enhancing learning opportunities. When asked how the teachers or administrators could help them be more successful in school, students replied that teachers could be more strict and could monitor student behavior more closely, which is consistent with Brophy's (1997) findings that students want teachers to enforce clear behavioral standards. They acknowledge getting away with too much in class, which impacts the quality of learning that takes place. From Chris' suggestion of separating students who get into trouble together to enforcing classroom rules, students claim these actions by teachers would improve class.

The participants provide examples of differential treatment, in addition to reporting the lack of quality relationships with teachers. Except for Octavious, students' reports of receiving differential treatment are insignificant and do not affect their school experiences. Peers play an important part with students' feelings of connection to school in addition to the lure of talking and clowning in class which overpowers students' attention to their teachers. Lastly, parent involvement at home with schoolwork, according to the participants is minimal, leaving the students responsible for their academic commitment with little supervision and monitoring from their parents.

Teachers

To say that relationships matter sounds cliché. For years, educators have heard about the importance of relationships between students and teachers. Not to be redundant, it is important to state that once again, this study confirms that relationships count. The 5 participants in this study do not directly state that relationships are important, but when

asked about their best relationships with teachers or incidences that have occurred in their educational careers, their responses point to the fact that relationships matter.

In Price's study (2000) of 6 African American males, students did not mention a positive relationship with a teacher in high school although they fondly recalled their elementary and middle school teachers. In the current study, four of the students make positive comments about teachers in middle school but none has a strong connection with a middle school teacher. Four of the students name an elementary teacher as the teacher with whom they have had the best relationship.

When asked about past or current teachers, the participants in this study comment on personality-type characteristics or talk about how teachers make them feel. This parallels Brantlinger's (1994) finding that low-income middle school students discuss teachers on the basis of how they make students feel. As a case in point, when asked about teachers with whom they felt they had a positive relationship, Octavious mentioned an elementary teacher who acted like a second mother and Michael named an elementary teacher who acted like family. Though unable to recall what they had learned from these teachers, the students clearly remembered how the teachers acted and made them feel.

Positive, meaningful interactions between students and teachers are found in successful schools (Christle et al., 2005; Waxman et al., 1997). Waxman and colleagues (1997) found positive relations to be a component of effective schools in a comparison study of schools classified as effective/efficient (E/E) or ineffective/inefficient (I/I). Examining differences between the two types of schools, the importance of interactions between students and teachers were reinforced. Findings indicated that students in the

E/E schools interacted with their teachers 70% of the time as opposed to 47% of the time in the I/I schools. Also, the students in the E/E schools perceived a higher level of teacher support and order in the classroom than their counterparts in the I/I schools.

According to two students in the current study, simple conversation is both valued and desired by students. In Terrell's opinion, relations between students and teachers would be better if teachers would talk to students instead of the dictator model he feels some of his teachers use.

Ask questions about like, ask questions overall, not everything, but just some of the main things that's going on right now . . . And you ain't gotta be just up-to-date with everything that's going on right now like the basketball games and the football. I'm not saying be your students' best friend. I'm saying stop, stop playing the role of being the chief. Because that puts a lot of fear in the students but most of them get tired of it like me . . . Like if we had an assembly that just happened, 'How did ya'll like the assembly?' That would be enough.

During the final stages of the study, Chris' remark alludes to the importance of teachers knowing students. When asked what it was like to participate in the study, Chris replied, "It's made me feel like somebody's interested in how I am. That you want to get to know about my life and stuff." To others, this remark may not be profound and may even border on being superficial. But to know Chris and after hearing him say time and time again that he does not identify with any adult at school or outside of school, this is an important comment.

Treatment by teachers. Except for Octavious, students' reports of differential treatment by teachers are insignificant in their opinions. Interestingly, students seem to believe that teachers treat students according to their classroom behavior and work

completion. Although students report being treated differently than other students, some justify the teachers' actions.

Furthermore, the importance of ascertaining students' perceptions was reiterated after conducting one student observation in particular. Observation lends one view of the interactions between students and teachers but says nothing of how the interactions are perceived by students (Marcus et al., 1991). The case in point came from the observation of Chris during his science class. During the 35-minute observation, the teacher interacted with Chris eight times. Six of the times were coded as negative interactions and included directives from the teacher such as, "Chris, you need to listen!" and "Chris, sit down!" Two of the interactions were coded as neutral and included the teacher asking Chris to repeat the homework assignment.

As the observer, it was noticeable that although four other students were behaving in similar ways as Chris and sometimes worse, the other students were not called down as frequently as Chris. These four students consisted of an African American male, an African American female, and two Hispanic males. More specifically, the African American male was never called down, the African American female was called down once, one Hispanic male was scolded twice, and the other Hispanic male was corrected three times. The interesting point about this observation took place in the follow-up interview with Chris. When asked about the class and the teacher, Chris said it was a calm day and that he believed this teacher is fair, although she could be stricter to regain control of the class.

This is the perfect example of the importance of ascertaining students' perceptions. The researcher left the observation with one conclusion: Chris was called out more often than his classmates even though his behavior was the same or better than four other students in the class. Chris, on the other hand, had another interpretation of what took place in class and did not mention the fact that he was reprimanded for his behavior more often than his classmates.

A second case in point of the importance of hearing students' perceptions relates to race differences between the teacher and the student and the lack of attention students paid to the differences. As is often the case, Caucasian females dominate the teaching profession. At Wilson Andrew, three-fourths of the teaching staff is Caucasian and half are Caucasian females. Chris, Terrell, and Michael have all Caucasian teachers, most of whom are female. Corey and Octavious each have one African American female teacher and the remainder Caucasian.

A quick glance over the facts of the case could lead one to hypothesize that a plausible reason these five African American boys are struggling in school during the current school year is because they are taught by Caucasian teachers and predominantly Caucasian female teachers, who may be unable to relate well with these students. However, when listening to the participants' accounts, race or gender do not seem to influence how they get along with their teachers or how they believe they are treated (Casteel, 2000).

According to the boys' perceptions, their teachers treat students based on the behaviors they exhibit and work completion. Chris links treatment by teachers to

academic performance, claiming that students are allowed to do certain things if they are finished with their work, which he believes is a fair practice. Octavious believes teachers treat students based on behavior. “But by teachers, it’s how you act in they class. That’s the way they going to treat you.” He does not believe teacher treatment is related to gender or race but rather is dictated by the student’s behavior and willingness to work.

Terrell asserts that racism is not a factor in relations between students or between students and teachers at Wilson Andrew. “There’s no racism in this school whatsoever. Everybody loves everybody . . . That’s why I would never call nobody at this school a racist. It’s the person that you are that would probably lead them not to like you. It’s not racism, period.” After naming several qualities that make Wilson Andrew unique, such as the performing arts program, he adds, “And why would we focus on you know, what color you are or what race you are rather than what talent you have? Doesn’t make that much sense. And people see it that way.”

The fact that the boys do not point to or even allude to race as a factor is consistent with Casteel’s findings (2000). In Casteel’s quantitative study of seventh grade African American students, the majority of students did not believe race was a factor with their Caucasian teachers with regard to how they were treated, disciplined, or graded. Casteel’s findings and the findings from the current study are contrary to literature that states that race is often a factor between teachers and students.

This is not to say that all Caucasian teachers do an outstanding job teaching African American students, or students’ accusations of unfair treatment are false. As an administrator in the research setting, it is important to note that many of the teachers at

Wilson Andrew have worked in the school for years and make a conscious decision to teach there. As an aside, it is simple to detect those teachers who are respected by students in general, not just the participants in the study, and who are devoted to students' well being. Although there is an obvious absence in the presence of significant relationships with teachers, as reported by the participants, it is not thought to be specifically a matter of race or a lack of commitment to students. Rather, the common caveats of the profession, such as time, a focus on covering the curriculum, and a lack of structure to facilitate the development of relationships, are at least partially responsible. However, no one can confirm the true presence or absence of teachers' feelings toward students, which may be influenced by race, expectations, class, or other factors. For the purpose of this study, teachers' actual beliefs of students of other races and classes were not measured because the focus of the study was to ascertain students' perceptions. Nonetheless, the existence of teachers' beliefs and the influence of teachers' cultural lenses are acknowledged through the literature.

Additionally, the researcher recognizes the fact that these 5 students' failure to mention race as a factor in their treatment or achievement at school could be based on a number of factors, including being interviewed by a Caucasian female. However, the researcher does not believe this to be a factor due to their ease and level of comfort divulging their thoughts and personal experiences, including affiliating with peers who participate in illegal activity. Nonetheless, differences between the researcher and the participants, including race, gender, positionality, and age could be partial or complete explanations of what students chose to report or leave out.

Peers

With regard to their peers' influence on their behaviors, each of the participants acknowledges being influenced by peers in school. Whether it is encouragement to skip school or talk and play during class, the behaviors often lead to trouble with teachers. For all five of the students, the off-task classroom behaviors most often consist of talking to friends and not paying attention.

For Chris and Michael, the influence of their peers leads beyond the classroom and involves them in more serious activity. Research conducted by Brody et al. (2001) found that children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods were more susceptible to affiliation with deviant peers. Chris and Michael openly share the illegal and violent activities that take place in The Gardens where Michael once lived and where Chris still resides. Regardless of how Chris and Michael came to interact with these peers, their affiliation with peers involved in truancy, theft, and drugs is leading them down a road to juvenile delinquency.

Additionally, Michael admits to not doing homework because of how it would be looked upon by his peers. The societal influence encourages Michael to fit in with his peer group, which consists of African American males who have distanced themselves from schooling. Fordham (1996) may consider Michael's connection to this group a fictive kinship; a relationship not bound by family members, but bound by common beliefs and a collective identity. Nevertheless, his association with this group and his willingness to please them strongly affects his grades and achievement in school.

Students accept responsibility for their levels of success and do not point blame elsewhere. The influence of peers and getting caught up in misbehavior is alive and well. Students' peer groups are created by choosing individuals they enjoy being around. As found in Fordham (1996) and Graham, Taylor, and Hudley (1998), students choose to associate with peers they admire and respect and with whom they share common interests, including a lack of emphasis on academic achievement. However, each student says they cannot put all the blame on their friends for their misbehaviors or underachievement because each of them are capable of making the decision to behave and do well in school.

Unfortunately, their choices often stem from succumbing to the immediate temptations, such as playing around or finding other things more fun than schoolwork to occupy their time. Combined with the pressure peers provide that it is not cool to do schoolwork, students wind up giving into the immediacy of the moment with little thought about how their repetitive daily actions will impact their lives in the future.

Student connection to school. Prior to data collection, the researcher acknowledged the possibility that a student could say he felt connected to school despite his lack of academic progress and ability to successfully navigate the behavioral expectations of the classroom and school. All 5 participants admit their academic and behavioral struggles, yet when discussing connection to school, all five respond that they feel connected to school. Contrary to the researcher's definition of disconnection based on academic and behavior standards, participants' version of connection to school is tied to fitting in with other students and feeling comfortable with their peers.

Students' reports of feeling comfortable and connected to school stem from knowing many other students, having friends, and being well liked by their peers. Other than Corey's participation on the basketball team, which has had an observable positive impact on his class performance and in regaining his comfort in school, all other students attribute their connection to school to their peers. No student responded with an account of how a teacher or the school itself had influenced his connection to school, which contradicts other research that claims school climate features controlled by the school staff are the primary prerequisite for student belonging (Ma, 2003).

Parents

All 5 participants state that their families care if they are doing well in school but are not as clear on how their families support their educations. Asking if their homework has been completed is the norm and the extent to which parents help their children. Terrell and Chris describe losing privileges for bad grades on report cards. In addition to receiving negative consequences for bad report cards, Chris' mother offers rewards for improvement. However, neither of the boys' report cards reflects improvement as a result of the rewards or consequences.

The students' parents neither volunteer at the school nor do they attend evening events such as parent-teacher association meetings or performances. Two of the students' parents have visited the school to discuss concerns when teachers initiated conferences. However, each student asserts that they would not be allowed to drop out of school because of their parents' expectations of completing high school.

Each of the 5 students' parents with whom they live has completed high school according to the participants. With the lapse of time since doing schoolwork themselves, their parents may not feel equipped to help them at home. The school has a responsibility to teach parents how to help their children with schoolwork at home and the importance of establishing a place and time for doing homework (Epstein, 2001). Parental involvement and shared goals and objectives among parents and schools create a strong learning environment and increase students' opportunity for success (Comer, 1996; Epstein, 2001).

Implications

Tackling the issue of underachievement by young African American men is not simply about closing the achievement gap; it is about reconnecting these students to learning. In the case of the participants, test scores do not tell the whole story. Although inconsistent, at times their test scores are average or above average. Either way, it is not a matter of teaching what will appear on the test. It is, however, about relationships, involving students in their own learning, connecting with students and families, connecting teachers and students, and promoting the achievement of all students.

Identifying the influences impacting students' educations is only the first step. Finding ways to deal with or offset the influences is the second step. Students spend roughly 33 hours in school each week. Educators cannot directly control how students spend their time away from school. However, what educators can do is make good use of the time spent with students and attempt to engage parents in becoming more active and helpful participants in their children's educations. Hopefully, the positive institutional

and personal influences facilitated by the school will enhance students' school experiences and follow them outside of the schoolhouse. Because teachers, administrators, and school personnel can directly impact what goes on in schools, they are in prime position to positively influence students' experiences in school.

The 5 young men in the study were perceptive in detecting differential treatment, teachers' weaknesses in classroom management, and unengaging instruction (Babad et al., 1991; Wentzel, 1997). From their suggestions alone, educators can glean insight into what students believe would improve their experiences in school. In addition to what students shared, inferences were drawn identifying additional points of interest to which teachers and administrators must attend, including student-teacher relationships and the involvement of students' families in their educations.

Although supporting the stance that in general, school is important, the 5 students acknowledge not putting forth effort or having a strong interest in school (Ford, 1993; Mickelson, 1990; Noguera, 2003). Part of the disconnect between what they say and what they do must be attributed to a lack of connections with school adults, instruction that is less than engaging, the absence of strong academic support from home, and affirmation from sources other than education.

It is important to note the impossibility of studying the influences on students' educations in isolation from the larger context of society. Although choosing to address the influences that are more within the control of teachers and administrators, the researcher acknowledges the strong and ever present influence of society. Students' lives are influenced by the beliefs and values of their families and societal factors, such as the

connection between school success and the accusation of losing one's cultural identity. Such notions have been handed down through the generations and no simple solution for combating that line of thinking exists. The power and breadth of such societal influences "indicate that the site of the problem is much broader than what occurs between the school walls" (Fordham, 1996, p. 343). However, awareness of its presence and power in the lives of students and their families, as well as its manifestations in our classrooms, is a first step in the long walk to help students identify with high achievement and success without the cost of losing their identities.

The next section suggests areas of interest for schools, administrators, and teachers to explore with the underlying purpose of how to promote student success in school and creating schools that are more responsive to young African American men. Although the ideas offered are not new, they are often absent or overlooked in classrooms and schools. The findings in this study should remind and reassure educators that these principles are critical in their impact on students' educations.

Fostering an Attitude of Achievement

The participants in the study possess the ability to do well in school, but lack the motivation or desire to succeed. A discrepancy exists between students' stated beliefs of the importance of education and in students' effort (Ford, 1993; Mickelson, 1990). Teacher input suggested that the participants put forth little to no effort in class, although both participants and teachers believed they were capable of doing well. Students spoke of effort and completion of schoolwork as indicators and requirements of school success but acknowledged they were not exhibiting these behaviors. Although various influences

and factors exist in each of their lives, an important but almost silent portion of the puzzle needs addressing.

Ogbu (1992) suggests that involuntary minorities have great difficulty separating achievement from the endorsement and adoption of White culture. Mickelson (1990) proposes the difference between African American students' stated beliefs of the importance of education and what they demonstrate is also tied to students' ethnicity. Suggesting students' realizations that investments of hard work and commitment to education do not pay equal rewards to all individuals, students choose to put forth diminished effort. Students in Fordham's (1996) study echo the concerns that academic achievement is on the route to conforming to the White mainstream culture. In her study, underachieving students resisted academic achievement as a sign of avoiding that which represented the White ideology.

Michael countered his peers' comment that doing his homework meant he was turning White by refuting the notion altogether. Even though he admits he does not do his work, Michael asserts that statements like that are generated from the thought that African Americans are ignorant which he knows is untrue. Michael claims he does not equate doing well in school with acting White but still chooses to perform short of his abilities.

How can schools help students, particularly minority students, reach high levels of achievement when students have difficulty separating achievement from acting White? How can schools help students commit to putting forth strong effort when they question the payoffs society provides to people of color (Mickelson, 1990)? Educators serving

students who fall into Ogbu's (1990; 1992) classification of involuntary minorities must make a commitment to understand the deeper context at play with regard to achievement in school. Teachers and school administrators who do not fully understand the pressures placed on African American students to maintain their collective group identities will be overlooking an important component of student achievement. Torn between achievement in school with its risk of lost friends and disloyalty to their identity and maintaining the respect of their peers and community through resisting that which is associated with White culture, including achieving in school, students may feel forced to choose. Only with understanding of this dilemma can educators begin interpreting the pressures students' communities and peers place on them.

Why must school success and acting White go hand-in-hand in today's world? Michael realizes that statements regarding African Americans' intelligence are unfounded but continues to put forth little to no effort in school. Whether through the involvement of African American mentors or other role models who are successful, African American students must have exposure to African American individuals who demonstrate that success and the maintaining of one's collective identity can coexist (Ogbu, 1992). Students must be provided with real life models of individuals who have achieved success through education so they can see that hard work and dedication to success do pay off.

Developing Positive Relationships with Students

For middle level educators, the fact that students do not perceive a strong connection with an adult in middle school is troubling, but unfortunately, not shocking.

For the students in this study, it is questionable if more than one or two teachers had any impact on them throughout their years in school. Interestingly, students could not name their teachers since kindergarten. When looking at elementary report cards, they often did not remember their teachers. Even into my mid-30s, I can name every teacher since kindergarten. Out of curiosity, I asked my colleagues to name their teachers and one by one, each ran through the list of names with ease. Careful not to overanalyze such a simple task, one has to see the connection between the absence of relationships with teachers and the fact that students did not recall their teachers.

Relations with school adults help bridge students' worlds outside of school and their lives at school (Baker, 1999; Comer, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Epstein, 2001; McCombs & Pope, 1994; Nieto, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Not only do relationships bring teachers and students together, they also enhance students' willingness to connect to school and instruction. The absence of connections to school and teachers affects students' identification with school, commitment, and participation in school and ultimately, their performance (Brophy, 1997; Patchen, 2006). Comer (1996) simply puts it, "Strong relationships are required for effective schooling" (p. 153).

A step toward reconnecting students such as the five in this study is to get to know them. It is imperative that educators identify struggling students at the earliest point possible and find a dedicated mentor for each of them who responds to them like a family member, rather than an institutional lens (Baker, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Wentzel, 1997). Comer (1996) poses that "to change a child's behavior one must be able to understand that child. School is designed for the development of the child: to elicit

behavior change that results in development, school personnel must understand each child in their care” (p. 29). By listening to the students, engaging them in conversation, and spending extended time with them, a trusting relationship is likely to develop.

The relationship between the student and the adult can serve as motivation itself (Payne, 2002; Wentzel, 1997). Strategy #46 in the book, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, (Carlson, 1997) encourages people to take time each day to tell at least one person something you like or appreciate about them. Educators should heed this simple recommendation to compliment students and provide encouraging words that nurture the soul and build relations. With the feeling of reassurance and a connection to a caring adult, students' attitudes and commitment to learning are likely to be rekindled. Interestingly enough for Terrell and Octavious, evidence based on teachers' comments of academic and behavioral improvement coincide with the teacher each student names as his favorite.

The structure of middle schools varies from school to school. Educators must consider the importance of students and teachers getting to know one another and use this information when deciding on the structure of teams. Utilizing a small student to teacher ratio increases the chances of teachers and students knowing each other well (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Using two teacher teams, with each teacher teaching two core subjects in a block schedule, is a popular model for easing the transition from elementary to middle school and facilitating teachers and students knowing one another. Two teacher teams of approximately 50 students allows for extended time and facilitates teachers

getting to know a smaller group of students, as opposed to four teacher teams that may serve 100 students.

At the school level, educators must ascertain what structures are in place to allow for time and the opportunity for relationship building between teachers and students. Educators at Wilson Andrew believe the weekly class designed to develop leadership skills and expose students to multiple intelligences also promotes relationships between teachers and students. However, the student participants have a different opinion. As opposed to creating an extra class that meets once weekly, perhaps the emphasis should be on teachers becoming better acquainted with the students they teach on a daily basis. The difference between interacting with a student 36 times per year, or once weekly, versus 180 days per year is significant. Providing opportunities for team building, interacting with parents, and simply having conversations with students is the best avenue to building relationships (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

From the physical layout of the room to the design of cooperative, small group tasks, teachers must create the opportunity to interact with each student and get to know each of them in a meaningful way (Brophy, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Wood, 1992). Bernard (as cited in Christle et al., 2005) asserts that because of the amount of exposure students have to teachers, teachers are the most encountered role models aside from family. Therefore, educators are in prime position to reconnect students to school and positively influence their experiences.

Facilitating Student Engagement in Instruction

The study confirms that instruction must engage students in learning. Before educators can expect students to become actively involved in teaching and learning, schools must ensure that instruction is meaningful, engaging to students, and culturally responsive (Brophy, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Gay, 2000; National Board, 2001). This does not imply that teachers must solicit students' suggestions of topics to be covered but to teach the required curriculum in a way that is interesting and inviting to students, in addition to making connections to the students' world when possible (Brophy, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Gay, 2000).

The accepted norm of teacher-driven lessons of lecture and learning through reading the chapter must be replaced with involving students in their own learning. Teachers must work to present lessons in interesting ways to encourage students' participation. For example, Terrell, a self-renowned rapper, believes his love for rap does not have much to do with school. If one teacher could tap into his talent and allow him to incorporate rap into his work, Terrell would likely make a connection to school. Chris contends that math is his favorite subject even though he earned straight Fs on his report card. Teachers must capitalize on students' interests to connect students to learning.

In addition to teaching in a manner that is engaging to students, teachers must ensure that students are motivated to learn for their own benefit. Brophy (1997) suggests using learning goals, which focus on the acquisition of knowledge rather than the ability to perform or complete tasks. Goals outline what is to be mastered rather than a list of assignments that must be submitted. Learning goals allow students to learn cooperatively

without the influence of competition, which creates winners and losers and further distances struggling students from learning. Additionally, with the emphasis students place on the need to socialize with peers, cooperative learning activities allow students to socialize while the focus remains on learning.

In examining students' accounts of low grades and lack of work completion, the fact that all 5 students have scored at proficient levels on some of their yearly end of grade tests brings up the question of how students are being assessed at Wilson Andrew. Failing grades combined with proficiency on standardized tests point to teachers' reliance on daily effort and task completion as opposed to a true measure of students' content mastery. Therefore, it is worthwhile for schools to evaluate how students are being instructed and also how they are being assessed (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Rethinking how students are instructed and assessed, combined with a focus on learning goals, students are more likely to participate in class.

Inviting Families to Participate

Traditionally, involved parents were those who volunteer at the school and visit often. The parents of the 5 participants in this study do not volunteer or visit the school often. None of the students report receiving regular supervision at home from parents with regard to their schoolwork. However, all 5 participants report that their families care if they do well in school.

Greater involvement of students' families must be cultivated by the school to initiate and channel parents' contributions to students' pursuit of success. Parents care if their children do well in school but may not be familiar with how to go about helping

them succeed. Because of the blurring between acting White and achieving success, African American children need to hear encouragement from their parents to set high standards and to maximize their abilities (Ogbu, 1992). Schools and families joining forces provide a wealth of support for students to resist the pressures that result in lowered achievement (Comer, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Epstein, 2001; National Board, 2001; Price, 2002).

Parent involvement is no longer a measure of volunteer hours or attendance at school functions. Working-class parents and single parents may not have the opportunity to participate in these traditional ways (Cooper, 2003). Working jobs with little flexibility in requesting time off or working more than one job to provide for the family are impediments to being a visible presence at the school during school hours.

An interesting aside with regard to students in general at Wilson Andrew, as well as the 5 participants, is that when questions arise regarding their schedules, report cards, or disciplinary consequences, the students take the lead in initiating these discussions. At Wilson Andrew, the students call or visit the school to speak to an administrator when they need to obtain their birth certificates or report cards to play football or when they have not received their school schedules before the start of the school year. In the absence of parent advocates, some students have learned they must become their own advocates. This has proven to be problematic for students at times. When their involvement in the adult world, defined by roles they are assigned in the home or by roles they have assumed, is not respected, problems surface when they are placed back into a child's world by teachers.

The traditional role of parent involvement has been modernized and includes a more diverse view of how parents can support their children's educations. Epstein (2001) expanded the umbrella of parental involvement to include their involvement with their children and schoolwork at home, instead of the outdated view of only volunteering or visiting the school. Not expecting parents to remember algebraic concepts, literary terms, or volunteering to assist with school functions, parents can be involved with their children's educations in a number of ways.

Epstein (2001) shares ways parents can be involved with their children, grouped into five categories: (a) activities emphasizing reading, (b) learning through discussion, (c) informal learning activities at home, (d) contracts between teachers and parents, and (e) developing teaching and evaluation skills in parents. Unfortunately, for the 5 students in the study, parent involvement in their educations in these ways is clearly missing. Many of Epstein's activities are simple for parents to implement at home and include engaging their children in conversation about their day in school, listening to their children read, monitoring work completion, and completing some assignments together. Along with creating the structure for the time and place in which homework is to be completed and monitoring students' work at home, parents' involvement is a critical component to help students be successful in school.

Findings from both Lightfoot and Ogbu (as cited in Lareau, 1987) suggest schools make middle-class families feel welcome and overlook working-class families (p. 73). African American parents may perceive a lack of willingness for schools and educators to serve them because of their race or class status (Cooper, 2003). Schools have a

responsibility to be inviting to all families, regardless of race, gender, or income.

Educators must guard against assuming that because some parents are not visible during the school day that they do not value or support their children's educations. Schools and educators are charged with the responsibility of teaching parents how to be involved with their children's educations.

In addition to sharing strategies with parents of how to help their children at home, the school must be sensitive to the needs of the parents. Considering that much of Wilson Andrew's student population comes from low socioeconomic neighborhoods, the school must take into consideration families' needs for transportation and childcare. Wilson Andrew has offered bus transportation, childcare, and dinner on occasion to families attending evening parent meetings. Although only a few families took advantage of the offer, over time word will spread that the school is sensitive to the needs of its families.

Additionally, to enhance relations with parents and students, quality communications must take place between teachers and students' families on a regular basis. Whether through positive notes home or phone calls, positive communications as opposed to phone calls only for academic or behavior concerns need to become the norm.

Not only must the school believe in the importance of parents being more involved, but parents must also see the benefits deriving from their participation. However, the school must take the lead in reiterating this to parents. Laurence Steinberg (as cited in Price, 2002) asserts, "If we want our children and teenagers to value

education and strive for achievement, adults must behave as if doing well in school is more important than any other activity in which young people are involved” (p. 11).

A Responsibility to Empower

Students’ beliefs and their stories are born out of their lived experiences. Due to a lack of comparison, students neither question the offering and opportunities at Wilson Andrew nor do they view their lives as different from any others. The question then becomes, is it the school’s responsibility to expose students to opportunities and experiences they have not encountered? Is it the school’s responsibility to educate them about alternative views not typically supported by the current approved textbook adoption? Does the school have the moral responsibility to empower students and nurture them into becoming well-rounded, socially conscious individuals who can stand up and advocate or lie down in protest? What was initially thought to be beyond the scope of this study has found its place along with the specific steps educators must take to rekindle the love and excitement for learning that children express when they first walk into the front door of the schoolhouse in kindergarten.

Donna Marriott was an elementary school teacher who realized that her silence about race and racial issues spoke loudly to the children in her classroom (Marriott, 2003). After reading a student’s comment, “I don’t like being Black” and a second student’s assertion of a mean-spirited incident on the playground, Marriott realized racism was an issue. As a result, Marriott led her students through a journey of justice, liberty, and equality. Using children’s literature to explore these themes, Marriott’s students learned about racism, Martin Luther King, Jr., the ending of slavery, Ruby

Bridges, and more. She found that students could grab hold of the principles of justice and equality but had more difficulty with the concept of liberty. She shared Mychal Wynn's book, *The Eagles Who Thought They Were Chickens*, to teach the students about liberty. The story tells of a captured eagle aboard a slave ship that dies just after laying three eggs. Placed in the chicken yard, the three hatchlings are teased for being different. Unaware of their great heritage, the three walked the chicken yard with their heads hanging low. Another captured eagle is placed with the hatchlings but does not succumb to the chickens' taunting because of his strong sense of pride. After regaining his strength, he spreads his wings and soars out of the chicken yard leading two of the hatchlings to do the same. The third hatchling was unable to follow due to his broken spirit and hence, was left behind.

The outcome of the journey Donna Marriott took with her students was more than she could have imagined. Not only did the pursuit of justice and liberty have an impact on students' social skills, but also the link it made to student achievement, motivation, and relationships was a pleasant surprise. Once turned off to the world of education, Damon, a young African American student underwent a transformation from a history of troublesome behavior to a never-ending quest for justice.

Unfortunately, Marriott's (2003) story did not end there. The following year, Marriott followed up with two of the students from her class and was disheartened by what she heard from Damon's teacher. The previous year, Damon had reconnected to schooling and made significant improvements. His new teacher, however, was adamant about his questioning nature and complaints that things were never fair. In disbelief and

with grave disappointment, Marriott questioned her liberating project from the previous year. Had she set up Damon for failure by arming him with the tools of equality, justice, and liberty that teachers and schools were not ready to accept?

Conclusion

The current study contributes to the literature because of its examination of factors influencing students' educations from the perspectives of students, particularly young African American men. Much literature exists on factors influencing African American student achievement in school from the perspective of educators and researchers and from quantitative studies. Examining the influences on students' schooling from an adult perspective or from a social justice perspective reveals one set of factors. Research conducted from the perspectives of students reveals additional factors that may be absent when looking at school experiences from only the social justice point-of-view. The current research gave students the chance to tell the stories of their school experiences through their own eyes.

From the researcher's perspective, it is plausible that student characteristics, such as race and socioeconomic status are impacting the educational opportunities and experiences of students (Delpit, 1995; Fordham, 1996; Gay, 2000; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999, 2004; Ogbu, 1990, 1992). Interestingly, the students in this study did not see it that way. From the outset of the study through its conclusion, the participants took responsibility for their progress in school. One cannot help but wonder if these students have been socialized into believing that their underachievement is their own fault or if they believe they are truly responsible for their paths. Although accepting

responsibility, each participant agreed that increased parental support, engaging instruction, and close relationships with school adults would have likely enhanced their achievement in school.

Brophy (1997) states,

Apathy, not discouragement, is the ultimate motivational problem facing teachers . . . Apathetic students are uninterested in or even alienated from school learning. They don't find it meaningful or worthwhile, don't want to engage in it, don't value it even when they know they can achieve success with reasonable effort. (p. 203)

Although this statement contains elements of truth, the indifference of students has its roots somewhere. Educators must insist on identifying the roots of such attitudes, which will vary widely among students.

From the students' perspective, we might conclude that institutional and personal influences are the greatest factors in these 5 students' achievement in school. However, it is important not to overlook the potential influence of society. Overall, the participants do not endorse the influence of societal factors on their educations. Nonetheless, educators must be aware of the silent influence of society that is underlying students' beliefs, effort, and experiences in school. With this in the forefront of the minds of the individuals who lead schools, in addition to their control of both institutional and personal influences, school personnel can make changes to alleviate negative influences and fill the void where positive influences should exist.

However important they are, good intentions and awareness are not enough to bring about the changes needed in educational programs and policies to prevent academic inequities for students of color. Goodwill must be accompanied by

pedagogical knowledge and skills as well as the courage to dismantle the status quo. (Gay, 2000, p. 13)

Donna Marriott's (2003) story is just one example of a teacher taking action to expose students to principles of justice and liberty with the skills to question situations and practices that may be unfair. The purpose of schooling is not simply a matter of students passing the tests set before them, but a moral responsibility that must be taken seriously and embraced by educators who are committed to making the world a better place (Freire, 1993; Marriott, 2003; Nieto, 2004). As stated in the introduction, "education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it" (Edelman, 1992, pp. 9-10).

POSTSCRIPT

Since the conclusion of the study, Chris continued to frequent in-school suspension. He was suspended on the last day of school and for the first 5 days of the following school year because of a fight on the last day. Not a fighter by nature, Chris was visibly shaken by this altercation. On the previous day, he shared that he was looking forward to summer and his first ever trip to the beach. He was going to the beach with Michael and his family.

Michael continued coming to school and skipping periodically. He was suspended 2 days before the end of the year for skipping school and being disrespectful to the school resource officer. He came to school on the last day of school to march in with the eighth graders for Awards Day against the direction of the principal. At the conclusion of the ceremony, Michael was promptly brought to the office by the principal where he remained because his parents would not pick him up.

Terrell also continued to frequent in-school suspension for class misbehaviors. He was excited about burning a CD this summer with his friends in his rap group, Young Three. He claimed that their group does not rap for popularity or attention, like most rap groups; they rap to relieve stress. The 17-track CD they are recording over the summer is entitled *Turn the Page*.

Corey moved to Ohio at the end of the third quarter. Reluctant to leave Wilson Andrew, Corey had hoped to convince his grandmother to allow him to stay with her. To

no avail, Corey moved to Ohio over spring break. I spoke briefly to his grandmother at the end of the school year and she said he was doing well at his new school. After sharing that we missed him at Wilson Andrew Middle, she chuckled and questioned my statement. With reassuring words, I told her that Corey was a polite, mature, and respectful young man and that his presence was truly missed.

Octavious looked forward to attending a youth NFL camp over the summer. He visited the office several times on the last day of school to hug me and thank me “for everything.” He wants to come to school over the summer and help me work in the building.

When all was said and done with standardized tests and final report cards, 3 of the 4 remaining students failed for the school year due to grades. The school system’s promotion policy requires students to pass three out of their four core classes and 75% of their elective classes. Chris, Terrell, and Michael each failed two of their core classes for the year. Octavious failed Language Arts for the year but passed his other core classes, allowing him to be promoted.

Despite poor grades and behaviors that landed each of the 4 remaining students in in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension throughout the year, Octavious, Michael, and Terrell passed the reading portion of the state end-of-grade test. Chris was the only student who did not pass the reading test, scoring a level one out of a possible of four. As a result, because Terrell and Michael passed their reading end-of-grade tests, they were promoted. Chris did not pass the test or his classes for the year, and as a result was retained in seventh grade.

Token of Appreciation

As a token of my appreciation for their participation in the study, students were given a school yearbook. Four of the students did not purchase a yearbook, which made this a perfect gift. Octavious purchased a yearbook by raising money moving furniture for another family. He was so excited and almost became emotional when he received his money back. He said he had to spend the remainder of the money he had earned buying groceries. This way he got a yearbook and money to spend.

Receiving yearbooks also overwhelmed Chris, Michael, and Terrell. Throughout their remaining days, they eagerly exchanged yearbooks with their classmates and guarded their books carefully. Inside each yearbook, I placed a thank you note for their participation in the study. This gave me an enormous feeling of satisfaction to return my gratitude for the thoughts and time they had invested in this endeavor.

Corey moved to Ohio before yearbooks went on sale. I tracked down his grandmother and acquired his new home address in Ohio. Visiting each of Corey's previous classes, each student in his classes was given the opportunity to sign his yearbook before mailing it to him. I know he must have enjoyed the yearbook because when he was transferring out of the school, he wanted to take pictures to remember his time at Wilson Andrew.

As I watched those yellow buses pull away for the final time for the school year, I could not help but wonder what the future would hold for these young men. Living in a world much dictated by the level of education attained, I worried whether or not each of them would stay true to the course of a high school diploma or possibly aspire to

education beyond high school. For the one student remaining at Wilson Andrew, I look forward to continuing a close relationship with him. For those moving on and away from Wilson Andrew, I wonder who will ask them about their experiences, who will ask them to share their thoughts, and who will let them know they matter.

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APPENDIX A
STUDENT SURVEY

Directions: Read each statement and mark your response with a v in the appropriate column.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	I Don't Know	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I am successful in school.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. I am doing the best I can with my schoolwork.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. My teachers believe I am successful in school.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. I am demonstrating my best behavior in school.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. My family cares if I do well in school.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. I like my teachers.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
7. I like school.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8. I am comfortable at this school.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
9. I was successful at my previous school.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
10. My teachers care about me.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
11. My family helps me do my best in school.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

How would you describe your success in school? (Probe: Meeting behavioral expectations? Academic success?
Follow-up questions based on students' responses to surveys.)

Why do you think you have/have not been successful in school?

Ideas/Areas of interest

Questions/thoughts for follow-up

Observational notes:

Reflection after the interview:

Ideas/Areas of interest
Questions/thoughts for follow-up
Observational notes:
Reflection after the interview:

Ideas/Areas of interest
Questions/thoughts for follow-up
Observational notes:
Reflection after the interview:

APPENDIX C
OBSERVATION FORM

Student name: _____ Date _____ Time _____ Length of obs. _____ Location _____ Circle one: Structured Unstructured
Setting
Describe the setting
Interactions & behavior
Describe student-adult interactions Positive: Negative:
Describe peer interactions
Describe student's behavior (attention given to the teacher & instruction, on-task, fidgeting, etc.)
Ideas/Areas of interest