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# Motivation Towards Success: A Qualitative Comparative Case Study Illustrating The Differences In Motivating Factors In Achievement Between Low Ses High Achieving And Low Achieving African American High School Females

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MOTIVATION TOWARDS SUCCESS: A QUALITATIVE COMPARITIVE CASE  
STUDY ILLUSTRATING THE DIFFERENCES IN MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS IN  
ACHIEVEMENT BETWEEN LOW SES HIGH ACHIEVING AND LOW ACHIEVING  
AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL FEMALES

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## DEDICATION

I write this in honor of my mother who is gone on to heaven and to my earthly mother for always encouraging me no matter how many times I tried to give up. She motivated me and reminded me that through Christ all things are possible!

## ABSTRACT

For years educators have made attempts to explain the effects of poverty on student achievement. Many have set out to explore methods for better helping students with limited resources succeed academically, thus bridging the achievement gap between these students and their financially stable counterparts. The ultimate combination of poverty and race/ethnicity define major sources of disadvantage in educational outcomes (Maruyama, 2003). Viewing this from a racial standpoint places African American students at the receiving end of low achievement as a result of low socioeconomic status.

The missing thread that could potentially pull this together exists among the population of impoverished African American students who overcome the odds and succeed academically. Wiggan (2007) emphasized the importance of the perceptions of motivational factors among high achieving African American students regarding their learning environment, both home and school in attempts to offer insight for those that struggle. The focus of this comparative case study was to identify motivational factors in achievement among high and low achieving African American female high school students within a South Carolina public school setting.

This qualitative study consisted of interviews of both high and low achieving African American tenth grade females on their perceptions of the various factors that motivate them. The data gathered from the interviews was transcribed and analyzed in order to discern various themes, patterns and trends surrounding the context of motivation. The information gained from the life experiences of the participants was used to provide educators with an awareness and helpful insight into what factors

contribute to motivating this population of students, thus giving them access to the tools necessary for the development of productive approaches in moving low SES students that struggle towards success. Study limitations and implications for further research and study expansion were also addressed.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Anaya sits in the front of the classroom next to her best friend Chelsea as they both eagerly await the return of their graded tests from the previous week. Chelsea knows that she is going to get a good grade as she always does well in all of her classes. Anaya hopes that she too has done well on the test but realizes this may only be an empty desire as she rarely passes anything. Chelsea squeals in excitement as she receives her graded paper marked in purple displaying a bright “100” across the top. Anaya puts her head down and glances out of a nearby window as she rubs her fingers across the all too familiar sixth letter of the alphabet that covers her page in red. Their teacher looks at them candidly and wonders how two girls who have similar backgrounds, family structures and have been lifelong friends and neighbors can be so different academically. As Anaya crumbles up her paper, she longs to possess the zeal that Chelsea has for school. She thinks quietly to herself that one day Chelsea will make it out of their neighborhood. A tear forms in her eyes as she wishes to make it out with her.....*

Student motivation plays a major role in various dynamics of academics. Areas such as test scores, grades, school completion, goal setting and work ethic are impacted by a student’s motivation to be successful in these areas (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). The lack of resources and limited educational access have been identified as possible reasons behind students who come from low income families failing to achieve as high as other students with a surplus of resources (Boyd-Zaharias and Pate-Bain, 2008) A gap in the research exists, however, on the topic of those that actually excel and do well in school despite socioeconomic status (Wiggin, 2007). What motivational factors are present within the lives of impoverished children that encourage them to do better than their low achieving counterparts? What are the differences in motivation between children living in an environment that may be thought of as substandard excel in the classroom while their neighbor can barely pass to the next grade?

A review of the literature by Maruyama (2003) suggested that various motivational factors that contribute to an impoverished child's success include individual motivation, family involvement, school and community support systems. Some students are born with a natural drive or passion towards success (Niehaus, Rudasill, & Adelson, 2012). They do well in school and strive to go above and beyond what is required. They set high goals and work to achieve them. They see obstacles as challenges and work hard to overcome them. Something innately fuels them to think and perform at a higher level. They are often viewed as possessing a natural passion towards success (Freiberger, Steinmayr, & Spinath, 2012)

A child's first contact and introduction into the world is from the context of their family. Regardless of the dynamics or the family structure of the household, children generate their view of their environment based on family norms. In their research Pollock and Lamborn, (2006) highlighted the importance of the family when comparing middle- and upper-income children. They found that low-income African American children may have fewer resources outside the home at their disposal, and consequently, the influence of parents may be especially important in motivation towards achievement. Messages about peers, teachings of morals, values relationships and education are all communicated through the institute of the family. "Parents provide students with a social environment that influences the way in which students view education" (Herndon & Hirt, 2004, p. 491). Thus, the role of the family in motivating African American Low SES high achieving and low achieving females should be examined as it may play a critical part in determining the differences between these two groups as it relates to the family.

Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Theory of Minority School Performance viewed minority achievement from a broad and comprehensive perspective. Ogbu's theory took into account the social, historical, cultural, economic, and dialect situations of minorities within society (Ogbu, 2003). The theory suggested that there are two mitigating factors that determine a minority student's academic performance and school adjustment. Ogbu referred to the first factor as *the system* (Ogbu, 2003). The system involved the past and present treatment of the minority within society. How minorities interpret and respond to this treatment comprises the second factor, which Ogbu referred to as *community forces* (Ogbu, 2003). The study of community forces was made up of four critical factors; (a) beliefs about the instrumental value of schooling, (b) a frame of minority school comparison, (c) relational interpretations of schooling, and (d) symbolic beliefs about schooling (Ogbu, 1998). Student's perceptions of how they are viewed by school officials, teaching strategies and interpersonal relationships within the public school system play a role in how students view the climate of the school and how it enhances or motivates them towards success.

Community programs that focus on giving students an outlet to explore their talents, interests and hobbies provide them with an opportunity for creative growth and development. Fredricks and Simpkins' (2012) research suggested that in both childhood and adolescence, organized activity participation has been correlated with positive academic, psychological, and social adjustment for both low-income and middle class African American youth. For example, Regnerous (2000) examined religious socialization as it relates to schooling success. Religious affiliations such as attending church and being involved in faith based ministries are also community based

organizations that encourage youth to follow a positive way of life and may play a role in academic achievement. Effective community programs often support and foster the development of good morals and values and provide a source of encouragement towards academic achievement. Soria's (2012) research on the impact of collaboration in after-school programs on student achievement and school attendance revealed how in light of the issue with schools that continue to struggle with addressing the achievement gap for low-income students, after-school programs and community based organizations for students are viewed as a promising strategy to close this achievement gap between poor and affluent students.

The present study seeks to explore these motivational factors as they relate specifically to low SES high achieving and low achieving African American high school female students. A detailed review of research studies in chapter two provides an in depth look on the literature in this area.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A large percentage of school-age African American children are economically disadvantaged. One third (33%) come from families with incomes below the poverty level—a much higher proportion than for white students and a slightly higher proportion than for Latino students—and another 27% are near-poor (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). A great concern is how low SES plays a major role in the under achievement of African American students and how can this be addressed appropriately (Tucker & Herman, 2002).

Closing the achievement gap has been a topic of concern for years, with an emphasis on highlighting the disparity between the academic performances of African

American students in comparison to their white peers (Education Trust, 2005). Little research was found, however, that was conducted on within group differences. Seemingly little attention has been paid to the motivational factors of this population as it relates to high and low achievement within this group. Sources of motivation among low achieving and high achieving African American students could bring a new perspective to the experiences of these students within the public school system.

### **Nature of the Study**

The current study is based upon qualitative research methodology, which offers an approach in which participants' voices can be heard and documented (Glesne, 2006). The goal of this study, therefore, is to examine, the differences in motivational factors in the lives of low SES high and low achieving female African American high school students. For this study narrative analysis of in-depth interviews of the stories of six students were reported and compared to note their narratives for similarities and differences in what they consider to be sources of motivation in the area of academics. In this study I set out to answer the following research based questions:

### **Research Questions**

1. What are some of the intrinsic sources of motivation to do well in school that exist among low achieving and high achieving low SES African American female high school students? How do they differ? A review of past research by Skinner (1998) and Bandura (2001) on self-efficacy and achievement suggested that behaviors, motivation, and aspirations are influenced by whether an individual believes in his or her ability to attain a specific outcome. Along those same lines, their research garnered that adolescents high in self-efficacy are more likely than their peers low in self-efficacy to

set high and concrete goals, form logical plans, and challenge their abilities. It is within this framework that the following question for this study was derived:

2. Has school climate encouraged or discouraged the students desire to achieve academically? Fenzel & O'Brennan (2007) conducted research on the effects of school climate on motivation and academic achievement among at risk urban African American students. The researchers offered insight into the role of the school system and the role it can play in motivating students. Specifically, their work explored student engagement as it related to satisfaction with teachers, school structure and fairness. Howard (2001) provided qualitative data from his study of low SES African-American students that revealed three key findings regarding school climate and academic success; students preferred teachers who (a) displayed caring bonds and attitudes toward them, (b) established community- and family-type classroom environments, and (c) made learning an entertaining and fun process.

3. How does family support play a role in the student's academic success?

Ford's (1993) found that the messages that African American parents conveyed to their children regarding the importance of education for future success, as well as their children's perceptions of these messages, influenced adolescents' achievement orientation. According to research conducted by Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001) when parents indicate that they want to be involved in the education of their children they sometimes do not know where or how to become involved. In recent research, it is suggested have suggested that educators must develop ways to include parents in their children's education, especially parents from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Hill & Craft, 2003).

4. What is the student's view on how the communities in which they live in contribute or hinder their progress in school? Positive community involvement such as church participation and attending youth centers or other community based programs has been linked with academic success among low SES youth. Irvin, Farmer, Leung, Thompson and Hutchins (2010) highlighted the strong connection between low SES students who achieved academically and their increased involvement in community activities. Specifically those adolescents that were heavily involved in church within their community were noted as being very productive within the classroom.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In the *Journal of Racial-Ethnic Differences in Achievement* (2000) it is suggested that research on African American students has examined their school failure in terms of student's opposition to school achievement. The article proposed that as a group, African American students are at an educational disadvantage compared with white students for several reasons: (a) the average level of black students' parental education has generally been higher proportions of black students have come from families with low incomes; and larger proportions of black students have come from single-parent household. Only a few studies have explored school engagement and success among these students, and even fewer have examined the experiences of high achieving black students (Wiggins 2007). Gutman and McCloyd (2005) expanded on this in saying that previous research documents a challenging academic path for poor African American children. African-American children living in poverty are at a substantially higher risk of experiencing an array of academic difficulties including low performance on cognitive tests, low school performance,

and higher rates of school dropout. Demographic circumstances, however, are not an absolute predictor of individual success or failure. There are Low SES African-American children who experience academic success despite these tremendous odds.

The purpose of this study is to examine the motivational factors that exist between high and low achieving low SES African American high school females. This study attempts to uncover student perceptions on motivation and the role it plays in their academic success. The goal of this study is to provide a working framework for educators interested in providing effective support to Low SES African American Students. By giving a voice to those that achieve despite their economic situation, I hope to gather valuable information may be obtained that can be used to develop programs and other methods of improving academics within this population.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study uses the qualitative approach of narrative analysis in order to capture the stories of the students as they share their experiences. The procedures for implementing this type of research consist of focusing on individuals or a small group, gathering data through the collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences (Creswell, 2006). In conjunction with narrative analysis, this study uses the essence of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. This theory embraces the notion that institutional, structural and personal factors or conditions play a major role in shaping people's behaviors and interactions. Social cognitive theory is well suited for this study because it draws from internal and external factors that mold an individual's worldview, thus allowing the



researcher to better understand the life stories of the participants as it relates to their academic success.

### **Operational Definitions**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms will be defined as below:

**High achieving students.** Students with a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 or higher.

**Low SES.** Students who qualify for South Carolina's public school free or reduced lunch program.

**Low achieving students.** Students with a cumulative grade point average 2.0 or below.

**Motivational factors.** Those factors that initiate, direct, and sustain student's behavior in order to attain a goal.

### **Study Limitations**

The limitations to this research study are as follows:

1. One limitation is that all interviews will be conducted by the principle investigator.

The possibility that this procedure could introduce a form of bias has been previously suggested but not tested (Hill et al., 1997).

2. The study may also be limited to the extent that the researcher's perceptions may uniquely influence aspects of the investigation, such as the formulation of the research questions, which in turn may have influenced the type of data that was acquired.

3. Although the sample size of this study is consistent with other qualitative investigations, generalizability of the findings is limited. The sample was comprised of female African American students in grade ten within one particular school. Hence, the generalizability of the results to other schools, grade levels and genders should be

considered. One of the determining factors used in indicating students' low SES was generated based on their eligibility for South Carolina school's free lunch program. This qualifying measure may have a different meaning from state to state.

### **Significance of the Study**

Several factors were considered in developing this research. These factors included knowledge generation, professional application, and social change.

**Knowledge generation.** The disparity in academic achievement between African Americans and their white counterparts is commonly referred to as the achievement gap. This disparity is often associated with high school graduation rates, grade point averages, drop-out rates, standardized test scores, and college completion (Sheets, 2006). In 2008, the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that although the reading scores for Blacks and Hispanics have improved since 1992, there still remained a reading score gap of 27 points between black students and white students (Planty, Hussar, Snyder, Provasnik, Kena, Dinkes, Kewel Ramani, & Kemp, 2008). Whereas the expansion of knowledge that this study hopes to provide comes in is that a very limited amount of research has been done on within group differences among minorities. An aim of this study was to provide an extension of knowledge regarding motivation and academic performance among low SES African American students in an attempt to better nurture and foster academic success within this population. The goal of this study is to provide information to school faculty and staff on the importance of their role in the lives of students within this population and how their interactions with students may hinder or enhance the learning process. Community program leaders will also gain an awareness of the effectiveness of their programs as it pertains to academic success among this

population. This study also seeks to provide a clearer understanding of how family values and the messages conveyed to students about academic achievement plays a part in the lives of this population.

**Professional application.** Love and Kruger (2005) discussed how successful teachers of African American children create a relational and personal environment. As a result of executing this study, the professional application extends to teachers, community leaders and other educators and personnel working with this population of students. The results of this study may play a role in the improvement of teaching strategies and interventions used with this population. Ladson-Billings (1994) conducted an ethnographic study of the beliefs and practices of eight teachers whom principals, colleagues, and parents rated as highly effective teachers of African American children. The teachers (a) gave students numerous opportunities to learn collectively and cooperatively, (b) made few assumptions about students' prior knowledge, and (c) worked to develop critical thinking skills. They also viewed teaching as an art, believed that all students can succeed, perceived themselves as a part of the community, and viewed teaching as a way to give back to the community. The teachers believed that knowledge is reciprocal and shared by students and teachers. Moreover, the importance of recognizing students' race, culture, and ethnicity was at the center of the teachers' pedagogy. In the present study I hope to collect data that school administrators can use to better understand this population, thus creating appropriate professional development opportunities for faculty and staff on topics examining the role of the school in motivating students. Likewise, community leaders will be able to evaluate the success of their programs in reaching the young

people that they serve from this population. Community resources and parenting interventions to help families could also be modified to better assist families from this population with developing effective strategies in rearing their children towards academic success.

**Social change.** The social change that can occur as a result of this study is that by arming educators, parents and communities with the information to better serve this population, Low SES students as a whole could achieve at greater levels. Love and Kruger (2005) suggested that teacher education programs may need to incorporate greater examinations of beliefs related to knowledge, race and culture, teaching practices, teaching as a profession, expectations of students, and social relations within and beyond the classroom. To be more effective in the classroom, the researchers advised pre-service and in-service teachers to examine their assumptions and expectations, specifically about children of color and their families. This could translate into higher test scores, lowered drop out rates and an increase in these students moving towards higher education and being successful. Current school efforts at increasing involvement of African American parents in the education of their children are positive steps towards building school relationships (Thompson, 2003). Parents from this population who have students that achieve academically could be used as instrument of change because they could serve as mentors and help other families by sharing their best practices in parenting. The stories from the participants in this study could also serve as an inspiration to other young girls with similar experiences to come forth and share their testimonials in an effort to further heighten awareness of the needs of this population and pave the way for further studies.

## **Chapter Summary**

Collecting information from students about motivational factors in achievement can be vital to the future enhancement of the public education system. Their stories could serve as an introspective look into this population of students and what can be done to better motivate them towards success. This opportunity not only serves to empower this population of students but also to generate tools for educators, community members and parents towards fostering excellence among this population of students.

Chapter two contains a detailed review of the literature addressing the 0The chapter highlights what research says about Social Cognitive Theory as it relates to the present study. Chapter two also addresses the lack of literature on high achieving low SES African American females.

Continuing through the study, Chapter Three begins with a theoretical framework followed by an approach and rationale for the proposed qualitative methodology. Next, specific data collection methods are described including: sampling frame, interviews, and a description of the study. Third, a description of the data analysis is presented, concluding with a discussion of trustworthiness, my role as the researcher, ethical considerations, and reciprocity to participants.

Chapter four highlights the findings of the study. It begins by with a description of the participants in the study. The various themes that manifest from the narratives shared by the participants are illuminated. Chapter five concludes with an explanation of the limitations of the research. It also provides information for educators and others in the field working with this population. Implications for further research and study expansion are also included in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The students' level of achievement gap between African American and their non-minority counterparts have long been reported in the literature. Educators and policymakers have searched to find solutions on closing this gap and successfully bringing African American students to an equal playing field in the area of academic achievement. One of the most prevalent factors associated with the disparity in educational performance is poverty. Low achievement is not always based on low ability, but often on the lack of resources and opportunity (Arnold & Colburn, 2010). Working within a conceptual framework, the inquiry concerning the performance of students living in poverty who are high achievers warrants an empirical inquiry (Wiggan, 2007).

There is a dearth in the research that addresses the within group differences in motivation between high and low achieving African American students in poverty. In the literature review I present the available literature concerning the current empirical view on motivational and teaching approaches, particularly the gap associated between high and low achieving students living in poverty.

#### **Content and Organization of Review**

To provide an understanding of the academic experiences of African American students in relation to their socioeconomic condition, I open the literature review with a discussion of academic achievement and poverty, to establish a connection between the literature and the studies relating to factors of high and under achievement among the

population. To further situate the study within current literature an in depth look into the motivational factors that empirical studies suggest needs to be present for students to succeed, regardless of their economic status was explored. Specific literature in motivational factors in the areas of parental support, intrinsic motivation, school climate, community based motivation, and teaching approaches are reviewed. Literature on social cognitive theory and its relationship to motivation will be explored to substantiate the rationale for the usage of theory within the context of the study. By reviewing the research on the various sources of motivation and teaching approaches of students regardless of the socioeconomic and race, a discovery of an emergence of themes within the literature that can further support and answer the questions posed for the study are desired.

### **Strategy used for Searching the Literature**

The literature review on the topic of academic performance of students in relation to their economic background and school environment concerning the experienced approaches of motivation and teaching, was conducted via the online resources. The following research tools were accessed: article databases, indices, and electronic resources. The key terms used in the search were achievement, African Americans, low socioeconomic status, poverty, academic and intrinsic motivation, community, parental engagement, and school climate. These categories were combined to come up with phrases that would yield resourceful results. For example “achievement and African Americans” were placed in the key word search field to gain insight on topics such as the achievement gap and No Child Left Behind for a historical context of the literature. Academic Search Premier, Gale Virtual Reference, Wilson, ERIC (EBSCO), and Psyc

INFO were among the search engines used in the search for literature on the proposed topic.

Even with using such a variety of phrases and search strands of the topic, the literature search still produced very limited results in relation to motivational and teaching approaches of impoverished students who are either low or high academic achievers.

### **Poverty and Education of African American Students**

Children living in poverty present unique challenges to today's teachers (Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2003). These students exhibit a higher degree of school failure, often display developmental delays and difficulties, as well as receive lower standardized test scores and graduation rates. Additionally, their tardiness, absenteeism, and school dropout numbers exceed those of middle-class students (Fontes, 2003). Living in poverty is an economic state characterized as a life without possessing items for basic family needs, such as adequate food, clothing, and housing (Wood, 2003). However, the argument regarding the negative and unpredictable impact of poverty on the physical growth, emotional development, and the overall health of children is as much related to the unique environment or culture of poverty as it is with the finances of poverty (Bacon, 2008). According to Bacon (2008), environmental deprivations and the lack of basic requirements of a comfortable life that the culture of poverty is created and student experience school failure, struggling families, gangs, drugs, and violence.

Nearly one in five American children lives in poverty, which is one of the highest rates of poverty in the developed world (Neuman, 2008). According to James (2005), of all the types of educational disadvantage, children who are in extreme poverty often are



homeless or transient and are among the most difficult for American education to serve adequately. One of the greatest challenges in America education is the ability to successfully provide an educational experience characterized with adequate resources in a quality facility for every child, irrespective of their racial or socioeconomic background (Cole-Henderson, 2000; Barr & Parrett, 2007; Bacon, 2008).

Family income remains a consistent influence and indicator of a student's academic success in school. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2010), in all academic subject areas, students of all ages and grades from wealthy homes outperformed low-income students. In more current research, the same trend is true; there are persistently different subgroup scores in all content areas on standardized assessments between low socioeconomic children and those from more affluent households (National Center for Educational Statistics 2010). Many elements contribute to this: parents' education level, reading material in the home, life experiences, quality of food, and more often than not, a two-parent household (Barr & Parrett, 2007)

Because children of poverty also symbolize one of the quickest-growing segments in the public school population, educators must make every effort to meet the needs and maximize the abilities and talent in these under achieving learners. "Low-income children who attend schools with high percentages of classmates living in poverty rank at the bottom of almost every measure of academic achievement; almost two thirds of these students score below basic proficiency levels on standardized tests" (Olson & Jerald, 2008, p. 25). It is crucial that educators concentrate on the fundamental concerns related to the lack of achievement these children are experiencing (Nettles & Perna, 2007).

Educational institutions everywhere are faced with meeting changing populations of students, and many schools are challenged to educate a majority of students who come from poverty (Bacon, 2008). Traditionally, schools were designed to serve middle class residents that have the tools or wherewithal to properly provide experiences that increase the likelihood of success in school. Families who find themselves in economically deprived situations normally cannot access the necessary resources or experiences to prepare their children for the school experience. Bacon (2008) added that without an understanding of the world of poverty some children come from, educators will continue to have great difficulty helping their children achieve in schools that are traditionally based on and directed to support middle class values.

Although almost half of American adolescents face tremendous risks, African American adolescents are particularly vulnerable (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995). For many African American students, academic problems either begin or accelerate in early adolescence. For instance, Gutman and Midgley (2000) found that African American early adolescents living in poverty experienced a significant decline in grade point average from fifth to sixth grade. Based on these studies, there are reasons to believe that poverty and race/ethnicity define the major sources of disadvantage in educational outcomes. Low-income students and students of color underperform at all educational levels (Maruyama, 2003). Further research says that the difficulties faced by children of poverty and students of color all too often stay with them throughout their school years.

In a study of poverty and education, Swain (2006), identified the home environment of lower-income African Americans students as a factor that lead to

educational problems issues. Swain (2006) argued that dysfunctional homes, lack of parental involvement, the lower value that parents assign to education and study habits, poor nutrition and lifestyle, and exposure to high crime, violence, and noise are among the home environment factors that affect the ability of students in performing required academic tasks (Swain, 2006). These factors often times play a major role in the academic advancement of the population. Moreover, the factors that play a positive role in academic achievement tend to be absent in the lives of impoverished African American students (Berends, 2008).

The results of this research certainly points out that the lack of resources and impoverished living conditions can negatively affect a student's ability to be successful in school. The deficit in basic needs being met can have an impact on student achievement. This research also leads to the following question: Why do some African American students succeed academically in spite of the risk factors present when students live in poverty? What factors lead these students to defy the odds and excel in school given the odds of low success rates among their peers in the same environment?

### **Parental Motivation and Success of African American Students**

Armor (2006) suggested that parental support and family involvement have a positive effect on the educational achievement of African American students. Thus the family context is especially important, given that the home is the major ecological setting for children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Luster & McAdoo, 1994; McAdoo, 1991). Wilson (2009) studied the effects of parental monitoring of African American students and its relationship to achievement. In his quantitative study, he investigated a sample of students and parents from poverty to find their perceptions on what aspects of the family

contribute to a student's achievement. Wilson found that a student's perception of parental monitoring was related to achievement; that the closer children are monitored by their parents or perceive that they are being monitored, the better they excel academically. Wilson (2009) suggested that students, whose parents kept track of where they were going and what they were involved in, seemed to be a relevant factor in their doing well in school. In contrast, Wilson found that those students who did not have parental support were marked by low achievement. As a result of these findings, Wilson advocated for parents being active participants in the social and academic aspects of their student's lives.

In a similar study, Huang and Mason (2008) delved into the importance of parental involvement in the academic success of very young African American students. Using a qualitative approach, the researchers met with a focus group of low SES parents of students enrolled in public school. Based on a series of interviews with the parents in which they were encouraged to share their experiences as it related to supporting and encouraging their children towards academic success, Huang and Mason's (2008) asserted that parents' desire for their children to do well, despite their limited access to resources, played a tremendous role in the parents motivating their towards academic achievement. Parents in the study indicated that their children were not born into a legacy of success. However, they believed that through education, their children would have the opportunity to succeed. A common theme among parents was that they shared a special zeal for staying in tune with what their children were involved in and being active in their learning. Children of these parents were marked by high achievement. Huang and Mason (2008) suggested that the children of parents who set goals for their children and place a

high value on education and its role as a vehicle towards overcoming their life situation were more likely to excel academically.

Research has also been conducted with female African American students. For example, Pittman and Chase-Lansdale (2001) conducted a study on the relationship between maternal parenting style and African American adolescent functioning. The quantitative study focused on a sample of 302 African American adolescent girls and their mothers who lived in impoverished neighborhoods were interviewed and given questionnaires and self report surveys within their homes. The 75-minute individual interviews with the adolescents and mothers included questions about residence, perceptions of the neighborhood, social support and role models, knowledge and opinions of the welfare system, sexual and relationship histories, household composition, family and peer relations, educational and employment history, and family financial difficulties. The research generated a wealth of information on the factors research has shown to be critical and it specifically illuminated that parenting style was found to be significantly related to adolescent outcome in multiple domains including externalizing and internalizing behaviors, academic achievement, work orientation, sexual experience, and pregnancy history. Specifically, teens whose mothers were disengaged (low on both parental warmth and supervision/monitoring) were found to have the most negative outcome. Mothers who were engaged in their children's lives and used effective parenting strategies experienced positive outcomes within these categories. The researchers advocated for the potentially important buffering role that parenting plays in the lives of African American adolescent girls facing economic hardships (Pittman & Chase-Lansdale, 2001).

The literature is unequivocal: When low SES parents can take an active role in monitoring their child's whereabouts, become actively involved in their school endeavors, and supervise their community involvement, their children's rate of academic success increases (Wilson, 2009).

Partnerships between schools and families are essential in ensuring effective teaching and learning for poverty-level children (Barr & Parrett, 2008). In a study of high schools serving a majority of students living in poverty, Amatea and West-Olatunji (2007) used school counselors to examine the relationships between a student's home and the school. Amatea and West-Olatunji found many discontinuities between school and home for poor children. To differing degrees, a majority of children from low-income households arrived to school from a culture with different values and with different information from middle-class children. Amatea and West-Olatunji explained that "children of poverty might find that they do not know how to show their teachers what they know in ways the teacher can recognize." They also found that students may be asked to participate in activities, projects, or conversations using vocabulary that is unfamiliar, and may find that their teacher talks in ways that are unfamiliar and confusing.

In a study of immigrant families and American families who have had children in school for at least a year, Garcia-Coll et al. (2002) found that it was very common for parents who fell into a lower socioeconomic class to feel uncomfortable initiating conversation and talking with school personnel. It was also found that these parents consistently described feeling uncertain of the manner or strategies to assist their son or daughter children find success in school because of their own personal negative

experience in school. Additionally, low income parents often are accompanied by low self-esteem, little confidence, the inability to communicate, and sincere lack of understanding and knowledge about formal education processes. Parents who earn a low-income also commonly work in jobs that provide little flexibility in regards to work hours which are often long or unpredictable (Collignon, Men, & Tan, 2001). In addition, many of these families often have other demands such as additional child-care, eldercare, or extended family demands that may not permit them to be actively involved in the school atmosphere and functions (Weiss, 2003). Resulting from these challenges, low-income parents find routine and hands-on participation in their children's education to be very challenging as compared to families of middle class or above incomes (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002).

Sadowski (2001) found that the expectations a teacher displays for students play a crucial role in the young person's success or failure, particularly for children of poverty. The beliefs that classroom teachers and other school personnel carry and convey about students and their abilities have a significant influence on how and what children of poverty are taught (Cooney, Moore, & Bottoms, 2002). They further explained that it may not be the learning style or intelligence of the students that stops him or her from learning; it may be the teacher's perception of the child's style and ability that creates limited learning experiences and lower expectations for the student. To capitalize on the strengths of the student and the teacher, it is essential to have effective leadership present in the school building.

Based on the above mentioned studies, parental involvement, support and motivation towards success appears to play a significant role in student achievement.

When parents are active and have high standards for their students, students are motivated towards success. Could low income families that have parents that are supportive of their children and place a high value on education serve as a motivational tool for those students that are impoverished, yet still succeed?

### **Academic Motivation and African American Students**

The literature emphasizes that one important factor that directly or indirectly affects students' academic success is self-motivation. Self-motivation is an intrinsic type of motivation that suggests the inner self of a person to act on actions required to accomplish (Bowman, 2007). In academic settings, motivation originates from within the student or task itself, known as *intrinsic motivation*, or from an external source, referred to as *extrinsic motivation* (Bowman, 2007). Intrinsic academic motivation relates to the pleasurable activities that enhance academic performance (Hoffman, Hutchinson, & Reiss, 2009), whereas extrinsic motivation was defined by Bowman (2007) as an attempt to motivate students through "points, grades, and treats" (p. 82).

Positive student motivation is affected by intrinsic, self realized motivational factors, whereas extrinsic motivational strategies generally serve to create a false sense of achievement, and consequently, false motivation and non-achievement (Bowman, 2007). O'Connor (2009) explained that feedback in the form of words can be very motivational. For example, after a score of 7/10 has been put on an assignment, not much more can be said. However, if teachers indicate one or two strengths and one or two weaknesses, they have a basis for discussions with individual students to help them improve their work. The basic principle at work here is that words open up communication, whereas numbers close the communication down prematurely.



O'Connor (2009) argued that the traditional approach to performance standards, a grading system that links letters to percentages, is incompatible with a true standards-based system. Moving to such a system requires the elimination of points and percentages. Moreover, one of the most serious problems with traditional grading scales, according to O'Connor (2009), is that they are based on the idea that 90% is always excellent and 80% is always proficient and so on, but this is not true. The relationship depends on the difficulty of the concept or skill and the difficulty of the assessment. Another advantage of moving away from percentage grading scales to levels is that it significantly reduces the concerns about different grading scales in different school districts.

In motivating students, traditional assessment practices that foster competition orientate students towards grades rather than toward learning (O'Connor, 2009). Teachers should stop using points and percentages and use clearly described, criterion-referenced performance standards based on proficiency with a limited number of levels that are public, based on expert knowledge, clearly stated in words or numbers, and supported by exemplars or models (O'Connor, 2009). Past experiences with educational success or failure tend to affect students' current and future level of academic motivation (Green et al., 2012).

**Positive motivation.** The important role played by positive environments and supportive relationships in motivating lifelong learning must not be underestimated to ensure the successful cultivation of a lifelong learning culture (Ng, 2007). A great deal of literature is available concerning the connection between positive motivation and learning. Every search conducted revealed contemporary books, scholarly articles, and

research studies pertaining to positive motivation and learning. However, limited studies focused on the influences teacher policy has on student motivation. There were many that focus on the motivation of teachers, and even more of the literature focuses on increasing achievement through tighter, more professional, or better-initiated practices (Green et al., 2012).

Bowman (2007) reported that students enroll in educational endeavors pre motivated and ready to succeed, teachers just need to foster that motivation and keep from damaging it along the way. Student motivation was even found to affect teachers' enjoyment and confidence in teaching (Green et al., 2012). Regardless of the method in which students gain motivation, positive student motivation has a profound effect on student learning, class work, grades, self-esteem, and even relationships with family and friends (Bowman, 2007).

In addressing the multiple dimensions of motivation and engagement that are relevant to academic outcomes in students' lives, contextualizing motivation and engagement in a multidimensional way signify many ways in which they can succeed. Positive thoughts include self-belief, valuing school, and learning focus, while positive behaviors include planning, task management, and persistence (Martin, 2010). Children of involved parents are more likely to enjoy school and are likely have positive attitudes toward school (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010), participate in extracurricular activities, and graduate. They are also less likely to fail a grade, have poor attendance, be suspended or expelled, or have behavior problems at school (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2012; Fenning et al., 2012). In addition, Toldson, McGee, and Lemmons (2012) found that improving

academic engagement would require positive paternal engagement and reduction of behavioral-related school.

Children of involved parents are more likely to have higher levels of economic and educational achievement, career success, occupational competency, better educational outcomes, higher educational expectations, higher educational attainment, and psychological well being (Guo, 2010; Patel & Stevens, 2010). Moreover, Guo (2010) found that father and mother involvement at age 7 independently predicted educational attainment by age 20 for both sons and daughters, indicating that early parent involvement can be another protective factor in counteracting risk conditions that might lead to later low attainment levels.

**Negative motivation.** Behaviors recognized by the teacher researchers included inadequate homework completion, lack of focus during classroom activities, and low achievement on tests. The documented evidence of the problem was gathered through the following three tools: a parent survey, a student survey, and a classroom behavior checklist. Through the tools, the teacher researchers ascertained areas of weakness that were motivationally driven; specifically, off-task behavior, directions not followed, and poor work quality. A review of professional literature resulted in the action plan. Creative engagement, student self-assessment, and positive reinforcement were the solution strategies utilized. When it is used properly, creative engagement provides meaningful connections, hands-on activities, cooperative grouping, engaging content, and student choice (Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2011). Student self-assessment was another intervention utilized.

Positive reinforcement was used to help strengthen students' self-efficacy by providing support, praise, and encouragement. Post-intervention data revealed minor positive changes in students' attitudes toward school. There were noteworthy improvements in classroom behavior in the areas of on-task behavior, quality work, and classroom engagement. Despite positive results, it was evident that the successes were short-lived. The positive results may be attributed to the timing of the intervention with regard to the overall school year. Therefore, it is recommended to begin the school year with strategies in place and adjusting them when necessary (Maríñez-Lora & Quintana, 2009).

Negative thoughts include anxiety, failure avoidance, and uncertain control, while negative behaviors include self-handicapping and disengagement (Martin, 2010). Negative motivation is a little like fool's gold – it seems great on the surface but it is ultimately ineffective and unsustainable. Most people are accustomed to motivation of this sort. Those who struggle with weight, absorbed a lot of negative thoughts growing up – they were punished and reprimanded, but very rarely got the support and encouragement they needed. In school, students who received less support tend to have red pen marks on their schoolwork but not a lot of positive remarks. The focus was on what was missing – what should be fixed or corrected. Though this focuses on weight loss, it applies to education that punishment for perceived failures in their childhood has fueled destructive patterns of behavior in their adulthood (Hoffman, Hutchinson, & Reiss, 2009).

When it comes to motivation, Steele (2010) argued that the unacceptable form of motivation includes threats, restriction, belittling, pouting, and withdrawing. Threats

directed to a person to motivate are in reality a form of coercion. Coercion means to persuade or compel someone to do something by using threats. The message communicated is that “unless you do what I want, I will cause you to feel hurt.” Communicating that someone is unworthy, flawed, stupid, or incomplete is often rooted in a lack of self worth that the communicator is feeling toward self. Often times, it only leads to less productivity. It is often impossible to build up by tearing down.

Concerning restrictions, *the if/ then combo* is often a powerful verbal motivator when framed as a positive action / benefit scenario. However, when the “if –then” scenario is a form of restriction, then it becomes a stressor. Humans beings try to avoid pain. However, often the motivation to seek pleasure is greater than the motivation to avoid potential pain versus actual pain. Consider why people smoke even though they know of the long range health risks. Pouting is the feedback from receiving unwanted criticism as well as negative kinds of motivation. In either case, it is neither constructive nor productive. This is often a result of the dysfunctional family and the “you-hurt-me-so-I-will-hurt-you” mentality. They may be effective when initially used, they will still not produce long term beneficial effects. Like pouting, withdrawal is a method of feedback or communication that does not promote beneficial growth and development. If used correctly, negative motivation is appropriate and effective.

In the research that produced the Innovators Solution, a unique form of negative motivation was researched. It was found that challenges framed as a threat faced by all caused the team to embrace change. Innovating change with the promise of potential benefit the change might bring proved to be more effective. Once the team had embraced the negative, it was then imperative that the threat be reframed as a positive motivation of

opportunity that would relate to pleasure. In the scenario, the pleasure is now rooted in overcoming the threat and the pleasure from the positive outcome (Steele, 2010).

The literature reviewed states many times that positive academic motivation can have a positive influence on students for a lifetime (Green et al., 2012; Bowman, 2007); however, the literature is equally clear that negative academic motivation can have a profoundly negative effect on students' lives. Negative motivation begins to take its toll on students within the classroom, affecting withdrawal from learning activities, and eventually lack of motivation towards learning in general (Bowman, 2007). Lack of motivation, if allowed to continue, has been found to affect students' level of learning and progression towards high school graduation (Green et al., 2012). Eventually deepening into a tense relationship between the unmotivated student and his or her teachers, peers, and parents, negative academic motivation has the potential to reach beyond the classroom and the school.

According to Green et al. (2012), negative student motivation has the ability to affect teachers' enjoyment and confidence in their teaching. They found that often a cyclical relationship exists between the motivation and engagement of students and the confidence and enjoyment of teachers, to the extent that one affects the other and then in turn, secondarily effects the relationship; further damaging student motivation. In this way, negative student motivation has the ability to affect not only the abilities and confidence of teachers, but has an accumulative effect on the original student as well as his or her classmates.

Lack of academic motivation has the ability to affect students' lives outside of school as well (Fredricks et al., 2011). Pleasing the family was found to be a major

influence on student motivation (Mansour & Martin, 2009). Viewed as slippery slope logic to some, the connection between lack of motivation and dropout behavior is documented heavily in the literature. Starting with the home, classroom, teacher, peers, or intrinsically, the decision to drop out builds over time (Fredricks et al., 2011). Dropping out of high school carries with it many social, economic, and criminal implications for our society and the future of our nation (Lund, 2009). The U.S. Department of Justice: Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that nearly seven out of every 10 inmates did not receive their high school diploma.

Learned helplessness, depression, and a resulting lack of perceived control are other documented end results of a lack of academic motivation (Santos, Chartier, Whalen, Chateau, & Boyd, 2011). These psychological and sociological attributes have been found to potentially be permanent, following students throughout their lives, and eventually helping predetermine their reality as an adult. With a very fluctuating economy and an unstable job market, a high school diploma as well as a continued education is becoming extremely important. An increasing amount of businesses will not even consider a job application unless a person has a high school diploma. The Bureau of Labor Statistics contains data showing the increase in opportunities that a person with a high school diploma has in comparison to a person that has dropped out of high school. The data shows that only 55% of high school dropouts were employed from the year 2000 through 2005, as opposed to 71% of high school graduates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008, 52, p. 226). Although receiving an education is important to success later in life, “students who are dropping out of high school and not receiving a high school

diploma is a problem that our country is facing” (Townsend, Flisher, & King, 2007, p. 295).

After all the research that has been conducted, the problem of children dropping out of school still exists. It still exists today because of the many factors that contribute to school dropouts. Factors such as family structure, income, substance use, residential location, and motivation are all factors that contribute to the dropout rate. Within these factors are many different variables such as resources, peers, teachers, and divorce (Lund, 2009).

**Motivation of African American students.** Kerpelman, Eryigit, and Stephens (2007) set out on a journey to take a look at various factors that are associated with the achievement of African American students. Using a phenomenological approach, they took a large sample of inner city middle and high school students and addressed associations of self-efficacy, ethnic identity, and parental support with “future education orientation.” This orientation was defined as an adolescent’s desire to think ahead, set goals for themselves, and achieve them both personally and academically. The researchers discovered a significant relationship between self-efficacy and future education orientation. Hence, the more efficacious students feel, the more they excel and look towards bettering themselves for the future.

Stewart (2006) noted in a similar study on intrinsic motivation and education where he sampled a group of low SES African American adolescents, that individual motivation positively and significantly predicted academic achievement. Delving further into his research, Stewart (2006) suggested that a large part of internal motivation encompasses goal setting and seeing beyond the present. African American



students who strive to think beyond their current situation and look towards bettering themselves exhibited high levels of achievement despite their economic situation.

Another study of African American high school students showed that thinking about the future was associated with perceptions of education usefulness, and education usefulness was associated with placing value on academic work, which in turn showed associations with high achievement among Low SES African American students (Brown & Jones 2004). In other words, future orientation allows an adolescent to dream and hope for better possibilities in the future, setting the stage for actions that increase goal attainment (Kerpelman et al., 2008).

In an older study, Ward (1990) also emphasized self-esteem and how it plays an active role in the internal motivation of African American students. One particular domain of self-esteem that has been examined among African American youth is that of racial self-esteem or self-worth. Positive racial self-esteem has been found to enhance academic performance for some African American youth. Perhaps it is because during the high school years, as students begin to mature, that racial identity, personal commitment to education, and academic achievement begins to converge for these youth. As a result, higher achieving students would be more likely to have formed a positive racial self-esteem.

The various studies mentioned above share a commonality. When students feel better about themselves, they do better. A positive self –concept serves as an intrinsic motivation for students. The research concludes that for African American students, it is an integral part in helping them to think futuristically, set goals and work to achieve them. The literature shows that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds

often have a learned sense of failure. So, for those students that are out of the norm and are intrinsically motivated despite their living conditions, what attributes to their success? The study seeks to discover that.

Effects of community environment to academic performance of African American students. Irvin, Farmer, Leung, Thompson, and Hutchins (2010) intensely researched the relationship between rural low income adolescents' achievement and their involvement in community activities. Their multi methods quantitative design indicated that there was a distinct correlation between those youth involved in church activities and youth center programs within their community and high achievement in school. Findings suggested that it is important to consider participation in the activities of contexts outside of school that may support the achievement of African American youth.

According to Clark's (1990) retro study, achievement is best understood in the environmental contexts of children's everyday lives, which include the home as well as community settings like schools, churches, and recreation centers. Parents, as managers of their children's environments, not only create learning environments within the home but also encourage, organize, and supervise their children's educational opportunities in the community (Gutman & McCloy, 2000).

Ogbu (1981) suggested that the collective experience of one's community might communicate important messages about race, ethnicity, education, and opportunity. Young people living in communities where poverty and unemployment are rampant and where members of their racial-ethnic group have limited access to education and opportunity might have pessimistic views of race and ethnicity. On the other hand, some work suggests that having educated and successful members of your own ethnicity

in stable communities that reach out to the impoverished communities contributes to a sense of educational efficacy (Duncan, 1994; Furstenberg et al., 1993). Thus, providing an explanation as to why the push for community activity centers and mentorship programs in Low SES areas is so prevalent.

Rhamie (2006) researched the effects of church involvement on academic achievement in her qualitative study on African American females. Through interviews and surveys of the adolescents, the picture emerges of the contributions of the home, individual, school, and the community in their achievement. The study recognized the largest contributory factor from the community was the Black Church. In their own words, participants were given a voice to describe their church experiences and its impact on their performance. The results revealed that what differentiates those who succeed and those who do not is the level of resilience and protective factors that they have developed. The successful groups had more positive support from a wider range of sources across their experiences at home and within the community, which instilled a resilience or resistance to negative experiences. The low achieving groups, which had less support and more negative experiences, were more susceptible and vulnerable to the impact of negative school experiences. The African American church plays a significant role here and can positively contribute to the student's success, especially in the continued support for the education of African Americans, by building resilience and protective factors in the child to enable successful navigation through the public school system.

Participation in church activities has also garnered the attention of other researchers, particularly those focused on youth living in poverty. As compared to their lower achieving counterparts, high achieving African American adolescents living at or

below the poverty line have been shown to participate in more religious activities (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). Many scholars in this area share that adolescents who are involved in the Church reap both spiritual and academic rewards, in that being active within the church may reduce anxiety, provide rural African American youth access to more educated peers and adults who support learning, and reinforce the importance of education (Ervin et al., 2010). Some work additionally suggests that emersion into the church sector may be protective for low income students.

Could it be the driving factor behind success among low socioeconomic high achieving students? It is evident that community supports plays a major role, but to what extent? The proposed study hopes to decipher these concepts.

### **School Climate and Academic Achievement of African American Students**

Effectively teaching African American students continues to be one of the most pressing issues facing educators. Despite the plethora of school restructuring and educational reforms, the disproportionate underachievement of African American students is a consistent occurrence in U.S. schools. Howard (2001) indicated that effective teachers of African American students are not exclusively concerned about students' academic and cognitive development but about their social, emotional, and moral growth as well. He noted that when teachers take into considerations these factors, especially within economically deprived populations, students are more eager to move towards success (Howard, 2001). The literature consistently makes reference to "culturally responsive pedagogy" as a vehicle for reaching African American students. Culturally responsive pedagogy was eloquently described as a genuine belief by teachers

in students' abilities and a commitment to structure content, instruction, and assessment in a manner that refuses to accept anything less than students' absolute highest potential.

Jackson (2010) noted that African American underachievers harbor the potential for high intellectual performance and the desire to realize their potential. Unlocking the key to this potential requires an ardent belief within the student and the desire to try all means to tap into their potential, and the confidence to connect to these students through personal identity. When teachers' perceptions expand to recognize the power that addressing students' culture and language has on the learning process, teachers can design opportunities for students' strengths to blossom, confidence to build, and achievement to soar.

Wiggan's (2007) research highlighted the experiences of high achieving African American students and their perceptions on teacher practices, engaging pedagogy versus disengaging pedagogy. His phenomenological study consisted of a small sample of low SES high achieving African American students. Among many discoveries his research indicated that students that did well reported that engaging pedagogy impacted their school achievement and was associated with compassionate teachers, where caring meant being committed to teaching and developing professional relationships with the students. Wiggan (2007) suggested that in expanding his research it would be beneficial to hear from more low SES African American students who excel in school. Hopefully, hearing from these students could serve as a vehicle for change for enhancement within the public school system.

In an older study, Willis (1995) expounds on motivation in the public school system by further emphasizing the necessity for the school and teachers to serve as

a sort of extended family to foster academic achievement among low SES African American students. School climate, like positive relationships in an extended family, is created through beliefs governing attitudes and expectations. In school climate and positive extended family relations, positive attitudes and high expectations are salient regarding students overcoming obstacles such as poverty. Combining positive attitudes and high expectations with interpersonal interactions such as (a) insisting students work harder, (b) acknowledging students' efforts, and (c) exerting extra effort toward assisting students, prepares students for success. Willis (1998) later observed additional classrooms that served primarily African American students where effective teachers established a successful learning community by forming strong relationships with teachers, students, and parents. Thus, illustrating how connecting with the student involves understanding all aspects of that student.

### **African American Female Students and Academic Achievement**

The literature suffered greatly in the area of research studies conducted on low SES African American females and achievement. The study mentioned in the section of the literature review by Pittman and Chase-Lansdale (2001) on parenting styles and African American female development and achievement provided some insight into the topic. Evans-Winters' (2007) research pointed a gap in the literature out as well in her study on urban African American female students and educational resiliency. In their study, they mentioned how rare it is to hear discussions about Black girls from urban and inner city communities that graduate high school and attend college. As an advocate for the expansion of research on this topic, she supported the need for more urban education research and pedagogical reform efforts that look at how urban girls are resilient despite

their risks and vulnerabilities. In regards to those that are successful, Brickhouse, Lowery and Schultz (2000) conducted a study with middle school aged African American Females and their success in science. They found that these girls were successful due to their refusal to accept racial stereotypes. They also reported feeling acclimated and accepted within their school environment. In another study, Bermack, Chung and Sroskey- Sabado (2005) discovered a link between academic success among African American females who had participated in group counseling which focused on female empowerment. They also had mentors within the community that developed positive relationships with the students.

### **Social Cognitive Theory and Motivation**

Bandura (2001) proposed that Social Cognitive Theory describes student motivation to learn as the interrelationship between behavior, personal factors, and environmental factors and their impact on the student's zeal or desire towards achievement. This theory has been the premise that many studies have been based on when taking a look at how individuals learn.

Burney's (2007) research into gifted education used the social cognitive model and expanded it by looking beyond the student's self-belief and dissecting the variables that make up their motivation to learn and how motivation and cognition are linked. Burney (2007) advocated for the use of this model in schools by educators as a framework to plan programs that could enhance student self-beliefs, academic skills, self-regulation, and social context in facilitating positive student engagement and development. Additional research using this theory suggested numerous relationships

between achievement and how students think and feel about themselves and their environment.

Using the Social Cognitive Theory as a theoretical framework, the study of Bresó, Schaufeli, and Salanova, (2011) evaluated a 4-month, individual cognitive-behavioral intervention program to decrease burnout and increase self-efficacy, engagement, and performance among university students. The main objective of the intervention was to decrease the anxiety the students coped with before exams to increase their beliefs of self-efficacy. Besides the study group intervened, two control groups were involved (i.e., a “stressed” control group and a “healthy” control group). All three groups filled out a questionnaire before the intervention and then two months after the intervention was completed. The results showed that self-efficacy, engagement, and performance increased in the intervened group when compared to both control groups. Regarding burnout, decreases were noted in both the intervened and stressed control groups, but not in the healthy control group. The use of self-reports has been considered an important limitation in the study. While the students in the intervened group knew that the intervention focused on self-efficacy, burnout, engagement and performance, they might have answered T2 questionnaires with a positive bias. The T2 results in the intervened group would then have been exaggerated because of expectation. Even though the measures of engagement might have been overstated, then, the measures of performance were nonetheless stronger (in terms of objectivity), and such measures support the overall results obtained (Bresó et al., 2011).



## **Improving Literacy of Those in Poverty**

Palumbo and Sanacore (2009) conducted a study involving intermediate and middle school grade teachers to investigate how to combine literacy instruction and content information for students who are living in poverty. They found that most students living in poverty have a limited vocabulary, and their shift from word recognition abilities to comprehension and applied learning is slow to progress. By the fourth grade, these learners have fallen behind their classmates in both reading and mathematics. Based on their findings, Palumbo and Sanacore (2009) suggested that teachers can help minority children and those living in poverty to close the achievement gap in writing by fusing literacy instruction and content-area material. Their research shows that a connection improves reading and writing achievement as well as increases comprehension of information.

Students who struggle can also learn better if they have more time than the traditional school day. Extended learning opportunities provide three main services: (a) core content area enrichment to help students achieve required state standard measures, (b) remediation of traditional courses that reinforce and enhance the students' knowledge and skills, and (c) provide literacy and related educational services and information to families of the children enrolled (Southwest Educational Development Lab, 2011). Learning time and opportunities can be extended by organizing effective extracurricular programs that offer service before school, after school, and on weekends (Lauer et al., 2003; Vaden-Kiernan et al. 2008).

Another way to improve writing skills is to plan writing projects that require students to use basic grammatical, spelling, and punctuation skills (Kalantzis & Cope,

2005) in a case study aimed to investigate and describe how teachers created teaching and learning contexts within a new curriculum. The findings demonstrated that planned structure helped teachers to transform pedagogy and created an excitement in the classroom. Teachers also commented that as professionals, a benefit was gained from a more detailed approach to planning and the efforts was perceived as being beneficial to the students.

Kalantzis and Cope (2005) also found that writing projects need to be important in ways that are relevant and connected to adolescent age students. Assignments and projects should take into account the assorted needs and challenges of a variety of learners and the assignment should enhance strengths so that every child's results will be valued according to individualized objectives. By creating writing projects that give students real responsibility for their learning, the students are more apt to be engaged and improve their writing skills (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005).

Palumbo and Sanacore (2009) found that inside a caring teaching-learning environment, all teachers believe every student has the ability to learn rigorous subject matter; and in turn, every student needs to believe that their individual successes are the result of knowledge, hard work, and personal effort. "Young adolescents who struggle with writing benefit from educators who are caring and supportive and realize that an adolescent students' mind is a complex mixture of emotion and intellect" (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2009, p. 279). In addition, the findings show that students typically give more effort and perform at their best when emotions are connected to the instructor through a positive relationship and their interests are connected to the learning. Students who have not traditionally done well in school require teachers and a principal to create an

environment and system in which they reach academic success. As young teens continue to experience high expectations in writing, it becomes critical that educators maintain an emphasis on research-based, proven strategies. Any of these activities may be used in the classroom to make learning inclusive, supportive, and effective in improving writing skills and thus increasing the chances of helping all students to succeed in life.

### **Effective School Practices for Schools with Impoverished Students**

Instead of making excuses or accepting poor performance, some schools with a high incidence of poverty have attempted to change instructional practices to improve student achievement. Reeves (2003) conducted a study to examine high poverty schools where students demonstrated high academic performance. These schools are called 90/90/90 schools because, “90% or more of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch, 90% or more of the students were members of ethnic minority groups, and 90% or more of the students met the district or state academic standards in reading or another core area” (Reeves, 2003, p. 1). Reeves (2003) further stated while financial deficit clearly impacts a student’s academic success, demographics do not necessarily dictate that a student will experience low student achievement.

Reeves (2003) concluded that there are consistent quality practices occurring inside of these schools that hold high hope for increasing academic success and closing the equity gap in buildings of any demographic composition. Schools that are characterized with the 90/90/90 demographics commonly display five behaviors within the schools:

1. There is a strong emphasis and focus on academic achievement. Achievement is celebrated and publicized throughout the school and throughout the

community. Any student who is not able to meet the high standards is placed in an intervention program that may last up to 3 hours per day until he or she is able to meet the standards.

2. There are clear curricular choices for the school. The curriculum focuses on a few areas such as mathematics, reading, and writing.
3. There are frequent evaluations and chances for students to apply new skills. Student learning is the goal of the evaluation, not a grade.
4. There is a strong emphasis on writing in all academic areas. These high performing schools have ongoing writing performance assessment programs. A single rubric is used for writing assessments in all content areas, a factor which helps teachers and students to be more consistent in evaluating performance across the curriculum.
5. There is external scoring of student work. The external scoring allows the school to develop a common assessment practice (Reeves, 2003, p. 3).

Cole-Henderson (2000) determined that the existence of a relevant, coherent mission statement gives schools who serve mainly children of poverty an enhanced direction and stability. She also found that when shared by parents and guardians, it develops collaboration, reassures the presences of shared goals for students and what the school is striving to achieve, and reduces negative or counterproductive efforts (Cole-Henderson, 2000). Cole-Henderson (2000) further recognized that schools serving low-income children must be structured, including strong processes, and display a culture of learning that guide all stake holders toward the goal of quality teaching and learning.

Moreover, in a study to correct ineffective educational environments, Cole-Henderson (2000) studied successful elementary schools whose test scores evidenced sustained achievement in reading and mathematics. It was found that successful institutions who serve low-income children who produce high academic achievement display nine strong characteristics that make up the outer layer of the school. Cole-Henderson (2000) stated that the strength of these schools and its ability to support classroom instruction depends on the degree of presence of the following characteristics; “school site management, administrative leadership, staff stability, curriculum articulation and organization, staff development, parental involvement and support, school-wide recognition, and maximized learning time, and district support” (p. 78). The engagement and support of the building principal is a necessary component in creating and supporting these critical characteristics (Cole-Henderson, 2000).

When comparing the findings of the two studies, it is interesting to note that in both studies, there was an intense focus of time and energy toward student achievement. The curriculum was focused on core content such as mathematics and reading and there was attention to articulation of the content as well as grade level instruction. In addition, the schools in both studies highlighted the academic success of students and provided school-wide recognition. In the 90/90/90 study, Reeves (2003) found that continuous performance assessment was the key to student success. Whereas, in the Cole-Henderson (2002) study, value was found on improving the constituent groups, for example, professional development for staff, and increasing parental involvement were necessary characteristics in achieving academic success for schools serving children of poverty.

## **Chapter Summary**

Students living in poverty may not learn the same way as more affluent children, and because teachers typically come from a middle-class or more advantaged background, it may not be easy for them or for a school principal to understand their learning problems (Bacon, 2008). This can be a challenge to the way teachers teach, and principals do not always have the perception or skills to be part of the solution to children's learning weaknesses. Children may have developmental delays because of poor nutrition, low birth weight, being born to young mothers, or any of a myriad of problems that are part of the milieu of poverty that can lead to academic failure or lack of school progress (Wood, 2003).

Oftentimes, the priorities in these children's lives differ from middle-class children, whose parents value regular attendance and punctuality (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). In most cases, these deficiencies are caused by the culture of poverty, which may not provide basic family needs or support. Long-term effects of poverty can result in school failure, violence, gangs, drugs, incarceration, and continuing generations of deprivation that may be manifested in many negative and destructive ways (Fontes, 2003).

In this chapter, the relationship of poverty and race as major sources of disadvantage in educational outcomes is evident (Burney & Beilke, 2008). Low-income students and students of color at all educational levels had low academic performance (Maruyama, 2003). However, other studies argued that these factors are not as significant or even non-existing among other low socio-economic status (SES) African American students (Berends, 2008). Education discourses supported that despite the economic

disadvantages, there are several African American students who exceeded the academic performance of their counterparts (Brown & Brown, 2012; The Education Trust-West, 2013). These discourses shifted the scholars' perspective to focus on pedagogical approaches of teachers in motivating and teaching students regardless of gender, socioeconomic, and race (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait, & Hertzman, 2012). In light of this study, it is my intention to examine the motivation and teaching approaches the impoverished students experienced from their teachers.

This chapter reviewed the pertaining literature that contributes to and determines a need for this research study. Motivational factors differ between high and low achieving low socioeconomic African American students. Both groups of students experience a lack of resources within their environment which appears to be a pre cursor to a deficit in educational success. The underlying question that the study seeks to unravel the answer to is what motivational factors contribute to those students that are high achievers despite the norm of low achievement from their counterparts. Parental involvement, intrinsic motivation, school and community have an impact based on the research. To what extent or degree do these factors play in the lives of high achieving low socioeconomic African American students? In this study, I hope to shed more light on the source of success for those students that do achieve and make the data applicable in an effort to help those that struggle academically. In the next chapter, an in-depth overview of the method and methodologies that will guide the data collection procedures that will be used to capture the experiences as differences between the case narratives of high achieving and low achieving African American impoverished students are noted will be provided. A detailed

description of the data analysis processes that will be engaged in the interpretation of the data will also be given.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative comparative case study I explore the perceptions of both low and high achieving youths of low socio economic background within the same school environment. Sources of motivational factors are highlighted. The scarcity of research on the identification of motivational and teaching approaches both from low and high performing students is important in establishing important factors, other than economic class, that constitute academic performance among African American students (Boyd-Zaharias & Pate-Bain, 2008; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Wiggan, 2007). In this chapter, I will discuss the methods and techniques that I will be using to generate the textural descriptions of the perspectives of students on the experienced sources of motivation which contributed to their academic performance.

In this chapter, I will explain the research process I engaged to collect the perspectives of the two groups of African American high school female students. The chapter also presents the research question for the study and the procedures in the collection, analysis, and interpretations of the data in the context of the research questions of the study.

#### **Research Questions**

The main research question of the study is: What motivating factors play a role in the academic performance of high and low achieving low socioeconomic high school African American females? In seeking answers to this question, the following sub-questions will be posed:

1. What intrinsic motivational factors (self-esteem, belief in self, positive thinking, ability to set goals) to do well in school exist among low achieving and high achieving low SES African American female high school students?
2. What extrinsic factors (teachers, school officials, parents, peers, community) of motivation play a role in the academic performance of low achieving and high achieving low SES African American female high school students?

### **Research Method**

The purpose of the present study is to explore qualitatively the perceptions of low and high achieving youths of the same economic background and school environment, particularly concerning motivation and teaching approaches as experienced by this select group of students. With this objective, the use of a qualitative comparative case study design is appropriate in that such a design allows the researcher to explore textual descriptions of students' perspective on the approaches of the teachers in motivating and teaching the students to achieve academic performance as well as other sources of extrinsic and intrinsic sources of motivation. Comparative case studies cover two or more cases in a way that produces more generalizable knowledge about causal questions – how and why something occurs. Comparative case studies involve the analysis and synthesis of the similarities, differences and patterns across two or more cases that share a common focus or goal (Goodrick, 2014). To be able to do this well, the specific features of each case should be described in depth at the beginning of the study. In qualitative research, I will use the *interpretivist* perspective rather than a *positivist* view. Therefore, as an interpretivist, my research questions are limited to asking the “what” and “how” of the

phenomenon, and thus will not be responsible for analyzing the degree or extent of the relationship between the various factors that emerged in the analysis (Lin, 1998).

The qualitative research methodology is suitable in studies that descriptively analyze social phenomenon that are fathomable by exploring the perceptions, views, and experiences of an individual or group of individuals (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

Unlike the quantitative studies, qualitative descriptions are not made numerically, and instead, conclusions are drawn from the interpretations of the researcher. The difference between each methodology is that the former held the interpretivist perspectives, while the latter derives the analysis from beliefs based on a positivist perspective. A study is classified as being positivist when propositions are tested empirically from a group or sample population. Conversely, an interpretivist study collects information and understands its meaning based on a set of beliefs that are specific to the case (Lin, 1998). Furthermore, the interest of the positivist researcher is in the interpretation of general patterns, while an interpretivist specifically describes the detail of the pattern. In the case of the present study, motivation, methods, and approaches of teaching have been positively associated with the academic performance of students. However, these associations have been scarcely explored within the context of a student population, one that shares a similar economic background and is composed of students enrolled in same school. The pattern involving economic-wellbeing, motivational, and teaching approaches to the performance of the students limitedly explains the differences in the performance of high and low achieving students (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2009).

The use of a qualitative comparative case study is appropriate in understanding a phenomenon that has been limitedly explored scientifically (Hancock & Algozzine,

2006). In qualitative research, feelings, experiences, and thoughts of a sample population are explored and described in order to understand and explain a phenomenon (Yin, 2009). Unlike quantitative research that places its empirical reliability on the large size of the population, the experiences, feelings, and perceptions, as in the case of qualitative studies, are explored even with smaller-sized populations (Hellström et al., 2005).

Several methodologists have argued the reliability of the empirical information from the qualitative investigation due to the subjectivism involved in the researcher-participant dyad. However, qualitative researchers claimed that, though the researcher is “not necessarily detached from the research... [they] may actually be involved in the contextual situation of the participant” (Simon & Francis, 2001, p. 40). This means that the personal attachment of the researcher to the phenomenon examined, and to that of his or her subjects, is the very nature of the qualitative inquiry. Understanding a phenomenon requires the qualitative researcher to relive and experience the phenomenon in order to better understand the context of the participants’ responses (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Spagnoletti, 2010).

There are several typologies involved in qualitative methodology. Among these are ethnography, case study, biography, and phenomenology. While these types appear to have different research focuses, they are similar in the manner of (a) focusing on the life of an individual, (b) use of views and experiences to construct stories, and (c) use of a writer or narrator to narrate and interpret the collection of data pertaining to the situation or event. After considering the purpose and strengths of each of these types, I considered the comparative case study as appropriate in exploring the differences of the motivation and student perceptions of teaching approaches of two groups of students.

## **Research Design**

The intention of this present study is to explore and compare the differences between two groups of student populations, particularly concerning their perceptions of motivational factors as it relates to academic performance. The phenomenon is qualitative in nature because it seeks to understand the central reason for differences in students' academic performances, despite similarities of the students' socio demographic backgrounds (Spagnoletti, 2010). Because the intention is to compare two groups of students who were relatively exposed to different motivating and teaching approaches, the qualitative comparative case study design is more appropriate for this study. This design has the capability to explain deep information and perceptions of the research participants concerning a phenomenon that is similar in nature, but the outcomes of the event significantly differ from each other (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Yin, 2009). In this study, the groups of low and high performing students are assumed to have different cases of the teachers' delivery of motivation and teaching approaches, which had cause to result in their respective academic performance (Williams, Crooks, Whitfield, Kelley, Richards, DeMiglio et al., 2010). While concentration of a single phenomenon or case is most efficient in understanding the phenomenon as compared to using multiple cases, the single case is most appropriate when there is scarcity of available empirical information (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This present area of research, however, has been previously examined in numerous studies on students' academic performance. However, limited scholarly research is available on comparing interventions and approaches between two different cases of students' achievement, particularly the themes on motivation and teaching approaches experienced by the students themselves.

This comparative case study design aims to describe and interpret two cases of academic performance of African American student groups who may have similar or different exposures and experiences on motivation and teaching approaches of their teachers. I may have chosen other approaches; however, the demand of the current study is to generate a textural description of an educational issue experienced by two or more categories of student population under study (Williams et al., 2010). In this investigation, I intend to understand student perceptions of teacher's approaches, particularly the dimensions of motivation and teaching styles among high and low achieving students in a community high school (Roebaum, 2002; Yin, 2009). As well

as hearing student's feelings towards other intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation. As this is a qualitative comparative case study, I will analyze and interpret the perspectives of two groups of students based on the acceptable pedagogical beliefs, and infer those findings that are new, yet valuable, in the improvement of school practices (Yin, 2009).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher and their significance in this process is very intricate, and thus great attention should be paid to how the researcher may influence the outcome of the research. Creswell (2009) asserts that, "Particularly in qualitative research, the role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study" (p.196). There is some level of subjectivity in this study due to my background as an African American female who comes from a lower socioeconomic family. I excelled academically in comparison to my peers within my community. Therefore, there is a strong connection

with my respondents on the axioms of gender, race, economics, and culture, where there may be shared values and beliefs regarding family, community, and self. My current profession as a school counselor may also yield some assumptions and biases due to my experience in working with various students from this population. I have done a lot of group and individual counseling for females in the area of empowerment and motivation and feel that this is important for their positive development. Being a school counselor, I am a strong advocate for students and believe that many factors in their environment contribute to their overall academic performance.

As the subjectivity in this study has been highlighted, reflexivity is thus important for the reliability. Reflexivity ensures that I, as the researcher, am aware of my beliefs, values, biases, and behavior while among others, which can affect both my analysis and interpretations concerning the responses of the participants (Parahoo, 2006). The process of reflexivity requires me to regularly journal my experiences as I interact with the participants of the study. This action will remind me that I am part of the social world that I am currently examining. My honesty concerning my potential biases in this study is a significant feature in demonstrating my credibility as the researcher, as well as the reliability of the information that will be reported in the present study. As the researcher, I have an in-depth understanding of the world that I have gained through the intertwining of my racial, gender, and class identities. As an advocate for students, with a special interest in assisting those underserved populations, I believe that my responsibility is to give this specific population an opportunity to tell their stories. The knowledge gleaned from this case study will hopefully provide educators who directly serve these populations the tools needed to better assist these students in academic success.

## **Participant Selection**

When looking at the number of participants to be selected I referred to Creswell (2009) who suggested that case study research should not include more than four or five case studies in a single study. He mentioned that keeping the number small allows for a better chance at identifying themes. Based on this, I chose four participants for the purpose of the study. The participants for this study are identified as four African American female tenth-grade students who will be categorically grouped as being high and low academic performers based on their cumulative grade point average after the completion of their first full year of high school. Those participants whose grade point average is 3.0 or higher will be selected to represent high achieving students. The participants with a cumulative grade point average of 2.0 or less will be used to represent low achieving students. The two groups of students are classified as economically disadvantaged when they are recipients of free or reduced lunch, as deemed by South Carolina's public school system standards. Through the school counseling office, two queries will be ran using PowerSchool, a database system used to store information on students. Query 1 will be ran to generate a list that meets the criteria for high achieving low socioeconomic African American female students and query 2 will be ran to generate a list that meets the criteria for low achieving low socioeconomic African American female students. Once the two lists are generated, I will then randomly select two students from each list that meet the criteria needed for group 1-high achievers and group 2-low achievers. These students will be contacted and invited to participate in the study.

### *Research Site*

Purposeful sampling is recommended in qualitative research. Meaning the



research selects individual and sites for study because they can purposefully inform and understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study Creswell (2009). Convenience sampling was used based on the availability of the students that reflected the demographics necessary to conduct the study. Having been employed previously at the site made administration more receptive to granting me permission to access student data and allow me to set up meet times and secure a location to conduct the interviews. The site chosen for this study is a well-known diverse public high school with a population of 2,000 students in grades 9-12 from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I was granted permission by the University of South Carolina's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study as well as by the principal of the school and the director of guidance. Measures will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. In order to remain an ethical researcher, the identities of the participants will be protected and concealed. By maintaining anonymity of the participants' information through use of pseudonyms, the rights of the participants to confidentiality are invoked. Further, the study involves participants who are minors, and who thus require signed parental permission of informed consent by their guardian. These permissions will be sought prior to the conduction of the data collection activities. The documents, which are required to ensure the parents' consent of participation, will be distributed two weeks prior to the scheduled interview. Additionally, parents and participants will be made fully aware of the risks involved in this study and participants will be given the option of withdrawing at any time.

## **Data Collection Method and Procedures**

Appropriate methods in the collection of the qualitative data, issues such as access of the participants, permission from the participants, particularly those members of the vulnerable groups, availability of field experts, and achievement of required samples was used to generate diverse ideas and responses (Yin, 2009). Qualitative methodologists enumerated field observations, conduct of interviews, document review, and audio and visual material reviews as the common forms of qualitative data collection methods (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Yin, 2009). While these methods can all be used through the process of triangulation, I considered the conduct of the semi-structured, in-depth interview as a viable option in the collection of the data. My intention is to generate the perspectives of the low and high achieving students concerning their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Thus, the conduct of the in-depth interview with the students is sufficient to collect the information needed for the research questions (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Face-to-face interviews will be used following semi-structured questions, which were determined to be the most appropriate data collection method in understanding the significance of motivation in the academic performance of students in school (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004). Though it is appropriate in the present study, there remain several advantages and disadvantages associated in using face-to-face interviews. The advantages include meeting my participants in person, which gives me enough time to assess their condition during the interview, the ability to assess the truthfulness of their responses through body cues, and the capacity to document the interview either through video or audio (Spagnoletti, 2010). The disadvantages include proximity of the participants, which

limits my personal evaluation on their responses, and difficulty in replicating the research process.

In the collection of data, I will first seek the permission of the principal concerning the conduct of the study. Doing such would require me to write a letter requesting permission to conduct, as well as recruit, their students to participate in the study. The letter that I will personally deliver to the administrator will contain the purpose, significance, data collection procedure, and ethics that will be observed in the study. Upon receiving the approval of the principal, I will begin by retrieving the list of students who may qualify to participate in the study from the director of guidance. After such, a letter of invitation, as well as informed consent, will be distributed to the parents of the students who qualify to participate in the study. I will personally orient them of the purpose, procedure, and ethical conduct that will be observed in the study. The parents of the participants will be informed that a signed assent form will be accomplished and submitted prior to the conduction of the interview.

In the actual conduct of the face-to-face interview, I will read the content of the assent form to the participants. This will ensure that the participants are aware that the proceedings of the interview will be audio-recorded as basis for the transcription. A copy of the interview transcription will be emailed to the participants. This will provide the participants with the opportunity to review the transcriptions and identify any misrepresentations so that they are avoided and will not affect the research.

A guide questionnaire will be used in the conduct of the semi-structured face-to-face interview with the participants. With five main-questions, the interview will be

estimated to last about one hour. These five main interview questions follow an order aligned to the research questions:

1. What do you feel motivates you in your role as a student?
2. How do you describe the impact of your teachers, administrators, school counselors and other school officials as it relates to your performance in school?
3. What influence do your peers have on your performance?
4. How does your family impact your academic performance?
5. What role does the community that you grew up in or currently live in (church, recreation centers, neighborhood, etc.) play in your academics?

The responses to the interview questions will be analyzed according to the steps and procedures detailed in the subsequent section. The participants will each meet individually with me for one-hour sessions. The interviews will consist of the five guide questions mentioned above. Although the interview will be somewhat guided by these questions, the participants will be given the freedom to expand and move the conversation in any direction that they feel would best get their story told. The interviews will be audio recorded, and the participants will be made aware so that they can receive a copy of the transcribed interview.

### **Data Collection Analysis**

Interviews are the basis for the study. After the recorded interviews are transcribed, I will review the data in order to detect themes that may arise from the information. Information within the transcriptions will be categorized initially using the descriptors aligned with the interview questions.

I will be using a thematic analysis strategy. This is a process of coding and then segregating the data by codes into data —clumps for further analysis and description (Glesne, 2011). The coding process will consist of sorting and defining my data. This defining and sorting process will help me physically separate out —labeled material regarding a topic or subject. Comparisons will be made easier as I perform this systematic mining of the data. There are three possible ways to derive my codes: a priori, a posteriori, and in vivo. A priori codes are generated from my prior knowledge of the phenomenon before the study; such as, my research questions, concepts/theories embedded in the literature on alternative schools and principal leadership. A posteriori codes are generated from the knowledge I gained from the study. Moreover, in vivo codes are generated from the words and expressions used by my participants. As I read the data, I will look for topics, key ideas, key terms and concepts. This will assist me in generating a useful codebook. The codes will be applied to lines or passages that contained that topic, key idea, term or concept. Each code name is a representation of the topic, idea, or concept that was meant to be expressed. Similar lines of text will be coded the exact same way. When I create new codes, I will add them to my codebook and provide a short definition with them. I will create as many major codes as the data calls for so that all of the information will be coded, even the things that do not have a specific place in the organization of the study. I will create an organizational framework for my data by putting like-minded pieces of data together into data clumps (Glesne, 2011) such as categories of codes and themes based on categories. My rationale for using these methods is based on prior coursework I obtained in utilizing methods of data analysis. I found these methods very rewarding during my prior training sessions and decided to use

them in my study to help me identify codes and themes. This analysis process will help me answer my research questions by assisting me in identifying essential phrases or coding certain actions taken by my participants that were directly or indirectly related to my research questions. Categorizing different phrases, will help me to establish themes that are consistent between both groups of participants.

### **Trustworthiness of Data**

To increase credibility and ensure trustworthiness, I used several of the verification procedures described by Creswell, 2009. Being aware of my own subjectivity as highlighted in my "role of the researcher" section, I continued to examine how that might influence my study, I employed journaling so that I could chart my own thoughts and feelings as I interviewed the participants. In addition to this, I also used member checking where I invited the participants to review transcripts of interviews, discussed my thoughts and directions, and shared drafts for feedback from them. This member checking aided in insuring that I accurately interpreted their responses to the questions. Lastly, I used peer review to assist in this process. I asked two of my colleagues who are also in doctoral programs and are familiar with qualitative research to review the data and my interpretation of the data and provide me with their feedback.

### **Summary**

Chapter three details the methodology of the study. The chapter justified the use of the qualitative comparative case study method in exploring the case phenomenon of 4 students who will be grouped into two categories: high and low performing students. The inclusion criteria of the participants are: (a) economically disadvantaged, as determined by the free lunch program, and (b) representatives of low and high performing students,

based their cumulative grade point average. This chapter serves as a blue print for the procedures involved in conducting the study. The next chapter will detail the discoveries and results of the research.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This study was conducted in order to investigate motivational factors in achievement among high and low achieving low SES African American female high school students within a South Carolina public school setting. The purpose of the study was to capture the perceptions of the participant's experiences as to what factors they felt contributed to their academic performance. A review of the literature yielded a common theme regarding motivational factors among this population as it relates to achievement and can best be summarized by Maruyama (2003) who suggested that various motivational factors that contribute to an impoverished child's success include individual motivation, family involvement, school and community support systems. I conducted my research through a comparative case study using four participants. The participants shared their stories of what extrinsic and intrinsic factors they felt contributed to their academic performance. Specific research questions included:

1. What factors of motivation play a role in the academic performance of high and low achieving low socioeconomic high school African American females?
2. What are some intrinsic sources of motivation to do well in school that exist among low achieving and high achieving low SES African American female high school students?



3. What extrinsic factors (teachers, school officials, parents, peers, community) of motivation play a role in the academic performance of low achieving and high achieving low SES African American female high school students?

This chapter will include a description of the participants for the study as well as the results of the data collected from interviews with the participants. This will be presented through the use of themes. To provide a more in depth look into the participant's experiences, quotes and phrases and other statements shared by the participants that support the common themes will be included.

### **Description of Participants**

The participants for the study consisted of four African American females who attended a large suburban South Carolina public high school and were in their second year of high school. The young ladies all qualified for the state's free lunch program. Two of the participants were designated as high achieving for the purpose of this study based on their cumulative grade point average being 3.0 or higher at the completion of their first year of high school. The other two participants were designated as low achieving for the purpose of this study based on their cumulative grade point average being 2.0 or below at the completion of their first year in high school. Each participant will be referred to using a pseudonym to protect their identities: *Participant 1*- "Lala" Age 15. She lives in a nearby trailer park with her mother and two sisters. She currently works as a student counselor at a local recreation center for youth. She considers herself a loner at school in terms of friendships but is involved in the art club and school chorus.

She reports not having any discipline referrals from elementary until the present. Her GPA is a 3.7.

*Participant 2-* “Shanice” Age 16. She also lives in a nearby trailer park with her mother, father, grandmother and baby brother. She helps her mom at home with her baby brother and does not have a job. She is very active within her school and is on the dance team and in the drama club. She sees herself as a friend to everyone and says that she can get along well with anyone, this giving her a lot of friends. She reports having a few minor discipline infractions such as being late to class and not wearing her school ID. Her GPA is a 3.5.

*Participant 3-* “Oni” Age 15. She lives in a nearby trailer park with her mother and two older siblings. She runs errands and cleans up on weekends in the local beauty shop where her mom is employed. She considers herself to be very popular as it relates to peers. She reports having numerous discipline infractions from middle school to present. Her GPA is a 2.0.

*Participant 4-* “Asia” Age 16. She lives in a nearby trailer park with her mother, her mom’s live in boyfriend, four younger siblings and one older sibling. She doesn’t work. She describes herself as the class clown and says she has a lot of friends and hangs in a very large group. She reports having numerous serious discipline infractions from elementary school to present. Her GPA is a 1.8.

### **Analysis of Data**

I conducted interviews with the girls separately. Each interview was audio recorded to aid in the coding process and transcribing. The girls were provided with a

copy of the transcribed interviews to allow for member checking. Using thematic analysis, I reviewed the transcripts to look for themes that emerged throughout the participant's stories and coded them. This resulted in the surfacing of the following major themes between the two groups; Family motivation/lack of family motivation, Positive/Negative teacher and school faculty and staff relationships and future plans. The interview questions that were used to guide the discussion are as follows: These five main interview questions follow an order aligned to the research questions:

1. What do you feel motivates you in your role as a student?
2. How do you describe the impact of your teachers, administrators, school counselors and other school officials as it relates to your performance in school?
3. What influence do your peers have on your performance?
4. How does your family impact your academic performance?
5. What role does the community that you grew up in or currently live in (church, recreation centers, neighborhood, etc.) play in your academics?

Table 4.1 highlights the various themes/codes that surfaced from the stories of the participants. The definition of the themes came from the descriptions provided by the participants and what it meant to them. Family support refers to having someone in the home that pushes/helps you to do good things or serves as a source of encouragement. Lack of family support is marked by little to no help at home, the absence of a positive individual in the home and minimal support. Positive relationships with school faculty and staff refers to their ability to bond, talk with, interact and feel as though they were

helped and in good standing with school officials such as administrators, teachers, counselors and other faculty and staff. Negative relationships with school faculty and staff are described as the inability to connect and the looming feeling that trouble was associated with teachers, admin and other school officials; this was also marked by a feeling of distrust and the mindset that these people do not have the student’s best interest at heart. Belief in self refers to personal goal setting, positive self- esteem, looking beyond the present situation and thinking towards future and what happens after high school and thoughts towards growing up. Also, for some participants this theme referred to independence, being self-reliant and trusting only in yourself. Friendship refers to relationships with peers. Community support is described as non- family members in the participant’s immediate environment and the role they play in their lives.

*Table 4.1 Codes and Themes*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>
<p>Family Support (Support/Lack of support)- Refers to the motivation, pushing, encouragement from guardians, immediate and extended family to do well in school. Lack of family motivation is the absence or scarcity of family support.</p>	<p>Family support/Lack of Family support- Always there, pushing, helping, encouraging, making things work, finding time, setting goals. Lack of Family support-never showing up, no help, focus on right now, don’t care, other things more important than school. Taking care of yourself</p>
<p>Relationships with School Faculty and Staff</p>	<p>Positive Relationships with school faculty</p>

<p>(Positive/Negative) Positive relationships refer to good experiences and interactions with teachers, counselors, administrators and other school officials. Also the building of trust and seeing faculty and staff as helpful and being viewed in a positive light by faculty and staff at school. Negative relationships with school officials is described as the lack of trust and failure to connect. Also the inability to view adults in the school as helpful.</p>	<p>and staff- Trust, someone you can go to, want you to do well, caring, helpful.</p> <p>Negative Relationships- Punishment, always watching, can't trust, unfair treatment</p>
<p>Belief in self refers to morals, values, believing in one's abilities, goal setting and ambitions for the future. Also refers to independence, ability to take care of self and day to day survival.</p>	<p>Belief in self- Drive, hope, thinking positive, being optimistic, thinking about college, survival, making things work, focus on the right now, self- reliance, trusting no one but yourself.</p>
<p>Friendship</p> <p>Forming relationships with peers.</p>	<p>Loner, One best friend, someone that understands, standing out, being accepted, liked by others, Closeness, sticking up, trusting</p>
<p>Community Support- People not related to you in your immediate environment that contribute to your well- being.</p>	<p>Community support- Church groups, recreation centers, next door neighbors, helpers, dependable, keeping busy, a place</p>

	to go, staying off the streets.
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*Themes*

**Family Support**

All participants were consistent with what family support was. They shared that it was the motivation, pushing, encouragement from guardians, immediate and extended family to do well. Two of the four participants commented on how their family started early with them in showing them the importance of doing well in school. They shared stories that put their families in the role of motivators, encourages helpers and driving factors towards them being successful in school. The other two participants shared a different aspect. One which was focused more on the sub theme of lack of support. Their stories consisted of the absent parent or the family who did not talk about school or who did put a lot of value on education. These two participants shared a lot about how their families seemed to be more focused on things outside of school and viewed school as more of a holding or boarding environment than a place of learning.

When asked about the role that they felt their family played in their academic performance the high achieving participants shared stories which revolved around parental support. They discussed how their parents served as encouragers and helpers. The low achieving participants shared different stories. Their stories were marked by negative views of school by their parents, lack of support and showing little interest in their education.

Lala- *My mom always pushes me to do well in school. She always makes sure that she helps me with my homework and projects even when she has to work late, she even calls me from her job to ask me what I had for homework. She always comes to anything that I am involved in. Even when no one else would come she is always there. She tells me and my sisters that she wants us to go to college and do something good in life to help others and be able to make good money. My dad left us a long time ago, so my mom wants me to get a good education so I don't have to depend on any man to take care of me.*

Shanice- *My dad is really strict and makes sure that I don't act like the other kids in the park. I can't do anything until my homework is done and no hanging out in the park. He makes me get involved in things he says to keep my mind busy. My mom stays home and takes care of my brother. She is not very strict, but she told me she always wanted to do good in school but she had me so she dropped out. She says that I have to do good because no one in our family did. I have to be the one that becomes something. My grandmother always helps me with making things for school or sewing things for projects. I always have the best projects because of her. She teaches me a lot every day about God and church, says she is proud of me. Since I'm getting older they can't always understand my work but I always show my mom and grandma what I'm working on so they know. My dad just wants it done and me to get good grades!*

Oni- *Family support, well my mom does hair and she likes when I help out. When I come from school she doesn't really ask me about it. She doesn't get mad if I make bad grades. I'm going to fix hair too so I just want to go to beauty school. My mom went there and she said you don't have to be smart or anything to go, just sign up and go. When she's not working at the shop she goes out a lot with her friends. I go out with my friends too*

*or with my older sister. Sometimes I don't get my homework done but my mom doesn't get mad. Like I said I'm going to beauty school so you don't really have to know history and math for that. My mom lets me help at the shop, I really like that.*

*Asia- My momma say school is good to get rid of me. She say she ain't got to worry about me being up at the house worrying her all day. Ha! She don't come to stuff at school, she better not, I'm too old for that. She didn't come when I was younger either, which I don't really care. She comes when I get in trouble though. I don't really care about school anyway. My momma never make me do homework or check my report card or parent portal or none of that. She said I just better help around the house or I have to get out. I really want to be a designer and make my own shoes. I have a friend that will help me. My momma said that she don't care as long as I make some money.*

### **School Faculty and Staff Relations**

The high achieving participants shared their views on school faculty and staff. Both participants had positive comments regarding their interactions with teachers, counselors and administrators. Their view of school faculty and staff was that of helpers, people you can trust. The low achieving participants viewed faculty and staff as obstacles. They spoke of teachers as being hard on them or negative. They saw administrators as authority figures that did not have their best interest in mind. They did not feel they could trust their counselors and therefore did not visit with them unless required.



*Lala- I have had a lot of great teachers over the years. Most of my teachers go the extra mile to help. My teachers that I have had in high school make learning fun. Or maybe it's not that fun, but they are so nice and work so hard to make sure we all understand everything, it seems fun to me. I have had two counselors that were helpful, they always made sure that my schedule was great and I got the classes I wanted. I had a big problem one year and needed to talk to someone and I remember my counselor being there to listen to me. Our principal is cool and I have had really good principals over the years too. I always see them when we have award ceremonies or special events at the school. Keeping things organized is what I see them as doing.*

*Shanice- I can describe my teachers in one word...Awesome! Even as far back as kindergarten, I feel that I always got the best teachers. They always complimented me and let me know that I was smart. Kind of like my family. My counselors have been cool too. I mostly see them for schedules and things like that, but never any problems. In middle school and elementary I saw our principals do a lot more than I do in high school. In high school you usually have to go see them if you have some problems or discipline stuff. I really never had any of that! Thank goodness!*

*Oni- I have never had a teacher I liked...well take that back, I had one but he got fired for some shady stuff at school. They always loading us with work and writing me up for doing stuff that I don't be doing. I seen my counselor a lot, but she only talk a bunch of garbage about me trying to be nice to people and focusing in class. I really don't care about that and I can tell that she know I ain't listening to her. My administrator is cool except for when he has to suspend me which is like all the time. So I guess he's not that cool. It's always been like that though. The nurse use to be nice to me until I took some*

*stuff out of her office and then she snitched on me and I got in trouble and now we don't chill like that no more.*

*Asia- Me and teachers don't get along. I stay in trouble because they say I got a lot of mouth on me. Which I do and I don't care. They don't care, they never even look at me when they hand me that paper to go see the principal. He gets on my nerves too, matter of fact every principal I had gets on my nerves. They never let me explain myself and they always watching and waiting to put it on me. I don't ever stand a chance. Even the security guard be standing outside watch me, always talking about he see me smoking. Liar. That's what pretty much everybody at school does, tells lies. Even when I was in kindergarten, they did nothing but lie on me. I can't wait to leave.*

### **Belief in Self**

When asked what role did their own personal thoughts, and feelings about school play in their academic performance both groups of girls shared different perspectives. The high achieving girls talked a lot about setting goals and having always felt like they wanted to be successful even in earlier grades. They mentioned things like abiding by a set of morals and having values as well as planning for the future. The low achieving girls put major emphasis on the present and what they could do to take care of themselves and be independent now. They shared stories of having a survival mode mindset as it related to education and their overall performance in school.

*Lala- I was always taught to think positive and show others the way things should be done. I guess like be a good example. So I always think that people are watching me. So, this makes me feel like I should always be doing good things. I do well in school, I*

*help in my community and I want to go to college so that I can make a big difference in the world. No matter what happens, I always dream big. My dad always tells me this.*

*Shanice- Not many girls in my neighborhood do well in school. I think that makes me and others like me rare. I go to church and always remember what I was taught. I have good family values and those make me think good of myself. I use to get picked on a lot in middle school for being smart, but I didn't let that bother me because I know it's all going to pay off once I graduate and go to college. Whenever I would feel bad about myself, I would just think how cool it's going to be to get out of the trailer park and do something in my life and for my family. I always say that I love myself...like every day! That keeps me motivated.*

*Oni- I'm the only person I can count on. I don't trust nobody and I don't wait on noone. I know I can take care of myself and I know that I can do whatever I need to do to survive out here. I wish I didn't have to go to school so I could get a job and really take care of business. I know that I could do a lot more if I could work a full time job instead of wasting my time at school. I need to be making money now, I know that I can do it too.*

## **Friendship**

When asked about peer relations and how that played a role in academics, both groups had very different responses. The high achieving students did not place a big emphasis on friendships. Their interactions with peers were more course work related rather than interpersonal relationships. The low achieving group of girls discussed the social interaction as being the most important part of their school experience. They put a high value on being accepted by their peers and supporting their friends.

*Lala- Well I really don't have a lot of people I consider friends. Mostly just people that I am cool with or that I might know from a club that I am involved in or at the youth center where I work.... I'm not allowed to hang out with other kids. My family doesn't think this is a good idea because of peer pressure and loosing focus on my schoolwork. My mom always says, "friends, boys and books don't mix." I mostly just keep to myself.*

*Shanice- I would say that everyone gets along with me and I get along with them. I don't really have close friends but if you ask anyone my name, I'm sure they will have nice things to say. I don't meet any strangers, very outgoing. I would love to go out with some kids from school but my dad doesn't trust them. He always says they are bad influences. I really don't agree, but I don't argue. So, friendships are important to me, but I don't think they really affect how I do in school. I kind of separate that from my school studies. My dad wouldn't have it any other way!*

*Oni- It's not about who I want to be friends with..It's about how everyone wants to be friends with me. That's the main reason I still come to school is to chill with all my friends. That's probably the best part of school. It's what I look forward to. I don't know how I got so popular but I am. People want to be me. Now that's something... Pretty much all of my friends at school live in my neighborhood too, so we hang out at night and on the weekends! People know us all around!*

*Asia- My friends make me want to come to school. I can count on them and they know I always have their back. We go out, we hang out at my house and everything. My mom doesn't care who I hang with either. She says it's my choice. I think sometimes I get my friends in trouble in school It's funny to me. But that's what they get for following me*

*around so much....ha! If I didn't have my friends I would probably runaway and just not go to school. I don't know, maybe I wouldn't but that's what I like most about school. Me and my crew we terrorize the school. Well not really but I bet teachers think that when they see us.*

### **Community Support**

Each participant was asked to comment on the role of community support systems as it relates to their academics. The two high achieving participants mentioned a heavy involvement in church as well as being active at the local recreation center. They commented that these two places also reinforced the values and morals that they were being taught at home while giving them something to do to keep them busy. They also mentioned how their neighbors on each side of them always keep an eye out for them. They know if they need something or someone for extra help, the neighbors on either side of them would be there for them. The other two young ladies in the low achieving group did not have a lot to say about community supports. They talked mostly about peers and hanging in the neighborhood outside or going to clubs, parties outside of the community.

*Lala- I spend a lot of time at the rec center. I work their afterschool tutoring little kids. I use to go there after school when I was little so I wouldn't have to be at home alone until my mom got off work. They always helped me there and made sure I didn't get into any trouble. My mom would have me to stay there until 6:30pm when they closed. Then we usually had some church activity to go to. We still do that now even now that I am older. The people at my church have always been very supportive of me doing good in school. My pastor says that they are going to give me a scholarship. Every year they give all the*

*kids at my church school supplies, so we don't have to worry about that. I'm in like two youth groups at my church and we even take college visits. Also, my neighbors are like super spies, but they are really good people. On the weekends when my mom is working and the rec center is closed, I go to their house or they come and check on me at my house to make sure that I am safe.*

*Shanice- I would say that my church has been very supportive in everything that I do in school. Some of my church members even come to events or programs that I have at school! It's funny because at my church we have a youth group and they let us talk about things that happen in school and try to help us to think a positive ways to handle them. This is always helpful to me getting through big situations. For me the church is an emotional support system. Going there makes me feel like a better person and I try to be that better person at school. And my dad says it keeps me from being on the street with all the "knuckle heads" in our park! Also one of my neighbors is like a big momma. She looks out for all the kids on our block. She always gives us extra food even if we don't need it! Her big thing is that we do our homework and let her check it. I don't think she understands it, but she still checks it!!!*

*Oni-I guess the people at my mom's beauty shop always look out for me. But they mostly want to make sure I don't get pregnant or get mixed up with some bad boy. I still always like the bad boys though, so I guess they don't help much. They say stuff like stay in school and stuff, but that's about all. They don't ever give me nothing or do anything for me. So, I guess they don't really do much for me when it comes to school. I mostly just chill with my friends in the neighborhood and their parents don't be home most of the time. That's about all....*

*Asia- Where I stay people always have house parties. When I'm not going to those I go to the club. Probably not supposed to be in them but they don't care. As long as you got five dollars, you can get in. I hang with my friends in the neighborhood and that's pretty much it. We don't talk about school, that's our chill time. I mean we talk about people at school but not about grades and stuff like that. We talk about everything else though!*

## **Research Questions**

Table 4.2 shows a comparison of the themes that surfaced based on the research questions. Attention should be given to the difference between the two groups of participants perspectives on planning for the future and being goal oriented verses survival in the present thinking when it comes to internal motivation. The high achieving participants constantly mentioned college and shared how they strived to do well in school so that they could graduate and pursue higher education. In contrast, the lower achieving participants were more focused on the present and basic survival. They were not concerned with future and did not feel the need to work towards anything academically. As it relates to extrinsic motivation, family seemed to play a major role in both groups of participant's academic motivation. For the high achievers a common theme was families supporting them in school. They mentioned parents placing a high value on education, making good grades, doing homework and providing them with the resources necessary to complete these tasks. Also a lot of talk was about planning for the future just as the high achieving participants mentioned when talking about intrinsic motivation. In contrast, the low achievers did not mention support from families when it came to academics. They viewed school as more of a holding place to keep them from being at home. Their interviews depicted parents as being concerned with other things

and not placing a high value on education. Positive versus negative relationships with school officials was a significant theme between both groups. The high achieving participants viewed teachers, counselors and administrators as helpers and noted their good relationships with various school officials. In contrast, the low achievers, described school officials in a more negative light. They shared bad experiences with teachers and expressed that they felt administrators could not be trusted. Peer relations as shared by the high achieving participants didn't seem to play a major role in academics. They didn't feel that friendships positively or negatively impacted their academic performance. However, the low achieving participants put a high emphasis on friendships and even mentioned how it served as a motivational tool for them to come to school. They also shared that they viewed socialization with peers as being what they look forward to coming to school for. Community support and the lack there of was another prevalent theme between the participants. The high achievers shared stories of significant community organizations such as church, recreations centers and neighbors that played a role in encouraging and motivating them to be successful in school. The low achieving participants did not have any stories to share on the impact of community members as it related to education. They mostly reverted back to discussions of peers in the community who they engaged in activities outside of school as being important.



Table 4.2 Research Questions and Themes

Research Questions	Themes
<p>1. What are some intrinsic sources of motivation to do well in school that exist among low achieving and high achieving low SES African American female high school students?</p>	<p>Goal Setting future oriented thinking vs. Present oriented thinking/Survival</p>
<p>2. What extrinsic factors (teachers, school officials, parents, peers, community) of motivation play a role in the academic performance of low achieving and high achieving low SES African American female high school students?</p>	<p>Families that place a high value on education vs. families do not place a high value on education</p> <p>Positive relationships with school officials vs. negative relationships with school officials</p> <p>Low significance placed on peer relations vs. high importance placed on peer relations</p> <p>Strong positive community influences vs. lack of positive community support</p>

## **Exploration of Trustworthiness**

I found it quite beneficial to journal after meeting with the participants. This technique was used for me to explore my own thoughts, feelings and to control for any possible bias. For me it was almost like a debriefing. I had the opportunity to jot down in an informal way my thoughts, impressions and perceptions of the interviews. Something that stood out to me in reviewing my journal was that I used a lot of positive language when referring to high achieving participants. This was not evident in my journaling about the low achieving participants. At first I thought this was due to some type of favoritism or bias that I was unconsciously experiencing. Further examination led me to realize that this was not the case. I believe I was reflecting what they had expressed to me. Throughout the interview with the low achieving participants, they often spoke with a very negative air while the high achieving participants used more positive language. Both groups of participants had the opportunity to review the coded transcripts in order to be certain that my interpretation of their stories were accurate. They were able to go through and make marks where needed for any discrepancies or misinterpretations. Both groups agreed that I did well in capturing their stories. They did not have any concerns, corrections or additions to be added. One of the participants from the high achieving group commented that she felt like a celebrity having her story apart of something important! Lastly, peer review was used as an additional validation method. Having the benefit of working in the school system made it relatively easy to find two extra set of eyes to review the data and explore my interpretations, meanings, and ask me questions for clarity on my findings. I decided to use two school administrators who are also in doctoral programs and are familiar with qualitative research. We had an opportunity to

meet and discuss their review of my data. Both reviewers found that my codes and themes were similar to what they would have interpreted. One reviewer felt that I did an excellent job of identifying the major themes that stood out. She commented that she would have struggled with this being that the participant's stories were so colorful and filled with so many details. The other reviewer asked me a lot of technical questions about the design of the study and my reasoning behind conducting this research. He shared that he thought that it was definitely a much needed area of research. He too commended me on my identification of major themes as well as my attention to detail. This was a very helpful step in assuring the trustworthiness of my research.

## **Summary**

Findings from this study provided a great deal of insight into motivational factors in academic performance between high achieving low SES students and low achieving low SES students. The participants stories revealed themes such as goal oriented future thinking and present survival mode mindset, parental support, lack of parental support, positive and negative relationships with school officials, high and low importance of peer relations and community support and the deficit of community support. The high achieving participants had a lot of support from family and community members. They did not place a high value on peer relations as it related to academic success. They also reported a positive view of the future in terms of planning for college and setting goals, thus motivating them to want to excel academically to accomplish these goals. In contrast their low achieving counterparts lacked parental and community support towards school. They were more concerned with present survival and did not share aspirations for the future. They placed a high value on peer relations and found this to be a

motivational factor for coming to school but did not impact performance. A detailed discussion of the themes and findings as it relates to the literature will be presented in chapter five. Implications for school officials working with these populations and suggestions for future research will also be presented.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the motivational factors that exist between high and low achieving low SES African American high school females. I set out to explore student perceptions on motivation and the role it played in their academic performance. Closing the achievement gap has been a topic of concern for years, with an emphasis on highlighting the disparity between the academic performances of African American students in comparison to their white peers (Education Trust, 2005). Little research was found, however, that was conducted on within group differences. Seemingly little attention has been paid to the motivational factors of this population as it relates to high and low achievement within this group. Sources of motivation among low achieving and high achieving African American students can bring a new perspective to the experiences of these students within the public school system. Results of this study can be used to provide a working framework for educators(administrators, school counselors, teachers, community members) interested in providing effective support to Low SES African American Students. The data gathered can be used to develop programs and other methods of improving academics within this population.

In this chapter, a discussion of the findings will be shared as it relates to the review of the literature in chapter two. Excerpts from the literature review will be used in this chapter to provide a basis for the thematic discussion. In addition to this, implications, and suggestions for further research will be discussed.

The results of the study were gathered from the data collected following the interviews of four participants. The participants were four African American high school female students in their second year of high school. The participants were divided into two groups, high achieving and low achieving as determined by their cumulative grade point average. Both groups were classified as low socioeconomic based on qualifying for the state's free lunch program. The research questions for the study were as follows:

1. What factors of motivation play a role in the academic performance of high and low achieving low socioeconomic high school African American females?
2. What are some intrinsic sources of motivation to do well in school that exist among low achieving and high achieving low SES African American female high school students?
3. What extrinsic factors (teachers, school officials, parents, peers, community) of motivation play a role in the academic performance of low achieving and high achieving low SES African American female high school students?

The data was coded and analyzed using thematic analysis strategy. This is a process of coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description (Glesne, 2011). Five themes emerged from this analysis: family support (support/lack of support), relationships with school faculty and staff (positive/negative), belief in self, friendship and community support.

## **Findings and Themes**

### *Family Support*

Armor (2006) suggested that parental support and family involvement have a positive effect on the educational achievement of African American students. Thus the family context is especially important, given that the home is the major ecological setting for children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Luster & McAdoo, 1994; McAdoo, 1991). The participants in the current study who were in the high achieving group shared stories of their parents and extended family members showing an interest in their education and making certain that they supported them by coming to school events and helping them at home despite economic challenges. The participants from this group described their parents as the “driving force” or commented how their parents “pushed” them to do well. These girls placed a lot of emphasis on how important this was in motivating them to be successful. In contrast, the participants in the low achieving group shared stories of their parents not placing a high value on education. They felt as though their parent’s view of school was more of a holding place, or something for them to do to get them out of the home. This seemed to contribute to the participant’s negative view of school. Wilson (2009) suggested that students, whose parents kept track of where they were going and what they were involved in, seemed to be a relevant factor in their doing well in school. In contrast, Wilson found that those students who did not have parental support were marked by low achievement. As a result of these findings, Wilson advocated for parents being active participants in the social and academic aspects of their student’s lives. The current study alluded to similar results in that participants in the high achieving group mentioned how their parents were concerned with who they interacted with and what

they were involved in. These participants shared that they were involved in various activities and had places to go after school to be sure they were safe and in a positive atmosphere. Their parents were involved in securing this. The low achieving participants didn't have much to share regarding their parents influence on their social activities. They seemed to have a lot of freedom based on their descriptions of their in school and out of school interactions, Huang and Mason (2008) delved into the importance of parental involvement in the academic success of very young African American students. In the current study, the low achieving participants did not indicate in their stories having ever had support from their parents even in the early years. The high achieving participants constantly made reference to how their parents were always interested in their performance early on in their academic career. This mirrored the findings of Hagan and Mason's research which resulted in their findings of parents in the study indicating that their children were not born into a legacy of success. However, they believed that through education, their children would have the opportunity to succeed. A common theme among parents was that they shared a special zeal for staying in tune with what their children were involved in and being active in their learning. Children of these parents were marked by high achievement.

### *Relationships with School Faculty*

Wiggan's (2007) research highlighted the experiences of high achieving African American students and their perceptions on teacher practices, engaging pedagogy versus disengaging pedagogy. His phenomenological study consisted of a small sample of low SES high achieving African American students. Among many discoveries his research indicated that students that did well reported that engaging pedagogy impacted their



school achievement and was associated with compassionate teachers, where caring meant being committed to teaching and developing professional relationships with the students. In the current study, the high achieving students described teachers, faculty and staff as being “helpful” and “supportive.” They made reference to positive interactions with school officials. This was very different from the low achieving students’ perceptions of school officials. They described their interactions as being very negative, and saw them in a very punitive light. They failed to make connections with school officials and found themselves always getting into trouble with these adults unlike their high achieving counterparts who spoke highly of teachers and their positive relationships. Howard (2001) indicated that effective teachers of African American students are not exclusively concerned about students’ academic and cognitive development but about their social, emotional, and moral growth as well. He noted that when teachers take into considerations these factors, especially within economically deprived populations, students are more eager to move towards success. In the current study, the low achieving participants seemed to view school officials as not caring about them and watching /waiting for them to do something wrong. They never mentioned any positive talks or sharing personal information with teachers, administrators or counselors. This was quite different with the high achievers. Although they did not go into detail about specific conversations with school officials both participants did share how teachers, counselors and administrators were viewed as encouragers, This indicating some type of positive bonding taking place.

### *Belief in Self*

Kerpelman, Eryigit, and Stephens (2007) set out on a journey to take a look at various factors that are associated with the achievement of African American students. Using a phenomenological approach, they took a large sample of inner city middle and high school students and addressed associations of self-efficacy, ethnic identity, and parental support with “future education orientation.” This orientation was defined as an adolescent’s desire to think ahead, set goals for themselves, and achieve them both personally and academically. The researchers discovered a significant relationship between self-efficacy and future education orientation. Hence, the more efficacious students feel, the more they excel and look towards bettering themselves for the future. The current study results coincide with this study. The high achieving group shared a lot about future goals, attending college and being successful later in life. Whereas the low achieving group reflected on the present and did not share much about future plans or make connections. The participants in the high achieving group also spoke very highly of their abilities to excel academically and having high ambitions. In contrast, the lower achieving students were limited in their discussion of ability and belief in themselves to achieve. They were more concerned with survival and their belief in self was linked more to trusting only themselves in day to day social interactions rather than academic ability. Stewart (2006) also suggested that African American students who strive to think beyond their current situation and look towards bettering themselves exhibited high levels of achievement despite their economic situation. In the present study low achieving students often made mention of not having the necessary resources to participate in various projects, activities that were school

related. They would use negative language in saying that it didn't matter and they didn't really care because "school was not important". The high achieving participants mentioned having limited resources, but shared how their parents and those around them would do everything they could to be certain that their needs were met. They also indicated that this was yet another driving force for them to want to do well in school so that they could graduate, go to college and get a career where they could provide for themselves and help their families. Here we see these students using poverty as a means for motivation rather than a hindrance.

### ***Friendships***

Brickhouse, Lowery and Schultz (2000) conducted a study on African American female students in a public school and their academic achievement. They found that the students who performed well academically reported feeling accepted by their peers and acclimated into their school. In the current study peer relations seemed to play a large role as a source of motivation of the low achieving students to come to school. They reported a major factor in why they actually came to school was to socialize and be around their peers. These students reported having large friend circles and being what they referred to as "popular." It did not have any bearings on their academic performance. For the high achieving students peer relations were mentioned in more of an academic light. For example, one of the participants mentioned her involvement in clubs and activities at school and having a big social circle due to this. The other high achieving participant mentioned study groups at school with friends and in class project based peer relations. The high achievers seemed to have more of an academic/extra

curricular link with peers. In contrast, the low achievers were more focused on the social aspect, group membership side of relationships with peers.

### ***Community***

Ogbu (1981) suggested that the collective experience of one's community might communicate important messages about race, ethnicity, education, and opportunity. His research also mentioned how young people living in communities where poverty and unemployment are rampant and where members of their racial-ethnic group have limited access to education and opportunity might have pessimistic views. This was true in the current study for the low achieving participants. These students had a very negative outlook on school and performing well. However, their high achieving peers who lived in the same community had very different positive views on education and were involved in healthy and motivating after school programs, had connections with positive adults in the community or were involved in church. They seemed to identify more with the Irvin, Farmer, Leung, Thompson, and Hutchins (2010) whose research focused on the relationship between rural low income adolescents' achievement and their involvement in community activities. Their multi methods quantitative design indicated that there was a distinct correlation between those youth involved in church activities and youth center programs within their community and high achievement in school. The low achieving students in the present study only shared their connection with the community as it related to "hanging out with friends" going to parties and just being in the neighborhood. This suggesting a lack of structure as it pertained to time spent outside of the classroom. Rhamie (2006) researched the effects of church involvement on academic achievement in her qualitative study on African American females. Her research showed

the support of the church for these students was very important in building resilience and motivating them towards high academic performance. In the current study, high achieving participants reflected this in their shared stories of how they were involved in church youth groups, participated in church related activities and/or had church members that provided them with financial support for school related activities or supported them by coming to different events. Those students in the low achieving group did not share that they had any church affiliations.

### **Significance of the Study**

Chapter one described the significance of the present study as it related to knowledge generation, professional application and social change. The results of the study yielded the following as it pertains to those three areas.

**Knowledge Generation-** The themes that emerged from the research of motivational factors among this population were; family support, belief in self, friendship, relationships with school officials and community support. The absence or presence of these factors played a significant role in the participants view on education and their academic performance. Having this knowledge can assist school officials and community members in taking a look at their impact within the lives of these students and encourage them to be more cognizant of their daily interactions, rapport building, being intentional and supportive of students in this population.

**Professional Application-** School officials and community leaders can take the knowledge gained from the present study's uncovering of the motivational factors towards academic performance and apply it by expanding professional development opportunities for teachers and other educators that focus on effectively working with this

population. Since parental support was a very important source of motivation, the research also suggests that parent education programs and other opportunities for parents to learn helpful strategies to support their children should be explored. In addition to this, the research suggested that positive community involvement such as youth center involvement and church affiliation were very important in motivating students to perform well. This would be helpful for community leaders in giving them a starting point for looking at recruiting those students at an early age into programs and helping parents with the resources necessary to keep them involved.

Social Change- Giving these young ladies a voice to share their experience can open the door for other young ladies to feel motivated and confident in sharing their story and helping others. This also speaks to the need for advocacy from school faculty such as school counselors to be certain that these students needs are being properly met.

The next section goes into a deeper discussion on how these factors can be put into practice.

### **Implications for Practice**

The current study offers helpful implications for teachers, administrators, counselors and other school officials. To begin it is evident that parental involvement plays a major role in motivating high achieving low SES African American females to perform well academically. These girls benefit from having a parent who supports them by encouraging them, setting limitations, creating structure and showing a genuine interest in their education. The other side of this reveals that low achieving low SES African American females who do not have this support and motivation, do not share the same view on the importance of academics. What this may suggest for school officials is

targeting these families as early as elementary school and integrating parent education programs, parenting workshops and other forms of positive parenting strategy programs for low SES parents to have access to. It may also suggest some type of tracking or monitoring system to insure that from one grade level to the next, these parents are consistent with attending these help sessions.

Another implication is that positive and negative relationships with school officials were very important in contributing to students' views of school and their motivation towards doing well academically. High achieving students described teachers, administrators and counselors as being helpful, trustworthy, caring and reported having a good rapport with them. The low achieving students reported having negative experiences with faculty and staff. They viewed them in more of an authoritarian position. These students reported having numerous discipline infractions and always having a feeling that faculty and staff viewed them in a negative light. They associated school faculty and staff with punishment and negative consequences. These feelings led to their inability to bond and create positive relationships. This information can be very helpful to school officials in their work with students. For example, this may help administrators in looking at more positive approaches to behavioral interventions. It may also be useful in developing professional development opportunities for school faculty and staff. For counselors this can be helpful in offering more small group and individual sessions focused on topics that would be effective in garnering respect and trust and motivating this population to excel academically. Going a step further, the results of the study also indicates a call to action and advocacy as it relates to school counselors. This is depicted within the American School Counselor's Association National Model (2012),

which states that“ Because school counseling cuts across all curricular areas, school counselors often are the only adults who have a big picture of the students; therefore school counselors need to advocate for their students to allow students to become successful. That advocacy and other work of school counselors should lead to changes in the school culture to create the optimal environment for learning. (p. xi) As educational leaders, school counselors are ideally situated to serve as advocates for every student in meeting high academic, career and personal/social standards. Advocating for the academic achievement of every student is a key role of school counselors and places them at the forefront of efforts to promote school reform. To promote student achievement, school counselors advocate for students’ academic, career and personal/social development needs and work to ensure these needs are addressed throughout the K-12 school experience. School counselors believe, support and promote every student’s opportunity to achieve success in school. (ASCA, 2012 p. 4) 70 School counselors also serve as advocates by working with school faculty/staff, parents/family, and community members to remove barriers to student success and achievement, especially for minority students in low-income, urban schools (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Bryan, 2005; Lee 2005). Bryan suggests that counselors can educate teachers, administrators, and other school staff, about those barriers through professional development and other staff training. The school counselor can be a tremendous asset in targeting those associated with this population.

Support from the community and extracurricular involvement in community based organizations seemed to play a major role in the motivation of the high achieving students. They reported how important it was having their church, neighbors



and other community members supporting them, encouraging them and providing them with resources needed to perform well in school. They also had positive things to say about their involvement in recreation center programs and being involved in various organizations that met after school as well. The low achievers did not share in this experience. They were not able to report having any extra curricular involvement, attending church or having community members to look after them. One of the low achievers did talk about her work within the community beauty salon but it did not have any connection with her academics from what she described. This information could be helpful to parents and educators as it relates to getting these students involved in positive community based activities. For community leaders this information can be useful in looking at targeting this population early and giving parents the resources in order to get their children involved. Recruitment and retention of youth in positive community programs could be explored with this population as well.

A final implication of this study is that the internal factors of motivation in this study appear to be outcomes of the external factors. The high achieving students spoke about how they worked hard in school because they wanted to further their education by graduating and attending college. They implied that parents, teachers and members of the community shared these same goals for them and provided the source of encouragement for them to perform well in school in order to achieve these goals. This suggesting that their determination, self-esteem and ability to think past their current situation and into the future may be associated with positive influence of those significant people within their lives. In contrast, the low achievers lacked the ability to set academic goals or look beyond the present. They appeared to be stuck in what they described as a

basic survival mode. Again, they were unable to recall instances of motivation from parents, school officials or community members as it related to academic achievement. This is helpful knowledge to educators and policymakers in that more attention can be devoted to targeting the external factors such as advocacy for effective parenting strategies, expanding professional development topics for school officials and working closely with community members to develop support systems for this population,

### **Study Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research**

Chapter one noted three possible limitations to the current study; issues with the researcher being bias since they are the only one conducting the interviews and personal perceptions of the population by the researcher hindering the results. I will highlight how those were addressed in the current study next.

Establishing trustworthiness for the study as indicated in the previous chapter was very important in controlling for researcher bias and misinterpretation of the data. Member checking, researcher journaling and peer review were all used to control for biasness, researcher personal perceptions of what was being studied and misinterpretation of the data. The helpfulness of the research as it applies to other settings and different populations could be something that is worthy of being explored in future research. The next section highlights suggestions for expanding the research.

A review of the current study suggests that motivation both external and internal sources play a significant role in the academic performance of low Socioeconomic African American females. When looking at future research it may be helpful to look at

gender differences and see what males in these groups may report as motivational factors in their academic performance. This study focused on African American females. It may be useful to explore the perceptions of other low socioeconomic minorities and hear their stories. The current study participants were high school students. It would be interesting to consider other grade levels; elementary and middle school aged participants. A final area of interest for future research would be a study that incorporated participants from different geographical locations such as inner city populations and explore their perceptions of what motivates them academically.

### **Additional Study Limitations, Implications for further research and other insight gained for school counselors**

Other limitations to this study to be considered are the definition of what deems a student low socioeconomic in other area in comparison to South Carolina's standards, saturation-having more student participants in each group and insuring that the sample is a true representation of the school population. When looking towards extending research it would also be beneficial to consider changing the interview style to a focus group rather than meeting with participants individually. This could provide the dynamic of peer interaction especially since peers played a role in motivation for the low achieving students.

A more intuitive look into additional knowledge obtained that could better assist counselors in working with this population yielded the importance of looking at providing families of low achieving students with career resources early on. Low achieving students noted how their parents placed a huge emphasis on survival and the present situation. If these parents were given the opportunity to have career counseling,

they may be able to focus more on their students' academic performance. School counselors could help facilitate this by bringing in community career resources as early as elementary to assist. In keeping with early intervention, it is important to also look at counselor education programs and training counselors to look deeper into the impact of the family and community as it pertains to academic performance among this population. By doing this, counselors will be better prepared to work with targeting these areas early. Since group membership and peers was very important to low SES participants, this is helpful news to counselors in looking at the creation of small groups focused on belonging and developing positive peer circles. Perceptions of school officials and teachers by low SES participants were very negative. They did not have a lot of trust or positive connections with school staff. Having this information from the study could provide counselors with the tools necessary to take a deeper look at what may be at the root of these feelings and actually explore teacher and administrator perceptions of this population of students. What preconceived notions do school faculty and staff have about low SES students? Counselors can provide professional development for teachers and administrators about this with the goal of changing these misconceptions and hopefully creating positive relationships between teachers, administration and this population.

## **Summary**

In this study, I set out to explore the perceptions of motivational factors in the academic performance between low SES high achieving and low achieving high school females. The purpose of this study was twofold. First, I wanted to give this population a voice by affording them the opportunity to share their experiences. I also wanted to provide helpful insight for faculty, staff and other school officials and community members serving this population in order to provide them with the knowledge necessary to better assist this population. Results of the study from four interviews, yielded five themes; family support (support/lack of support), relationships with school faculty and staff (positive/negative), belief in self, friendship and community support. These themes played significant roles in the participant's views of their academic performance. Further research is needed to provide additional insight into the lives and experiences of this population. The sharing of this knowledge is key to better assisting and serving this population.

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