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Motivation of African American Students to Persevere Academically

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Walden University

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Walden University

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

Motivation of African American Students to Persevere Academically

by

Stephen C. Anyaka

MEd, National University, La Jolla, California, 2006

BS, University of Jos Nigeria, 1987

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

African American high school students face considerable personal and circumstantial challenges such as poverty, living in high crime neighborhoods, a lack of positive role models, low socioeconomic status, and social inequity in their efforts to achieve academic success. Finding solutions for persistent academic underperformance and closing the achievement disparity gap for minority children are challenging. This generic qualitative study examined the motivations of high-achieving African American high school students to persevere and achieve academic success despite their personal and circumstantial challenges. Social cognitive theory framed the study. Semistructured interview data were collected from 10 high achieving African American high school juniors and seniors from 2 local schools. Data were thematically analyzed via open coding. The following themes were identified; (a) utility of school and the importance of education; (b) importance of organization; (c) importance of involvement in extracurricular and creative activities; (d) positive home support, parent involvement, and communication; (e) positive sibling/peer influence; (f) positive adult role models; (g) high expectations of self; (h) importance of perseverance, and; (i) seeing barriers and challenges as opportunities. The findings of this study promote social change by providing information to individuals, families, and school systems that may lead to the development of interventions that could enhance school engagement in African American students.

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my family for their unreserved support and encouragement.

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It is with great honor and privilege that I acknowledge my committee chair, Dr. John Astin. Your graciousness, patience, and encouragement enabled me to start this project. You have been there for me. I am equally grateful to Dr. Mueller for stepping up to the call when I needed a committee member the most. Words alone cannot express my sense of appreciation. I thank you both most kindly.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The milestone United States Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* (1954) resulted in the desegregation of schools and efforts to reduce educational disparities between African American children and those of dominant ethnic groups in the United States. Approximately 60 years later, poor academic success and disproportionately elevated school dropout rates continue to be a common problem among African American children, particularly those from low-income families (Wilmer & Bloom, 2014). Many African American children consistently underperform, widening the achievement gap between African American and other ethnic children (U.S. Department of Education [DoED], 2014). These disparities in academic performance frequently begin in the early elementary grades and persist throughout high school (Fiscella & Kitzman, 2009).

Particularly problematic is the increased underperformance of African American male students. African American males lag behind their female counterparts in their academic outcomes and have higher disciplinary problems and school dropout rates than their peers from other ethnic groups (DoED, 2014; Harper & Davis, 2012; Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, & Jennings, 2010).

Many African American youths are challenged by numerous barriers to academic achievement and success such as increasing poverty, risky neighborhoods riddled with crime and violence, lack of positive role models, low parental education, low socioeconomic status, and societal inequity (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Ford, 2011; Kirp, 2011; Li & Hassan, 2010; Milam, Furr-Holden, & Leaf, 2010). Because a large number of African American youth who live in poverty are predisposed

to increased chances of poor academic outcomes (DoED, 2014), the examination of factors that foster academic success for low-income urban African American children is particularly important. Although existing research has focused on the barriers contributing to the poor academic performance of many African American students, less is known about the specific motivators and characteristics that promote perseverance and resilience, and which contribute to the academic success of African Americans with limited economic and social resources who live in risky neighborhoods and attend poorly equipped schools. Even less is known about the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of African American students who have managed to excel academically. The premise of this study is that clarifying the reasons some African American students are able to persevere and achieve success despite significant social and psychological challenges is relevant to furthering the understanding of how best to support African American students academically.

This chapter addresses the purpose, problem, research questions, and conceptual framework for this study. I present the theoretical foundation and nature of the study, and summarize existing research regarding the challenges faced by African American students in their learning experiences. Furthermore, I identify the gap in the literature that prompted the study, and address how this study adds to the existing body of knowledge. Finally, I discuss the significance, scope, and limitations of the study.

Background

Improving the learning experiences of African American children has important and long-lasting implications for their academic and social development. Finding ways to increase African American students' engagement in academic experiences may foster

better school behavior, enable them to achieve at higher levels, and make them less likely to drop out of school. According to the U.S. Department of Education (DoED, 2014), Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment; however, these children also represent 42% of preschool children suspended once, and 48% of preschool children suspended more than once. In comparison, White students represent 43% of preschool enrollment and 26% of preschool children suspended more than once. The DoED report further revealed that although Black students represent 16% of student enrollment in high school, they represent 27% of students referred to law enforcement, and 31% of students subjected to a school-related arrest. In comparison, White students represent 51% of enrollment, 41% of students referred to law enforcement, and 39% of those arrested (DoED, 2014).

Ramanathan (2013) reported that academic and discipline problems for many African American students in local California schools begin as early as second and third grade. In addition, DoED (2014) data for local school districts revealed that minority students are underperforming in California state schools. In the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), Black students scored an average of 33 points lower than White students on a reading test. Further, students who were eligible for a free or reduced lunch price, an indicator of low family income, had an average score in reading that was 35 points lower than students who were not eligible. Compared to 2012, this achievement gap was 14 points wider. In 2013, Black students in the Fresno School District (FSD) scored an average of 31 points lower than White students. Moreover, FSD students who were eligible for a free or reduced lunch price scored an average of 31 points lower than students who were not eligible. This is not significantly different from the findings in

2009, which showed a disparity of 33 points. In San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) in 2013, Black students had an average score that was 35 points lower than that of White students. SDUSD students who were eligible for a free or reduced lunch price had an average score that was 34 points lower than that of students who were not eligible, which is not significantly different from the 2003 gap of 27 points (DoED, 2014).

Student or event dropout rates are another essential piece of the achievement gap. African American and Hispanic high school students are more likely to drop out than White and Asian/Pacific Islander students. The event dropout rate, which indicates the percentage of high school students who drop out in a given year, was 7.3% for Blacks, 5.0% for Hispanics, 2.8% for Whites, and 1.6% for Asian/Pacific Islanders. Event dropout rates are significantly higher for students in low-income families, approximately six times greater than the rate of their peers from high-income families (8.9% compared with 1.5%) (Laird, Kienzl, DeBell, & Chapman, 2007). Research further suggests that school suspension has an adverse impact on learning, as students may have difficulty catching up with the material upon returning from a suspension (Harper & Davis, 2012; Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2010; Ramanathan, 2013).

Although academic challenges among African Americans can begin as early as elementary school (DoED, 2014; Ramanathan, 2013), the transition to high school presents additional unique challenges for adolescents. Adolescents who attend middle and high school are vulnerable to the complexities of the physical, emotional, and cognitive changes they experience. Changes such as puberty, the quest for autonomy, social acceptance, and increased self-consciousness may affect adolescents' psychosocial well-being. The consequences of these developmental milestones may also include

alienation from friends and family, engaging in high-risk behaviors, decreased school engagement, and declining academic functioning (Griffin & Galassi, 2010). At the same time, research indicates that disadvantaged minority children, particularly African Americans, are vulnerable to declines in academic motivation and performance during the transition to high school, and many do not recover from this decline in the subsequent years of their education (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Wei et al., 2010).

Culture influences teaching and learning (Butler-Barnes, Chavous, & Williams, 2012; Oyserman, Sorensen, Reber, & Chen, 2009; Rodriguez, Umana-Taylor, Smith, & Johnson, 2009), and many aspects of African American culture contribute to a student's identity and self-concept, beliefs and values, attitudes and expectations, social relations, language use, and other behaviors (Butler-Barnes et al., 2012; Gillen-O'Neel, Fuligni, & Ruble, 2011; Smith, Smith, Dumas, Levine, & Prinz, 2009). Racial and cultural biases, as well as perceived and observed stereotypes, affect cognitive and personal behavior, thereby influencing the number of African American students who act effectively in school. These biases and stereotypes also influence the students' social relations and language use in relation to institutional definitions of appropriate behavior (Butler-Barnes et al., 2012; Gillen-O'Neel et al., 2011; Harper et al., 2012; Pringle et al., 2010; Thomas, Caldwell, Faison, & Jackson, 2009). The negative portrayal of African American children as behaving badly, having a resistant demeanor, and being opposed to learning impacts the essence of these children's education and might encourage disengagement and eventual academic failure (Harper et al., 2012).

Thoman, Smith, Brown, Chase, and Lee (2013) reviewed the contributing role of stereotype threat to learning and performance outcomes for stigmatized students. By integrating research on stereotype threat, achievement motivation, belonging, and intrinsic motivation, Thoman et al. presented the emotional experiences of stigmatized students in a self-regulatory framework. They did this to make predictions about ways in which concern about confirming a negative competence-based stereotype can disrupt or derail students' academic and career motivations. Thoman et al. concluded that understanding whether and how stigmatized students regulate their feelings of interest and belonging in the face of stereotype threat can potentially lead to improving their academic outcomes.

Poverty, racial bias (perceived and observed), environmental disadvantages, impoverished schools, and stress can lead to behavioral, academic, and psychological difficulties among African American children (Archambault et al., 2009; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Wei et al., 2010). However, many African American children are able to overcome these barriers and become well-adapted individuals (Harper et al. 2012; Leak, 2003; McGee & Martin, 2011) with strong racial pride and high motivation for academic success (Byrd & Chavous, 2011; Carter, 2008; Hurd, Sanchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012; Zell, 2011). It is particularly relevant to understand the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of these students in the process of their determination to succeed.

This study focused on African American high school junior and senior students' descriptions of the motivators and facilitators of their academic perseverance despite the myriad obstacles they face. Research was lacking on high school African American

students' perceptions of their motivators, facilitators, emotions, thoughts, and experiences as they persevere to succeed in school.

College-level sample populations, targeting only one challenging factor, or based on factors identified solely by researchers, limited the relatively few studies that addressed barriers or motivators. Pringle et al. (2010) examined African American high school students' perceptions of teacher expectations, Li and Hassan (2010) targeted college-level students, and Harper et al. (2012) studied college-level students in inequitable schooling.

Reddick (2013) called for reports on academic performance of Black children to ensure a nuanced and accurate picture of Black students and their educational experiences. Reddick lamented studies that depicted Black students, or any demographic of students, as deficient or troubled when the blame and responsibility appeared to lay primarily, if not exclusively, with systemic racial and societal disparity. Reddick called for more strength-based research and reports to serve as motivation for academic achievement.

To fill this gap, it was imperative to examine the learning experiences of high-achieving African American high school students attending inner-city schools in perilous environments. It was also desirable to gain an in-depth understanding of (a) what African American high school students believe motivates them to succeed despite the significant odds against them, and (b) the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of African American students as they persevere to succeed academically. Given the nature of the difficulties that the average African American student experiences, an identification of motivators

and facilitating factors that foster their school engagement is critical (Kenny, Walsh-Blair, Blustein, Bempechat, & Seltzer, 2010).

Problem Statement

I grouped previous research that addressed African American students' school performance into three broad but related categories. The first was studies that focused on individual characteristics, and which assumed that African American students' failure at school related primarily to psychological factors such as poor self-concept or lack of motivation. This approach has been criticized for its simplicity and lack of sensitivity toward African American experiences. The second comprises research that focused on the lack of equity of school resources as the primary source of low academic performance among African American students. Researchers taking this approach argued that African American students, especially those from poor backgrounds, are denied access to adequate educational resources, are subjected to low teacher expectations, and are victims of school policies such as tracking or exclusion from rigorous academic classes (Pollard, 1993; Pringle et al., 2010). Researchers also argued that African American students may be disengaged from learning due to curricula that ignore or debase their culture and heritage (Byrd & Chavous, 2011; Hurd et al. 2012; McGee & Martin, 2011; Pollard, 1993). Several of these researchers contended that school-related factors may lead to changes in individual characteristics such as decreased self-esteem and motivation.

In the third group of studies, researchers attributed African American students' academic underperformance to situations that are systemic and inherent in U.S. society, such as racial stratification, persistent microaggressions toward African Americans' low status in society, and societal policies that exclude African Americans from fully

participating in social and economic institutions (Ellion, French, Slaney, & Wang, 2012; Pollard, 1993; Schmader, 2010). This perspective suggests that student-specific factors such as negative self-perceptions, decreased motivation, and lower levels of academic achievement are the result of society's perpetuation of low status for this group in schools, as well as in the community through exclusion from the work force. Despite these circumstances, there are African American high school students who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity and subjected to the same unfair societal and school conditions as those who fail, are persevering and succeeding academically. In the current study, I explored what motivates some of these African American high school junior and senior students to be successful in school, as well as the personal and circumstantial factors that support their efforts to succeed academically, by gathering descriptions from their vantage points.

Study Purpose

Although it is important to identify barriers faced by African American students, the aim of this study was to identify motivators for academic success through emphasis on African American learners' success stories: that is, to understand reasons some African American students persevere to succeed academically against significant odds. This study focused on 10 African American high school juniors and seniors currently demonstrating laudable academic performance despite circumstances that made it likely they would fail in school. I also examined what motivates these successful African American students to persevere despite socioeconomic, family, and environmental disadvantages. Additionally, I explored the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of these students during the process of persevering. Findings may assist future African American

students who confront similar difficulties in making necessary adjustments for success in their learning experiences.

This generic qualitative study explores the central concept of academic motivation from the participants' own words (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2008; Cooper & Endacott, 2007) and employs the thematic analysis (TA) technique to verify themes and patterns in the participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research Questions

The research questions (RQs) for the proposed study were as follows:

RQ1: What motivates African American junior and senior high school students to be successful in school?

RQ2: What personal and circumstantial factors support African American junior and senior high school students' efforts to succeed academically?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

Researchers have linked academic underperformance of African American students to social and environmental barriers that result in unfavorable psychological and educational outcomes (Archambault et al., 2009; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Griffin & Galassi., 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Wei et al., 2010). The problem of social and environmental barriers to academic success can be explained using social cognitive theory (SCT), a model for bridging behaviorist and cognitive theories (Bandura, 1977).

According to social cognitive theory, an individual's behavior results from environmental experiences and expectations, beliefs and ideas, and the behavioral examples of others (American Psychological Association, 2009; Cullen, 2011).

Researchers have linked the problems of African American students' academic

underperformance to social and environmental barriers that result in unfavorable psychological and educational outcomes (Archambault et al., 2009; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Wei et al., 2010). In the current study, I drew from self-efficacy theory to examine motivational factors that inspire some African American students to persevere against significant barriers to their academic success in high school from the vantage point of the research participants (Bandura, 1977; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Taylor & Graham, 2007). The construct of self-efficacy stems from Bandura's social cognitive theory, which defines self-efficacy as an individual's beliefs about his or her self-worth, competence, autonomy, abilities to master and achieve, and resilience in the face of difficult tasks (Bandura, 1977; Bembenuddy, 2010; Efklides, 2011; Lefton & Brannon, 2006; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). I further explored the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of these students in their learning activities.

Nature of the Study

This is a generic qualitative study. The generic qualitative approach involves “studies that seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the individuals involved” (Cooper & Endacott, 2007, p. 816). The general approach was used to advance understanding about the factors that motivate some African American junior and senior high school students to persevere academically, graduate from high school, and pursue higher education in the face of significant challenges. The research design included 60-minute semistructured audio-recorded interviews to discover and understand participants' perspectives and experiences.

I used a thematic analysis technique (TA) for data analysis. TA is a technique for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns and themes within qualitative data. TA is an essentialist or realist method used to report the experiences, meanings, and the reality of individuals. Researchers also describe TA as a constructionist approach that views knowledge as embedded in social contexts—human thoughts, feelings, language, and behavior—that are the result of interchange with the external world (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013).

African American children's academic motivation may be predicated on the disadvantages attributable to the provision of lower quality education to minority populations, as well as to the broader social, psychological, family, and environmental contexts that limit their opportunities. Nevertheless, many African American students excel in school despite these barriers. By using a generic qualitative approach and the TA technique, I highlighted aspects of the participants' emotions and identified the factors they found particularly motivating.

Definitions

Achievement gap: The academic performance disparity between or among student groups, as measured by educational indicators such as grades, graduation rates, standardized test scores, college admission, and course selection. The groups may be defined by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, English language proficiency, gender, geographic location, etc. (DoED, 2012).

Dropout rate: The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) defines the dropout rate as the number of students dropping out of school each year (DoED, 2012; NCES, 2013).

High school dropout: A student enrolled at the beginning of the year but not enrolled at the beginning of the next year, who did not graduate from high school or complete some other district- or state-approved educational program. A dropout is not a student who is temporarily absent due to suspension, school-approved illness, or death (DoED, 2012; NCES, 2013).

Assumptions

There were five assumptions underlying this study. I assumed that gathering data directly from junior and senior African American high school students would clarify the personal and circumstantial factors that African American students find particularly motivating in their learning experiences. I assumed that African American students' experiences and the meanings of these experiences are formed through the students' interactions with their social environment, the historical and cultural contexts in which they live and attend school, and other life activities. I assumed that a qualitative study of participants' descriptions of their emotions, thoughts, and learning experiences would

help elucidate the dynamics of these interactions and how they impact academic success. I assumed that broader clarifications for motivation could be drawn from this sample of African American junior and senior high school students recruited for this study to the larger population of minority grade school students. I assumed that the participating students would continue to persevere, graduate high school, and aspire to higher education. Finally, I assumed that the TA technique and qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) software would facilitate the identification of patterns and themes from the data.

Scope and Delimitations

The delimitations for this study were grounded on my goals, which were (a) to understand the factors that motivate some African American junior and senior high school students to achieve academic excellence despite significant social and psychological challenges, and (b) to develop strategies to enhance existing interventions for the academic success of minority children. For this reason, I explored the personal and circumstantial factors that support African American junior and senior high school students' efforts to succeed academically, with the study sample limited to African American junior and senior high school students. Although the emotions, feelings, thoughts, and experiences of other minority groups are worthy of examination, participants of different minority groups were not the focus of this study.

Limitations

I limited participants to 10 African American high school students attending suburban high schools who self-identified as living in low-income families and facing adverse social and environmental conditions that posed potential barriers to their

learning. African American adolescents attending suburban high schools and living in low-income families are not a homogeneous group. This study focused on a small number of participants and took place within a single county in California; therefore, the results may not be generalizable across the nation. However, DoED (2014) data revealed a consistency in the underperformance among African American students on standardized assessments across the nation, and the literature indicated minimal regional differences in the academic achievement of African American students. Findings from the current study may not have significant implications for other populations of minority students; therefore, it is important to study other populations for the purpose of comparison. In addition, African American students' experiences with racial discrimination and socioeconomic disenfranchisement may have affected how they responded to the questions, which could have affected the overall research findings. Finally, the limitations of qualitative studies relate to their validity and reliability (Creswell, 2009). I employed triangulation and bracketing to strengthen the study's validity and authenticity.

Significance

Much of the extant research emphasizes the examination of African American students who are failing. This study was significant because of its emphasis on successful students and the identification of factors that may act as educational motivators and facilitators for success. Previous studies addressed barriers to African American students' academic success (Archambault et al., 2009; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Wei et al., 2010). A common theme from these studies was that being part of an ethnic minority group confronted by significant social, environmental, and psychological challenges, combined with the developmental changes

of adolescence, can undermine the self-efficacy and drive for academic achievement (Archambault et al., 2009; Bandura, 1977; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Wei et al., 2010). Therefore, I aimed to enhance intervention, practice, and policy strategies and add to the existing knowledge base.

This study may provide insight into personal and circumstantial factors that motivate African American junior and senior high school students' efforts to succeed academically. This study may reveal how these students negotiate the challenges they face in their learning experiences, and therefore may help educators develop interventions that improve perseverance and buffer the social and psychological challenges students face. Further, this study may reveal strategies for motivation, inspiration, and directions toward learning experiences and lifestyles that are more promising for African American students.

Implications for Positive Social Change

This study may prompt efforts to focus on social and psychological factors that contribute to knowledge and practices that promote improved academic outcomes for minority populations, and may help to bridge the significant achievement gaps still in existence. The specific changes I hope will emerge from this research are that schools will reevaluate their perception of parental involvement and give students a voice by involving them in decision about their class schedules. In addition, I hope community organizations come to understand the importance of positive role models and extracurricular activities, and allocate resources to support students in the inner-city schools.

Summary

In this chapter, I addressed the purpose, problem, background, research questions, conceptual framework, research design, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of this study. I addressed existing research regarding social and psychological challenges and motivation for minority students' academic success, and discussed how the present study will add to the existing literature. Although African American students' academic underperformance has been the focus of much research, the literature on motivation and perseverance from the perspective of successful low-income African American students is sparse.

The dearth of information about persevering and high-achieving minority students and the reasons they work to succeed academically is my concern. Previous research indicated links between high racial identity congruence, personal beliefs, high positive mentors, parental involvement, and positive self-efficacy and the success of African Americans in education. Most studies have been limited to the pervasiveness of deficit perspectives and poor academic achievement, and have not adequately addressed what motivates some African American adolescents to persevere and achieve success, or the dichotomies between cognitive and noncognitive variables. Clarifying the reasons some African American students make the decision to persevere and achieve success despite significant social and psychological challenges is relevant to promote success among African American adolescents.

Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which emphasizes the amount of effort individuals are willing to expend and how long they will persevere against obstacles, and Mischel's self-regulatory theory, which holds that individuals adapt their responses based on

experiences and the assessment of current situations (Lefton & Brannon, 2006), served as the theoretical foundations for this study. These theories provided the structure for the study's RQs, which addressed the motivating factors for African American junior and senior high school students to be successful in school and the personal and circumstantial traits that support their efforts to succeed academically.

The participants in this study included 10 African American junior and senior high school students, five male and five female, identified as on track to graduate high school and aspiring to higher education. Because of the lack of research on the reasons why some African American students are motivated to persevere academically, there is an urgent need to investigate ways to promote higher academic achievement and improve the achievement gap for minority students. I intended to fill this gap in the existing literature. The ultimate expectation was that the findings from this study would provide positive directions toward learning experiences and lifestyles that are more promising for African American students. In Chapter 2, I examine recent studies on the factors that contribute to achievement gaps and African American students' disengagement in school. I explain the theoretical orientation used to structure the study, followed by a review of the literature on the influences of social and psychological factors that affect the academic success of African American students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter addresses the issue of motivation for African American children to succeed academically and the impact of their success on society. I discuss the subject in relation to challenges that confront minority students in their learning experiences. In addition, I identify the social and psychological factors that may work in tandem to contribute to the problem. Finally, I review research studies related to social and psychological factors, as well as how these factors contribute to school disengagement and threaten the academic performance of African American children.

Several factors are thought to promote academic underperformance and threaten academic engagement among African Americans. These factors are addressed in the standardized assessment employed for measuring academic success: racial identity, school culture and environment, parental involvement, family structure, socioeconomic status, quality of neighborhood, and psychological factors. I employed Bandura and Mischel's cognitive theories to examine these factors. The theories pertained to how African American students believe in themselves and their abilities and skills as students; their resilience, confidence, discipline, academic aspirations, and essence of their education; and how their previous and current behaviors and learning experiences impact their future academic success (Bandura, 1977; Mischel & Shoda, 1999; Whiting, 2009c; Zimmerman, 1989).

I explored the study topic from the perspectives of 10 African American high school juniors and seniors who, despite exposure to significant stress and adversity, are persevering and succeeding academically, are on track to graduate high school, and are aspiring to higher education. African American children in the inner city are likely to

experience various challenges related to socioeconomics, family, neighborhood, culture, and school. In considering their academic needs and challenges, one is compelled to know more about what motivates some African American students to persevere in the face of these significant difficulties. I aimed to understand the emotions and thoughts these successful students find particularly motivating, the reasons they persevere to excel in their studies, and the personal and circumstantial factors that support their efforts to succeed academically.

Previous research on academic achievement focused mainly on empirical indicators of poor academic outcomes for African Americans reported by teachers, parents, researchers, and standardized assessments. However, the literature indicated that African American children's academic deficits are affected by several variables, which may be school related or the result of other racial, social, psychological, and environmental factors. For example, Pringle et al. (2010) highlighted negative teacher expectations and a lack of encouragement of African American students to enroll in advanced or honors classes. Butler-Barnes et al. (2012) identified teacher perceptions and stereotype threats toward African American male students that portray them as physically threatening, nonintellectual, and disengaged, as well as having the highest referral rate for perceived behavior problems of any demographic.

Perceived teacher expectations, unfriendly school culture due to perceived stereotypes, and structural economic conditions that disproportionately affect African American adolescents may contribute more to their poor academic performance relative to other ethnic groups (Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010). Several school-related factors impact the academic engagement of African American adolescents. They include

poorly equipped inner-city schools, poor school attendance, understaffing, large class sizes, inadequate feedback, incongruent use of praise for learning outcomes, and a gap between the cognitive and affective domains of instruction delivery (Butler-Barnes et al., 2012; DoED, 2014; Gillen-O'Neel et al., 2011; Harper & Davis III, 2012; Thomas et al., 2009). Nevertheless, some African American students excel academically despite the significant difficulties they confront.

Though the reports on disproportionately low academic performance of African American students abound, little is known about African American students who persevere to become successful. In the current study, I attempted to fill this gap in the literature by shifting focus from African American students who are failing to African American junior and senior high school students who are on track to graduate and pursue higher education. I investigated the factors that motivate and guide these students to persevere academically. Additionally, I explored the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of these students during the process of persevering in their learning. The central concept of academic motivation was addressed through the participants' own words using a generic qualitative approach (Caelli et al., 2008; Cooper & Endacott, 2007), and thematic analysis (TA) to identify themes and patterns in the participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Findings may provide minority students with guidance and direction toward learning experiences and lifestyles that are more promising. In addition, parents, teachers, administrators, and program developers may become more conscious of the factors that can positively influence the academic perseverance and success of African American students through grade school and the transition to college.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched the EBSCO, ProQuest, PsychARTICLES, PsycINFO, SAGE, ERIC, and NIMH databases either directly or through the Walden Library. I also used the Google Scholar search engine. I used multiple key words alone and in combination, including *African American barriers and facilitators to academic success, academic achievement gap, minority students academic achievement, self-efficacy, self-regulation, motivation, perseverance, resilience, student perception, academic success, African American academic achievement gap, school dropout rates, and academic needs*. I retrieved additional information and data about barriers to academic success from relevant agencies under the DoED. From the collected articles, I conducted a review of references that previous authors included to locate additional sources. The Walden online library was helpful in accessing subscription-only articles from other databases when required. The DoED provided statistics on assessment scores, dropout rates, and demographic information. Google Scholar was useful for general and specific searches for articles. ProQuest, PsychARTICLES, PsycINFO, and SAGE were excellent databases for information from professional bodies and peer-reviewed articles. I limited my search to peer-reviewed articles and publications from 2009 to 2014. However, this date restriction was lifted for important literature that addressed theoretical foundations and judicial or legislative materials.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical framework for this study was social cognitive systems. Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Mischel's self-regulation theory provided foundation for this study to clarify participants' perceptions of their self-worth, competence, autonomy,

abilities to master and achieve, and perseverance in the face of significant social, psychological, and academic challenges. Self-regulation theory was used to understand how participants' current situations, previous experiences, cultural antecedents, and belief systems affect their ways of thinking and acting, personal goal settings, and educational values (Bandura, 1977; Mischel & Shoda, 1999; Zimmerman, 1989).

Self-Efficacy Theory

Bandura (1977) employed the term self-efficacy to denote an individual's belief about whether they can successfully engage in and execute a specific behavior. Decisions about self-efficacy determine how much effort individuals will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and adverse experiences. A strong sense of self-efficacy enables an individual to feel empowered to influence and even create the circumstances of his or her life. Individuals' perceived self-efficacy in managing a specific situation also reinforces their sense of self-worth and self-confidence that they can control the situation.

It is important to understand how African American students perceive themselves as learners when undertaking any endeavor to promote their achievement and self-confidence in school (Whiting, 2009b). For example, individuals who lack confidence in school have been identified as unmotivated and disengaged, and are said to find nonacademic activities more satisfying. Conversely, students with high self-efficacy are more likely to be motivated and resilient and to persevere in school to achieve success. Students with high self-efficacy are often confident in themselves and their abilities and skills as learners. They are described as resilient, self-confident, and able to persevere,

and are known to acknowledge the challenges that confront them but remain resolute to succeed (Bandura, 1977; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, Whiting, 2009c).

The current study focused on the motivators for success and the personal and circumstantial factors that contribute to participants' efforts to succeed as learners. According to Bandura, individuals with high self-efficacy have strong personal characteristics; they are motivated and optimistic, believe they are competent, and are more willing to seek out academic challenges (Bandura, 1977; Whiting, 2009c).

Self-Regulation Theory

Mischel's self-regulation theory asserts that thought is essential for determining an individual's behavior, and that the ways in which individuals' current situations, previous experiences, cultural backgrounds, and belief systems influence their thoughts and actions are significant (Lefton & Brannon, 2006). Self-regulation theory holds that an individual's ways of thinking and acting change in response to changing environments. Mischel and Shoda (1999) suggested that "relative permanent personal disposition interacts with cognitive-affective personality units to produce behavior" (p. 484).

Cognitive-affective personality components have multiple significance: what an individual is capable of doing; how the individual processes, attends to, and selects information; the individual's prediction of the outcomes of his or her actions; the importance the person attaches to various aspects of life; and the feelings and emotions that accompany his or her physiological responses (Bembenutty, 2010; Efklides, 2011; Zimmerman, 1989). Self-regulation theory has had considerable influence on psychological thought, as it takes the individual's situation and culture into consideration

to show that day-to-day behavioral variations should not be seen as aberrations but as meaningful responses to changing circumstances (Lefton & Brannon, 2006).

Researchers have linked social cognitive and behavioral approaches to motivation. Self-regulation theory posits that students should be able to observe their behavior, judge it against specific standards, and reinforce or correct themselves (Zimmerman, 1989). Successful African American junior and senior high school students are self-regulated learners who are motivated to learn, have expectations for their academic outcomes, and perceive value in going to school (Efklides, 2011). Eccles and Wigfield (2002) suggested that self-regulated learners believe they can perform effectively, are more self-aware, set numerous and varied goals for themselves, evaluate how their performance compares to a standard or to the performance of others, and react proactively to performance outcomes (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). Students can be described as self-regulated to the degree to which they are self-aware of their learning or thinking processes and motivations, as well as by their active participation in the learning process and in achieving their goals (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Zimmerman, 1989).

Bandura (1977) argued that although there are various actions individuals can take to achieve success; people often avoid doing these things because they do not have the right incentives or they lack appropriate skills. Nevertheless, efficacy expectations are essential to individuals' choice of activity, how much effort they will expend on the activity, and the level of perseverance they achieve under demanding conditions. Understanding successful African American junior and senior students' expectancy beliefs is relevant to the present study because it helps explicate whether these students equate having a good education with better socioeconomic status (outcome expectation),

and clarifies the extent to which they believe in their abilities to participate in rigorous academic programs (efficacy expectation).

I combined self-efficacy and self-regulation theories to examine what motivates some African American students to persevere academically, and what personal and circumstantial factors support these students' efforts to succeed in their studies. African American students' underperformance has been a persistent subject of research. A common theme underlying previous research is that being a part of an ethnic minority, living in poverty, attending inadequately equipped and poorly staffed schools, living in risky neighborhoods exposed to crime and violence, and experiencing the developmental changes of adolescence undermine the self-efficacy and motivation needed to succeed in school (Archambault et al., 2009; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Wei et al., 2010). African American students who exhibit greater intrinsic motivational attributes tend to persevere more toward academic success. Those who cease their coping efforts prematurely tend to retain self-debilitating expectations and fears, accounting for the high rate of school dropouts among African Americans, particularly males (DoED, 2014; Hayenga & Corpus, 2010). For example, African American students may question whether they have the skills and motivation necessary to achieve academic success, or whether education is worth the effort. African American adolescents may entertain doubts about their abilities to succeed in school and may be afraid of failure; consequently, they may be less motivated to engage in learning activities (Haimovitz, Wormington, & Corpus, 2011; Opendakker & Maulana, 2011).

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

The literature search revealed that many African American students struggle in their studies due to various factors such as inadequate early education and child health (Fiscella & Kitzman, 2014; Tucker et al., 2011) or factors inside of school (Harper et al. 2012; Pringle et al. 2010). Other influences include patterns of academic and social disengagement inside and outside the school environment (Archambault et al. 2009) and perceived parental involvement and psychological well-being (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Wei et al. 2010). Additional factors include social and environmental barriers such as poverty and living within risky neighborhoods riddled with crime and violence (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009), racial and cultural bias and stereotyping (Butler-Barnes et al., 2012; Gillen-O'Neel et al., 2011; Harper et al., 2012; Pringle et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2009), and cognitive/personal behavior problems (Archambault et al., 2009). Regardless, some African American students are motivated to persevere and achieve excellent academic outcomes in the face of these incredible odds. A wealth of empirical evidence on general motivation exists, pointing toward various conclusions. The following sections address in detail each of the variables highlighted within the literature.

Motivation for Academic Success

The American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology (APA, 2009, p. 252) defines motivation as “the impetus that gives purpose or direction to human or animal behavior and operates at a conscious or unconscious level”. Motives can be divided into physiological (primary or organic motives, like hunger), personal, social, or secondary motives (affiliation, competition, individual interest, and goals). Researchers

often distinguish between internal motivating forces and external factors ruled by rewards and punishment that can discourage certain behaviors (APA, 2009, p. 252; Lai, 2009).

Motivation theories showed that individuals who have high academic aspirations are predisposed to being motivated; they make learning a high priority, and endeavor to succeed. Such individuals are reflective in their thinking, in that they think about the past, present, and future, and, particularly, how their past and present actions and choices influence ongoing efforts for achievement (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Whiting, 2009a). Motivation was argued to be relevant in determining an individual's success and failure, and to explain the reason why some students persevere while others do not (Opdenakker & Maulana, 2011). African American students' motivation may be rooted in several factors, including: how interesting the students find the learning materials, their levels of curiosity, their interactions with the school, school culture and environment, and what the school offers as incentives, and their feelings of autonomy (Dowson & McInerney, 2001; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006).

Another aspect of motivation concerned the internal locus of control, which emphasized that an individual's motivation is influenced by a sense of autonomy over the outcomes of their endeavors. Autonomy has been identified as one of the basic psychological needs, in addition to competence and relatedness (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Whiting (2009b) argued that individuals who have an internal locus of control are optimistic; they believe they are capable of achieving success due to their hard work; they study; and they complete related tasks, such as school assignments. Such individuals with an internal locus of control accept personal responsibility for their performance and make efforts to self-regulate, while being realistic and aware of external pressures and social

inequalities presented by their neighborhood and school environment (p. 55; Whiting, 2009b, p. 229).

Influence of School Culture and School Environment on Academic Motivation

African American students' motivation to succeed may be rooted in their interactions with the school environment as well as their cognitive and affective learning experiences. Emphasis on students' cognitive development is not sufficient: schools need to inculcate affective objectives in the curriculum so that students will ascribe a high value to education and understand its relevance in their lives and roles as future community leaders. An effective approach is for teachers to motivate students to enjoy and want to learn by making lessons relevant to the students' everyday lives by bridging the cognitive and affective gap (Tan, Goh, & Chia, 2006). Diaz (2010) argued that educators have maintained the same direct instructional and teacher-centered approach to teaching for over two centuries, and there is a need for a paradigm shift toward a student-centered instructional approach. The strength of this argument is that today's classroom is more diverse and students' needs and values are different from what they were two centuries ago. In addition, direct instruction and the teacher-centered instructional approach may not be congruent to the sociocultural background of the average African American student.

While efforts have been made to close the achievement gap, African American students still perform below their peers from other ethnic groups. The majority of African American students do not enroll in advanced placement and honors classes. According to data released by the DoED, out of 92,000 12th grade students, only 7% of Black students performed at or above proficient level in mathematics compared to 12% of Hispanic

students, 12% of American Indian/Alaskan Native students, 33% of White students, 47% of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 26% of mixed-race students. In addition, 16% Black students performed at or above basic level in reading compared to 23% of Hispanic students, 26% of American Indian/Alaskan Native, 47% of White students, 47% of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 38% of mixed-raced students (DoED, 2014).

In a study of 138 schools that offered one or more AP courses, of the total 239,540 students, 32,495 (14%) enrolled in at least one AP class. The racial demographics of students who took one or more AP courses revealed that Asian American and White students were overrepresented (White: 46% of total student population, 55% of those enrolled in one or more AP classes; Hispanic: 39% and 31%; Asian: 3% and 6%; Black: 6% and 5%; and American Indian: 6% and 3%). On average, Asian American and White students were overrepresented in AP courses, and American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students were underrepresented in AP courses (Cisneros, Gomez, Corley, & Powers, 2014).

This disparity was attributed to discrimination, stereotyping, and differential opportunities that persist in schools and in society today. Research revealed that teachers, counselors, and other school professionals often have low expectations for minority children and fail to provide them with adequate opportunities for success (Howard, 2003; Pringle et al., 2010).

Research had examined African American students' interactions with teachers, school culture, and school environment, as well as teachers' perceptions of African American students' abilities to affect how these variables influence their academic outcomes. To understand the impact of teacher expectations on academic achievement of

African American high school students, Pringle et al. (2010) interviewed 48 African American high school students in a qualitative study. Some teachers openly stated that they did not expect the same quality work from African American students as from their White peers (Lynn et al. 2010).

Harper et al. (2012) described this phenomenon following a counter narrative study on Black male students' responses to inequitable schooling, involving 10 African American college male students. This study found that "some teachers have unsubstantiated thoughts and beliefs about Black male students; put simply these thoughts can be harmful and quite detrimental (p. 103)." In their qualitative study, Li and Hassan (2010) examined the factors that motivated academic success among 78 pre-service African American teachers at a Historically Black College or University that offers an accredited teacher education program. Li and Hassan (2010) concluded that both supportive learning environments with positive relations between teachers and students, in addition to proactive personal traits are important motivators the success of minority students.

Howard (2003) used semi-structured interviews with 20 African American high school students (10 girls, 10 boys) to gain insight into the students' perceptions of school in general and their academic identities. The data collected from the study revealed three consistent themes: the role of parents, the influence of teachers and counselors, and the overall interest in attending college. Students with high self-efficacy for education reported having frequent discussions about college and parents who expected them to go to college. Some of the participants discussed how poor teacher-student relationships and the lack of caring and overall teacher apathy contributed to their school failure. One of

the participants stated, “[it was like these teachers think that just because we’re Black kids from the ghetto that we can’t learn anything. They don’t care. They don’t try to teach us anything. After a while, you say forget it, I’m not trying to learn nothing from y’all [the teachers]. I know that I am smart, but it’s like they don’t give you the chance to show it” (Howard, 2003, p. 10).

Both Li et al. (2010), and Howard (2003) share similar strengths in revealing that a supportive learning environment and positive interaction with teachers are important to African American students’ academic engagement. Positive learning environment at school, quality interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, and teachers’ high expectations of students were among the facilitating concepts and motivations for success. The gaps in these studies support the current research. First, these gaps point out the need to clarify personal and circumstantial factors that reinforce the efforts of African American high school juniors and seniors to persevere in their learning experiences. Second, the gaps indicate the need for adult role models including teachers who will act mentors to African American students as they motivate students by holding them to high expectations.

The onset of academic challenges for African American students has been identified as early as elementary school (DoED, 2014; Ramanathan, 2013). Research identified poor disciplinary outcomes as contributing to the academic challenges of African American students, and African American males in particular. Specifically, among students suspended from school across California in 2009-2010, African American students comprised 18% of suspensions compared to 6% for Whites. In some school districts in Los Angeles County, African American males have a higher risk of

experiencing suspension more than once in a school year. For instance, at Paramount Unified, a startling 45% of African-American students were suspended more than once, which is more than twice the state average of 18%. In some districts, African-American male suspension rates were much higher than White male suspension rates. Los Angeles Unified School District reported a higher percentage of African American male suspension at 18%, compared to 5% for Whites. Most of these students found it difficult to catch up with their academic work upon returning from school suspension (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Ramanathan, 2012; Wei et al., 2010).

The transition from middle to high school presents unique challenges for adolescents due to the complexities of the physical, emotional, and cognitive changes adolescents undergo. Changes such as puberty, quests for autonomy and social acceptance, and increased self-consciousness may impact adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing, school engagement, and academic functioning (Griffin & Galassi, 2010). At the same time, research indicated that disadvantaged minority children, particularly African Americans, are vulnerable to declines in academic motivation and performance during the transition to high school, and that many do not recover from this decline in the subsequent years of high school. African American students may struggle with befriending fellow African Americans who do not share and encourage academic success. This may result in interacting with studious peers from other ethnic groups, causing alienation from same-ethnic peers and a loss of connectedness (Newman et al., 2000).

Hurd et al. (2012) argued that adolescents who hold their racial group in high regard feel connected to other members of their group, are aware of societal biases

against their group, and perceive higher academic achievement as an opportunity to overcome negative stereotypes of their group, resulting in an internal locus of control (Byrd & Chavous, 2011; Carter, 2008; McGee & Martin, 2011;). The presence of mentors, specifically non-parent and non-family adults, in the lives of African American adolescents had been identified as a motivator for academic perseverance and success (Butler-Barnes et al., 2012; Hurd et al., 2012). African American students who perceive their school environment as supportive, as demonstrated by their interactions with faculty, school counselors, and peers, as well as the campus climate and student involvement, report higher connectedness to their learning and are more motivated to succeed (Bush & Bush, 2010).

Research revealed that successful African American students developed unique coping strategies to avert negative peer pressure. Some adopted a playful persona to conceal their academic abilities, while others stuck to mainstream cultural standards and norms at school and embraced African American cultural standards outside of school to achieve connectedness (Bush & Bush, 2010; Newman et al. 2000). Research indicated that race, connectedness, and school environment influence African American students' motivation and academic performance. Cultural beliefs and same-ethnic peer connectedness are critical to positive learning experiences. High racial identity has been revealed to boost students' self-esteem and disposition toward education (Whiting, 2009b). The current study attempted among others to elucidate the personal and circumstantial factors that enabled African American students with high self-efficacy to negotiate between maintaining successful learning experiences and acceptance among their same-ethnic peers, and surviving within school cultural standards.

Racial Identity as Motivation for Academic Success

Racial identity is an important concept of psychosocial consequence to African Americans. Psychologists have identified factors such as self-esteem, quality of life, attitude toward education, and stereotyping to have impacts on African American students (Ellion et al., 2012). Smith et al. (2009) defined racial identity as “an individual’s level of acceptance of his or her racial group membership as a salient reference group (p. 146).” Smith et al. (2009) suggested that children’s racial identity develops differentially by gender, and that girls display faster growth but lower initial ethnic identity than boys do. However, racial identity was moderately but statistically significantly associated with various important child outcomes, such as academic success.

Despite the integration of schools following the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* (Brown v. Board, 1954), the struggle for racial equality in educational opportunity remained unresolved. At present, 60 years after the *Brown v. Board* decision, race is still a factor in the general discourse of the academic outcomes of African American children. Issues such as racial-ethnic socialization, ethnic stigma, the role of racial identity and beliefs, minority stress, and culture and situated cognition are all variables examined in various scholarly works investigating the academic outcomes of minority students, particularly African Americans (Butler-Barnes et al. 2012; Ellion et al. 2012; Gillen-O’Neel et al. 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Schmader (2010) suggested that African American students’ underperformance could be a consequence of the persistent reminders of ways in which they might be negatively stereotyped. Thus, African American children may be performing more poorly academically than are their peers due to continuous, institutionalized comparisons to their

peers from other ethnic groups, particularly concerning reports from standardized assessments. According to Schmader (2010), it is possible that individuals exposed to constant and consistent reminders of being the target of negative stereotypes expended cognitive effort on more than just the immediate task. This is because the circumstances placed doubts on the individual's self-efficacy. The anxiety aroused by this doubt of their self-efficacy could adversely affect the working memory needed to excel at complex cognitive tasks, resulting in poor academic outcomes. Whiting (2009b) argued that racial identity influences students' motivation and success. High self-importance was also identified as synonymous with strong work ethic and resilience to social injustices (Butler-Barnes et al. 2012).

Butler-Barnes et al. (2012) studied 158 adolescent African American boys to assess the implications of racial pride and religiosity for academic motivation and achievement. They measured African American male students' perceptions of their utility for future personal success, and the association of these perceptions with school performance. The researchers were also interested in how male students tap into individual attributes such as racial pride and religiosity in relation to their cultural backgrounds (p. 486). Butler-Barnes et al. (2012) concluded that African American adolescent males' personal attitudes and feelings about their group have a strong influence on their academic performance, and strong religiosity and racial pride have positive influences on the academic achievement of African American children regardless of gender. The study revealed that high racial group pride supports positive educational values, which evidences a strong link between race and academic achievement.

In a similar study, Byrd et al. (2011) examined adolescents' racial identity beliefs, school racial climate perceptions, and intrinsic motivation for learning among 359 African American high school juniors. The study focused on direct associations between motivation and racial identity/school racial climate. The study concluded that participants who perceived positive attitudes of race from teachers and staff showed greater intrinsic motivation (Pringle et al., 2010). McGee and Martin (2011) used a case study of an African American male to investigate the experiences and stories of Black men who overcame issues of racial identity across various times and contexts to obtain doctoral degrees in mathematics. McGee and Martin (2011) used a life story interview approach to enable the participant discuss in depth how race, racial identity, and resiliency affected his social experiences as he persevered to succeed. The life story narrative entails a reconstructed past, perceived present and anticipated future (p. 50).

The participant's story revealed an African American's public and private forms of resistance, resilience, persistence, and struggle, and the occasional accommodation he negotiated, in order to achieve academic excellence in mathematics. This study further revealed the ordeals of being a Black male, and the experiences of race-based discriminatory behaviors from teachers, peers, and educational institutions. The study also showed that the student's resilience developed in concert with his self-confidence, realistic self-assessment, awareness of racism, and use of humor (Bush & Bush, 2010; Newman et al., 2000). The report highlighted racial identity issues as motivation for students in the process to persevere against incredible odds. Ellion et al. (2012) examined 219 African American college students attending two large, predominantly White universities with regard to the concepts of perfectionism (defined as "the extreme striving

for perfection and the disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable” [p.118]), academic achievement, self-esteem, depression, and racial identity. They concluded that individuals who identified more positively with their racial group have higher academic outcomes than those who did not.

Holliday and Strange (2013) explored the lived experiences of 18 African American males who had advanced to higher education. The aim of the study was to identify the reasons African American males attend college so that higher education institutions can work toward increasing the number of African American males in attendance. Overall, participants reported that acquiring higher education was essential to better job prospects, quality of life, and economic gain, which acted as motivation for higher education. These findings were similar to those of Harper and Davis (2012), Brooks, Jones, and Latten (2014), which indicated that acquiring higher education is a precursor to overcome poverty and improved social status.

Although these studies used relational designs, their findings were remarkably similar to those of previous studies, which showed that African American students might develop feelings of disengagement and a lack of belonging in school due to perceived biases of race and stereotype threat. In contrast, stronger racial group identity has been reported to motivate perseverance and academic success among African American students (Harper et al., 2012; Hurd et al., 2012). Research also reveals that institutional structure and beliefs affect the engagement and experiences, both cognitive and non-cognitive, of African American students. Haimovitz et al. (2011) used a longitudinal method to survey 978 third through eighth graders across 83 classrooms in eight schools (five public and three parochial) to explore how beliefs about intelligence predict

motivational change. The study revealed that encouraging adaptable attitudes might help sustain children's intrinsic motivation, thereby enhancing academic success and lifelong learning.

This study highlighted that children sought validation for their intelligence through schoolwork. Students who were less flexible regarding feedback on intelligence were more likely to experience declines in intrinsic motivation, whereas students who were amenable to changes in their schoolwork as a measure of their ability maintained intrinsic motivation throughout the school year. The weaknesses of this study were that correlation does not imply causality, and it did not address how beliefs and goals impact motivation to academic success. Understanding African American students' thoughts, experiences, and beliefs about their abilities is critical in order to develop effective programs for intervention. It is evident that discrimination, stereotyping, and differential opportunities persist in schools and society today. Most of the problems began before children enter school. Because many minority children come from low-income families and neighborhoods and have parents with low levels of education, they often lack quality early education backgrounds (DoED, 2014). Notwithstanding, past studies revealed that resilient African American students identify parental support, frequent discussion of education and college, and their parents' expectations for them to go to college as influential factors (Harper et al., 2012; Howard, 2003).

Parental Involvement, Family Structure, Socioeconomic Status, and Academic Success

Families influence children's development and educational outcomes through parenting, adequate nutrition, quality healthcare, early education enrollment, and

psychological development. Across lifespan development, families tend to operate as economic units and provide the social, emotional, and instrumental supports, stressors, or buffers that influence children's success and other related behaviors (Hill & Tyson, 2009). A family's socioeconomic status, based on parental income, occupation, and social status, can strongly influence a student's attitudes toward school, background knowledge, school readiness, and motivation for academic success. However, research showed that regardless of a parent's socioeconomic status or educational background, children achieved at higher levels and had better social adjustment when their parents and other family members are involved and interested in their education (Harper et al. 2012; Howard, 2003). A family's involvement in a child's education helps lay a solid educational foundation and conveys the value of education to the child (Harper & Davis III, 2012; Li & Hassan, 2010; Willenz, 2009; Willingham, 2012).

Robinson and Harris (2014) argued that many forms of parental involvement, such as observing a child's class, contacting the school about a child's behavior, helping decide a child's high school courses, or helping a child with homework, hinder student's achievement in some situations. The researchers examined whether depth of parental involvement in children's education improved their test scores and grades using longitudinal surveys of American families over three decades. The researchers analyzed a longitudinal survey of 63 different homes using race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and level of parental involvement as variables to measure academic outcomes of elementary through high school students. Robinson and Harris (2014) reported that parent involvement through participation in school and helping with homework had a negative effect on the students' performance on standardized tests. They argued that parental

assistance with homework only appeared to benefit adolescent Asian/Pacific Island students. The assistance, according to the researchers, was limited to the students' age/grade levels, but it did not benefit their test scores. Robinson and Harris (2014) suggested that schools should place more emphasis on helping parents identify specific and creative ways to communicate the value of education, tailored to each stage in a child's development.

Apparently, Robinson and Harris' (2014) research focused more on children's test scores rather than the complete school experience. The study did not consider the benefits of a parent being a physical presence in a child's life, setting clear rules and limits, providing a stress-free home environment suitable for learning, ensuring that the child gets to school on time every day, or making time to discuss the impact of the child's current learning on future education and career. In addition, children who grew up in poverty and were thus confronted by social and psychological challenges, still persevered to succeed in school, have identified their parents' teaching about the value of education as motivation for their perseverance and success (Harper et al. 2012; Li & Hassan, 2010; Willenz, 2009).

In contrast, Griffin and Galassi (2010) concluded that parents identified poor communication between parents and teachers and a lack of awareness of school and community resources as barriers. They designed their qualitative, action-oriented study to explore parental perceptions of barriers to academic success among 29 parents of seventh graders at a rural middle school. The scholars contended that school counselors could be a valuable resource for parents by increasing the parents' awareness of resources that might help their children overcome barriers to academic success. They also cited the

benefits of improving collaboration between parents, schools, and communities by identifying community resources that would help students with learning (Washington, 2010). Caskey (2009) examined the influence of parental involvement in middle schools on adolescents' psychological wellbeing. The researchers concluded that perceived parental involvement is beneficial to adolescents' psychological wellbeing in terms of self-esteem, self-worth, and self-efficacy.

Unlike Robinson and Harris (2014), the other studies pointed to a similar conclusion: parental involvement, interaction with school staff and teachers, interaction with and exploring community-based resources, and encouraging the value of education are critical to students' motivation and academic success. Improved relationships between parents and teachers have been shown to benefit children as early as Head Start programs (Williams & Sánchez, 2011). Mendez (2010) examined the role of parental involvement among 288 parents of minority children attending a Head Start program by investigating the parents' participation in an intervention program. Of the 288 parents, 111 served as the control group and 177 served as the intervention group. Mendez (2010) concluded that African American parents were interested in learning better ways to support their children's preschool educational experiences. This research finding suggested that effective communication between parents and teachers significantly improved children's behaviors and enhanced the social skills of children attending preschool. Mendez (2010) concluded that enhancing parent-teacher relationships might be beneficial to children's social development and academic skills.

Children lag behind when not exposed to positively stimulating environments. Children identified as struggling with reading, writing, and mathematics in second grade

are less likely to graduate high school or go to college if appropriate interventions were not provided (Williams & Sánchez, 2011). Preparing children in advance to acquire the necessary skills for school readiness enhances children's emotional modulation and positive behavior in school and the community (Mendez, 2010). Poverty, inadequate academic language in early life, beginning school late, and living in risky neighborhoods with exposure to crime and violence are among the barriers that affect African American students' academic outcomes (Archambault et al., 2009; Ford, 2011; Kirp, 2011; Li & Hassan, 2010; Williams & Sánchez, 2011). Many African American students are motivated to succeed, to overcome dichotomies between these cognitive and non-cognitive odds against them (Bush & Bush, 2010).

Research showed some of the challenges, barriers, and deficits confronting African American families and students. At the same time, research showed that African American parents were for the most part, supportive of successful academic outcomes for their children, despite being blamed for their children's academic underperformance. Despite these significant challenges, some African American children who live in poverty and are at risk of academic failure, all the same persevere academically, graduate high school, and attend college. Family involvement can offer valuable perspectives into community norms, cultural sensitivities, and students' needs. For example, when family members are involved in school decision-making and advisory committees, they can influence the development of culturally relevant intervention programs (Caskey, 2009). In addition, parents can identify, integrate, and build links to, community and school-based resources and services that strengthen intervention programs for students' learning and progress (Harper & Davis III, 2012; Li & Hassan, 2010; Mendez, 2010; Willenz,

2009). The current study focused on learning more about African American high school juniors and seniors who, though exposed to risky neighborhoods and challenging conditions, were successful in school and aspired to pursue higher education.

Neuroscientists, pediatricians, and developmental psychologists had identified early childhood as the foundation for the establishment of intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development. The nature of the developing child's environment and experiences shape early brain development. Young children with secure attachment develop a sense of trust, feel safe, gain self-confidence, and are able to explore their environments because they feel they have a safe base (McGowan, Sasaki, D'Alessio, Dymov, Labonté, Szyf & Meaney, 2009).

In their studies, McGowan et al. (2009) identified higher activity levels in the hippocampi of rats that developed under very affectionate mothers. Since the hippocampus is the neural receptor responsible for regulating stress hormones, these rats were well adjusted. The scholars replicated these experiments by analyzing, postmortem, the brains of 12 people who died of natural causes and 24 people who committed suicide. Among the 24 suicide subjects, 12 of them were victims of child abuse, while the other 12 subjects did not suffer abuse as children. McGowan and others found that the 12 subjects who experienced childhood abuse showed reduced activity in their hippocampi, which implies fewer receptors and is linked to poor stress regulation. The researchers suggested that negative environmental experiences increased an individual's stress level and eroded the ability to function effectively when exposed to challenging situations.

Influence of Neighborhood on Academic Success

The neighborhood environment has a significant effect on African Americans youths' academic success. Prolonged exposure to risky and crime-ridden neighborhoods has an adverse effect on children's psychosocial development and academic functioning (Burdick-Will et al., 2011; Wodtke, Harding, & Elwert, 2011). A significant study from the University of British Columbia (2010) compared the relative effects of neighborhood poverty on early childhood and early adolescence. The study found that the neighborhood in which kindergarten-aged children live predicts their reading comprehension skills in middle school. The study also revealed that children raised in risky neighborhoods with high rates of poverty perform poorly on standardized tests in middle school despite their place of residence while attending middle school. The study identified collective efforts on the part of parents, educators, family, friends, and community members, as well as access to good schools, libraries, after-school programs, and bookstores, as motivators to better academic outcome. The study concluded that children's reading comprehension might be set on a negative course early in life if children and their families are living in resource-deprived neighborhoods at the time.

Similarly, Wodtke et al. (2011) suggested that continued exposure to poor neighborhoods has a severe impact on high school graduation rates, and growing up in the most disadvantaged quintile of neighborhoods decreases the prospect of graduation by 20% for Black and 18% for non-Black children. To conceptualize an individual's behavior as embedded within their community required an exploration of how the quality of the neighborhood affects the residents' interactions with schools, values toward education, and their overall learning experiences. Unfortunately, news media had paid

disproportionate attention to the perpetrators of violence, and little or no attention to the children who are directly or indirectly the victims of crimes in risky neighborhoods.

Children from minority groups live in communities that expose them to myriad social problems, including drugs, violent crime, and gang activities (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009; Milam et al., 2010). Therefore, it is important to understand how these children's emotions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences motivate them to persevere in learning.

Cooley-Strickland et al. (2009) examined the effects of chronic exposure to community violence on emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning among 746 students (aged 8-12) in six urban elementary schools located in three counties in Baltimore, Maryland. The elementary schools were located in low-, moderate-, or high-crime level neighborhoods. The study sought to identify pliable risks and protective factors that could be targeted for prevention and intervention programs. Cooley-Strickland et al. (2009) concluded that poor urban children exposed to violence and crime are among the most vulnerable populations in terms of emotional and behavioral problems. This is consistent with other research on the impact of risky neighborhoods on family values, such as religiosity and ethnic identity, which significantly contribute to how children defined and coped with stress and the demands of daily life (Butler-Barnes et al. 2012; McGowan et al. 2009). The current study elicited participants' reasons for persevering and overcoming the identified barriers, and examined the factors that motivate them to achieve academic success.

Milam et al. (2010) studied the effects of school and neighborhood safety on academic achievement among third and fifth graders in Baltimore City public schools. The study sampled 447 residential block faces and 116 schools within Baltimore.

Academic achievement for the student population was based on the percentage of students who scored as “proficient” or “advanced” at math and reading in the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) in the 2005-2006 school year. Student self-reports were administered to participants at school to elucidate safety level, violence exposure, and the risk of walking to school. The students’ self-reports were then sent home to parents. Multivariate statistical analysis and linear regression models were employed to estimate the relationship between perceived achievements. The predominantly African American participants were distributed as follows: 113 students in third grade, 115 students in fourth grade, and 114 students in fifth grade. The study assessed community and school safety using a “Neighborhood Inventory for Environmental Typology, a purported objective observational assessment of neighborhood characteristics” (p. 3). Academic achievement was measured with the MSA, a standardized assessment administered to all third through eighth graders within the Maryland schools (Milam et al., 2010). Student responses had about an 87% response rate and parent responses were about 31%.

This study revealed that a student’s sense of safety was important to their academic success, and identified poverty as a more important predictor of academic achievement than neighborhood violence. Nonetheless, risky neighborhoods have psychosocial impacts on students’ overall functioning and consequences to their learning. Rossen, Pollack, Curriero, Shields, and Cooley-Strickland (2011) explained that over 55.8% of children who reside in neighborhoods high in incivilities reported walking to school despite lower levels of perceived safety. Since a high proportion of children who resided in disadvantaged neighborhoods walked to school, schools should direct efforts at minimizing their exposure to neighborhood hazards by ensuring safe routes to and from

school. This is similar to the conclusion of Milam et al. (2010), which called for schools to find ways to improve community environments to better support children's safety (Li & Hassan, 2010).

The reviewed studies reveal that economic and social characteristics of residential neighborhoods have a direct impact on the overall quality of life of residents and the psychosocial wellbeing and academic outcomes of children. Children from lower socioeconomic families who live in poor neighborhoods are subject to chronic stress. This produced negative consequences for their psychological and physiological wellbeing, affecting the children's mental and physical health while reducing their quality of life and educational functioning. In addition, exposure to childhood abuse and other negative environmental stresses may lead to lower activity in the hippocampus, increasing an individual's stress level and undermining the ability to function effectively when exposed to challenging situations (McGowan et al. 2009). Children and adolescents in risky communities lack enrichment programs, social infrastructure, and other resources for effective extracurricular activities.

Risky neighborhoods posed significant disruptive consequences in the lives of African American children. Family kinship, especially the extended family, provided emotional stability necessary for psychological wellbeing and to buffer the effects of crises, such as poor school attendance and dropout rates (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris; Wei et al., 2010). Harper et al. (2012) represented the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of a successful African American as follows:

I was astonished to discover that my family member who was incarcerated admired me simply because I had a diploma. To be alive after being born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, one of America's murder capitals is an accomplishment in itself. My early days were dim from all the dark clouds of drugs, violence, and gang activities around me. If people are influenced by their surroundings, the likelihood of me having intellectual interests was implausible, especially in an at-risk environment (pp. 114-115).

Harper et al. suggested that it was the participant's "optimism in the face of despair" that motivated higher academic achievement, as well as the value the participant placed on education and their view that "education is a ticket to overcome poverty and reach possibilities beyond their existing conditions" (p. 116).

The reviewed literature elucidated the significance of the role of family and the sense of safety to academic motivation. The studies highlighted that neighborhood and community safety is paramount to enrichment programs that foster academic success. Understanding the motives behind participants' optimism, and the emotions, thoughts, and feelings that drive such optimism, would serve as inspiration to spur African American children toward more promising ways of life and reinforce existing intervention programs in the community and in schools. Unsafe neighborhoods affect children's psychosocial development, academic functioning, and overall academic outcomes (Burdick-Will et al. 2011; Wodtke et al. 2011).

Psychological Factors That Affect Academic Success

Psychological engagement has been considered from many angles, including activities that focus on the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social needs of students.

Research revealed that the onset of academic and disciplinary problems for many African American students in local California schools is as early as second and third grade. Research further suggested that school suspension has an adverse impact on learning, as students might have difficulty catching up with the materials on returning from suspension (Harper & Davis III, 2012; Pringle et al. 2010; Ramanathan, 2013). For the most part, the difficulties these students displayed in school may be attributable to experiences they brought with them: experiences related to poverty, difficult and diverse family circumstances, living in risky neighborhoods, physical and emotional problems, and poor health (DoED, 2014). Understanding the role of psychological and social problems on the learning experiences of African American students is critical, and understanding how some African American students negotiate these challenges is essential for program improvement. School systems are not expected to satisfy every need of their students; however, schools should be able to meet needs that directly affect their students' learning (Marx, Wooley, & Northop, 1998, p.142), such as the sense of fit, comfort, motivation, and esteem that the students feel within the school context.

A sense of belonging in a racially diverse middle or high school is a key indicator of psychological engagement in the academic setting, including academic and social adjustment. Students with a high sense of belonging in school tend to demonstrate better academic engagement, including the adoption of cognitive strategies for achievement and mastery of goals (Rosenthal et al., 2011). Drawing from positive psychology, the psychological states of contentment or joy are defined through the individual traits or character strengths and social institutions that enhance subjective wellbeing and make life worth living. School culture may enhance or decrease the individual and collective

strengths of African Americans; specifically, teachers' perceptions, biases, and lower expectations of African American students can affect their positive affectivity and overall learning progress (Pringle et al. 2010).

In their study, Walton and Cohen (2011) examined non-cognitive constructs such as the sense of belonging, general attitudes toward school, sense of self-efficacy, ability to complete work, and the sense of having requisite intellectual capabilities and social skills in an achievement-oriented academic environment (Bandura, 1977; Kirp, 2011; Oyserman et al., 2009). The study showed that many African American students have an inherent fear of failing, borne out of perceived stereotype vulnerability and prejudice, which had historical antecedents and was inimical to their academic success. Pringle et al. (2010) discussed the role of stereotypes and stereotype threats due to African American high school students' perceptions of teachers' expectations. Their study identified societal, school system, and community factors, as well as preschool experiences and societal discriminatory practices, as variables that can block students from achieving better learning outcomes. Pringle et al. (2010) reported that the majority of African American students believed that most of their teachers had low expectations of African American students in comparison to their other ethnic counterparts. These beliefs had a negative psychological impact on African American students, which adversely affected their motivation to achieve academically.

Parsons (2005) argued that positive emotional contact was imperative for students' involvement in school and could result in greater school engagement and positive learning outcomes for students. Prejudice and discrimination based on race or ethnicity, gender, social class, or neighborhood, whether explicit or implicit; contributed

significantly to an individual's sense of self-worth and perception of life as worth living (Schmader, 2010). In order to help students foster resilience in the face of difficult social, environmental, and academic tasks, persevere toward goals, make necessary adjustments toward achieving success, recover from problems, and attain success it is critical to understand each child's perceptions of their character. The perception of self is shaped by the child's family system and the support with which the child was raised. An individual's psychosocial wellness and overall functioning depended on the interactions between nature and nurture provided by the family system (Harper et al. 2012; Li & Hassan, 2010; Schmader, 2010; Willenz, 2009).

Thus far, research had revealed that African American students appeared engaged and motivated to succeed when the school culture had high expectations for students, school practices focused on preparing students for college and careers, and teachers and administrators consistently stressed achievement and embracing a positive attitude towards student's performance. However, teachers' and counselors' attitudes and perceptions toward African American students could have negative consequence on their overall performance in standardized assessments, among other performance indicators. The barriers teachers and counselors placed on high-level courses also affect the learning of African American students and increase the achievement gap. Academic achievement was a measure of students' performance on standardized assessments, and the data so far showed a significant gap between African American students and their peers from other ethnic groups in reading and mathematics (DoED, 2014; Perkins-Gough, 2006).

Measurement of Academic Success in K-12 Grade Levels

Standardized tests were used to measure students' academic outcomes. From a broader standpoint, the academic achievement gap is an examination of student demographic subgroups on standardized tests that measured how much students have learned in a given context (e.g., in reading and math) at the state and national levels. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the federal entity primarily responsible for collecting, analyzing, and reporting education data, reported that the subgroups comprising minority students of African American and Hispanic origins performed lower than do other subgroups in reading, mathematics, and science from a national perspective (DoED, 2014; NCES, 2013).

The use of standardized tests to assess teachers, schools, and districts had increased dramatically in recent years. The majority of states now have statewide testing programs in which students at selected grade levels take standardized achievement tests, minimum competence tests, and criterion tests to rate how thoroughly students have mastered specific skills or areas of knowledge. Education departments used the outcomes of these tests for accountability programs, which has intensified the debate on testing standards and the use or misuse of test results (Slavin, 2003, p. 539). Critics of standardized tests were concerned about the issues of validity and reliability. They worry that the tests may give false results about the status of learning in the nation's schools, that the tests may be unfair to, or biased against, minority students and students from low-income families, and that they reduced teaching and learning to mere test preparation (p. 542). Research had shown that minority children raised in poverty have exposure to minimal academic enrichment at home or through extracurricular activities, thus tests

may give an unfair advantage to a particular group of students. For example, a test that includes a reading comprehension of geography, whether national or international, may be biased because the items assess knowledge or skills that are common to one subgroup. Despite this weakness, tests scores were still used to measure the level of proficiency or competency of students' academic skills (DoED, 2014).

According to data released by DoED, out of 92,000 12th grade students, only 7% of Black students performed at or above proficient level in mathematics, compared to 12% of Hispanic students, 12% of American Indian/Alaskan Native students, 33% of White students, 47% of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 26% of mixed-race students. 16% Black students performed at or above basic level in reading, compared to 23% of Hispanics, 26% of American Indian/Alaskan Natives, 47% of Whites, 47% of Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 38% of mixed-race students (DoED, 2014). Due to reported underperformance of minority students, particularly African Americans, on standardized tests (DoED, 2014), there were concerns that using said tests to measure students' performance may block these students from opportunities and lead to academic disengagement. Congress passed the "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) legislation of 2001 to ensure that all students learn at acceptable levels. NCLB mandates that each child should have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to earn a high quality education, and that all children reach at least the minimum competence level needed to challenge state academic achievement standards and assessments (Fiscella & Kitzman, 2009; Johnson et al., 2005, p. 391).

NCLB encouraged high-stakes testing to an unprecedented degree and linked the benefits of standardized tests with improved educational quality, academic achievement,

accurate assessment of student learning, and the assumption that all students were uniform in terms of whether, what, and how they learn (Fiscella & Kitzman, 2009). While the NCLB Act of 2001 ensured the use of standardized tests to measure students' academic success, thus far there is a lack of empirical evidence validating NCLB's assumption that all children could gain academic proficiency through standardized measures of achievement, or that this will close the achievement gap between poorer students and their counterparts from more affluent families. The proposed progress toward closing the achievement gap in 2014 had yet to be fulfilled (Fiscella & Kitzman, 2009). Overall, NCES reports showed that the subgroups comprising minority students of African American and Hispanic origins continued to perform lower than do other subgroups in reading, mathematics, and science (DoED, 2014; NCES, 2013). Minority children were still challenged by such barriers as inadequate investment in child health and early education, inequity in school funding, and sparse allocation of resources based on the needs of students. They also often attended adversely affected schools that served mostly poor and minority students. All of these barriers negatively affected the academic outcomes of minority students (Fiscella & Kitzman, 2009).

Research revealed the connection between race, poverty, socioeconomic status, school culture, and challenging environmental variables and the academic performance of children from low socioeconomic families, who were predominantly African American and Hispanic. In addition, students with histories of abuse, neglect, homelessness, high mobility, parental unemployment, and lower parental educational levels were at an extreme disadvantage. These children experienced high stress, lacked exposure to quality early educational experiences and stimulating home environments, were exposed to

unfavorable school environments, lacked a sense of belonging, were more likely to suffer from psychological challenges, and were at greater risk for poor test outcomes (DoED 2014). Notwithstanding, standardized test results could serve as feedback and a benchmark for student learning if used constructively to support the learning process. Unfortunately, test scores have been used in ways that were detrimental to minority students' welfare and achievement. When standardized tests were used to track students and limit their access to rigorous academic programs, there is concern. The current study assumed that highlighting the successes of African American students in school through their own descriptions will serve to motivate and encourage these children's ethnic peers who, because of the negative attention from standardized test reports, appeared disengaged and discouraged to persevere in their learning process.

Summary

Academic achievement has both social and economic realities, including school dropout rates, cycles of poverty, family insecurity, racial wealth gaps and inequality, poor health, and economic disadvantage due to financial illiteracy. For the purposes of this study, it was necessary to investigate why some African American students persevered academically and whether a difference existed in these factors for African American students specifically. Motivation to succeed was linked to having goals that drive psychological and physical energy toward the realization of the desired goal. Research showed that social and psychological factors have negative impacts on the academic outcomes of minority students, and that this can be particularly detrimental for African American students who were also the target of discrimination. Understanding that African American students faced significant challenges every day in their neighborhoods

and at school is a possible cause for their academic challenges, at least in part, which may further explain the reasons for persistent achievement gap.

This study focused on motivations for academic success among some African American students despite significant social and psychological challenges. Particularly, this study explored the personal and circumstantial factors that supported the students' efforts to succeed in high school. Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Mischel's self-regulation theory guided this study to clarify participants' perceptions of their self-worth, competence, autonomy, abilities to master and achieve, past experiences, cultural antecedents, belief systems, and perseverance in the face of significant social, psychological, and academic challenges. Past research revealed that students with high self-efficacy were better adapted to their neighborhoods and school environments and tend to achieve better life and academic outcomes. Previous research providing great amounts of data regarding African American students' academic underperformance and barriers to learning engagement has paved the way for the current study. However, none of the existing studies focused on personal and circumstantial factors that supported the students' efforts to succeed in high school. The present study aimed to fill this gap in the research by examining the motivators for academic success among African American high school juniors and seniors, specifically the personal and circumstantial factors that support these students' efforts to succeed academically. In Chapter 3, I discussed the study methods, including the research design and data analysis techniques.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Although it is important to identify the barriers African American students face, the aim of this study was to identify strategies to support academic success through an emphasis on African American learners' success stories: that is, to understand why some African American students persevere to succeed academically against incredible odds. This study focused on African American high school juniors and seniors who demonstrated laudable academic performance even though their circumstances made it likely they would fail in school. I also examined what motivates these successful students to persevere despite their socioeconomic, familial, and environmental disadvantages. Additionally, I explored the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of these students during the process of persevering in their learning. Findings from this study may be used to enhance awareness among teachers, administrators, program developers, and parents to be more conscious of the factors that can positively influence the academic persistence and success of African American students through grade school and the transition to

college. The central concept of academic motivation was explored through the participants' own words. I used a generic qualitative approach (Caelli et al., 2008; Cooper & Endacott, 2007) and thematic analysis (TA) to identify themes and patterns in the participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research Design and Rationale

The following research questions (RQs) were used to guide the study:

RQ1: What motivates African American junior and senior high school students to be successful in school?

RQ2: What personal and circumstantial factors support African American junior and senior high school students' efforts to succeed academically?

Qualitative methods are frequently employed to study topics that have received little research attention and require more in-depth exploration (Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Tucker & Herman, 2002). In this case, the focus was to understand what motivates some African American junior and senior high school students to persevere academically in the face of incredible odds, and to understand their emotions, thoughts, and experiences in the process of persevering.

Creswell (2009) noted that qualitative methods are necessary when variables cannot be easily identified at the beginning of a research project. It would be difficult to explain in simple, measurable terms the lived experiences of African American children, their educational values, their attitudes toward academic success, the meanings they bring to school, and how their cultures and environments shape those factors that drive them to succeed. Some quantitative studies have provided data on indicators for motivation among successful African American students; however, quantitative studies cannot

adequately address why these children possess the perseverance to succeed, particularly from the students' perspectives. I employed a generic qualitative approach to address these questions.

The generic qualitative method is defined as “studies that seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the individuals involved” (Cooper & Endacott, 2007, p. 817). These studies are often eclectic, demonstrating some or all of the characteristics of a qualitative endeavor with an attempt at combining several methodologies or approaches, while often claiming no particular methodological viewpoint. These studies emphasize understanding an experience, event, or phenomenon (Caelli et al., 2008). In the current study, the phenomenon in question was the motivation to persevere academically among some African American high school juniors and seniors.

Generic qualitative studies are conducted to obtain descriptive responses from individuals. To understand a phenomenon, rather than just to interpret its significance, researchers must obtain knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the event or state of affairs. Descriptions always depend on the perceptions, emotions, feelings, thoughts, and sensibilities of the describer (Caelli et al., 2008; Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 2009; Sandelowski, 2000). The general approach to the current study was to advance understanding by asking the participants about the factors that motivate them to persevere academically, to graduate from high school, and aspire to attend college despite their status as at risk for failure.

A review of the literature established the significance of this study for practice and policy through an overview of the issues behind widespread academic

underperformance among African Americans, as well as equity concerns regarding this underperformance. Previous studies addressing academic achievement were either entirely empirical, included limited qualitative data, or were conducted with little regard for the voices of those most affected, namely African American students. Many of these studies included surveys, archival data, or quasi-experimental research designs focused on the deficits of African American children to explain academic outcomes. From this deficit-focused approach, researchers constructed knowledge from within the research world through rather subjective engagement with African American children.

In the current study, I combined sampling, data collection and analysis, and representation methods to provide descriptions of academic perseverance among a population of African American high school juniors and seniors. The generic qualitative approach was the most appropriate choice for this study given its emphasis on participants' descriptions of the reasons they persevere academically and their emotions, feelings, and thoughts during their learning experiences. I considered several aspects of the qualitative method when choosing my approach. For example, I could have explored the life of an individual through biography. Although such an exploration is possible, I did not seek to explore the life of an individual African American student junior or senior high school student. Ethnographers seek to describe and analyze all or parts of a culture or community by describing the beliefs and practices of the group under study. Ethnographers also seek to demonstrate how the various parts contribute to the culture as a whole. The goal in ethnography is to try to understand the unique configuration of the culture of the bounded group with a minimum number of preconceived ideas or theories

beyond the general assumptions outlined above. I considered this approach, but the focus of the current study was not cultural antecedents to academic success.

In a case study, the researcher conducts an in-depth analysis of a single case or multiple cases. This type of qualitative study could provide additional insight into previously researched information. However, I aimed to explore the perceptions of a group rather than a single individual. Grounded theory is used when the researcher seeks to develop a theory. Because this study focused on understanding a phenomenon according to existing theories, grounded theory was not appropriate. Phenomenological studies are commonly used in psychology and other social science disciplines to explore lived experiences and to show how complex meanings are constructed from simple units of direct experience in everyday life. Phenomenology is based on the assumption that there is an essence to shared experiences. The experiences of individuals are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2002). Previous studies on the academic underperformance of African Americans were mainly empirical and addressed the reasons for students' learning difficulties to be the variables and assumptions outlined by the researchers.

The generic qualitative approach was preferable for obtaining an in-depth understanding of the motivations for academic perseverance among African American high school students, as well as their emotions, feelings, thoughts, and experiences in their process of endurance. This approach allowed me to discover and understand the worldviews of African American high school junior and senior students concerning the motivating factors underlying their academic success (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The generic qualitative approach enabled my participants to describe their experiences as

students and what academic success and pursuing higher education means for them comprehensively. Examining the emotions, thoughts, feelings, and educational values and needs of African American junior and senior high school students required an exploration of their perspectives on motivators for academic success. Therefore, it would have been difficult to define the variables of such an exploration in advance. Themes from the qualitative results could provide the basis for future quantitative studies by identifying variables of interest from the participants' perspectives.

I used the TA technique for determining and analyzing patterns in the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) described TA as an essentialist or realist method to report the experiences, meanings, and realities of individuals, but it can also serve as a constructionist technique that views knowledge as embedded within a social context. That is, human thoughts, feelings, languages, and behaviors are the results of the interchange with the external world. It may be argued that African American children's academic underperformance is a consequence of the way the broader social context affects them through the provision of lower quality education (Sternberg, 2004). I explored this argument from the participants' perspectives to obtain a more precise understanding.

TA can also be viewed as a form of critical realism theory in that it acknowledges the ways individuals make meaning out of experience and the ways the broader social context then impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of reality. TA can serve to reveal reality, which in this study was that African American children are struggling academically. TA can also be used to unravel the surface of reality, which in this case was the exploration of the types of experiences that

will become helpful contributions to learning for African American children (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The TA approach helped to explicate the aspects of academic experiences that participants find particularly motivating, the reasons these students persevere to succeed, and the factors they believe help them cope more effectively despite the difficulties they confront.

Role of the Researcher

My role as researcher was observer-participant. My purpose as a researcher was to pursue a better understanding of how African American children view education, and how their emotions, thoughts, and feelings impact their educational success (McCaslin & Scott, 2003). I recognized the inevitable bias based on my understanding of the problem and my experiences as a public school teacher working with minority children and adolescents identified as having social, emotional, and academic difficulties. Although I could see how my experiences as a former high school teacher may have influenced my attempts to determine how these students persevere academically, I used peer review throughout the process to ensure that the data was presented in an objective fashion. Peer review is essential to uphold high ethical standards (Creswell, 2009). I secured the services of two individuals, a licensed psychologist and a postdoctoral individual, both graduates of Walden University who were knowledgeable in psychological studies. Further, I used field notes and memos to enhance coding during data analysis. These field notes helped me to clarify and bracket my bias, and to reconcile gaps between my perceptions and peer reviewers' perceptions, as needed (Barbie, 2004).

The study was conducted at two public schools in Los Angeles County. As a Los Angeles resident, I participated by conducting interviews and organizing and analyzing

the data. I was the primary instrument for data collection and recruited participants through the schools' principals and counselors. My role was to listen, observe, and learn through the participants' descriptions. The procedures that guided the study included ethical practices, selection of participants, data collection techniques, data analysis techniques, verification of trustworthiness/authenticity, data interpretation, and dissemination of the findings.

Methodology

Study Participant Selection Logic

Qualitative approaches to data collection usually involve direct, one-to-one interaction with participants. A purposeful sample of 10 African American high school juniors and seniors who could best help me understand the problem and answer the research questions were recruited from Los Angeles County public schools. Purposeful sampling was employed because it allowed me to gain information from a population that had relevant experiences to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2009). The selection of participants was based on the following criteria: male and female high school juniors and seniors who identify as African American or Black, maintain a minimum grade point average of 2.8 or higher, and qualify for free or reduced lunch. Participant selection was based on the self-reporting of potential participants. In qualitative studies, the size of research sample varies; researchers have argued that the number of participants is not as important as gaining insight into participants' perspectives regarding the study's research questions (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Mason, 2010). Although 10 students were interviewed, recruitment continued until saturation was reached, or when participant responses no longer revealed new themes (Creswell 2009).

Participant Recruitment Procedure

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, Walden IRB number 08-18-15-0167608, I applied to and obtained a letter of cooperation from the participating school district to recruit a purposeful sample of 10 African American high school juniors and seniors who met the study criteria. Participants included five male and five female students to ensure equal gender representation. Participants were students from low-performing schools as identified by the DoED (2014) and local school district reports. Initial recruitment for this study was conducted through open invitation. I then sent confidential invitations via electronic mail to those students who met the inclusion criteria based on their response to the invitation and self-report.

An information meeting was scheduled for potential participants who met the research criteria at the school site in a designated room to ensure privacy and confidentiality. At this meeting, I provided further information about the study and responded to participants' questions or concerns about their involvement in the study. Students who expressed willingness to participate and meet the research criteria based on their self-report were provided assent and consent forms to be signed with their parents to participate in the study. Furthermore, I informed participants that they did not have to complete the interview and could withdraw at any time without consequence. Completed forms were returned to me through enclosed self-addressed envelopes.

Interview Protocol

The interviews consisted of a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions. These questions were designed to elicit accounts of participants' experiences in their homes, at school, in their neighborhoods, and in the classroom context, and maintain

reliability across participants. I used the interview protocol to ensure that uniformity occurred with all research participants (see Appendix B). The initial questions involved an icebreaker to help develop rapport. This was followed by the remaining questions that explored participants' motivation for success and academic experiences. The interview ended with an appreciation of participants' time (Creswell, 2009).

Data Collection

I served as the primary instrument for collection and analysis of all interview data (Creswell, 2009). The interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face at a designated room on campus to ensure privacy and confidentiality. All interviews were audio-recorded using voice to text software to enhance transcription. In addition, I maintained field notes in an attempt to capture any additional descriptions or information that is relevant to the research questions. All interviews took place on the school site during homeroom or non-academic class periods to ensure that participants did not miss any learning opportunities. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. I transcribed a complete version of the interview as soon as possible following the interview to facilitate the authentication of the data. The transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. I represented each participant with pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data Analysis Plan

Coding was enhanced with computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The software chosen for this study was MAXQDA 11, purpose-built software for qualitative and mixed methods data analysis. Data units as small as phrases in a sentence and as large as full conversations were descriptively micro-coded, and the occurrence frequency of different codes examined to identify patterns and themes.

MAXQDA enables researchers to create their own coding systems, to organize, sort, and use categories, and to categorize data. It enhances the organization of thoughts and theories into memos and attaches them to any data element to foster the clustering of units and meanings. These clustered elements then form themes. MAXQDA displayed the data and allowed for easy extraction of general and distinctive themes from all of the interviews, thereby making a composite summary (VERBI GmbH, 2014).

The transcriptions were analyzed to determine common themes that emerged from participants' responses using thematic analysis (TA). The TA of data to identify patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest followed a phased process (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Specifically, TA process involved:

- Familiarizing oneself with the data which involves transcribing the, reading and re-reading the data noting initial ideas.
- Generating initial codes, which involve coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set and collating data relevant to each code.
- Searching for themes this stage deals with collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
- Reviewing themes, checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set.
- Defining and naming themes, which is an ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

- Producing the report; this aspect involves selection of vivid, compelling extract examples; final analysis of selected extracts; relating the analysis back to the research question and literature; producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

The collected data were subjected to a rigorous analytical process, and the services of independent reviewers were constantly employed. To assess the validity of the analysis, the researcher manually verified all of the relevant, corresponding themes. This verification process ensured identical themes and patterns were identified and coded appropriately (McHugh, Horner, Jason, Colditz & Wallace, 2013).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility and trustworthiness were ensured by bracketing and triangulation. In this study, bracketing refers to the cordoning-off of the researcher's personal views or preconceptions (Cooper & Endacott, 2007).

Triangulation seeks to validate the research findings by generating and comparing different sorts of data and different respondents' perspectives on the topic under investigation. Triangulation is also a strategy that involves the use of different research methods to test the same findings. I achieved triangulation by interviewing multiple participants from two different school sites, incorporating field notes/memos, and reviewing transcripts before developing themes. I identified patterns of convergence to develop or corroborate an overall interpretation. Therefore, triangulation served not only as a pure test of validity but also as a way to safeguard comprehensiveness and encourage a reflexive analysis of the data (Cooper & Endacott, 2007).

Transferability, or external validity, is the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (Pringle et al., 2010), which can be difficult to establish in qualitative research. The current study involved participants from two different high schools within the participating school district. We hope that consistent findings between participating sites will increase the results' applicability to other situations and settings.

The findings were verified rather than validated. Verification in qualitative studies is a distinct strength in that the accounts made through extensive time spent on data collection and the closeness to participants add value to the study. Techniques that ensured verification of findings included the use of an audit trail, researcher's journal, transcripts, audiotapes, notes, early data analysis and interpretation, as well as effective communication with independent reviewers and the research participants (Creswell, 1998, p. 201). Independent reviewers knowledgeable in qualitative inquiry performed independent reviews of this study. Copies of the original transcripts were provided to the reviewers, along with copies of the findings, which contained the individual structural descriptions and the composite descriptions of the group as a whole. The researcher in this study is a former teacher who had observed and experienced disparities in school funding and quality of instruction between inner-city schools and schools in more affluent parts of Los Angeles. The researcher has some insight to educators' perceptions of minority students' abilities to succeed in school from a teacher's perspective. He is cognizant of his experiences and bracketed them accordingly. Creswell (1998) noted the importance of soliciting participants' feedback to help ensure the validity and credibility

of study findings and interpretations (p. 202). However, this was not necessary for the current study.

Ethical Procedures

I obtained approval from Walden University's IRB to recruit study participants. The participants in this study were 11th to 12th-grade students enrolled in two local public schools. Parental releases were obtained and participants decided whether to participate. There was no compensation for the participants. I met with participants in convenient locations on school campuses to ensure their privacy and to reduce distractions. Although no harm was anticipated for study participation, this study nevertheless comprised participants who were identified as performing well in their studies, were on track for graduation, and will be going to college. With that in mind, I went into the interviews aware that I might be interviewing adolescents capable of sharing very difficult academic experiences. There could be a psychological risk introduced when these students described feelings of academic difficulties. To reduce this risk, I offered to provide participants and their parents/guardians with information about local resources for out-of-school youth, including, if necessary, organizations that provide counseling. I also offered to help put participants in contact with these kinds of organizations. Each participant completed a consent form and confidentiality waiver for this purpose.

Files, audio recordings, and transcripts were secured in a locked cabinet in my home office. Only myself and persons selected to assist with validating the results had access to the transcripts. Participants' identifying information were coded and encrypted, and all identifiable information were redacted to protect their privacy.

Summary

This generic qualitative research project evaluated the theoretical, empirical, and methodological rationale for a qualitative study within an African American high school student population to explore motivation for African American high school students to persevere and achieve academic success. Interviews were obtained from participants, and TA was used to identify themes and patterns elicited from participants' descriptions of their social and environmental experiences. The desire to understand how African American junior and senior high school students incorporate a robust strategy within their larger efforts toward success requires an in-depth examination of their emotions, feelings, thoughts, and schooling experiences. Given that the selected participants were achieving in ways that are counter to the literature and the prevailing societal discourse, it was critical to understand how their socio-cultural, environmental, and racial backgrounds motivated and shaped their ability to deal with great challenges and allowed them to persevere academically. I hope that the findings will serve as a motivation for African American students who confront similar difficulties, in effect providing inspiration and direction toward more promising learning experiences, value for education, and improved lifestyles.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the reasons why some African American high school students persevere and succeed academically despite significant personal and circumstantial difficulties. I interviewed 10 high-achieving African American high school juniors and seniors currently enrolled in inner-city schools and living in risky neighborhoods. I sought an in-depth understanding of (a) what participants believe motivates them to persevere despite the significant odds against them, and (b) the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of the participants as they determine to succeed in academics. I sampled African American high school juniors and seniors currently demonstrating high academic performance despite circumstances that make failure in school a likely possibility.

The central questions examined were the following: “What motivates African American junior and senior high school students to be successful in school?” and “What personal and circumstantial factors support African American junior and senior high school students’ efforts to succeed academically?” Data gathered from the interviews were transcribed the same day as each interview to increase accuracy. Subsequently, the transcripts were analyzed to determine common themes in the participants’ responses. This process was ongoing throughout the quarter, as the interviews were held with students from different school sites at different times over a period of 3 months.

Data analysis began with a review of the transcriptions, then moved to a stage of organizing codes into discrete units for analysis, and finally into a selective phase of showing the associations between themes. The participants in this study were students from two different high schools within the participating school district. This chapter

includes description of the data collection and analysis techniques employed in this study and presentation of the findings. I also discuss issues of validity and trustworthiness.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Participant Recruitment

I sought and obtained a letter of cooperation from the school district and approval for the study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. I recruited a purposive sample of 10 African American high school juniors and seniors who met the study criteria. Recruitment for participation was by open invitation through announcements in classes. Students who expressed interest through individual contact with me were invited to an information meeting by electronic mail. The information meeting was scheduled for potential participants who met the research criteria, at the school site in a designated room. At this meeting, I explained the nature of the study and responded to questions or concerns about participating. Students who continued to express willingness to participate and met the research criteria based on self-reporting were provided assent and consent forms to be signed to participate in the study. As potential participants were all under 18 years of age, they were advised to complete the assent forms with their parents/guardians as part of the process. Participants were informed that they did not have to complete the interview and could withdraw at any time without consequence. The participants who returned signed assent and consent forms showing parent/guardian authorization to participate in the study were then scheduled for interviews. Final participants included five male and five female students.

Participant Demographics

A total of 10 participants, including three juniors and seven seniors, participated in the study. Participants self identified as (a) African Americans, (b) raised in low-income household (that is eligible for free or reduced price lunch), (c) living in a single-parent household (that is parent with no spouse present, or living with a biological never-married parent), (d) living in low-income/risky neighborhood, and (e) attending an urban public school in which more than 70% or more of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. One participant was living with a friend after being forced to leave home by her mother in her sophomore year (she has no contact with her biological father). She has been working after school since 10th grade to support herself.

Participants were students in schools identified as low performing by the DoED (2014) and local school district reports. Participants self-reported as growing up in challenging family and environmental conditions. For example, Participant M08s's mother was diagnosed with cancer during his 10th grade year. Following the diagnosis, things became challenging because of more resources going to hospital bills, the emotions of seeing his mother going through pains, and the gradual change in her physical appearance. They lived in a neighbourhood where gang activities and pressure to join gangs made learning more challenging. His mother died in his junior year. In his senior year, he enrolled in a community college to learn coding to have a job while attending college. Participant F03s was forced to leave home by her mother in 10th grade; she lived with a friend and had to work to provide for herself from 10th grade through senior year. All five seniors are potentially on track for admission to a 4-year college. Participant F06s will be going to a state university. Due to injuries, he will not

receive a sports scholarship playing soccer, but he wants to be a teacher and coach upon graduating college. Participant M06s talked about the challenges and pressure of living with uncles who were gang members with drug involvement, the pressure to be recruited, and the mental strength to resist and stay focused on school. Participant M07s talked about experiences of being evicted with his mother and how they lived with various family members. Eventually when his mother found an apartment, they still had the stress of not knowing how to meet the rent and his mother had to work two jobs. He was on his school's varsity football team. He was expecting to gain sports scholarship. In one of their games, he sustained a serious injury, a multiple leg fracture, and the doctors advised him to quit football. His passion for sports made him join the marching band. According to him, "If I can't play, I can still participate in sport through the band. I study hard to see if I can qualify for some academic scholarship." Participant F01s discussed how she would leave school to go home and relieve her mother to care for her grandfather so her mother would go to work. She stated that they take turns caring for her grandfather. She talked about being teased at school in her 9th grade year due to her weight. This experience was so stressful for her that she did not find school very interesting. In her sophomore year, she transferred to a new school and started exercising. She started designing clothes for plus-size girls because she did not like what was available. She has an early admission to study fashion and business management. Participant F05j talked about living in a risky neighbourhood replete with death due to gang activities. She described seeing dead bodies due to shootings from gang members and lamented the effect this had on her and possibly other children. According to M05j, "children should

not be exposed to violence like these.” Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Participant	Grade Level	Gender	GPA	Living Arrangement
F01s	Senior	Female	3.45	Mother
F02s	Senior	Female	3.58	Mother, visits Father
F03s	Senior	Female	3.02	Friend (reported being forced to leave home by mother)
F04j	Junior	Female	3.54	Mother
F05j	Junior	Female	3.04	Mother
M06s	Senior	Male	3.06	Mother
M07s	Senior	Male	3.25	Mother
M08s	Senior	Male	3.35	Mother
M09s	Senior	Male	3.10	Foster (since 10 months old, separated from siblings at 12 months, has no knowledge of siblings or mother’s whereabouts)
M10j	Junior	Male	3.66	Father, visits Mother

Interview Protocol

The interviews included a series of semistructured open-ended questions designed to elicit accounts of participants’ experiences in their homes, neighborhoods, school, and classrooms . I used an interview protocol (Appendix E) to ensure uniformity of data collection with all research participants. The initial questions included an icebreaker used

to develop rapport. This was followed by questions that addressed participants' motivation for success and their academic experiences. Each interview ended with an acknowledgement of the participant's time and appreciation for his or her participation in the study (Creswell, 2009).

Data Collection

I developed the interview protocol. This semistructured interview was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009). The interviews were conducted individually and face to face at a designated room on campus that ensured privacy and confidentiality. All interviews were recorded using voice-to-text software. All interviews took place on the school site during advisory periods, which ensured that participants did not miss any learning opportunities. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, and the participants were highly cooperative during the interviews. Complete versions were transcribed as soon as possible following the interview to facilitate the authentication of the data. Participants' confidentiality was ensured using individual codes to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

MAXQDA-12, a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to support the analysis process. MAXQDA-12 is designed for qualitative and mixed methods data analysis. This software enables data units as small as phrases in a sentence and as large as full conversations to be descriptively coded. I used open coding that involved reviewing the entire text for descriptive categories. Using the constant comparative method, categories were refined by seeking examples across all transcripts until approximately no new information yielded additional meaning. As the categories emerged and were

refined, I considered how they might be related to one another across all participants' transcripts with the emerging patterns forming the specific themes. Each category and subcategory was color coded in MAXQDA for easy identification and collation. Table 2 shows an example of the coding process and development of themes.

Table 2

Example of Data Analysis Process

Data Extract/ Codes	Selected Themes
Get better life, overcome personal barriers. Safe and comfortable neighbourhood/ environment.	Utility of School and Importance of Education
Getting and staying organized, planning, scheduling, Supportive peers, collaboration and combine goals and expectations, work hard in our studies.	Importance of Organization Positive Peer Influence
I study hard and keep my grades up so I can get a scholarship to college and achieve my dream of becoming an attorney and help others.	Importance of Perseverance
Honor family, historical important persons, and other family members who cared.	Positive adult role models and importance of honoring historical important people
Communication, talk about learning and importance of learning, meaningful ways to get involved,	Positive home support and communication

Data gathered from the interviews were transcribed the same day of the interview. Subsequently, the transcripts were analyzed to determine common themes in the participants' responses. This process was ongoing throughout the quarter, as the interviews were held with students from different school sites at different times over a period of 3 months. The analysis began with a review of the transcriptions to identify codes, then moved into the stage of identifying themes based on these codes.

Presentation of Findings

Clarke and Braun's (2013) phases of thematic analysis were used to examine the transcripts for pertinent codes and to combine codes to form themes. The first step involved a verbatim transcript of all responses. Transcripts were first assessed for their face-value meaning. I then examined the context within the interview protocol in which the response was made and checked the transcript with the audio recording for accuracy. The next step involved identifying key text segments and generating codes for these. The third phase involved sorting different codes into potential themes. The final phase involved refining, defining, and naming the themes. Table 3 shows an example of the coding process.

Table 3

Example of Coding Process

Data Extract	Coded for
My dad doesn't live with my mom, but he cares for me and my sisters. He cares about our education and encourages us to do well in school. I feel that his involvement in my life is very encouraging and makes me feel loved. Because my dad talk with me about my school activities, I feel loved, motivated, and willing to do well in my classes knowing that someone cares. It is important for kids to feel loved by family, having someone to ask about school when you get home, your homework, your day at school.	Importance of support from father Positive home support
I believe that if we have parents talking to young children about the importance of education and careers, they would be motivated because they can see that they can make something of themselves rather than dropping out of school, hanging with friends and getting in trouble.	1. Parent involvement 2. Importance of education
Having discussion with my mom helped too. Talking about what do you have planned for the future, goals in life, you know, stuff like that gets you to think and school will be on your mind. I think just having communication with your parent will motivate you to do better in school.	1. Parent involvement 2. Communication with children

Presented in the following sections are the themes related to what motivates participants to persevere and succeed academically despite significant personal and circumstantial difficulties. The nine themes were (a) utility of school and the importance of education; (b) importance of organization, (c) importance of involvement in extracurricular and creative activities; (d) positive home support, parent involvement, and communication; (e) positive sibling/peer influence (f) positive adult role models, (g) high expectations of self; (h) importance of perseverance; and (i) seeing barriers and challenges as opportunities.

Utility of School and Importance of Education

Although participants were aware of the barriers that disadvantaged them and other minority students, such as violent neighborhoods, poorly equipped schools, and lack of opportunities, participants in this study indicated a confidence in the importance of discovering the value of education. Their responses revealed a view of education as a means to improve one's life and afford opportunity for upward social and economic mobility. All of the participants in this study expressed a desire to continue their educations beyond high school. In addition, some aspired to be of service to others through their future professional and entrepreneurial endeavors. For example, participant M06s talked about coming back to his community, becoming a teacher and a role model to youth and participating in community activities that provide mentoring to youth.

When asked why being successful in school is important to them and what they hoped for in the future, the participants' responses reflected a clear understanding that persevering, succeeding academically, and pursuing their dreams are the best options to overcome their challenging home and neighborhood environments and current poverty. All participants in this study believed that going to college would provide a better chance at overcoming poverty, and enable them to escape violence and become successful in life. For example:

Participant F02s: Education will help me live a free life without people controlling what I do or whom I choose to spend my life with.

Participant F03s: I go to school to gain knowledge, to help better myself as a person, one big reason is to go to college and overcome life struggle.

Participants M07s: I live in the underprivileged area and in order to get out of this, I need to succeed in school. I want a better life for me and my family; I have to do this.

Participant F05j: If something is important to you, stay focused on it, don't focus on negative things, education is my ticket to succeed in life, and I know I have to stay focused on my school work to get of this neighbourhood.

Participant F03s: I know that school is my best option in my current plight. I was determined to succeed and go to UCLA.

Participant M08s: I need to free myself and I guess having a good education and a good professional career will be my ticket to get over my challenges.

Participant F02s: I've got to do my best because I don't want to go through the same life as my parents; I see that as another motivation to do well in school.

Participant M09s: I have to show that I am as smart as anyone, even smarter. I have to free myself and I guess having a good education and a good professional career will be my ticket to get over my challenges.

The majority of the participants interviewed believed that education would provide them with opportunity to improve their lives, and this encouraged them to persevere and to remain committed to completing their education, even in the face of personal and circumstantial difficulties. For example:

Participant F20s: I know that school is my best option in my current plight. I was determined to succeed and go to UCLA.

Participant F03s: I need to free myself and I guess having a good education and a good professional career will be my ticket to get over my challenges.

Participant M07s: I've got to do my best because I don't want to go through the same life as my parents; I see that as another motivation to do well in school.

ParticipantM06s: Sometimes some friends may discourage you, even family members who are in gangs and make some money, you know; but I say to my friends to use school to get out of trouble, you know, go to college, so you can get away from all these.

Importance of Being Organized/Planning

Participants identified organization, time management, goal setting, planning, scheduling, seeking help, and self-management as several strategies they employed in their efforts to succeed. For instance, some participants described some of their personal qualities as follows:

Participant M08s: I make plans about my assignments, organize and prioritize my schoolwork, personal life and family life.

Participant F05j: I manage my time well to enable me study and prepare for my college prep tests like SAT and ACT. I just use time management very wisely.

Participant M09s: I like to organize my things so that in the mornings I don't have to be running around looking for my school stuff or homework. You see, I have to take care of my younger ones so I have to be organized and make plans to enable me get things right.

Participant: If you have everything planned out, you'll have everything done before your bedtime if you stayed focused.

Participant M10j: I can be organized. It makes things easier. I use my phone to organize and schedule my activities.

Participant F03s: I'm involved in sports, so I make schedules to accommodate my extracurricular activities and study time.

Participant F02s: I'm involved in sports, so I make schedules to accommodate my extracurricular activities and study time.

Participants' revealed how strategies such as organizing, planning, scheduling, prioritizing, self-management and regulation of their study time help them to persevere in completing their daily activities. Participants' responses underscored their awareness of how staying organized helps them focus on their learning tasks despite enticing non-academic distractions such pressure from gang affiliated family members that could prevent them from achieving academic outcomes that they valued. For example:

Participant M08s stated: Our neighbourhood has people in gangs and they make real trouble for young people. Sometimes I go to the neighboring city to use their library to avoid unnecessary problems from some local gangs. You know, you just have to figure a way to get things together while keeping your cool. Gang activities, violence and crime, people in the gang, most didn't finish high school, they always want young people like me to join, and if you don't want to join, they make troubles for you.

Importance of Involvement in Extracurricular and Creative Activities

Participants tied constructive use of time to their involvement in extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, and creative activities like art. For example, one female participant described involvement in sports as a positive distraction. Other participant's responses reiterated the importance of involvement in extracurricular or creative activities

as a way to overcome boredom and avoid negative distractions in their lives and neighborhoods:

Participant F02s: We get involved in sports to keep you from the things going on at home that you don't want to see, think about or even know. Being in cheer and participation in sports helps put your mind at ease until mom or dad or grandma shows up.

Participant F01s: Not having anything to do make me bored. Sometimes I just go in my closet, get old clothes and remake them.

Participant F03s: I get to participate in different extracurricular activities, being the co-captain of the dance team, president of Black student union and other leadership activities keep focused.

Participant F05j: My school has good boys' and girls' basketball teams that have won championships at the state level. We have a good marching band. This helps to keep students in school after school and away from drama at home and problems in the neighborhood.

Importance of Positive Home Support, Parent Involvement and Communication

Participants revealed that their parents were involved in their education in meaningful ways that enhanced their school activities, contributed positively to their behaviors, and motivated their drive to succeed. The participants reiterated that even though their parents have limited resources, their clear and consistent messages about the importance of education reinforced the students' perseverance and motivation. For example, one of the participants stated that "it is important for kids to feel loved by

family, having someone to ask about school when you get home, ask about your homework, your day at school. You know things like that show that someone cares.”

Participant F02s: My dad encourages us to see our challenges as a way to do better. Because my dad talks with me about my school activities, I feel loved, motivated and willing to do well in my classes knowing that someone cares.

Participant M07s: Having discussion with my mom is helpful. Talking about what I have planned for the future, goals in my life, stuff like that gets you to think and school will be on your mind.

Participant F01s: When parents ask about school, care about your homework, your grades, come to your games; it shows that they care and want you to be successful.

Participant F04j: Just having communication with your parents will motivate you to do better in school. Just talking about your future and how to better yourself; even taking a child to visit colleges are things that can make you want to do well in school, parents should take their children on college tours.

Participant M06s: Being able to talk to my mom and grandma helps me focus on what is important.

Overall, participants tied positive home support and parental involvement to their parents' genuine care about their learning, communication about the importance of education, and continued encouragement to persevere academically, even when their parents have separated or divorced. Most of the participants' responses emphasized the importance of communication between parents and children as a motivation for success. Participants in this study reported their self-esteem needs were enhanced through positive

family support, and this boosts their perseverance and their motivation to succeed. For example, participant M09s reported that his foster-mother told him that even though her religious beliefs go contrary to his sexual orientation, she still loves him, and she encourages him to talk openly to her about his worries regarding his sexuality.

Positive Sibling/Peer Influence

Participants espoused the importance of positive sibling and peer influence, and the impact of non-family members who influenced their desire to persevere academically. For example, one participant stated that she kept friends who share the same interest in going to college. This participant stated further that seeing her older sister strong and going to college, living on campus away from home and independent, motivates her to succeed.

Participant F03s: My sister, she left home at age 17 years; she went to UCLA, she is a sophomore there and she is my role model.

Participant F03s: My friend and her mom for giving me shelter, companionship and encouraging me to stay strong and focused on my studies.

Participant F05j: My family like I said, my sisters are both in college and they are role models to me, they encourage me a lot to keep pushing myself, to never give up.

Positive Adult Role Models

Participants also described the importance of honoring important historical persons in their lives through their academic success, particularly people like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Harriet Tubman, who in the words of the participants made it possible for them to be where they are today. When talking about an important person in

her life, another participant stated that her grandmother encouraged her to be successful in life and to do something meaningful; she finds going to school meaningful and would like to honor her grandmother through her success. Participants also spoke about the important influence of teachers. Some participants identified with important contemporary people whose work they find inspiring. Some participants identified with important contemporary people whose work they find inspiring. For example:

Participant M06s: I admire Maya Angelou, I love her writings, she faced many difficulties growing up but she was very successful. I know I will arise.

Participant M10j: African American civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and other valued education, they fought for integration. I feel like in their honor, I have to be successful to justify the pains and suffering they endured to pave the way for me.

Participant M07s: Like people like Harriet Tubman, who worked hard for us to get this far, I feel if you don't take advantage of that, you're disrespectful to them and your parents.

Participant M06s: Ms. H. was the first teacher that actually opened her arms to me and started talking to me about school, my classes and how to study.

Participant F04s: My AVID/AP World history teacher. She encourages and guides us with our college classes. She talks to us about the importance of education even after school; she is a wonderful role model to us.

Participant F03s: Having adult talking to you about the importance of education and careers is motivating and helps you realize you can make something out of yourself.

Participant M07s: I admire a pro-soccer player, Garret Bell. He grew up in a neighborhood that wasn't so flashy, there was a lot of violence, but he was able to overcome all obstacles and became a pro.

Participant F01s: My grandfather was big on education too and he motivated me, I like so make him proud.

Participant F03s: My friend and her mom for giving me shelter, companionship and encouraging me to stay strong and focused on my studies.

The findings from this study showed the importance of positive adult role models as sources of social support that may include parents, siblings, extended family members, teachers, friends and their families. This is shown in the strength of the participant's perception that there were people in their lives, who cared for them when they were in need. This result is consistent with findings by Ahmed et al. (2010) and Rueger et al. (2010), however, who found that strong social support produced a resiliency that allows individuals to perform well in stressful environments. Equally, social support impacts health related motivation meaning that those with a strong system of social support tend to engage in positive behaviors (Brummett et al., 2001; Walton & Cohen, 2007). For example, participants in this study talked about getting involved in extracurricular activities that kept them engaged after school. Some were engaged in sports activities and leadership activities, and poetry clubs. Some participants talked about going outside their community in search of resources for success and avoiding confrontation with gang members.

High Expectations of Self

Several participants in this study linked their commitment to learning and their success to their achievement-orientated mindset and a high sense of self-worth. For example, some participants stated as follows:

Participant F02s: I am very smart, I love reading, I'm focused and I'm motivated.

Participant M06s: My standards will always be higher than anyone else's. My expectations for myself will always be higher than anyone has for me.

Participant F01s: I already know to do the right thing.

Participant F03s: A lot depended on my self-motivation, and my focus.

Participant M06s: I think my ego is a lot different everybody else's, my personality, I always like to be calm and collected.

Participant M10j: When you know that you have signed up for AP classes, it means that you will be prepared coming to class, you need to have your work done.

Participant F01s: I like to see what I want to do, what will make me happy in the future, so I just motivate myself to be the best me I can be.

Participant: I hold myself accountable for my learning.

Participant M08s: I push myself more than people try to push me, I push myself more than my parents try to push me.

Participant F05s: I am determined to successful in life and in my career.

Overall, participants revealed a high sense of self and assuming personal responsibility for their learning as contributory to their success.

Importance of Perseverance

Participants in this study revealed the importance of persevering in their journey to become successful in their personal future and professional aspirations in their responses. Several participants linked their desire to succeed to a better future made possible through their perseverance. For example:

Participant 07s: Though it was tough sometimes, I'm not the type of person that brings my frustration to school. I know that it will get better; I was able to devote time to my studies.

Participant F03s: I have been working hard to go to a four-year college and I'm hoping to go to UCLA, it will be dream come true.

Participant M07s: I'm always optimistic about everything no matter the circumstances.

Participant M08s: I study hard and keep my grades up so I can get a scholarship to college and achieve my dream of becoming an attorney and help others.

In many of their responses, participants indicated a determination to persevere academically in order to achieve their professional goals, and demonstrated a desire to use their knowledge and skills to live a successful life and help others.

Seeing Barriers and Challenges as Opportunities

The findings gave understanding to the research question, "What personal and circumstantial factors support African American junior and senior high school students' efforts to succeed academically?" Unsafe environments and neighbourhoods pose significant challenges to many African American youth including their school attendance and overall academic success. Lack of safety and violence in the community along with

increased exposure to criminal activities may pose a barrier to academic success for many African American youth. Responses from participants in this study suggest that they were able to turn some of these significant environmental challenges into motivation to persevere academically. Participants also lamented the absence of community partners and engaging activities that provide positive distraction for youth.

Participant M08s stated: Our neighbourhood has people in gangs and they make real trouble for young people. Gang activities, violence and crime, people in the gang, most didn't finish high school, they always want young people like me to join, and if you don't want to join, they make troubles for you. Sometimes I go to the neighbouring city to use their library to avoid unnecessary problems from some locals. I get to get away from people who may get you in trouble. You know, you just have to figure a way to get yourself out of trouble while keeping your cool. Enrolling in classes for coding also helps me stay on college campus instead of feeling bored as a senior with less classes in high school.

Participant M10j stated: Young people do not have many activities in this community. Mostly the activities that we have here are mostly things that are put in Caucasian communities like UCLA areas. It puts us on a negative stand point. I feel like we have to work three times as hard as they do to equal or maybe half what they get and most of the time that's why Black people or even Hispanics don't have the motivation because we are not given the same kind of opportunities as those, we're not given the same standpoint as those people, and it makes it harder for us that's why we're beat down as a people.

Participant F02s: My dad encourages us to see our challenges as a way to do better.

Participant M06s stated: Opportunities here for young people –I think that people that live in inner-city like mine, they create their own opportunities from what lifestyle they choose I guess. I think my community; we don't have big role models. There are a lot of things in this community that can hold us back. Some of us have part of family members who are gang members, well they can do something as dumb as selling drugs to help themselves go by, so it comes to perspective, which is the way family gang members or peers talk to a young person.

Participant M09s responded, "To work hard on things important to me so I would achieve them. You see, I was placed in foster care when I was ten months old. I met my biological mom once and I don't recall very well when. My other siblings were placed in different homes. It is hard for me not knowing who my siblings are. I consider other kids (foster) in the house my siblings. I would like to meet with my family and find out why I was placed in foster that early. It could be overwhelming sometimes. That is the reason I study hard to keep my grades up.

Participant F03s stated, Yea, since 10th grade, I have been through a lot. I was kicked out of home by my own mother and ever since I haven't been the same. I was lucky to be living with my friend's family since my dad was not in my life. Sometimes it could be confusing. I got a job and work after school to support myself.

M05j stated: On various occasions I have seen dead bodies on my street. Most times when you hear the sound of siren always involve police activity due to violence from gang related shootings. But rather than allow these things to prevent me from going to school, I made sure to plan my day in a way that when I go to school, I am involved in after school activity like cheer that keep me in school until my mom comes to get me in the evening. This way, I don't have to be around people who may get me in trouble.

The findings suggest that despite the risks posed by unsafe neighborhoods, participants found ways to defy the effects of the challenges posed by for example gang activities by seeking resources outside of their neighborhoods to increase their chances of success. Consistent with DoED, (2014), Hayenga et a. (2010) and Lair, (2011), participants showed greater intrinsic motivational attributes and therefore tend to persevere more toward academic success. Participants exhibited high internal locus of control (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Whiting suggested that individuals who have an internal locus make efforts to self-regulate, while being realistic and aware of external pressures and social inequalities presented by their neighborhood and school environments (Whiting, 2009b, p. 55; p. 229).

Validity and Peer Review

Validity in qualitative research refers to the degree the findings accurately reflect the situation and are supported by evidence. Triangulation is used in qualitative research to check and establish validity by exploring a research question from multiple perspectives. Some benefits of triangulation include, “increasing confidence in research

data, revealing unique findings, and providing a clearer understanding of the problem (Thurmond, 2001, p. 254).” In this study,

Transferability, or external validity, is the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (Pringle et al., 2010). This can be difficult to establish in qualitative research, and so this study recruited participants from two different high schools in the same school district. Verification is a distinct strength in qualitative studies. The accounts gathered through extensive time spent on data collection, and talking directly to participants, add value to the study. This study used early data analysis, an audit trail, transcripts, and audio recordings. Two independent reviewers, a licensed clinical psychologist and a post-doctoral psychologist, provided their services for this study. The peer reviewers were provided information about the study, including characteristics, the problem faced, transcripts, and the purpose of the study. These reviewers’ collective insights revealed that each participant addressed significant challenges that minority students face while still persevering academically. As they examined the various transcripts, the reviewers agreed that while many of the participants came from underprivileged homes, they appeared to maintain a positive outlook about their future. This outlook suggests that the participants do not want to live the lives that they are currently in forever. Many participants understood that the only way to change their lives is to obtain an education beyond high school and that many of the participants stated that the reason they enjoyed school was that it was a means to escape the mundane daily routine at home. The students also examined what they learn from those whom they meet in daily life or who provided them with education. The participants value education because it helps them to prepare for their future. The data

highlighted the impact of negative environmental and community influences, such as financial hardship, gangs, and being unable to choose the right friends. Furthermore, the data revealed that many of the participants talked about the important people in their lives, such as teachers and loved ones they admired, especially the ones who really cared about them

They welcome the opportunity to overcome poverty and a risky neighborhood environment, or avoid mundane or difficult routines at home and other challenging home environments. They also enjoy socialization and preparing for college. The participants believe that their success in school is important, as many of them will be the first in their families to go to college. Education is necessary so that they can create a better life for themselves. Many participants stated the importance of paving their way and creating a platform that will enable them to go for what they want. Many aspire to go further than their parents have gone.

The data highlighted that many of the participants talked about their inner drive to push themselves harder than their family or friends. It appears that the lack of opportunities in the inner city also helped participants to be creative in finding ways to overcome their challenges, such as seeking resources elsewhere in neighboring cities and colleges (e.g. going to safer libraries in neighboring cities, attending academic enrichment programs outside their cities). The data further revealed that many of the participants experienced what can be considered traumatic experiences, such as family separation and placement in foster homes, being forced to leave home and fend for self, death, failure, or witnessing gang violence, at various times in their young lives. Despite these challenges, the participants were resilient enough to persevere and work hard for

success after each failure. Participants continued to persevere to succeed even when many of the participants felt that they could not go on.

Summary

Analysis of the data taken from the above themes demonstrates that the participants appeared to maintain control of the personal and circumstantial difficulties in their personal lives. The data reveal how participants were able to negotiate the challenges posed by several environmental variables that could affect resilience, such as family support, the stability and quality of schools, and opportunities in and the safety of their neighborhoods. The participants appeared to develop strategies to increase their resilience and emotional regulation by adopting a positive but realistic outlook, engaging in physical activities, maintaining close and supportive networks, and imitating resilient role models.

Participants saw challenges in their lives as opportunities for success, and appear able to moderate their emotional reactions to difficulties and their willingness to persevere academically. The participants brought different perspectives to parental involvement that even something as basic as parents having communication with their children shows caring, and love. Participants described how parents talking with children about school, their classes, and career goals, and even going on college visits with their children, can motivate a student, give them something to think about, and show them the value of education. Chapter 5 included an interpretation of these findings, discussed the limitations of the study, offers recommendations for future research, and explores the implications of this study for social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the motivation of African American Students to persevere academically despite significant personal and circumstantial difficulties. I examined the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of participants as they persevered to succeed academically, in addition to the personal and circumstantial factors that supported their persevering efforts. I interviewed 10 high-achieving African American high school students (five female and five male, three juniors and seven seniors) enrolled in two different inner-city schools and living in risky neighborhoods. The key findings of the thematic data analysis included satisfying the urge to be successful in life, overcoming poverty, and rising to a higher socioeconomic status. Participants underscored the utility of school and the importance of education, the role of parents in communicating the value of education, the role of positive sibling and peer influence, the importance of being organized, engagement in extracurricular activities, and a high sense of self as factors that support the motivation to persevere. In this chapter, I interpret the findings, discuss the limitations and implications of the study, and offer recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

This study addressed the motivations for academic success of persevering minority high school juniors and seniors. As discussed in Chapter 2, factors such as school culture and quality of the neighborhood, parental involvement and family structure, socioeconomic status, and other psychological factors pose barriers to academic success and to closing the achievement gap among African American students. Studies have focused on the disproportionately low academic performance of African American

students, and most success stories have addressed college and graduate-level students; little is known about successful, persevering African American students at the high school level (Carter, 2008). This study focused on 10 successful high school junior and senior students and their emotions, thoughts, and experiences as they persevere in their learning process. Specifically, this qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What motivates African American junior and senior high school students to be successful in school?
2. What personal and circumstantial factors support African American junior and senior high school students' efforts to succeed academically?

The findings illustrated the centrality of the value of education to participants' self-definition, and how the importance of education informed their attitudes and beliefs about the rationale for their academic perseverance.

Utility of School and Importance of Education

The results indicated that participants perceived a connection between education and overcoming poverty and attaining a higher socioeconomic status. As a result, participants appeared to make personal effort to take responsibility for staying engaged, remaining focused, and finding several sources of motivation to succeed in school. Hurd et al. (2012), Carter (2008), and Harper et al. (2012) found that successful African American students view education as a vehicle for upward social and economic mobility. Although low socioeconomic status has been identified as a contributor to poor academic outcomes for a large number of African American youth, participants in this study demonstrated high expectations of self and believed in their ability to succeed in school

and in life despite the difficult circumstances they faced (Archambault et al., 2009; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; DoED, 2014; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Wei et al., 2010). Consistent with McCoy, Wolf, and Godfrey's (2014) findings, this study showed that parental or caregiver values of education shaped participants' relative levels of intrinsic motivation. This theme gave insight into the connection between participants' home environments and their motivational qualities. Understanding the connection may help in engaging parents and framing students' learning goals.

The findings in this study revealed the importance of having positive attitudes and beliefs about the utility and importance of education. It would be beneficial for future researchers to consider middle school students and high school freshmen and sophomores to gauge the impact of positive attitudes and beliefs about the utility and importance of education as a motivation for perseverance and academic success.

Importance of Family Involvement and Support

Findings indicated the importance of family involvement and support in the lives of low-income single-parent families. Hill and Tyson (2009) identified parent education and socioeconomic status as predictors for better academic outcomes and well-being in children. Previous studies indicated that children raised in low-income families, or those living with a divorced or single parent with limited financial and educational resources, traditionally underperform academically. Archambault et al., (2009), Ford (2011), Kirp (2011), Li and Hassan (2010), and Williams and Sánchez (2011) reported that poverty, inadequate academic language in early life, and living in risky neighborhoods with exposure to crime and violence were connected with academic underperformance in African American students. The present study indicated that despite low parent

education, poverty, and other barriers, participants reported being loved and parents talking to them about the importance of education, encouraging them to persevere, and helping them see challenges as opportunities.

Likewise, personal factors such as the structure of the participant's family, sexual orientation, illness or disability either in the participants or in parents, or involvement in gang activities and drugs by family members are factors that could have impacted the participants' academic outcomes (Arnett, 2000; Bauldry et al., 2012; Needham & Austin, 2010). I found that children who grow up in poverty confronted by social and psychological challenges may persevere to succeed in school. I found that parents' or caregivers' communication of the importance and value of education served as motivation for students' perseverance and success (Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Harper et al., 2012; Willenz, 2009). Many of the parents of the participants in this study never had the opportunity to go to college, most of the other family members never finished high school, and some had gang affiliations. Many of the parents worked two jobs, yet these parents made time to communicate the utility of school and value of education to their children.

The findings of this study indicated the importance of parental validation of the academic and social interests of their children. Participants reported that their parents' encouragement to see their personal and circumstantial difficulties as opportunities for growth and achievement gave them a sense of internal security and helped ameliorate the challenges posed by inevitable setbacks and difficulties.

The findings in this study revealed another dimension of parental involvement in the lives of their children and the participants' motivation for academic success. A lack

of economic resources and a related anxiety about everyday matters might prevent low-income parents from supporting their academically persevering children. It is evident from the findings of this study that even parents with limited resources can, through their messages of realistic optimism to the children and their actions in the home, play a crucial role in their children's perseverance to succeed. The findings reveal that participants reported feeling supported and loved because their families talked with them about their learning and emphasized the utility of education. It is noteworthy also that positive adult role models provide strong social support that may prevent risky behaviors. Consistent with Ahmed et al.'s (2010) and Rueger et al.'s (2010) findings, having a positive adult role model whether a child is in foster care or living with distant relatives or friends can be a motivational factor for success.

The participants' parents and other adults in their lives encouraged the children to strive for the best, reinforced their ability to view challenges as opportunities, and provided them with a positive view of the future. Although no causal conclusions can be drawn, the findings suggest that parents and family members may have acted as filters for participants, helping them to interpret events and circumstances from the outside world more positively, and in the process creating strong messages about how the real world works and what to expect from it. The findings further revealed that participants in this study espouse a particular set of beliefs: they believe that their social support system loves and cares about them, that education is important, and that they have the innate qualities necessary to be successful. Further, they seem to carry a positive feeling about the process of learning itself. Contrary to certain views found in the literature (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Wei et al., 2010), it

is evident from this study that some African American children and their parents do care about and place great value on education.

Importance of Perseverance

The current study indicated that perseverance in the face of despair may be an important driving force for academic perseverance in the learning process (Harper & Davis III, 2012). Despite significant personal and circumstantial difficulties including life-altering changes beyond participants' control, participants in this study espoused optimism in their process of learning and the outcomes of their learning experiences. Participants found it within themselves to persevere and press forward to meet their goals for success. The findings showed that participants value school and after-school activities because they act as a means to avoid the mundane, sometimes difficult, routines at home. School also helps them socialize through extracurricular and club activities, and learn new things that will prepare them for college and a successful future.

Importance of Involvement in Extracurricular and Creative Activities

The current study indicated that involvement in extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, and creative activities like art is a positive distraction that helps students persevere in their learning process. I found a link between participants' academic outcomes and the level of effort that they were willing to commit to their learning. They did not sit idle or indulge feelings of boredom; instead, they strove to find ways to make their time productive through art, sports, and leadership activities.

Importance of Organization/Planning

I found that organization, time management, goal setting, planning, scheduling, seeking help, and self-management are strategies that support and enhance the learning

experiences of individuals in their efforts to succeed. Specifically, participants' use of these strategies appeared to be a major driving force behind their motivation to persevere in their learning. The findings underscored the fact that organizing and prioritizing may function as key tactics to boost focus and avoid negative distractions that could hinder positive academic outcomes. The findings from this study showed participants' willingness to use cognitive strategies to delay gratification and sustain effort despite distractions and long-term waiting. This is a characteristic of highly self-regulated learners, which has been linked to higher self-efficacy and to more successful academic motivation and performance (Bandura, 1997; Zimmerman, 1989). This result is consistent with findings by Bembenuddy (2010) who suggested that self-regulatory strategies that enhance sustained effort to study, like time management, goal setting, and planning, should be promoted and assessed.

Importance of High Expectations of Self

Harper and Davis III (2012), Schmader (2010), and Willenz (2009) linked self-perception to various factors including resilience in the face of difficult social, environmental, and academic tasks; perseverance toward goals; and the ability to make necessary adjustments, recover from problems, and attain success. It is therefore critical to understand children's perceptions of themselves. Their perception of self is shaped by their family system and the support with which they are raised. An individual's psychosocial wellness and overall functioning depends on the interactions between nature and nurture provided by the family system.

The findings from this study revealed that participants linked their commitment and success, in addition to other qualities, to their high sense of self-worth, their

achievement-oriented mindset, and their personal responsibility for their learning. This finding corroborates those from Eccles and Wigfield (2002) and Shea and Bidjerano (2010) who suggested that self-regulated learners believe they can perform effectively, are more self-aware, set numerous and varied goals for themselves, are able to evaluate how well their performance compares to a standard or to the performance of others, and react proactively to performance outcomes. Although some of these characteristics cannot be taught, they can be inculcated through collaborative engagement and participation and using those already persevering as peer mentors in the neighborhood and in school. I found evidence of a high sense of self-efficacy among the participants and their beliefs about their self-worth, their competence and autonomy, their abilities to master and achieve, and their resilience in the face of difficult tasks (Bandura, 1977; Bembenutty, 2010; Efklides, 2011; Lefton & Brannon, 2006; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010).

Discussion

Participants in this study provided insight into how to motivate and promote perseverance and academic achievement among urban African American students. Participant responses may serve as suggestions for counselors in evaluating their counseling process and efforts to promote perseverance. Findings from this study may also inform school personnel, community leaders, mental health professionals, and families in their efforts to develop methods and approaches aimed at supporting African American students from low-income backgrounds.

Participants in this study viewed education as a way to attain higher socioeconomic status and overcome poverty. All participants appeared to have a strong sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy and employed many strategies and tactics to

enhance their focus and experiences in their learning process, findings that align with those of Williams and Portman (2014). Participants believed in their ability to excel, finding support in their family and their involvement in their studies, and their perception of the value of education as a means to overcome poverty.

Participants' responses indicated the importance of a strong work ethic and tenacity of purpose. The importance of strategic and tactical time management and engagement in the learning process through organizing, planning, and scheduling were factors identified to enhance students' learning experiences and achieve positive academic outcomes. The findings revealed the importance of involvement in extracurricular activities, membership in clubs and leadership groups, and engagement in creative activities. Southwick and Charney (2013) showed that involvement in physical activities guards against the undesirable effect of stress.

Despite that fact that the sample population for this study did not involve "traditional" two parent families, participants noted that "parental involvement" could be as simple as parents having a conversation with their children about their learning experiences, and did not necessarily have to take the form of attending back-to-school night events or membership in parent teacher associations and other school fundraising. Engaging children in conversation about school and their challenges, including their goals beyond high school, can provide youth with a stronger emotional and psychological connection with home and school, as well as an improved learning experience (William & Portman, 2014).

Limitations of the Study

Certain key limitations to this study should be noted. The study sample was small, comprising only 10 participants, but it adds to a growing body of evidence that minority children living in one parent homes, in foster care, or living single or divorced parent families of low socioeconomic status possess the capacity to excel academically. The study was also limited to high school juniors and seniors from two inner city schools. Future research could use a larger number of participants, including middle school students, or span multiple school districts. A larger sample population would produce more information and might yield greater generalizability.

Another limitation was that as all data were collected through self-reporting, it was therefore difficult to assess any potential exaggerations in the responses. The possibility cannot be ruled out as a possible confound; however, previous research suggests that students have a tendency to be accurate when self-reporting (Thomas et al., 2009).

Recommendations

Future research should the relationship between physical and mental health on the academic outcomes and wellbeing of African American students. For example, aerobic exercises have been identified as beneficial for reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as improving attention, planning, decision-making, and memory; exercise boosts the body's levels of endorphins, dopamine, and serotonin, which may elevate mood and suppress the release of the stress hormone, cortisol (Southwick et al., 2013). Future research may look into measuring levels of stress and anxiety among African American students who are identified as persevering academically.

Implications for Social Change

This study's findings present the potential for social change. From an environmental perspective, the positive social change inspired by this study can take place at various levels (e.g. individual, school, family, and community) and include different types of direct and indirect interaction with minority students that impact their academic performance and, with appropriate interventions, can improve life outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1997).

The findings are in part, a testimony to the strength, perseverance, and optimism of young African-American students in the face of significant personal and circumstantial adversity. These findings demonstrated how using cognitive strategies enhanced individual participants' learning and skills like time planning, management, goal setting that improve individual's self-efficacy and self-regulation and can be modeled through clubs or employing successful students as peer mentors. From an ecological perspective, such interventions could take place at the school and community levels. For example, students may be encouraged to lead learning skills and homework support groups through local libraries, at school after school, or other community groups like churches to provide venues and adult support. Additionally, arrangements could be made so that some law enforcement presence could increase at such times in those areas that these activities take place to encourage safety and improve attendance and participation. The implication of this type of intervention is that, in the end, as suggested by the present study, the children may begin to understand the value and importance of education.

The present study findings are in part, a testimony to the strength, perseverance, and optimism of young African-American students in the face of significant personal and

circumstantial adversity. These findings demonstrate how self-efficacy and self-regulation can impact the perceived value of education, and in turn potentially contribute to economic growth and community stability. It is evident that some of the most significant influences on minority students' academic outcomes are positive parents, teachers, and community engagement in education. It is therefore important to develop a community network of individuals and organizations willing to act as positive role models.

Another way that the results of this study can be used to promote positive social change is on the school and community levels. Strategies can be developed that strengthen social support for minority children. The findings showed that participants hold historically important people and positive adult role models in high esteem. Schools and community groups working in concert could incorporate the involvement of successful minority individuals as mentors recruited from community, businesses, and local government organizations as well as chambers of commerce and college students. This type of intervention could simultaneously strengthen ethnic identity making it possible for them to develop stronger levels of racial pride, be more resilient to discrimination, and achieve at higher levels (Wei et al., 2010).

In addition, since participants were reporting their lived experiences, local members would appear to understand the participant's problems better than bureaucrats and professional services; while professionals and bureaucrats deliver services, community involvement would benefit students more (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993, p.51). Oftentimes, community groups focus on the capacity of individuals to get things done. An essential problem as revealed in the data is therefore that of a weakened community.

Participants lamented the dearth of programs for youth and community engagement at various levels in their lives. The availability of positive role models and mentors would support improved student academic engagement and perseverance. A supportive community would also benefit from more youth succeeding academically, as people with higher education and better paying jobs engage in less criminal activity (Ford, 2011). Taxpayers would also save through reduced expenses for security and corrections. These gains benefit everyone in the community, not only the individuals.

At the home level, parent(s) or guardians are physically present in the students' lives and make time to talk about school. Parents have structure and expectations, and hold discussions from time to time about the impact of their children's ongoing learning experiences on their future academic and career choices. Parents show they care through inquiring about their children's school experiences, reviewing assignments and test scores, and providing positive feedback. Parents act as filters to enable their children to understand the intricate challenges and life-changing events in their families and communities, and to instill hope.

Conclusion

The fundamental purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the motivation of African American youth to persevere academically and aspire to attend college despite significant personal and circumstantial difficulties. The findings of this study provided insight into participants' perspectives on the factors that motivate them to succeed academically. While plenty of research exists that examines the reasons for and the role of parental involvement, poverty, environment, and school culture on the academic

underperformance of African American youth, this study contributes to the existing body of research by studying high performing students.

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Appendix A: Confidentiality Agreement

Name of Signer:

During the course of my activity in peer reviewing data for this research: “What Motivates African American Students to Persevere Academically?” I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
 2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
 3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant’s name is not used.
 4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
 5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
 6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
 7. I will only access or use systems or devices I’m officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.
- Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Signature:

Date:

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Sample Interview Questions

1. Tell me your first name and anything else that you want to share with me about yourself.
2. What is your grade level?
3. What do you enjoy most about school?
4. Why is being successful in school important to you?
5. Do you feel that there are any personal qualities that have helped make you a more successful student (examples might include being organized, disciplined, hardworking, not afraid to ask questions or ask for help, etc.)?
6. Did you ever have a bad day when you felt like school just wasn't worth it? Tell me about that. What kept you coming back to school?
7. Have there been difficult experiences in your life that you weren't sure you were going to be able to make it through? If so, what do you feel enabled you to keep moving forward, despite those obstacles? Have those things have also been valuable to you in terms of your being able to achieve success in school?
8. Are there things in your life—at home, with friends, in your community—that you feel have made it more challenging to do well in school? What things do you feel have helped you to get through these challenges and still be successful in your studies?
9. When you think about the things that have been challenging for you about school, are there certain people in your life who you feel have helped you to face those challenges and get through them?