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HOPE TRANSCENDS: CREATING LADDERS TO OPPORTUNITY
FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

by

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HOPE TRANSCENDS: CREATING LADDERS TO OPPORTUNITY
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my late mother, Earnestine Carrington Sauls, who believed in me and was certain at her core that I was capable of great things. Thank you, my precious mother, for demanding excellence and the pursuit of my potential. Thank you teaching me the value of an education and a love of learning. Thank you for being a role model of what sacrifice and work ethic looks like. Thank you for being my biggest fan and cheerleader. Even in your physical absence, your belief in me continues to compel me to pursue my goals and to excel. I am grateful that your spirit and your voice compelling me forward lives within me.

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Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to all of the at-risk children in the world who want to see and achieve more than they may presently believe is possible, especially the

first ones who crossed my path. Thank you for helping me to discover the purpose for which I was created. Believe in and pursue your dreams.

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ABSTRACT
HOPE TRANSCENDS: CREATING LADDERS TO OPPORTUNITY
FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

Felecia Ann Carrington
University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2018

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The specific purpose of this study was to elevate the previous research on the construct of hope to identify the factors and attributes that at-risk students who are academically and socially successful perceive contributed to their hope. This work was built up the Hope Theory by C.R. Snyder et.al (2002). Utilizing a purposive sample, potential participants were identified at an urban middle school campus applying archival data which included standardized assessment, grade reports, school attendance records and student discipline reports. Potential participants (fifteen to twenty) who were identified as demonstrating behavioral and academic success according to archival data were invited to take a Snyder's Children Hope scale questionnaire. Next, the researcher conducted individual interviews with the ten potential participants who scored highest on the Snyder Hope Scale questionnaire. Ultimately, six participants were selected. The researcher

completed a qualitative study method utilizing the portraiture methodology. The researcher, through interviews, focus groups and observations examined family structure, guardianship and parenting, identity, pathways, and school experiences to identify saturated themes. Data analysis revealed a framework that schools can utilize to build hope in at-risk students by focusing on the key areas of positive adult relationships, social recognition, future orientation, social adaptation and service to others.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	xv
Chapter	Page
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Need for the Study	1
Purpose of Study	6
Statement of the Problem.....	7
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Research Question	9
Definition of Key Terms	9
Limitations of the Study.....	10
Basic Assumptions.....	11
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	12
No Child Left Behind.....	12
Schools Left Behind No More	14
The Achievement Gap	14
The Opportunity Gap	16
The Impact of School Environment.....	18
Making the Case for Hope	21
Hope Versus Self-Efficacy	22
Hope Theory	23
Hope Effects.....	24
Moving Forward with Hope.....	25
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY	27
Overview of the Research Problem	27
Theoretical Constructs	28
Portraiture Methodology.....	28
The Research Question	30
Research Design.....	31
Setting	31
Participant Selection	31
Instrumentation	33
Validity of the Hope Scale	33
Reliability of the Hope Scale	33
Data Collection Procedures.....	34
Data Analysis	36
Transcription.....	36

Triangulation of data.....	36
Member Checking.....	36
Peer Review	37
Privacy and Ethical Considerations	37
 CHAPTER IV: RESULTS.....	 38
Research Question	38
Pictures of Hope.....	38
Champion.....	40
Introduction.....	40
Family Structure.....	40
Guardianship and Parenting	41
Identity	45
Pathways	46
Poverty	47
School Experiences.....	50
Portraitist’s Connection to Champion.....	52
Beacon.....	54
Introduction.....	54
Family Structure.....	54
Guardianship & Parenting.....	55
Identity	57
Pathways	58
School Experiences	59
Portraitist’s Connection to Beacon	61
Conqueror	62
Introduction.....	62
Family Structure.....	62
Guardianship and Parenting.....	66
Identity	68
Pathways	71
Poverty	73
School Experiences	74
Portraitist’s Connection to Conqueror	77
Clark.....	79
Introduction.....	79
Family Structure.....	79
Parenting and Guardianship.....	80
Identity	82
Pathways	83
School Experiences	84
Portraitist’s Connection to Clark	85
Swan.....	87

Introduction.....	87
Family Structure.....	87
Parenting and Guardianship.....	89
Identity	92
Pathways	94
School Experiences.....	95
Portraitist’s Connection to Swan	96
Justice.....	97
Introduction.....	97
Family Structure.....	97
Guardianship & Parenting.....	98
Identity	102
Pathways	104
School Experiences.....	105
Portraitist’s Connection to Justice	107
Focus Groups	109
Significant Themes of the Focus Groups.....	111
Academic Achievement	111
Future Orientation.....	112
Being Underestimated.....	113
Social Adaptation and Recognition	114
Service to Others.....	115
Portraitist’s Connection to the Focus Groups	115
Academic Achievement	116
Future Orientation.....	116
Being Underestimated.....	117
Social Adaptation and Recognition	118
Service to Others.....	118
Summary of Findings.....	119
Family Structure.....	119
Parenting and Guardianship.....	119
Identity	120
Pathways	121
School Experiences.....	121
Positive Adult Relationships.....	121
Support Systems.....	122
Inclusion.....	122
Social Recognition	123
Conclusion	123
 CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	 124
Summary	124
Summary of the Findings.....	126

Positive Adult Relationships.....	127
Social Recognition and Inclusion	128
Opportunities to Cultivate Future Orientation	129
Social Adaptation.....	130
Service to Others.....	131
Implications and Call to Action	132
Positive Adult Relationships.....	132
Social Recognition and Inclusion	133
Opportunities to Cultivate Future Orientation	134
Social Adaptation.....	135
Service to Others.....	135
Limitations	136
Recommendations for Future Research	136
Conclusion	137
Hope Does Indeed Matter	138
Portraitist’s Final Connection	139
 CHAPTER VI: PORTRAIT OF THE PORTRAITIST	 142
Age 0 To 5	143
The Elementary Years.....	145
Secondary Years	147
Middle School.....	147
High School	149
Why Hope?	154
 REFERENCES	 157
 APPENDIX A: THE CHILDREN’S HOPE SCALE	 165
 APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT IDENTIFICATION INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	 166
 APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	 167
 APPENDIX D: COVER LETTER FOR TEACHERS.....	 168
 APPENDIX E: PARENTAL LETTER OF CONSENT	 169
 APPENDIX F: STUDENT PARTICIPANT ASSENT FORM.....	 170
 APPENDIX G: INFORMED CONSENT - PRINCIPAL	 171

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
Table 1: Focus Group Interview Table of Themes	110

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, public school bells have been ringing to welcome students from age four to nineteen. Schools have encouraged students to enter their doors and step into the promise that doing so will result in a level of success beyond school where the student would be able to make a positive mark in society as a contributing and valued citizen. No matter where these schools have been located, rural or urban, affluent or economically disadvantaged, the promise has been the same. Unfortunately, much too often, this promise has been many times met with the disappointment that has arisen when it has been unfulfilled.

This unfulfilled promise has been found disproportionately in schools where the resources to sustain the promise have been limited, both in urban and rural lower income schools (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). In these settings, the phenomenon of the achievement gap has been palpable. A decade after the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 [NCLB], more students and teachers find themselves even more left behind than before (Smyth, 2008). As standardized testing has become the primary tool to assess student performance, states across the country have been using it as the primary source to determine achievement, implement interventions and initiate programming changes (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar). However, the investments in resources have not elicited the type of gains which are necessary for a sustained impact.

Need for the Study

In the minds of many educators, the sound of the school bell has been replaced with the sound of alarm as economically disadvantaged and minority groups fall further and further behind academically (Smyth, 2008). Smyth (2008) found that the NCLB plan was flawed, inadequately funded, ineffectively structured which resulted in students, teachers and schools being left behind. Researchers have agreed that evaluating the

success of NCLB has led to concluding that many subgroups as well as economically-disadvantaged students have been adversely affected (Smyth, 2008). The achievement gap between these students and their non-disadvantaged counterparts has been alarming. Lagana-Riordan and Aguilar (2009) stated that the NCLB policy which had been intended to help at-risk students had failed to address many of the social problems that had contributed to the achievement gap.

National indicators have demonstrated that poor urban schools and at-risk students, many years after the inception of NCLB, have continued to perform drastically lower than the national average and of their white counterparts (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). In fact, Dworkin (2005) stated that schools with a high concentration of at-risk and mobile students have been more likely to fail to meet the Acceptable Yearly Progress (AYP) standards established under NCLB. Schools such as these are more likely to be hindered by financial barriers which limit the availability of resources geared toward student achievement. Ultimately, instead of the achievement gap being decreased, it is exacerbated.

Ladd (2017) found that NCLB contained three crippling flaws: its narrow focus which compelled schools to focus instruction on tested subjects, unrealistic and counterproductive expectations of seeking 100% success of students as well as the lengths to self-correct when those measures were not met and finally, the pressure for schools to perform without the support needed to do so. Sanders (2008) has stated that while the purpose of NCLB was to attempt to ensure that all children were provided a “fair, equal and significant opportunity” to have an education of strong quality, it has instead continued to deny access for a large population of students (p. 589). Instead, the law has resulted in a policy of consequences and rewards that inhibits opportunities for the exact population it was created to serve (Sanders, 2008). Sanders (2008) further

explains, “If its provisions are enforced, the statute could practically force low-income students to remain in poor-performing public schools while failing to address their real educational needs, thus decreasing the chances of them ever attaining academic proficiency.” (p. 589).

The question then becomes why NCLB is not meeting the challenges it was established to correct. Frymier (1992) stated that academic problems are accompanied by larger emotional and social at-risk factors in a student’s life. Further, Frymier explains that while some of the risk factors that students face are outside the sphere of influence of the school, research shows that educators addressing other risk factors within the school results in a corresponding positive impact on student achievement. By the same token, focusing on achievement via a model of standardized assessment and continuing to ignore the impact of social factors may continue to result in unnecessary disparities in student achievement (Smyth, 2008).

MacMahon (2011) explains that research has defined factors which are common to students who are at risk. While these elements do not guarantee the presence of risk, they are frequently present for this population of students. The researcher went on to explain that as more of these factors are found to be present, the effect of risk increases for this affected group (MacMahon, 2011). MacMahon explained that schools can cause risk which in turn causes risk of student failure through the following methods: meaningless curriculum, lack/absence of caring educators, lack of respect from teachers and low and/or negative expectations by both the students themselves as well as their educators.

Finn and Rock (1997) explain that the concept of risk is derived from the field of medicine and stems from the notion that exposure to certain conditions or “risk factors” results in a greater likelihood that an individual will face adversity which can negatively

affect the student's success in school or cause them to drop out. The U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census (1997) defines these at-risk factors to include poverty, limited English proficiency, absent parents, one-parent families, unwed parents and parents who did not graduate from high school or immigrated within the last five years. Not surprisingly, many students in urban settings have multiple factors affecting them simultaneously, decreasing their likelihood for success.

Researchers have established the need to address the risk factors that students possess. Somers, Owens and Piliawsky (2008) establish the importance of educators acknowledging and speaking to how these risk factors can affect the success of students, particularly in urban environments. These researchers go on to explain that due to the impact of poverty on many at-risk students' lives, they struggle to see the importance or correlation between their current academic progress and their potential success in their career as an adult (Somers et. al., (2008).

“Many youngsters who experience these conditions manage to achieve some level of school success. But all too often, these risk factors are accompanied by a set of risk behaviors, which, manifested by individual students, create impediments to learning...” (Finn & Rock, 1997, p. 221). This leads to the possibility that students who face multiple risk factors could perceive that overcoming these factors is simply impossible.

Not all students who are considered at risk demonstrate a lack of achievement. Finn and Rock (1997) found that these successful at-risk students are able to perform successfully even though they face multiple potential barriers to that achievement. These attributes that these students share is that they possess both the motivation and the set of behaviors to be successful in school. One commonality that these students demonstrate is hope (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Snyder et.al (2002), founder of the Hope Theory, has defined hope as “a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency, (goal-directed energy), and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)” (p. 820). Hope is an individual’s perceived capability to derive pathways to their desired goals, and to motivate themselves via agentic thinking to use those pathways (Feldman, Rand, & Kahle-Wroblewski, 2009). In short, hope is demonstrated by being able to visualize multiple paths toward a goal while also possessing the will to follow the route to achieving them. This hope then becomes the mental foundation that is needed to pursue goals (Feldman et al., 2009). If hope is necessary to achieve goals despite circumstances, then it must be equally as imperative to build that hope in students with multiple risk factors.

Though school environment is considered a major contributor to student learning, it is not addressed in NCLB (Urrieta, 2004). Students without positive and supportive school environments face additional risk factors with limited opportunities to offset them. “Engagement in the learning environment and in the broader school environment are important antecedents of school achievement” (Finn & Rock, 1997, p. 221). The researchers go on to explain that unlike a student’s economic situation or their race, engagement may be manipulable. When educators encourage engagement behaviors, a student’s chances of completing school successfully are increased (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Research has demonstrated that when protective factors are present in schools, students are able to demonstrate and sustain academic achievement (Smyth, 2008). Finn and Rock (1997) explain that neither a student’s self-view or school-related behaviors occur independently of the larger overall context of family, peers and school environment. That being the case, it becomes imperative that all schools but particularly those filled with at-risk students, develop the affective social factors necessary to create

the potential of success for all students. Instead, many schools continue to focus on interventions which are solely academic in nature while expecting to achieve their desired results to no avail (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). Consequently, a paradigm shift must be initiated to recognize the importance of social factors in school with respect to student achievement.

Purpose of Study

The specific purpose of this study was to elevate the previous research on the construct of hope to identify the factors and attributes that at-risk students who are academically and socially successful perceive contributed to their hope. Finn and Rock (1997) share that if a student holds a positive self-view or perception and routinely demonstrates the corresponding behaviors that the result will be increased protective factors that strengthen the possibility and opportunity to be successful in school despite their at-risk factors. By ascertaining these elements, the researcher intends to establish how schools can create the proper environment to foster student success. The researcher also intends to examine interventions being utilized which focus on both social and academic intervention. The goal of this study ultimately is to contribute to creating a framework that will increase the likelihood of student achievement amongst at-risk students. The study encompasses the desire to identify the tools which build hope within at-risk students by first detecting the common factors and attributes that are shared with respect to students' perspectives of hope.

Promise Middle School will provide the setting for this qualitative study which will explore the perceptions of at-risk students regarding the factors contributing to their success. The researcher will utilize archival data to begin to identify potential participants, followed by purposive sampling. Next, the researcher will conduct participant interviews and focus groups. Using the portraiture methodology for the

study, the researcher will look for critical factors that participants perceive contribute to their perspective of hope. Created by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) to document the components of effective schools “the portraiture methodology is used when a researcher wishes to produce a full picture of an event or person that tells as much about the subject as it does the researcher, or portraitist” (Chapman, 2007, p. 157).

Statement of the Problem

Huffman (2013) reminds us that the identification of and interventions for students who are considered at risk is critical given the impact it has on the educational outcomes for the affected students. In order to attain the level of achievement needed to close the achievement gap, solely focusing upon academic intervention has been insufficient. The combination of academic interventions and interventions which address risk factors are more effective methods for closing the achievement gap (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). The problem is the need to identify the factors that contributed to the development of hope in at-risk students with high levels of achievement so that these elements can be developed in schools, thereby providing other at-risk students greater opportunities for success.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research study was the Hope Theory (Snyder et al., 2002). The foundation of Hope Theory is that the construct of hope is comprised of two sub-constructs, pathways and agency (Robinson & Rose, 2010). In that hope requires the combination of both sub-constructs, it becomes essential to determine what factors contribute to the development of agency (motivation) and pathways (routes to goals). Snyder et al., (2002), the creator of the Hope Theory, stated that agency and pathways must occur simultaneously in order for the maximum goal attainment. Ponterotto, Mendelowitz, & Collabolletta (2008) further explain that both pathways and

agency are “positively related, additive, and reciprocal but neither component alone defines hope, nor are they synonymous” (p. 100). Hope is related to academic achievement across all grade levels (Robinson & Rose, 2010).

Other constructs and theories have been given in respect to determining elements of successful individuals who experience challenges in their environment including goal setting, self-efficacy and resilience. The premise of this study is that hope is necessary to achieve goals (Feldman et al., 2009), making goal attainment possible. Further, as self-efficacy theory postulates, instead of focusing on a specific situation, hope is an overarching construct that includes both short and long-term situations (Snyder et al., 2002) Finally, in respect to resilience, the individual is able to successfully adapt to adverse circumstances (Finn & Rock, 1997), which can be viewed as motivation. However, hope is still elevated beyond resilience due to it being comprised both of the motivation (agency) and routes to success (pathways).

Snyder, Lopez, Shorey, Rand and Feldman (2003) stated that in hope theory, the construct of hope is delineated by “individuals’ perceptions regarding their capacity to (1) clearly conceptualize goals, (2) develop the specific strategies to reach those goals (pathways thinking) and (3) initiate and sustain the motivation for using those strategies (agency thinking)” (p. 122). The researchers explain that both pathways and agency are required to be evident in order to fulfill goal pursuit. Consequently, these two elements are positively related yet not identical (Snyder et al., 2003).

Ponterotto et al. (2008) further explains that the element of goals serves as the anchor of the hope theory. This element is critical in that goals are the targets of mental action sequences. The goals that an individual establishes must land on the fulfillment continuum between goals that are certain of achievement and those that are unrealistic (Ponterotto et al., 2008). In order to fulfill these goals, a person must be able to

recognize that they are able to visualize one or more paths, or pathways, to these goals (Ponterotto et al., 2008).

Research Question

If hope is an essential trait for success, then we must determine how to develop the agency and pathways which are essential to the attainment of hope in all students. To do so, it is essential to determine its components.

Through a qualitative study, the researcher will attempt to answer following question:

Research Question - What factors and attributes do at-risk students who are academically and socially successful perceive to contribute to hope?

Definition of Key Terms

Hope – the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways (Snyder et al., 2002).

Agency – the perceived capacity to use one’s pathways to reach desired goals (Snyder et al., 2002).

Pathways – cognitive routes to goals (Feldman et. al., 2009).

Motivation – a specific set of processes that provide energy for different behaviors (Wentzel & Wigfield, 2007).

Engagement – Broad construct that includes affective, cognitive, and behavioral characteristics (Wentzel & Wigfield, 2007).

At-risk students - Students who, through no fault of their own, are at risk of low academic achievement and dropping out before completing high school. These risk factors include, but are not limited to, disability, poverty, limited English proficiency, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, single parent status, and low parental educational attainment (Vessely, 2010).

Academically successful – students who are passing all classes, on path to graduate on time and who obtain passing scores on standardized assessment (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Socially successful - students who consistently demonstrate acquiescence behaviors to school and class rules including arriving at school and class on time, coming prepared for class, responding to directions and instructions initiated by teachers (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Opportunity gap – representation of the disparities in opportunities available to children of different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds where engaging, culturally relevant instruction is lacking, expectations minimal, and resources scarce, students from disadvantaged groups tend to be outperformed by their more privileged counterparts (Ladson-Billings, Welner, & Carter, 2013).

Achievement gap - The difference in academic achievement between African American, American Indian and Hispanic students and their white and Asian peers and the difference in academic achievement between students, whose families are of low-income, and their peers from middle and upper income families (According to The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).

Limitations of the Study

It is important to note limitations of the present study. First, the findings will rely on a self-report measure of hope and its components. As hope is derived based on subconstructs which are based on perception, the researcher is reliant on the participants to accurately self-report.

Second, though it is understood that there are related constructs which may be related to hope such as self-efficacy and resilience, they will not be the focus of this study.

Finally, as the participants of this study were at-risk students in an urban setting, generalizability may not be appropriate to non-minority students who are not at risk or even other urban settings, as the findings are highly contextualized with the setting of the study. Further, while it is established that family factors also impact student achievement, this present study will focus on how the school environment impacts students individually and collectively.

Basic Assumptions

Before moving forward, certain basic assumptions should be stated. As the foundation of this research is based on Hope Theory, the first basic assumption is that this theory has been thoroughly validated and proven reliable by previous researchers (Feldman et al., 2009). Therefore, this study will not attempt to reiterate these prior findings, but will utilize them to create a framework for creating hope in students.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of the literature encompassed the elements that the leading researchers deemed are critical in considering the presence and perceptions of hope in at-risk students as well as the impact of school environment and practices. The primary research question being explored in this research study is to identify what factors and attributes at-risk students who are academically and socially successful perceive to contribute to their hope. Therefore, the review of literature will focus on the impact of current governmental and systemic practices and the critical elements which should be considering when focusing on the construct of hope. The topics included in the literature review are No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the opportunity gap, the achievement gap, school environment, hope theory, self-efficacy theory and hope effects.

No Child Left Behind

Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar (2009) explain that the goal of NCLB was to close the achievement gap that exists between white, economically-advantaged students and others who are considered as potentially at-risk for school failure. However, the researchers go on to explain that unfortunately, though, the risk factors for poor school performance are overwhelmingly social (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). NCLB focuses exclusively on academic performance, resulting in increased numbers of students at risk instead of fewer. Instead of being spurred by a focus on improving educational equity for the disadvantaged, “NCLB was instead fueled by a fear that U.S. students were falling behind those of other industrialized nations and this would lead to economic consequences for the United States” (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar 2009, p.136). Further, Donnor and Shockley (2010) explain that the educational policies which are controlling curriculum and instruction are critical to forming the potential capacity of learning

opportunities of at-risk students and play a vital part in the social and economic advancement potential.

NCLB is not the issue. NCLB is simply a vehicle to address a problem that was already in existence. The variance between the performance of minority and/or at-risk students both nationally and state-by-state is clear (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). Multiple factors serve as the root of this problem which can be traced back to the origins of race and class within this country (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). In essence, the gap was created systematically with the creation of this country and has been ongoing since. Sanders (2008) explains that the implementation of NCLB inhibits the educational opportunities for the very population that it is trying to serve.

NCLB was expected to be the fix and it's failing (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). Smyth (2008) explains that multiple years after its inception, we have found that the plan is flawed, developmentally inappropriate, ill funded, and leaving more students, teachers, and schools behind than ever before. As more students are being "left behind", it becomes prudent to ascertain the reason (Smyth, 2008). As educational practitioners, we have an obligation not to turn our backs away and accept that this issue will continue beyond our control, but instead we must continue to press forward in the search for solutions (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009).

Ladd (2012) explains that the United States' policy initiatives such as NCLB miss the mark because it ignores the evidence that at-risk students, particularly those in poverty, consistently perform below their advantaged counterparts. Further, as this policy does not explicitly address the existing disparities, it is perpetuating what its intended to correct, doing additional harm (Ladd, 2012).

Schools Left Behind No More

The premise that NCLB is based upon is that states, school systems, educators and students will be motivated to demonstrate academic growth to avoid the consequences of failing to do so. Accordingly, in order to establish rewards and consequences, measurement becomes necessary and has broadly been accepted to be standardized testing. Unfortunately, the issue with this high-stakes testing is that the stakes are so high that schools are forced to use various strategies to find success including teaching to the test (Smyth, 2008) and redirecting resources away from some students to others to improve scores (Dworkin, 2005).

The standards movement that is the crux of the current educational system uses school performance as indication of the health of the country (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). While the focus is maintained on raising the bar for all students, there is little attention given to making provisions for students who are at a mismatch. The mismatch extends from the structure of schools as compared to social, cultural and economic realities from which the students come. More intensive academic interventions will not solve the problem arising from the gulf that is growing between some students and the institutions which are tasked with developing them (Deschenes et al., 2001). Meanwhile, struggling students face a system which teaches them to blame themselves for their failure.

The Achievement Gap

Zhao (2016) explains that the Achievement Gap is not a new problem but is one that has persisted or decades. “The vast chasm in academic achievement has long existed along racial and poverty lines. Children of color and from low-income families have, on average, performed worse on virtually all indicators of academic success: standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, and college matriculation rates (Zhao, 2016, p.

720).” While NCLB has within its parameters which are, on the surface, labeled as protections for students, they instead serve to continue the disparity. Smyth (2008) shares that NCLB gives schools the numbers which justify the continuation of tracking, sorting and labeling their students which has long been the practice. Gorski (2013) explains that the only sure way of eliminating the achievement gap is to eradicate poverty. Educators can not accomplish that monumental task on their own, nor can we afford to wait or expect that the condition of poverty will go away.

Donnor and Shockley (2010) explain that for traditionally under-served students, the education policies that govern curriculum and instruction are essential for shaping the capacity of learning opportunities vital to their collective social and economic advancement. Unfortunately, through its implementation, NCLB is forcing at-risk students to remain in poor-performing schools, decreasing these students’ chances of academic equality (Left Behind, 2008). Schools which are not performing to the standards are provided insufficient resources to address their deficiencies (Left Behind, 2008). Further, the school choice provision, created to serve as a tool for students, serves as a barrier when successful schools turn struggling students away or solicit the schools around them for their best students. Simultaneously, disadvantaged student families are unable to move their children due to a lack of financial resources (Dworkin, 2005).

Reardon (2013) explains that the disparity between the academic achievement of disadvantaged students versus their more affluent counterparts is linked directly to financial resources. He explains that affluent students enter school ahead as their parents have access to the resources necessary to make them ready to learn. Further, the income inequality and its effect on achievement remain intact from elementary through the secondary grades (Reardon, 2013). The researcher goes on to explain that the difference

is not linked solely to the possession of the resources but, to how more advantaged parents utilize their resources differently.

Zhao (2016) extolls that closing the achievement gap has proven difficult. Sweeping policies such as NCLB and pedagogical innovations have not been sufficient to stem the tide caused by the negative factors that at-risk students face (Zhao 2016). The achievement gap signifies a lack of educational inequality that is neither secret or mysterious. It appears evident that the disparities created by decades of policy in the country as well the deficiencies in the framework of the NCLB Act are tremendous. Subsequently, there is no quick fix.

As long as inequality is present, the achievement gap will continue (Gorski, 2013). Zhao (2016) explains that one reason NCLB does not work is because it set about to improve the existing educational paradigm and policies are needed that “counter racism, improve communities, upgrade school facilities, enhance teacher quality and provide early learning programs for disadvantaged children” (p. 721). However, Zhao (2016) goes on to explain that educators should not be discouraged because where immediate change can happen is within the school.

Therefore, it is imperative to examine our practices so that this long-standing deficiency might be turned around. As educational practitioners, it is our duty to act utilizing the tools that are available to us, one of which is the environment within the school.

The Opportunity Gap

Wilson (2011) explains that public opinion polls continually reflect the belief that the poor and unemployed exist in those conditions because of their own shortcomings and inadequacies. It is not a common practice for most to ponder the impact of societal forces such as discrimination, lack of economic opportunities and one additional factor,

failing schools (Wilson, 2011). Unfortunately, crisis-level circumstances become necessary to force a discussion of the plight that disadvantaged students face. A recent example of this phenomena was the situation that was exposed during Hurricane Katrina (Wilson, 2011). The nation's attention was drawn to the devastation that followed. Clearly, those that were left behind to face the wrath of the storm were families who were financially unable to flee. During this storm, Americans witnessed the effects of chronic subordination (Wilson, 2011).

Reis and Renzulli (2010) have stated that opportunity gaps lead to achievement gaps. Students who attend urban schools are rarely able to receive enrichment-based learning opportunities. Although research has clearly demonstrated that students who experience these opportunities achieve at higher rates, this disparity continues to be the norm (Reis & Renzulli, 2010). Dunlop (2013) goes further by explaining that although education is expected to be a common good, it has been established as a system which establishes winners and losers. School reforms currently enacted are actually increasing the achievement gap instead of decreasing it as promised (Dunlop, 2013).

Verstegen (2015) shares that it is necessary to move beyond the reach of reform to address the numerous and intertwining needs many children bring with them to school that create actual obstacles to learning. According to A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education (BBA) (2008), the NCLB Laws assume that ineffective schools are the sole reason for the achievement gap. Therefore, by implementing higher standards for students and teachers that include frequent testing, as well as more accountability and professional development, the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students will be eradicated (BBA, 2008). BBA (2008) further contends that if America's schools continue to focus on test scores alone, they will not achieve more than modest success. On the other hand, if schools increase their ambitions and utilize broader

strategies, then all children will be able to achieve the American dream. It should not be considered a euphoric ideal that all students in our schools should be able to achieve in safe and supportive environments, no matter their background.

The Impact of School Environment

Research has established that the school environment represents a potential leverage point for education reform and interventions that can target not only students' perceptions of their abilities but goal orientation, hope and achievement (Van Ryzin, 2011). Wentzel and Wigfield (2007) have stated that a student's motivation has a direct impact on his/her social and academic function. Further, they go on to explain that educators have the ability to influence students' motivation both positively and negatively (Wentzel & Wigfield, 2007). When the focus turns to both increasing student engagement and connectedness, student achievement increases. Kushman, Sieber and Harold (2000) add that high levels of engagement and motivation have been linked to reduced dropout rates and increased student success.

In a study by Somers et. al. (2008), researchers sought to understand which risk factors affected the success of urban, African American youth. The study determined that long term social support is a critical factor in the success of adolescents. Essential to school reform is the fundamental element of developing schools into communities which provide care and support for its students (Osterman, 2000). Central to the creation of communities is that the members have a trust in others, feelings of belonging and safety (Osterman, 2000). Osterman explains that the concept of community is dependent upon the existence of four attributes: membership, influence, integration/fulfillment of needs and a shared emotional connection. Students who experience the feelings of acceptance are more motivated, engaged and committed to school. These concepts of commitment and engagement ultimately result in increased performance (Osterman, 2000).

Unfortunately, despite the evidence that communities can serve as the foundation for learning and emotional support, most schools continue to neglect to give the social and emotional needs of its students any consideration. Instead, schools focus on academic achievement and ultimately the resulting element of competition. What remains is a contrast where schools must choose either to focus upon individualism and competition or community and collaboration (Osterman, 2000).

In essence, the current system declares that there are winners and there are losers instead of a sense of belonging which includes the belief that the success of all students is inextricably connected. Deci, E., Vallerand, R., Pelletier, L., & Ryan, R. (1991) explain that when students' needs remain unsatisfied in the school setting, it can be predicted that the result will be diminished motivation, impaired development, alienation and poor performance. These potential factors are in stark contrast to the accomplished and confident citizens that are expected to be the result of increased accountability and standardized achievement.

Cassidy and Bates (2005) contend that the social, emotional and academic development of adolescents is dependent on whether or not the environments in which they develop are sources of caring. While educators struggle to meet the demands of legislative expectations, seeking opportunities to demonstrate care within the schools and classrooms are being diminished. Those students who are most greatly affected are also the students who can least afford to be in uncaring environments, the at-risk.

Unfortunately, the school structure at present works against establishing supportive environments. Deschenes et al. (2001) goes further by stating that schools are calibrated to serve students who are privileged rather than those who exist on the margin. Students who are perceived at risk are viewed from a deficit or inequities perspective (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). To this end, students are believed to possess personal deficiencies which

are the root of their lack of success such as poor motivation and low intelligence. Other barriers that can impact education such as having parents with limited schooling or being from a single-parent household are acknowledged but not addressed. Instead, in response to these issues, the proffered solution has been to offer the same traditional schooling components more extensively, i.e. early intervention programs, push-in academic intervention, tutorials, etc. Cassidy and Bates (2005) explain that to address the opportunity and achievement gap, educators must acknowledge the societal factors and alter the structural barriers in the school and community, so that all learners can flourish.

Patton et al. (2000) found that differences in schools are more closely related to climate than to the differences in the students enrolled. Therefore, we must focus on the social components of the school environment. This focus takes into account the understanding that when protective factors are present in schools, student perceptions of autonomy are strengthened, ultimately resulting in increased connectedness to school and achievement (Ryzin, 2011). The research on school environment suggests that a school environment that is positive will garner sustained impact on student perceptions of hope (Patton et al., 2000).

Kutsyuruba, Klinger, and Hussain (2015) explain that there are five elements to a positive school environment: safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, institutional environment and staff relationships. Of these, a focus on interpersonal relationships can have an immediate positive impact. Positive teacher-student relationships are critical to students' perceptions of themselves and their behavioral choices (Kutsyuruba et. Al 2015). Ryzin's (2011) research determined that school environment can support healthy adolescent development and school performance. Consequently, when there is a desire to make an impact with students and their perceptions of autonomy, it is best to begin with the school environment itself as it serves

as the vehicle best suited at achieving results. These actions may be able to “instigate a positive feedback loop that, over time, promotes the growth of protective factors within students, such as engagement and hope” (Ryzin, p. 1578).

Payne (2011) establishes that schools should be examples of institutionalized caring. In this environment, teachers have a broad interest in their students which includes their character and their future. There are some established components that are evident, including a high level of intellectual demand, a holistic concern for children and a strong sense of teacher efficacy (Payne, 2011). Cassidy and Bates (2005) ask that we consider if the pressure to teach a standardized curriculum and improve test scores is thwarting the desire of teachers to care for all their students, especially those that are difficult. The challenge then becomes for educators to seek opportunities to demonstrate care so that it is received by the student while balancing with the demand of increased expectations.

We have a moral and economic obligation to do what’s right for each child (Dunlop, 2013). Does not every child deserve the opportunity to be successful in the 21st century? If not, then, why not? Further, if the answer to this question is no, then which students should receive this chance and by the same token, who should not? Dunlop asserts that students should not be shut out based on circumstances over which they have no control. Nonetheless, it is this exact disparity which is the crux of the opportunity gap which exists in the educational system. Educators must focus on structuring the school to address the mismatch between public education and the standards movement (Deschenes et al., 2001).

Making the Case for Hope

As research has demonstrated that through the practices that educators implement within schools, then we must seek a tool that will provide the desired impact. That tool

is hope. Snyder (1995) has stated human beings being goal directed is naturally tied to getting to where we want to be in life. However, being goal directed is not sufficient, we must also possess two other key components, the cognitive willpower to move toward one's goals (agency) and the perceived ability to create routes to get someplace (Snyder, 1995). Feldman et al. (2009) explain that the presence of hope reflects a perception, not necessarily based in reality. Elaborating further on Snyder et al. (1991), Feldman et al. (2009) go on to explain that the subjective experience of hope itself does not necessarily require concrete pathways nor reality-based agency. Students who demonstrate high hope believe they have the power to see the future as better than their present. Multiple research studies have been conducted to validate that hope does have a positive influence. Further, hope is a construct that becomes an equalizer in relation to other factors such as intelligence and income (Lopez, 2010).

Bashant (2016) explained that hope drives feelings of well-being. The researcher went on to explain that hope has been found to have a positive association to feelings of self-efficacy, social competence, optimism and more (Bashant, 2016). Twenty years of field research show that the more hopeful students do better in school and life than students who are less hopeful (Lopez, 2010). Lopez goes on to explain that a recent Gallup 2009 poll found that half of American students do not have the hope needed to succeed, but could be taught to, as hope is a malleable construct.

Hope Versus Self-Efficacy

Magaletta and Oliver (1999) explain that Bandura's self-efficacy theory clarified the differences that exist between self-efficacy (an individual's belief in their ability to complete a certain behavior) and the anticipation of the outcome (an individual's belief that a specific behavior will result in a certain outcome). Magaletta and Oliver explained that self-efficacy and hope are related constructs but not the same. These two concepts

are tied by their connection to expectancies. Hope distinguishes itself from self-efficacy because it is composed of self-efficacy and of outcomes (Magaletta & Oliver, 1999). Hope requires that an individual believe in their ability while also having a belief that through their action, they will achieve their outcome or goals.

Hope Theory

Sheehan and Rall (2011) found that the creation of hope within students was possible through a process that could be controlled which contradicts the idea that it is an inherent characteristic. In understanding the concept of hope, it is essentially the perception of one's capability to derive pathways to their desired goals, and motivate themselves via agency thinking to use those pathways (Feldman et al., 2009). Not only do hopeful students possess the necessary energy (agency), they also possess the ability to develop strategies to achieve their goals or plan contingencies when barriers are faced along the way (Snyder et. al., 2002).

In analyzing the construct of hope, it is essential to understand that hope is composed of three components, agency, pathways and goals. The first component, agency thinking, comprises the motivational aspects of hope. When an individual is full of hope, they utilize positive self-created messages in response to obstacles that they meet (Bashant, 2016). This is agency thinking. Second, Bashant (2016) explains that the next component, pathways thinking describes a person's belief that they are able to find a solution to problems or whenever they are met with an obstacle. Finally, Bashant (2016) describes that the final component, goals, entails a belief that we can accomplish a task so much so that we are compelled to continue working toward it.

Snyder determined that pathways are cognitive routes to goals while agency is the individual's perception of their ability. Hope then is based on perception. Snyder et. al, (2002) found that hope is the foundation of goal pursuit. Magaletta and Oliver (1999)

clarify that that imperative to defining hope are the twofold elements of will and ways. The researchers go on to explain that hope is a process, the bidirectional recurrence of will and ways.

Snyder (1995) has stated that the foundation of his theory was established on the importance and necessity of goals in daily living. The researcher establishes that hope is not a phantom or vague concept fortified by the ability of high-hope individuals to visualize their goals and make them fully describable to themselves and others (Snyder, 1995). Finally, “When a concrete goal becomes imaginable, ...this alone can unleash the person’s sense of energy to pursue the goal, as well as the capability to generate pathways” (Snyder, 1995, p.358).

Hope Effects

Snyder (1995) explained the result of hope in individuals by stating that those with higher levels of hope experience their goals in a more positive way than others. Specifically, individuals who have higher hope attack goals intent on being successful rather than on failure (Snyder, 1995). Snyder et. al, (2002) further found that individuals who have a high level of hope develop a sense of confidence on their chosen paths and also become adept at producing potential alternative routes. They are flexible, and are constrained when circumstances change.

Concurrently, Snyder et. al., (2002) found that agency thinking was an equally essential component of hope in that high hope individuals display an internal self-talk where they believe they can overcome obstacles. This goal-directed thinking surpasses emotions and drives goal-related performance (Snyder et al., 2002). As high hope results in a positive perspective, flexibility to address varying circumstances and building sustained motivation must be the trait that schools build in their at-risk students.

Moving Forward with Hope

Research has demonstrated that environmental factors can affect hope. It can be increased through targeted interventions (Westburg & Martin, 2003). Snyder (1995) explained that the components of hope (agency, pathways and goals) are evident in all individuals. Consequently, by affecting these elements, it is possible to reignite an individual's "hope machine" (Snyder, 1995). Hope proves itself to be a substantial opportunity to make an impact with students as it is comprised of humanistic components according to Westburg and Martin (2003). First, hope focuses on strengths and positive expectations instead of weaknesses. Second, it is related to other theories that focus upon building an individual's capacity and to accept accountability for their own decisions. Consequently, it becomes a vehicle to encourage progress toward goals. Third, hope involves perception of an individual's goal-directed abilities and behaviors and proposes that behaviors are intentional (Snyder et. al., 2002). Consequently, it can be concluded that at-risk students who are successful in school share the trait of hope (Robinson & Rose, 2010). These students are able to focus on their strengths, accept responsibility for their decisions and perceive that they have the opportunity to achieve their goals (Robinson & Rose, 2010). The question then becomes what factors and attributes contributed to building hope in students who face very real obstacles.

Snyder (1995) summarized the issue simply by explaining that what is needed are environments where individuals work together in a collective and supportive environment, enabling the completion of both individual and collective goals. Consequently, by having access to both the environment established appropriate supports, individuals would perceive that they possess both the agency and the pathways to success (Snyder, 1995). As school systems, under the structure of NCLB, are focusing their resources on academic interventions, this potential opportunity to make a socially-

constructed affective impact with students remains un-capitalized. Using qualitative methods, the researcher will seek to discover what factors contributed to these successful students overcoming the barriers which could have served as hindrances in goal attainment for other marginalized students.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview of the Research Problem

A literature review revealed that the focus for many schools who serve at-risk students has been solely on academic interventions as the route to success in closing opportunity and achievement gaps exacerbated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). By using the voices of the served students told through the portraiture methodology, this qualitative study will begin to provide a path for individual and district-wide school systems to follow which reaches the underserved in their populations. The researcher hopes to develop a narrative told from the voices of the participants regarding their perceptions about how the school environment affects their own agency, pathways and goal development or hope. By investigating these narratives and documenting their stories, the researcher desires to see how each participant confronts the risk factors that they face, and how the school environment impacts their hope and their ability to be successful.

Students who perceive that their school environment is not supportive of their psychological needs are at a greater risk for motivational and behavioral problems (Ryzin, 2011). Theories such as the Hope Theory establish that successful at-risk students possess skills in decision-making and are connected to school. Further, these students are able to demonstrate flexibility when met with barriers (Robinson & Rose, 2010). What's missing in the prior research is discerning what factors contributed to the hope within these students. What is missing is their story being told from their own perspective. The current study will attempt to bring these elements to light.

Theoretical Constructs

Portraiture Methodology

Through the portraiture methodology for the study, the researcher looked for critical factors that participants perceive contribute to their perspective of hope. “Created by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) to document the components of effective schools ..., the portraiture methodology is used when a researcher wishes to produce a full picture of an event or person that tells as much about the subject as it does the researcher, or portraitist” (Chapman, 2007, p. 157). Gaztambide-Fernandez, Cairns, Kawashima, Menna, and VanderDussen, (2011) describe the goals of portraiture to center around exploring the participants’ experiences while also exploring the complexities of how meaning is created within a particular context. The researchers go on to explain that the methodology of portraiture focuses on the investigation of “goodness” as described by participants, “instead of diagnosing or imposing pathologies as defined by the researcher” (Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2011). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) clarify that instead of interpreting competing or contradictory meanings and experiences that need a resolution, the researcher or portraitist utilizes these tensions and complications as part of what creates the research context “good”.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) explains the concept of goodness in these words: the myriad ways in which goodness gets expressed in various settings; that admits imperfection as an inevitable ingredient of goodness and refers instead to the inhabitants’ handling of perceived weaknesses; that looks backward and forward to institutional change and the staged quality of goodness; that reveals goodness as a holistic concept, a complex mixture of variables whose expression can only be recognized through a detailed narrative of institutional and interpersonal processes (Lawrence-Lightfoot, p. 25).

Chapman (2007) explains that the portraiture methodology combines the beauty of varying art forms with the “rigor” of the sciences in order to compare and contrast the unique perspective of each individual’s or setting’s experience. This methodology allows the researcher to document the voices, relationships and perceptions of participants as both individuals as well as members of a community as a whole for the purpose of establishing one molded image that is crafted by the researcher and the participants (Chapman, 2007). Consequently, it is critical that the researcher knows themselves in order to maintain rigor while balancing their personal bias.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) reminds us that there is never a single story that can be told. In the schools which serve at-risk students, of course, there are many. Lawrence-Lightfoot goes on to say that one of the most powerful characteristics of portraiture is its capacity to capture discrepancies, through the documentation of both the beautiful and ugly experiences that are elements of human development and social relationships. Lawrence-Lightfoot explains that this paradox is a central component to portraiture, converging the opposites of the voice of the portraitist which is everywhere in the work with the motivations and purpose of the work, “inquiry and intervention”.

Utilizing the portraiture methodology, the researcher intends to craft the stories of the chosen participants through presenting their personal narratives across their home and school lives. Chapman (2005) has stated that the portraiture methodology was created in response to the “marginalization and sterilization of experiences of teachers, administrators, and students in schools” (p. 28) and goes on to explain that the methodology allows the researcher to reject flat and/or stereotyped explanations of the success or failure of schools. Instead, the researcher is able to uncover multiple layers of contexts in reference to events and people. Consequently, this particular method will allow for the identification of commonalities in the factors that created hope in the

participants and the ways in which hope was created in their personal as well as academic lives. The goal is to capture the picture of the human experience and discover what elements served as the launching pad for achievement.

The Research Question

The question that this study attempted to answer was what factors at-risk students, who are academically and socially successful, perceive contributed to their hope. By seeking to answer this question, the researcher strove to understand their perspective and how the school environment impacts their experience. Ultimately, the researched hoped to establish a framework that can be used to intervene and/or motivate other at-risk students so that they, too, can develop the construct of hope and using the components of hope (agency and pathways), the at-risk students will be able to establish and achieve their goals.

In establishing the contextual framework for the narrative as it pertains to school environment, the researcher utilized open-ended questions to document the participants' perceptions of the impact of school environment and the external factors, all of which contribute to their hope. Further, the researcher established how the presence of hope impacted their achievement. The researcher sought to understand the participants' lived experience in respect to how the school environment either fortified or diminished their agency, pathways, goals and, ultimately their success.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain that it is critical when establishing a portrait to utilize context, creating a vivid description of “the geography, the demography of the neighborhood, and a detailed documentation of the physical characteristics of the place that evokes all senses” (p. 44). The image should be visual, audible and tactile. The goal for the researcher should be to make the reader feel as if they are present. As the researcher worked to develop the narratives of the participants,

emergent themes will then become evident. Consequently, it was critical for the researcher to remain cognizant of her role. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) expound that in the portraiture methodology, the place and stance of the researcher is made evident and vocal as a part of the story. The portraitist, then, clearly explains their perspectives and biases that they bring to the narrative, including how others respond to them (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Research Design

Setting

No Limit ISD is located in the southwest corner of a large urban city in the southcentral portion of the United States. The district encompasses 36.6 square miles and has approximately 45,000 students enrolled, speaking more than 80 languages. The district has 45 campuses (5 high schools, 6 middle schools, 6 intermediate schools, 24 elementary schools, 2 alternative campuses and other programs). No Limit ISD serves an ethnically-diverse student population (51.8% Hispanic, 30.6% African-American, 12.6% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.6% White/Anglo, .8% Native American and .6% two or more ethnicities). Further, many of the students in the district possess characteristics which would identify them as at-risk (82.1% economically disadvantaged, 37.4% limited English proficient, 19.6% Bilingual/ESL, 7.6% Special Education.).

Participant Selection

Participants in this study were middle school students in grades seven and eight who live in No Limit ISD. These were middle school students in this urban, Title I school who are identified as at risk of dropping out of school according to the federal at-risk factors, yet maintaining academic and behavioral success over the previous one to two years. At-risk students were identified as those who, through no fault of their own, are at risk of low academic achievement and dropping out before completing high school.

The risk factors which may be evident include poverty, limited English proficiency, race/ethnicity, single parent status, and low parental educational attainment (Vessely, 2010). Academic success shall be considered as passing all classes with an A/B average and on path to graduate on time while also obtaining passing scores on the prior year's State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness examination (STAAR). The final characteristic that participants must possess is being socially successful, defined as consistently demonstrating acquiescence behaviors to school and class rules including arriving at school and class on time, coming prepared for class, and responding to directions and instructions initiated by teachers (Finn & Rock, 1997). Also, to be considered, these students will have no disciplinary referrals in the current and previous school year.

Approval to initiate this study was received from the University of Houston – Clear Lake Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) and No Limit ISD's Internal Review Board (IRB) prior to initiation. Selection of the campus serving as the host site was purposive as well. The researcher spoke informally with the principal at Promise Middle School, Mrs. Wind, about the intent of the research project and established her willingness to have her school participate. The researcher hoped that at the conclusion of the study, the principal would be willing and open to receiving information and ideas from data analysis that would help her to provide support to her at-risk students.

Utilizing a purposive sample, potential participants were identified utilizing archival data which included standardized assessment, grade reports, school attendance records and student discipline reports. Potential participants (fifteen to twenty) who were identified as demonstrating behavioral and academic success according to archival data were invited to take a Snyder's Children Hope scale questionnaire (see Appendix A).

Next, the researcher conducted individual interviews with the ten potential participants who scored highest on the Snyder Hope Scale questionnaire. During this interview, these students were asked to expound on their answers to the questions on the scale. After the scale and interviews were completed, five participants were identified to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

Validity of the Hope Scale

Magaletta and Oliver (1999) stated that the validity of the Hope Scale was established by Snyder et. al., (1991). The researchers report that the scale has both convergent and discriminant validity. Further, Snyder (1995) also established that the Hope Scale possesses construct validity. Based on the Hope Scale score, it is possible to predict whether goals of high hope versus low hope individuals were successfully completed (Snyder, 1995).

When unhindered by any obstacles, individuals who possess higher levels of hope also report a greater level of mental energy as well as increased pathways toward their respective goals (Snyder, 1995). This correlation remains present even in the presence of obstacles. Snyder's (1995) work establishes that hope is a concrete way of thinking about oneself in relation to goals, not an immeasurable phenomenon. Magaletta and Oliver establish that the Hope Scale has been proven to possess a high internal consistency reliability. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale ranges from .74 to .78 when tested over multiple samples (Snyder, et. al., 1991). Further, the scale has test-retest correlations between .73 to .28 (Magaletta & Oliver, 1999).

Reliability of the Hope Scale

Snyder (1995) established that the Hope Scale possesses internal reliability. Further, the test-retest reliability of the Hope Scale was established when re-administered

to participants after intervals of time, showing a correlation that supports the premise that this scale has a dispositional, cross-temporal and cross-temporal underpinning (Snyder, 1995).

Data Collection Procedures

Icebreakers. The researcher utilized strategies to establish a level of comfort and communication with participants that allowed them to openly express their thoughts and actions. One of the methods utilized to establish this critical communication were icebreaker activities. DeSilets and Dickerson (2008) have stated that icebreakers recognize participants and fortify the values that the participants bring to the environment. DeSilets and Dickerson go on to explain that through utilizing these activities the result will be an environment that encourages interaction and the energy of the participants.

Chlup and Collins (2010) further expound on the research by reminding us that multiple methods are needed when attempting to reach learners, including icebreakers. They explain that icebreakers literally break the ice and allow members to “begin conversations, relieve inhibitions or tension among people, allowing those involved to build trust with and feel more open with one another” (Chlup & Collins, 2010, p. 34). Finally, these researchers establish that through the utilization of icebreakers, a safe environment and rapport can also be established (Chlup & Collins, 2010). Each of the interview sessions described below were audio recorded and the researcher took notes. These data sources comprised the portraits and identified emergent themes.

Interviews. Over the period of eight months, the researcher gathered data on the participants through four to six participant interview sessions. These interviews allowed the researcher to engage in critical dialogue with the participants.

The researcher met with the participants for a minimum of thirty minutes up to one hour in a private conference room at their school site using a semi-structured dialogic interview approach. The interviews were composed of open-ended questions which were designed to allow the participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences. During these sessions, which were audiotaped, the researcher interviewed the participants about their experiences and perspectives of both their present and previous schooling experiences. The participants were asked to share their personal histories and family structures. The students were asked to discuss their goals, feelings about school, family systems, inspirations, aspirations and motivations. The researcher also discussed future time perspectives of their academic and life goals with the participants. Upon compiling this information, participant profiles were developed.

These sessions and interviews were transcribed and utilized for analysis. Also, field notes were taken by the researcher in an electronic researcher's notebook. Utilizing field notes, the researcher documented setting information, observations, and non-verbal communication that could not be captured with audio recordings. Further, the researcher recorded her observations regarding how the participants interacted with the environment, the researcher and the process.

Focus Groups. During the research period, the participants participated in three to four focus groups with fellow participants. The purpose of these focus groups was to utilize peer impact to invoke deeper exposure to core beliefs and perspectives. The researcher facilitated these groups. These focus groups allowed for natural conversations which were provoked by the individual responses to other participants. The researcher identified commonalities and differences between the participants.

Researcher's Notebook. The researcher maintained a researcher's notebook throughout the data collection period. The notebook was used to journal throughout the

process, particularly before and after any data collection. The researcher documented information such as how the researcher was feeling, what the researcher was expecting to find, what the researcher was expecting to hear and the researcher's observations about the environment and interactions with the participants. The journaling process provided a critical tool for reflection and analysis.

Data Analysis

Transcription

Transcription was done in accordance with qualitative research standards regarding analysis of data from interviews and focus groups. The first step in this process was to transcribe all interviews and focus groups with study participants. These transcriptions were stored on a password protected laptop and backed up on a password protected external hard drive. During the transcription process, all names were changed to pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of the participants, their family members and the setting of the study.

Triangulation of data

Throughout the research process, the researcher utilized methods to ensure trustworthiness and validity. Multiple data sources (interviews, focus groups and observations) were utilized to triangulate the data and to provide validation of the findings. The triangulation was used to support the findings of the impact of school environment on the participants' hope. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain that triangulation is a critical component in that the researcher must use varying strategies and tools of collection to find points of convergence among them.

Member Checking

Member checking was conducted with the participants to validate the recorded observations and transcriptions. Finally, through peer debriefers comprised of experts in

the field (i.e. educators and qualitative researchers) the researcher sought peer review for additional feedback, clarification and verification of themes identified in the data.

Peer Review

The researcher utilized peer review by other researchers to validate transcriptions of the data sources as well as emergent themes. Peer reviews were conducted both during the data collection and the data analysis processes.

Privacy and Ethical Considerations

All requirements of UHCL's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) were fulfilled. All forms, participant student assents (see Appendix F), parental consent (see Appendix E), and the principal informed consent (Appendix G) were collected. The interviews, focus groups and observations were conducted in the allotted time frame. Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects permission to conduct research in these middle schools were obtained from the hosting school district as well prior to initiating the study.

Participants understood that their participation was voluntary, and could be withdrawn at any time, without any repercussion whatsoever. Further, the researcher exhausted all means to protect the confidentiality of the participants, their teachers and their parents most notably, through the use of pseudonyms. Additionally, a safe environment was established during data collection in order to encourage authentic participant sharing of their thoughts and experiences.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Research Question

This research study sought to identify what factors and attributes at-risk students who are academically and socially successful perceived to contribute to hope. To answer that question, the researcher utilized Promise Middle School, a campus designated as Title I due to its population of students facing poverty and other risk factors. Utilizing purposive sampling, at-risk students completed The Hope Scale by CR Snyder. Those participants who attained the highest scores on the scale were then screened by the researcher and permission obtained by their parent/guardian to participate. Finally, six participants were selected.

A factor in the selection of these participants was that they represented varying at-risk factors (poverty, limited English proficient, incarcerated parent, single-parent and deceased parent). The researcher's goal was to determine what students with these at-risk factors perceived as the contributing reasons for their success. Utilizing the portraiture methodology, the researcher crafted portraits through the lens of the participants.

Pictures of Hope

This study shared the portraits of six participants. At the time that the study began, three of the students were in seventh and eighth grades respectively. Two of the participants were female, leaving four males. Both of the female participants were African-American. Of the male students, two were Hispanic and two were African-American. All of the participants shared in common that they faced barriers to their academic success that they each were facing in their own way.

To protect the identity of the participants, they were each given a moniker that captured the traits, which resonated with the researcher during the time that was spent with them. Following, each participant was discussed in their own portrait. Each portrait

included the following critical components, captured by sub-headings: Introduction; Family Structure; Guardianship and Parenting; Identity; Pathways; Poverty (for affected participants); Relationships; School Experiences and the Researcher's Connection.

Champion

Introduction

When “Champion” enters the room, the first thing that you notice is his smile. An 8th grade African-American male, he enters the room with an expression that has a ready smile. He carries what appears to be a quiet confidence, readily communicating. He is a student who has learned how to interact with adults in a way where they are compelled to assist or advocate for him.

Family Structure

Champion is a product of a single-parent home. He lives with his mother, and his father lives in the Midwest. His mother has three sons, while his father has seven children. Situations that his immediate and extended family have faced have had an impact on where and with whom he has lived and who has lived with his family. On more than one occasion, his family has intersected with significant crises including domestic violence between his parents and the involvement of Children’s Protective Services with his relatives, as he shares here

...Like it was before fourth grade so I like realized we had to go back to Minnesota because my aunt and her kids were having problems. So my mom, we moved in with them. We had to take care of them or whatever because at first they were in a foster home, and then they came back with their mom. Yeah, so it was just a bit hard there, so it was like 10, 15 people in one house.

He has moved back and forth from Texas to Minnesota several times. Champion describes the impact of reasons behind some of these moves being his mother’s need to hide from his father. While he would not explicitly share these experiences, he shares that at times, his mother fled or hid from his father. He faults his father for these multiple changes that he has undergone between varying schools and states, “I think that's why we

moved a lot because -- mainly I think it was because of him.” He has learned already that family does not mean that you will not be disappointed, remarking, “I think my brother is coming Saturday or tomorrow... I’m used to stuff in the past, like I don’t want to get my hopes up like that...”

When talking about his role in the family, he views his role as that of a caretaker. Champion is the middle brother, responsible for taking care of his mother and his younger brother because of his absent and less-concerned father. He strives to take bumps in stride, neglecting to complain while also not asking others for help. In his mind, it is okay if he is in need if his family’s needs are met. When describing how he chooses to eat less to ensure that his younger brother could eat, he compared himself to his older brother, “But he’s always just going to eat whatever when he wants to eat. He just eats. He tells us to be protective over one another, but his actions don’t match.”

Champion views himself as responsible for taking care of those in the home, even more now that his older brother has moved out and north, just like his father. It is his role to work hard to be able to put himself in position to take care of his family financially in the future. He believes that his current sacrifices are necessary to take care of others and is working toward a brighter future.

Guardianship and Parenting

Champion’s relationship with his father has a tremendous impact on him. He struggles back and forth between being a young man who is angry at his father’s pattern of coming in and out of his life to a boy who desires time and memories with him. He is resentful of his father’s actions but, at the same time, desires his father’s approval.

Every time I, like, see him where I talk to him, it’s like I forget about everything and then we’re just talking like you’ve been here this whole time, when he really

hasn't, but I just forget about it. Yeah, I don't be worried about it. I get to talk to him.

On the other end of the spectrum, Champion is concerned about his now absent father attempting to insert himself in his life when Champion achieves his goal of being a professional athlete. He is concerned that his father will attempt to take credit for his achievements or take advantage of the spoils of success by choosing then, and only then, to be an active part of his life.

What I really fear is, like, what if people are right, like they say, like, you know, how a deadbeat dad-- they suddenly don't find you until like they see you on the big screen. I'm, like, what if that actually happens, like, all of a sudden, he's there like a lot more athletes just because I'm on the big screen.

Champion believes that he has adjusted to life with his father being not only out of his home but with making minimal contact with him. Champion is focused on moving forward with his goals in spite of the limited relationship with his father and despite the circumstances of his life that have resulted from that absence. At the same time, Champion's desire to be a successful athlete is partially rooted in his knowledge that athletic prowess is a trait valued by his father combined with the fact that many of his happiest memories with his father are connected to sports. He shared, "because he just liked basketball that much. That's what we had in common."

Champion feels a responsibility to be a successful athlete to carry on the tradition of family members who had promising skills but fell by the wayside in sports. His prowess in sports earns him acknowledgement and recognition from his parents and extended family. The praise that he receives causes him to feel that by actually going the distance, he will be validated and he will earn the connection and pride that he desires from his father and his father's family remarking,

...the thing is like literally my whole dad's side of the family they like basketball, so I wouldn't know how to think of it, like, because he loves basketball, like the whole family, like that's the sport, basketball. Like, nearly my whole side of the family could have made it, but they were always getting hurt so...

When asked to explain what he believes the impact of his father's absence has been on his rate of success in school, he describes he feels that he is used to it. He can, in his mind, accept it as a temporary state and move forward. While on some level he believes that his life would be improved, he struggles with what that would look like, saying,

Yeah, like, there's time, like, I think about, like, what if he was here, what would be different? Would it be the food would be different; the income or money would be different? Would the shoes on my feet be different? Would the clothes I'm wearing be different? Would the people around me be different because of the way I act? Would my attitude be different? I don't know, because it's hard to imagine when you haven't seen it before.

Champion's relationship with his mother is very different. Of her, he is protective and hesitant to say anything less than positive about her. He does not answer readily when discussing his mother's schooling, employment or decisions. He seems to shy away from any information that might shed a negative light. He shares that his mother has had some training in cosmetology but does not work in that field. Her employment is such that sometimes they have what they need, and sometimes they do not. He describes that due to finances, he has undergone multiple transitions.

When talking about life in his mother's home, he describes that there is a history of violence and chaos on both sides of his family but particularly his mother's. His mother comes from a sibling group described by Champion as one that has been fighting

since their childhood and continues to do so. He describes a volatility in his family that he does not understand but to which he has grown accustomed, accepting it as the way his family is and has been for many years.

The thing about is it's like -- dumb and drama and stupidity and literally people that fight. For some reason -- my mom's side of the family they always like beef with each other -- I -- I never got it because like, they're family...My grandma -- My grandpa on my mom's side of the family always arguing like abusive stuff or whatever. So kind of like -- kind of like rubbed off to like their kids...

However, his mother expects him to be successful in school and challenges him to maintain his academic success. He describes that she is concerned that he will become distracted with romantic relationships as other teens sometimes are. When he falls below her expectations, he faces the consequence of her increased scrutiny. He is adjusting to what he feels is a new dynamic of his mother becoming more concerned and forceful than she has before, attributing it to the beginning of him having a new girlfriend. He is frustrated with the increased pressure because he affirms that he has always done well in school but that is not acknowledged.

Well, for me, she wants me to get, like, As and Bs and all, so I've maintained it, like, my whole life, so she thought that was a good thing, so now, all of a sudden, she wants me to make sure that I keep getting them. And, then, if I fall below it, she just starts riding me or whatever. It's very annoying. It started last year, but she doesn't really remember. She never noticed it. I noticed it. So, ever since I've got a girlfriend, she's been riding me or whatever.

Champion has internalized that he must temporarily accept the obstacles that he struggles with on a daily basis. He is cognizant of his barriers but determined to

overcome them. He shared, “Some kids like me live with people other than their parents, and some kids are poor and they can’t afford certain things like clothing or food.”

Identity

Champion has internalized that his current circumstances do not determine his destiny. He believes that he not only can, but will overcome the obstacles in his path if he continues to move forward with his goals of being a successful scholar athlete. He accepts the lack that he has faced by remembering that there are others who may face more dire circumstances. So, instead of collapsing due to anger or frustration, he chooses a positive, forward thinking outlook. When asked what was the hardest thing that he faced, he responded,

I'm not sure what would be the hardest because I never looked anything to be hard. Because like I always thought maybe, somebody was going through worse. So I'm like, this couldn't be that bad. Yeah, like every time, now that I think about it, like everything I've been through is for a reason. And every little thing mattered. Because every little thing got me to this point.

What shines through when spending time with Champion is that he is a student who possesses determination and grit. He has decided that failure for him is not optional and is only possible if he doubts his destiny or stops working hard. He believes that each of the obstacles in his path will be overcome. When he meets an obstacle, he presses through it instead of letting it overtake him.

Because I know I can't fail at what I want to do. I know I have to make it. And I'm not gonna let nothing stop me from making it. I know -- because I know so many reasons why people didn't make it. So, I'm like if I can get past that then there's nothing hard about it. I know there's a lot of people who did make it. Ain't no reason why I can't.

For him, the mark of strength comes from being aware of his circumstances but not complaining about them. After establishing rapport in the initial visit, he acknowledged that many times, he is hungry at school but chooses not to ask for help. He has decided that there are students who must be worse off than him who might need help and that since his circumstance is temporary, for now he can silently deal with the effects. He chooses to bear the weight instead of asking his mom or staff at school for help. He shared,

I think this student is a kid that like I notice he has like bad like situations at home like he's not even one of those kids that's like that doesn't have all the shoes and like everything handed to them, this student is a kid than can just wake up in the morning, put a smile on his face and do his work. He's not going to have everything handed to them one day. The person that works for it the most is the one that going to get the most prize at the end of it.

Pathways

The barriers which cause Champion to be at-risk which should, on paper, result in a lack of success are viewed by him as just things that he has to overcome. He does not accept that his current circumstance is a permanent condition. Instead, his eyes are focused forward on what he will become in the future.

...like, barriers on here, it's probably because I don't notice them, because I don't really look at them that way. I just look at them, that's just how everything is set up, and it's just how I have to get through every day, but some of the stuff, I don't even look at it as barriers.

Champion focuses his attention on placing himself in the best position that he can in every area that has an impact on his future, with his coaches, with his teachers, with his

grades. Because his home life presents challenges, he uses the minutes of his day to ensure that he can accomplish his goals so that when the time comes, he is ready.

Like, as long as you figure out, like, what to do, put everything in, like, order and organize everything. Like, me, I do my homework throughout the day, like, throughout classes and stuff, so like when I'm done with the work in class and we have extra time, I'm doing homework, or, like, in the library, I'm doing homework. Sometimes practice starts a little bit later, so, before that, I'm doing homework, and, like, in athletic period if I'm not doing anything, I'm, like, doing the homework, over the working and getting it done, so that way I don't have to do nothing at home...

While being focused on what he will gain in the future, he is also cognizant of things that a successful student has to choose to give up. He is determined that he will not add additional barriers to his success via poor decision-making or negative influences. He believes that with intentional steps, he increases his likelihood to success. He believes that you have to give up wasted time and negative people to gain a positive future.

Poverty

Poverty intersects with Champion's life in two ways, transiency and unmet needs. Though both of these areas were consistently mentioned by the participant, what shone through was Champion's belief that these were temporal concerns. He is focused forward on to brighter pastures but understands for now that these are his circumstances.

Transiency. First, in relation to transiency, Champion shares that his family has moved many times during his years in school, more times than he can count. He expresses frustration that because he is attempting to develop as an athlete, the moves are

more difficult because of changed coaches and teams than for friendships. He has accepted that his friendships are temporary because they end abruptly.

So every time you move, it's like then you come back, like the people don't remember you. Maybe they don't remember you, or it's kind of blurry, then you've got to make up the relationship again. It's like you're just starting over. It's like five new lives.

When asked to describe how the moves have affected him, Champion explains the impact in terms of relationships. He realizes the changing connections as he moves from place to place, and it resonates with him.

Unmet Needs. For Champion, hunger is a near permanent condition. He has accepted that not having enough food, whether at home or at school, is a part of his life. Instead of being mired in resentment, he focuses on working toward his goals instead. However, despite his positive outlook, it is evident that the lack that has found its way into his daily existence does impact him and cause him to yearn, at times, that his circumstances were different.

Like, now, we used to have free lunch, but now I can't get it anymore. I had free lunch for, like, nine years of my life. Now, I can't have free lunch no more. Like, suddenly, I guess my mom either forgot to sign a paper or whatever, now, I owe a lot of money, because I didn't have nothing to eat those days at lunch. I mean, since -- ever since, like, maybe the first day of school, I haven't been eating anything at lunch. Yeah, but I just don't eat. I just talk, so I don't think about it. There's a few times my mom maybe bring home Subway and I just save it that next day for lunch.

He handles the lack of food in terms of survival of the fittest, similar to the competitions that he has faced in his sports games. However, instead of becoming selfish, he takes as little as he can and looks out for others.

Because I'm like okay, it's like it's nothing really new. So, when I do eat, I make sure I get what's right. Because I know like if you have it and then you know it could be gone any minute. And, plus, you're living at home with a lot of other people. Like you have brothers and you've got one that likes to eat a lot, then you got some that you know who ain't gonna be able to eat because they're younger than you; it's like a food chain. So it's like you're trying to save some for them. So I'm like if I don't eat, at least I know they're eating because I'm not eating.

Though hunger is ever present for this participant, the unmet needs of poverty also rear their head in other ways such as having a loss of essential needs like electricity, clothing, etc. Sometimes these unmet needs affect his schooling because he is unable to attend school due to serving as a caretaker or because the needs at home are so great. As poverty intersects into Champion's life, he takes from it the understanding of being a good steward over his possessions by conserving them. What is also evident is that instead of what could be an all-encompassing anger, he chooses instead to be appreciative of what he has instead of frustrated with what he does not have.

Like if you -- sometimes you have to like stay at home. I stay home with my brothers and my older brother was living with me at the time too so we sometimes the power or whatever go off or like water gets stuck in our stuff so we had to light candles while my mom's at work or whatever. And there was a point of time when my mom didn't have a job, like the whole summer or throughout the school year so it was like I started to notice like the food was like depleting and

stuff. So it was like -- you got to like conserve maybe. That's why like I'm fine without eating sometimes.

School Experiences

The researcher attempted to determine the impact of the frameworks, opportunities and barriers in school and how they have affected Champion. He realizes that through the connections that he establishes in school, he ensures a more likely outcome for his future path. He both accesses and demonstrates gratitude for those who choose to invest in him.

He recognizes that within schools there are classification and organization systems, which are used to manage students. He began to notice these structures in elementary school. When relating a story from 3rd grade, he noted, "...and we were like all color-coded and like uniforms and stuff. So, if they tried to sneak off to the other school, we know who's where." He recognizes that the adults within the school use tools to control students.

Adult Influence. Champion is appreciative of adults who have invested in him. He shares that he intentionally seeks out these connections, not just for his future outlook but for the other benefits of having an adult who chooses him and who believes in him. He needs these validations of his work and efforts outside of his home. When he builds rapport with an adult, he demonstrates a need for a connection that is maternal or paternal. Even with this researcher, it was evident that he sought an increased relational connection, hugging at the beginning and end of sessions and desiring to call the researcher, "Moma".

There was a significant adult relationship that he discusses having been a part of his schooling that impacted him. The first event occurred in elementary school when he was chosen by one of his teachers for a special opportunity. This teacher took him and

another student for a special presentation in front of a large group. He recognized that this was an opportunity that was unique. When describing the impact of this teacher he shared,

like when I had him, I realized like my potential, that I was smart, and what I could do with myself. I guess he must've seen something in me or whatever... It felt pretty good. Like I was in front of like judges and stuff so it was awesome. And then I was young, too, so it was a good experience.

For Champion, he describes his encounter with this teacher as the one when he first realized that he was smart. This is also when he realized that he could have opportunities available to him outside of current circumstances. Consequentially, since that intersection, he attempts to seek out connections and pathways that will continue to do so including significant relationships with coaches and other adults who treat him like a member of their extended family, providing food, support and recognition. Simultaneously, he disregards others whom he feels are not invested in him as just one more thing that he has to overcome.

Extracurricular Activities. Extracurricular activities for Champion serve as a bridge and as an oasis from the factors in his life that could negatively impact his success. Not only does he actively participate in both football and basketball in school, but he does basketball outside of school. He is also enrolled in the Peer Assistance Leadership Class (PALS) class of students who are hand-selected because of the leadership skills that they possess. These students serve as ambassadors to others. He believes that his biggest obstacle is the need to prove to others of what he is capable. He shared a poignant self-proclamation statement, “My real obstacle is proving what I can do, really.”

Portraitist's Connection to Champion

My connection to Champion was strong because so much of his story resonated with my own. During my time with him, I found myself conducting my own self-talk to ensure that I immersed myself in his experience while not projecting my own. However, what I found over and over again was not only in circumstance but, in outlook, our stories intersected. I could relate to the impact of having a father who was inconsistently a part of his life and the resulting hurt because of it. Further, I understood how this yearning for this natural relationship could result in fear of the same father suddenly becoming interested when I achieved success.

Beyond the parental connections, Champion's intentional usage of school as a vehicle and escape from his life's circumstances mirrored my own history. Instead of focusing on the lack, we each chose to escape in school, immersing ourselves in more positive pursuits. Not only did this oasis provide temporary respite, but it became the life water for our future goals.

Finally, perhaps most significant, both Champion and I sought adults who nurtured our potential. These adults provided access to new experiences, validation of our efforts and ability and safe harbor. Champion continues to seek adults who provide him a pathway toward or lighting along the way to a bright future. He, like me, chooses to create his own village.

Where we significantly differed, to Champion's credit, was his ability to remain positive in his outlook. In my own experience, I found myself angry with the difficulty that I faced. Champion already understands what I grew to understand in my adult years. He understands, at a significantly younger age than me, that these barriers are for a reason and instead of focusing on the "why" or unfairness of them, he should instead focus on them being temporary circumstances while being grateful for what he does have

because there are others who may struggle more. This ability is what I admired most, making him a true Champion to me.

Beacon

Introduction

Beacon is the son of Cuban immigrants. Now, they have divorced, forcing their son to travel back and forth between their very different financial class lives. He, who entered U.S. schools as an English as a Second Language (ESL) student, greets me with a ready smile, devoid of any accent. His name is Beacon because he is seemingly surrounded by a self-generated bright and brilliant light. His smile is both internal and external, immediately provoking a curiosity as to why it seems so genuine. He is a young man who draws others, a natural magnet.

Beacon is an 8th grade Latino. He is an accomplished student, performing well enough academically to be welcomed into the National Junior Honor Society. He is a student leader who has been chosen to serve as an example for his peers. He is focused on creating the best future possible and live out the role that has been expected of him, to excel.

Family Structure

Beacon lives in a Spanish-speaking home with his mother and her boyfriend who Beacon calls his stepdad. He also has a six-year-old brother who lives in the home. Though this is the nucleus of his family, he often finds extra extended family have moved into the home, where his mother and stepdad provide support for other family members. At the time of the interview, his married cousins and children were also living with Beacon's family.

When asked about being the child of divorce, Beacon shrugs it off. He believes that he has moved past the disappointment that he once felt and justifies the split as being best because "it was dark" during the time before the split. He describes that his parents would fight. He believes that he has learned that in relationships you, "can't have it your

way, but there's always a good way." He appreciates that his parents have figured out how to share time with him.

On alternating weekends, he travels to his father's apartment where he lives with his father's wife and Beacon's two paternal siblings. Beacon describes that due to his father's financial status, his life in this household differs greatly than at his primary home. Accordingly, when he is with his father, he has to adjust his consumption and desires.

Guardianship & Parenting

Beacon's relationship with his mother is extremely impactful both in his viewpoint as well as in his actions. Due to his mother's influence, he has developed confidence in his ability to be successful. After what his parents endured, he has internalized that any obstacle that he encounters can surely be overcome.

Well I always tell myself anything is possible. That's the way of thinking. My mother taught me that. She showed me that she came—she actually struggled a lot to get to where she is right now and I admire her.

His mother's story serves as an inspiration for him. His mother entered the United States at the age of thirteen, a Cuban immigrant and an ESL student. Beacon shares that his mother worked hard enough in school to be in Advanced Placement classes. After graduating, she went on to become trained in the medical field conducting medical testing such as ultrasounds. Beacon's mother teaches him that his education is the path to success. Accordingly, her expectation for his own success are high.

I have to work on PALS class. That's the only B I have left and B is terrible in my house. B is bad. It's unacceptable because my mom really wants me to struggle—not to struggle, but to push myself, yes. That was the word. And it's

good that she does that because some parents just don't care. Like they just care if you're passing but for me, passing is just, it's not a good standard.

Beacon traverses back and forth between extreme pride in his mother's accomplishments and seeming disappointment in his father's. While he celebrates his mother, discussions of his father are much more limited. He does not approve of the choices that his father made. He stated that he believes that his father is the risk factor which caused him to be chosen for the study. When asked to explain his thinking, he shared,

Maybe it's the fact that I have a stepdad but he actually, to be honest, helps me out more than my dad because my dad, he's a trucker, right? He drives trucks and is really not a good example. But he's smart too. He's smart, he's just lazy. And he would have had a good degree here. I don't know, maybe a better job, and whatever instead of trucking. But my mom, she sets a better example for me.

Beacon's father started college but did not finish. He works as a truck driver for a family friend. For Beacon's goal-oriented thinking and aspirations, this seems inexcusable. He compares his father's current station to that of his mother's boyfriend who owns his own trucking business. He does not proffer any explanations, or for that matter empathy, for his biological father not achieving more, such as having to take care of family or adjusting to a new country as an immigrant. For Beacon, who exudes caring and understanding for others, surprisingly for his father, there is little grace given beyond being understanding of the disparity between households and adjusting to them as he goes from one parent to another.

Because we made a deal when I was like two years old. It was one weekend with my mom, one weekend with my dad. So that weekend was with him and I saw him and he was like 'I don't know about work. We can't buy all this stuff.' I

said, 'all right, I understand,' so I tried to stay away from all the food and not be too much to help him out.

Both of Beacon's father figures defer to his mother in matters of school and performance. The standards that she has established for her son are high. Not only does she expect her son to perform well in school, she expects him to produce all A's on his report cards. If he fails to do so, there are dire consequences.

He mostly cares about me working because he knows my mom already handles that with me. And so what my mom tells me is that I have to behave good with the teachers so I have good relationships with them and I don't fight with them much and that their expectations for me would be 90 and above. Anything lower than a 90, I probably won't get accepted to a university.

Beacon is aware of the importance of obtaining great academic performance in preparation for application for college, yet he is only in the eighth grade. Already, he is intent on laying the groundwork for future success, four years down the line.

Identity

Beacon describes himself as a person that pushes himself to do well in school and help others. He is proud of his achievements.

The fact of me getting almost all A's in all my classes is really outstanding. If I keep this rate, I could probably get a scholarship which is my main goal right now. And that would be grand because some people I know just don't have the ability to be like me and I just really, I feel bad for them and I really want to help them. Maybe one day I will.

Some of the fortitude that he currently has internalized comes from having to make several transitions thus far in his life. Not only has he experienced the divorce of his parents but, he has also had to move from state to state on two occasions and been

forced to start over. What he has taken from the difficult experiences that he has faced is that he has the ability to start over.

So I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where to sit. I remember my first day. I didn't know what to do, where to sit, teacher telling me to go over here. That's one of the hard parts. Yes. I can deal with it. I've dealt with it but some people can't.

To Beacon, there is no excuse not to move forward. He has set his sights on the goals that he has ahead of him. He believes that goals are, "Something that you see, you put—like you set something for yourself and you try to achieve it in however way possible." For him, his future will be bright if he does not get deterred from his path.

Pathways

Beacon's short-term goals mirror his long-term ones. He is focused on finishing his 8th grade year with all A's and continuing that trend through high school. He expresses interest about a course that he is taking in Career and Technology Education because through it he has chosen a career in engineering. He has developed a path that will not only enable him to go to college, but ensure a path for his younger brother to do the same.

Same thing, getting A's in all my classes, getting an engineering class for all my four years, and striving in that, and getting recommendation letters from different universities. And the highest goal that I have ever set myself to doing and I'm still trying to achieve it is to get a scholarship in engineering or anything, to be honest. And if I get my scholarship for free, like mine's already paid so if I get it for free, it'll go onto my brother.

Beacon is determined not to allow any obstacles to block his path to success. "I get past it, however I can. Like if it's say a problem that I'm facing, I just work really

hard to try and get it out of the way in whatever way I can do it.” This mantra is proven through the examples of obstacles that he has overcome including divorce, moving schools twice within the previous two years, and living in a Spanish-speaking household. On the other side of these obstacles, he was able to complete high school Algebra the year prior in seventh grade, be accepted into the National Junior Honor Society, be selected for PALS (Peer Assistance Leadership) for his 8th grade year and finally, achieve commended (highest honor) scores on his state assessment examinations during the span of time covering these interviews.

School Experiences

Beacon believes that his participation in school and its programs/classes are instrumental to his success. He targets specific experiences and belief systems, which he believes are rooted in his involvement in these classes and organizations.

My tech class really lets me express my engineering skills and that’s a class that enlightened me to become an engineer and that is one of the classes. Then there’s PALS. It really lets me show off my helping skills and how I can be nice to people and help the community out. There’s also NJHS. That’s one of the things that helps me help the community. We do our service hours. That’s a good way to help out the community.

He is taking full advantage of the opportunities that he has been given through the coursework and extra-curricular activities and transforming them into building blocks for his future. In each activity, he seeks and finds value. He can connect not only how the experiences can be currently utilized, but also how he can use them to scaffold his future.

Adult Influences. Beacon has developed relationships which he counts on for success in school. He believes that a relationship in his prior school and one this current year have been extremely significant for him. He shared that one of his current

relationships has been integral to his inspiration and success, describing it, “He motivates me. He tells me that I can do it, I can do it. He—if I have a problem, he’s another person that will help me out with the problem.” He discusses one of his past teachers during his seventh grade year as having impacted his outlook even more.

She taught me how to perceive things in a positive way. She told me never to get mad. Don’t do dumb stuff. Just take a second and think about what you’re going to do and then think about what ways it can be positive or different outcome.

Like any ordinary teen that probably get like bipolar about it. One second you’re happy, the next you’re sad, then you’re depressed and nervous, like all around. I always used to get mad at my mom for no reason just like oh, she’s so strict. She makes me get A’s. It would come out of nowhere but then when I went to her class, she taught me what was wrong and right, how to see things in positive ways. She always talked about being positive.

He attributes his ability to transition to teachers who supported him in easing his transition.

Without their example, I probably wouldn’t be as educated, as respectful, or as nice as I am today and given that, I wouldn’t be me. I’d probably be a lot meaner, probably just not care about anybody—one of those people that just are disrespectful. But with them, they’ve really helped me out and they’ve educated me. They’ve been strict with me. That’s one of the good parts and I did get a lot from them.

Beacon has established an impactful support system that he attributes as being a source to his success. He recognizes that he has benefitted from these adult relationships. Even more significantly, it is his perception that his outlook on life and how he

approaches it has been positively altered due to this support system and these pivotal relationships.

Portraitist's Connection to Beacon

I can relate most to the pressure of expectation that is clearly part of Beacon's experience. Having had parents who struggled and entered this country as Cuban immigrants, he has the pressure of exemplifying the American Dream that inspired their journey. There is an added burden that comes when you have parents who have overcome much and want you to achieve their goal. This weight can either crush or inspire. For both Beacon and I, this pressure created a driving force. For our mothers, education was the ticket to a better life, and they demanded that we punch ours.

Secondly, Beacon bears the mantle of high expectations. This mantle, originally passed through the aforementioned parental expectation eventually becomes one that is nurtured by an individual through a self-selected choice of action. Beacon is laser-focused on being successful and is fearful of falling short of success. He makes little allowances for struggle and none for failure. That is a tremendous amount of pressure for a teenager and I am hopeful that, better than this researcher, he is able to find the balance to allow for humanity and the successes and struggle which are par for the course.

Not surprisingly for Beacon, there was a particular teacher who served as a cultivator of the skills that exist within him. The encouragement of this person was so significant that Beacon recognized it as a turning point in his life. He continues to seek out relationships with teachers who provide him a safe haven at school. Similarly, I can target a particular relationship and connection that changed the trajectory of my own life. There is simply no replacement for the power that one educator can have over a child. I, like, Beacon, am grateful for the one that chose us.

Conqueror

Introduction

The door opens and “The Conqueror” enters the room. He strides in with a balance of confidence and curiosity. He has met enough adults to know that this meeting could go either way, toward positivity or toward frustration. Effortlessly moving like the athlete that he is, his six-foot frame enters the room. His physical efforts in playing two sports are evident in the way he carries himself. Conqueror is a tall African-American male, with broad shoulders that carry more than the weight of football pads. He is carrying the hopes of this family who evacuated New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, hoping for a better way of life.

Conqueror is in the 8th grade when the researcher enters his life. He plays both football and basketball, both inside and outside of school. Though he is presented with barriers that will be discussed in this portrait, they do not define him. To the contrary, he projects the belief that these roadblocks can be removed with consistent work, effort and a chorus of advocates pushing him across the finish line to victory.

Family Structure

Conqueror’s experience does not include any memories of either a two-parent household or two parents acting in partnership for his care. To the contrary, he is a young man being raised by his mother in a single-parent household. He lives in the home with his mother and one high school aged brother. His oldest brother is thirty years old and lives on his own. Conqueror is the baby of the family.

Conqueror is a student who has had to wrestle with more crises by his 8th grade year than many adults may have to face during their entire lifetime. He is not a stranger to chaotic situations, including events where he was fearful of losing his life. He recalled

a frightening situation that occurred when he was seven years old as one of the most difficult moments he's faced.

There was this time me and my brother, it was, like, a long time ago. Like, he was older— we went to this, like, party and some ghetto kids, they just came, like, shooting out of nowhere. Like, like in their cars just running around shooting guns at us. We had to run and hide because they were known in the neighborhood for just killing somebody and just running away. It was, like, the most difficult situation. I thought I'd actually die that night.

Situations resulting in fear and chaos from aggression intersect in this young man's life in multiple ways including the domestic abuse of his grandmother by her husband as well as his aunt's battle with mental illness. Conqueror explains that his mother's sister struggles with a bipolar disorder that causes her to have unpredictable and volatile behavior, both inside and outside the home. These outbursts result in a constant vigilance being paid to his aunt's moods and habits. He also witnesses that the burden of primary care falls to his own mother.

My mom's sister, who has— she's mentally disabled. She, like, kind of like — she, like, kind of crazy. Then, like, a lot of stuff with my family happened. Like, it's all revolved around her. She'll do some crazy stuff — like, just jump on somebody. Like, yell at somebody at the store or something. And my mom, she always has to get into it and just — it's a lot of stuff. Well, like, how can I say this? Like, one time my aunt was at the store, she, like, started yelling, like, at somebody I knew because she got, like, a bad temper, like, when she don't take her medications. And she had just went off and my mom had to come to the store and like calm her down. Like, every time something happens, like, the first person they call is my mom because she's the older sister. And one of my mom's

sisters, she has cancer right now. One of her sisters already died from the cancer.

My mom, she just – it's a lot on her.

Compounded with an absent father, mentally ill aunt as well as an aunt fighting cancer, Conqueror also shared that his grandmother is seriously ill and going in and out of the hospital. Again, it is his mother who takes on the responsibility of her care, an added struggle. Perhaps most troubling, though, was when Conqueror shared that in addition to these three women in his family fighting illness, there is yet a fourth, his mother.

One of the most difficult things? It's, like, seeing my mom when she was sick. She had a lot of seizures and I remember one night I found her. She had passed out and, like, it was like a pool of blood and I was the only one home. She was trying to make it to my room because I think she was out of her mind because I think she forgot to take her medicine. She had hit her like mouth and it was bloody and I didn't know what to do. I was asleep. Like, I woke up – like, seriously. I had to rub my eyes like is this really, like, blood? I called my older brother then they helped her. It was like she was – she's had a seizure. And, like, she said she's been having it for a long time. And they just found out probably like three years ago that they were like seizures. She said she's had them since she was like born, that she just, like – that she just found out that it was like seizures because she kept passing out for some reason. And I can see, like – I remember this one time, like, she was about to have one again. Like, she don't look like she's herself. Like she's talking to you but looking somewhere else. I tell her just lay down.

Conqueror has faced a constant state of uncertainty that is brought about by being surrounded by the illness in the female members of his family. Instead of being able to

be a carefree adolescent, he has faced the pressure of serving as a caretaker and protector to those he loves. His weight is only lessened due to the bond and care of his older brother, who was thirty years old at the time of the interview. He relies on this brother and attributes some of his success to this relationship. He believes that his family makes a difference in his success and in his outlook.

Well, my mom and brothers, they always tell me whenever I'm being goofy, they just always tell me, you know, what it could be like – some of those other people in the world who ain't nothing, just living off what people give them. But, me...I want to be able to give back and stuff and just sometimes I like to pray and thank God that I'm still living, focused on being a contributor to society. Yes, they make a difference because they push me a lot.

In the absence of a father and a paternal relationship, Conqueror's oldest brother steps in to fill the gap left in this single-parent household. Conqueror clearly leans on his older sibling as a stand-in father figure, counting on him to stand in the gap when his mother is overwhelmed with all the tremendous burdens on her plate.

He just – whenever I need something he always there. Like, when my mom goes to stuff. He'd be the one to take care of us. And he's, like – even though it's not his situation he'll put himself in the situation to help my mom, like, get all the stress off of her. Like, when my mom is, like – like she out all night with my grandma at the hospital he come. He come over there just to spend time with us and stuff.

For Conqueror, this familial support is essential. Unlike other teens who are not cognizant of the benefit of their family, Conqueror is not only aware but, grateful. He can articulate the effect that his family has on his success and, he believes that the result is positive. With the multiple arrows thrown in their direction, Conqueror leans on his

family to propel him forward. With their support, he believes his opportunity to achieve is increased.

Because whenever, like, I'm doing, like, bad at school or I'm having bad games or something they just tell me, like, they did it before and that they trust me to just – like, stop, think about it and just let it go. You're gonna always come back better. That's what I do.

Guardianship and Parenting

Conqueror's relationship with his father is non-existent. He is neither able to relay any memories with his father nor does he have any experiences of being part of a two-parent household. It has always been him along with his siblings and any other relatives dependent upon his mother for survival. When asked about his father's whereabouts, Conqueror replies, "I don't know. I don't even know." He stated that he has no way to contact him or his family. His paternal ties are, for now at least, lost. Conqueror relays the impact of his father's absence using these words, "I don't even care about him. I – like it don't even matter to me."

This loss manifests itself an increased awareness of the survival instincts of his mother and, his desire to make her proud of him. He explains that his mother's expectations are high, the result of her coming from a strict home that was full of its own violence. His mother witnessed the domestic abuse of her mother at the hands of her spouse. Conqueror's mother has explained to him that witnessing this abuse made her learn to be tough. That strength was utilized in her work as a police officer prior to Hurricane Katrina for eighteen years. Unfortunately, she was unable to continue that career after fleeing to Texas to save her family, struggling financially year after year.

Conqueror credits his mother with being responsible for his success in school. In her house, academics are expected to be the primary focus for this athlete. She

encourages her son to excel in his academic performance so that he is better able to take care of himself when he becomes an adult. She makes it clear for her sons that she will not aid any effort at being less than a self-sufficient man.

She said, like, sports, they come last in school because she said the way I've heard it happens is if we get badly injured then we're going to fall back on school. So she said make sure we get that education. She ain't gonna have us living in her house. She's real strict about school.

Perhaps the biggest message that has been transferred from Conqueror's mother to her son is the need to be self-sufficient. He has witnessed multiple instances of his mother's ongoing financial struggles and how she has handled them. From them, he has learned that an individual cannot be dependent on others for his survival. His mother, then, has become his role model of fortitude through, above and around life's circumstance so that improved position is achieved. For example, he shared

Probably third or fourth grade, that's when I remember, but then, like it affected me. Like, it made me, like, whenever I did some – like, I had – I knew I had to work for it. My mom, she like, got a job, that like she, like, she going to work for this money was like to stop struggling. It made me see, like, we don't need nobody else to do nothing because I – she didn't even have nobody else, like, to help her with nothing. It seemed like you can do everything you want in life by yourself, because she did. Like she started from a struggle, now she's doing better. She got – she got what she wanted. That's what I see.

From his mother, Conqueror has internalized that he can overcome his obstacles. Watching his mother strive to overcome struggles within the family has developed the belief in him that he, too, can do the same.

Identity

With the adversity that Conqueror has faced, he has learned to look ahead, focused forward instead of backward. His life experiences have resulted in a level of maturity not often found in his peer group. He understands that his future is dependent on the choices that he makes today, necessitating that those choices are optimal and grounded in sound decision-making. With this kind of decision-making, he realizes that he will not see an immediate change in his circumstances but, he believes that an improvement is coming, stating, “Goals is, like, just everything you wanted. Like, everything you worked for. It’s, like – it has finally paid off and, like, you just, like, your dreams come true, really.”

Conqueror also realizes that the roadblocks in his path have made a difference in how he views his life. It has had an effect in the choices that he makes from day to day. When it comes to these barriers, he is even able to view his experience through his spiritual belief in a higher power and can see a benefit in the hardships that are a part of his life. To him, these situations are temporary.

Oh, like biggest benefit of what I’ve gone through? Like, knowing that you can always do better. Just because that day was hard, like, God isn’t going to put you through nothing that you can’t take. He would have done stopped you. That’s what I believe. Like, even if I have a bad day, like, some days you probably want bad days because you know the next day can be even better.

Conqueror has learned through experience that he will encounter many things out of his control like the illness running rampant in his family, having to evacuate to another state due to a natural disaster and frequent acts of violence. Instead of collapsing into helplessness, he is resolute in his determination to move forward.

It makes me want things more. It makes me – it makes you work harder for more things that other people have. Because you're just thinking, like, you've got to go get it – you've got to get it somehow. Ain't nobody going to give it to you. Most cases you either have to – people be doing crazy things just to get money and stuff. I mean, they've got ways to do stuff, but, like, selling drugs and stuff is not the way to do it. Just education and whatever talents you have, just make something out of that.

Consequently, Conqueror believes that to move forward, he has to take actions to place himself on the path to success. His focus is achieving success as a professional athlete long-term but, he takes actions to place himself in a good position today. As his family has taught him, through the encouragement of his siblings and his window into his mother's struggles to overcome adversity, no one is going to give him anything. He has to put the pieces into place to help himself. For example, at the beginning of this journey, Conqueror mentioned that he is concerned about his upcoming state readiness examination in math because he failed the examination in the seventh grade. However, by the end of the interview cycle, Conqueror reports, "Feels good. I've been able to pass that math STAAR the first time, but I did it." He went on to articulate how he was determined that he would improve and worked hard on focusing to achieve his goal. He understands that there will be struggles. However, this young man has already internalized, "Like, if something bad happens I just try to get it out of my mind. Something better is always going to happen."

The roadblocks and obstacles that have been placed into Conquerors' path have become the fuel which propels his momentum forward. He is not utilizing these risk factors as an excuse to throw up his hands in despair. To the contrary, he is pushing back against them in order to mark his place of success. To ensure his success, he explains

that while he is focused on sports as his primary pathway, he believes that he has other alternatives. “I feel like will I make it? Yeah, that’s how I feel. I feel like sports is just one of my pathways but sports is the only pathway I want to take. I’ve got – I can do a lot of stuff.” Conqueror, therefore, understands that the goal is to just keep trying. On his belief of how to handle these obstacles, he explains, “I’ll just keep pushing through them and, like, you know, you’re going to have your days. One day ain’t going to bring you down.”

Conqueror walks a fine line between utilizing the support of others and claiming his own independence. Along with the acknowledgement of the support and push of his family, he attributes his desire to succeed to be affected by the support system he has established in school. He demonstrates a strong desire to stand on his own two feet and control his destiny. This yearning can most likely be attributed to a desire to counter all of the obstacles that he cannot control. He wants to be the master of his destiny, believing that the result will be the ability to sustain his success.

It’s better to do it by yourself. Like, if you have everything given to you, you won’t know what it’s like to do it by yourself. You’ve got to go through it the hard way to get it because once you get there you’re going to still need help.

Finally, what shines through in the identity of this man is gratitude for what he has been provided and acknowledgement of the sacrifices of his support team. Though he has faced a life of lack at the time of the study, he recognized that his current situation was not his end game. Instead of resentment and anger in response to his struggles, what resonated was an awareness of how the strife had strengthened him. He understands that he can move through the chaos and struggle to the brighter pastures that he believes lie ahead for him. For now, instead of protesting his circumstances, he has been using them as a scaffold to greatness.

Because, like, whenever I get something like how people like complain about it like I'm used to not having it as much and I'm not as, like, spoiled as other people are. Like, I, like, what I get, I can take and I can make it into something better. Like, I don't take things -- and plus, I don't take things for granted either. So that made me stronger.

Despite having limited means, Conqueror exudes gratitude for what he has been given and the fortitude to multiply that into something greater.

Pathways

Goal-setting is one area in Conqueror's life of which there had been no lack. He establishes both short-term and long-term goals for himself to achieve followed by actions to facilitate reaching the goal on which he has set his sights. When asked to explain his perception of what a goal is, Conqueror explained, "Goals is like something that you always wanted to do in life and that you're going to try to make it to do. Like, it's like a process." At the age of fourteen, he believes that a goal is the last step and that the struggles along the way are stepping stones. Failure is not an end to the targeted objective. Conqueror had several goals established for himself at the beginning of the interviews, which included:

- Passing his math STAAR (state exam) and moving from a math support class to an advanced placement class. "Like, be in one of the top math classes so I could go from not understanding it to being one of the best."
- Moving on to high school and working to be chosen for the varsity football and basketball teams.
- Attending a Division I college or university. "Go to a successful college, not a small. Any college, but I want to go to the higher Division 1 school so I can play sports and have better teachers to make it and get a degree and stuff."

Though he had been certainly hopeful of achieving success as a professional athlete, he understood that he had to maintain alternative routes to success. He knew that there was more than one way forward. He has believed that he is adept at other areas such as the sciences or in possibly being an artist. His desired goal to pursue in college has been the area of Psychology with the goal of establishing a business of his own. He is passionate about understanding the brain and using that passion to make a career if sports do not work out. He is determined to have multiple paths toward an end goal of success.

Like, if anything, if I had to be successful in school or football, I would have to choose to be successful in school because if you are successful in football then that's the only thing you have to lean back on. But with school, you have many different career choices to choose.

Conqueror is able to share examples of goals that he has established and then worked to achieve such as teaching himself how to dunk a basketball by watching Youtube videos and then changing his own training routine to increase his leg strength until he became successful at it, or setting a goal of improving his grades and then putting in the corresponding work. Further, he was most proud of his efforts during his eighth year which resulted in passing the state examination in mathematics because he realized that his intentional efforts of focus and self-belief paid off for him. These experiences have resonated so deeply within him that he is skeptical of things that come easily, sharing that he learned the lesson the hard way when he agreed to take answers from another student on a test in the prior year and ultimately, ended up failing the examination. Instead, his belief system now is relayed this way,

Stuff that comes to me the easy way, like, I don't trust it because it can't be that easy so something got to be wrong with it. You've got to work for what you

really want. Because, like, everything that came easy to me, like, something's wrong with it.

Outside of sports, Conqueror believes that he is establishing a way to achieve financial stability for himself and his family. He reflects on what he believes was a turning point of one of his teachers having their class watch a documentary which showed the dangers involved in alternative lifestyles involving gangs, drugs and violence. From it, Conqueror grew to believe that through obtaining his education, he could earn on his own the financial rewards and success that others seek through illicit means. The difference to him was that when he does so, the right way, then no one can take it away from him. It is his to keep. Conqueror explains his long-term plan,

You have to pass eighth grade, high school, get an offer from colleges, have good grades so I can go to that college, play sports and, like, study, like, biology and stuff. Then after I graduate that college go either go through with the NFL, that was my first plan but if it's not going that well I'll just – I'll still play football but on the side I'll do, like, have a job that includes science and stuff. And if it – like, if I get injured or something, I'll already be with that job so I'll be knowing what to do and I can do most of my time with that job and take care of myself.

Poverty

Poverty is an intersection that Conqueror has met that has caused him to have a different perspective on the struggle that others may have. He has lived through his family's relocation to Texas from Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. He has watched his mother go from a stable career to being unemployed and unable to take care of her family. He has known hunger, and he has learned how to go without his needs being met. He summarizes the impact of these experiences in that his perspective on the plight of

others changing his perspective on others in poverty. Instead of being an observer, he became a part of the class.

I think about what you call them – like, I think about – I think about, like, now when I look at people that are, like us struggling I think – I remember how I used to think of them, like, homeless people. I used to think of them like how people think of them, like they just did drugs and they threw their life away. Some people look at them different, like that’s all that they could do. Like, they could do no better than being homeless. They can be homeless and be in bed or be in jail and people be like oh, you use drugs and you’re just junkies and you just want to be on the streets and stuff. Like, some people, they may have what you have too, like, be what you call poor, some people don’t want to be on the streets. That’s how – that’s what I look at different now.

He recalls a particularly painful period of time after they first moved from New Orleans and Conqueror was feeling the pressure to hide his poverty, “I had just got here. I had to cover it up like because I really didn’t have, like, a lot of clothes or nothing.” He learned to hide the fact that he had few to no shirts; he learned to wear a hoodie daily to cover up wearing the same shirt or not having a shirt at all. He learned that since jeans are so similar that his peers would not notice. Consequently, instead of categorizing people into roles of not wanting to do better than their current circumstances or of not being as good as others, he has realized, “You can’t judge a book by its cover.”

School Experiences

Conqueror attributes programs and staff members within the school as being responsible for his success. Not only has he developed relationships and experiences due to his participation in sports; this young man enjoys participation in an extracurricular mentoring group as well as critical relationships with his teachers. Of the mentoring

group, Conqueror summarizes, “It helped you become a better individual as a young male and it taught you how to become a better young male.” The adults within the school are making an impact with this student.

Extra-Curricular Activities. As an athlete, participation in sports is an obvious part of Conqueror’s life. However, what he is gaining goes beyond his development of additional prowess. He is gaining relationships which provide safe harbor as a counter-balance to the chaos that he faces. As a result, he has developed a desire of recognition by others. “I have good coaches. They tell me to always push myself. That helps influence me a lot.”

Adult Influences. To that end, Conqueror recognizes the benefit that he receives from the support of the adults in his life. He was able to share particular relationships in his life that are making a positive difference. One such relationship is that with his coach and his wife.

My AU coach and his wife, they talk to me a lot about being successful. Oh, whenever, like, I have a bad game he tells me – because he says he sees a lot of potential in me because I do good in most of my games. He just tells me to pick my head up and like after every shot I miss just get back because you can make the next one. His belief in me makes a difference.

Further, Conqueror discusses that there are adults in the school, both teachers and counselors, who he knows both believe in and invest in him. He desires that they are proud of his efforts and that he continues to gain their approval. One such teacher’s relationship affirms the message that he receives from his mother about effort and his future. Consequently, it resonates with him so profoundly that it has become his own viewpoint.

Ms. “West”, she tells me it’s already hard enough being a black male in the world. She says, whenever I’m, like, daydreaming, she says wake up because you don’t want to become one of those people that’s not doing nothing with their lives. She said being a black male is hard enough so I just got to get an education so people won’t think of me in a bad way.

Conqueror is grateful for the positive adults that are part of his school experience. “The teachers. They don’t give up on you. They know that you can do better. That’s why I always stay at this school.” He notes that teachers talking to him specifically about how they believe in him and about the potential that they see in him has been instrumental in his success. He noted that his current math teacher’s efforts this year were, in part, the catalyst for his success, because he did not want to let her down. “She was like snap out of it. She’s like don’t be like what everybody expect you to be like, be greater.” He elaborated his point with additional instances of teachers conducting individual conferences with him, giving him tough love and, not allowing him to stop trying. When asked if these efforts affected his success, he explained,

Oh, it impacts me a lot. Like now I’m focusing in class because I see that I don’t want to let, like, those teachers down most of all. Because it felt like I’m in that class now – it feels like – I feel like just like how my mom’s talking to me. I feel like they’re my mom sometimes. And I always listen to my mom.

Conqueror was asked to discuss what he would suggest to the principal of the campus in order to support students in being successful. He suggested that school leaders offer programs of interest to all students and then provide learning opportunities to keep students interested. He also compared classrooms where students feel comfortable as compared to others. He stated that the focus should be in creating environments where students are given opportunities to talk and be comfortable. However, he stated that these

instances should be infused with real life connections, particularly about the risks of not taking advantage of the educational opportunities that the students were being offered.

Because, like, it really makes you think, like, right now some kids, they just be like oh, yeah, middle school – they going to pass me. But if you think about it, like, if you don't pay attention, one decision in school, one, like, mess up that you don't care about, it could, like, change your whole life. If you just listen you can make it up or you could just get it right the first time.

To Conqueror, the most important aspect of student success is their opportunities to have positive relationships.

Patience. And teach them, like, confidence. Some kids, like, have some teachers that have already given up on them like the first day they see the kid is not listening. Like the kid wants to do good, just like you got to open up to them because the kid – what I see is some kids don't trust some adults. Show them that you're really there for them just to help them.

Portraitist's Connection to Conqueror

During our time together, I was drawn to Conqueror for many reasons. First, and most obvious, was my admiration not only of Conqueror's desire to overcome his obstacles but, also his willingness to implement the effort needed to do so. For me, it resonated with my own desire to escape the circumstances of my situation. We both understand the obvious learned lesson that you have to count on yourself. There would be no cavalry or fairy godmother with magic wands. The way out of the situation was hard work and achievement through education.

A second connection where our stories intersected was in the weight of poverty and how it impacted both he and I. We both had concerns of how others perceived us, so much so that we felt the pressure to keep our needs secret, trying all that we could to hide

it. For me, part of this secrecy stemmed from a direct teaching from my mother due to her own pride. It is natural for a teen to desire to fit in and be like others in middle school, so this added pressure along with all the other factors that he faced to make his success all the more laudable.

Third, Conqueror and I share the experience of having a sick parent. There really are no words which can adequately express the sleepless nights that come when you are in a single-parent household of a parent who is seriously ill, particularly when the illness that they have is one that causes them to lose consciousness, control or be in such excruciating pain that they need your assistance. This is his experience and, it is also mine. Maintaining focus in school when your source of protection is ill is beyond difficult. Many days it feels impossible but, he, like I, found the capacity to keep going.

Finally, and significantly, Conqueror is motivated to be successful because he has managed to find advocates within school. These pivotal relationships have been so impactful that he already recognizes that he is driven to be successful in order to reward their support and belief in him with his progress. These positive adult relationships have become like those of an extended family and Conqueror utilizes them as his safe haven and tool of affirmation in his journey, as I did.

Clark

Introduction

Sitting across the table from this diminutive Latino male, strong is not the first adjective that comes to mind. Smaller than average for his age, as Clark peers back at you through his glasses, the first words that might come to mind are shy or timid. He sits quietly watching, unsurely, to try and figure out what's happening and why "him." His smile does not come easily, but must be earned after trust is established. By that time, you realize that shy is not at all a word to describe this young man, chock full of quiet strength. He shall be called, Clark, short for Clark Kent, in tribute to the quiet strength that he carries and in homage to the Superman that lies beneath the surface.

Clark is a 7th grade Latino student. He performs well both academically and behaviorally. He, like many other teens, enjoys gaming and skateboarding. Clark is an enthusiastic member of the school's band and has become so enthralled with it that he is considering a career as a musician. This is a young man who dreams that if he could wave a magic wand, "I would like to go on a mission to solve world hunger and world peace." Clark is quietly optimistic, seeking out the rainbows around him. His affect and his accomplishments belie that he is living a life without his parents, having lost one to abandonment and the other to death.

Family Structure

Clark lives with an uncle who is his deceased mother's brother. His uncle is married and there are children as well. The household consists of his uncle, aunt, and three cousins, ages nineteen, seventeen and eleven. His guardians have also opened their home to extended family members. Consequently, a cousin and her family are staying in the home as well.

Clark has lived in the home with his guardians since his mother became ill while he was in the fifth grade. They have fully stepped up and taken responsibility as his parental unit. Even before his mother's death, they were a source of support for him, one on which he has relied. Clark remembers the struggles that he and his mother faced financially. The memories he has of his aunt and uncle's assistance strengthen his current bond with them.

Like once in a while they gave us some money so I wasn't really scared. Like when you're on a balance beam and like you're on it and it's like going on a balance beam and you're like shaking and stuff but you're still on it. Like not falling off but you're still kind of almost falling off but you make it. There would be times like where we wouldn't have money but we'd get some. There were a couple of close calls. But it worked out.

Parenting and Guardianship

Clark's biological father is not in the picture of his daily life. He has no memories of his father, nor does he feel that he is missing what he has never known. His father abandoned him and his mother when Clark was two years old, and he never looked back. Clark believes that not having his father has cost him nothing. Now, his uncle has stepped into those vacant shoes.

To the contrary, Clark vividly remembers his mother. He lived with her until she became ill. He describes his mother as struggling financially to make ends meet, with memories of having to go without wants and needs at times. Though his mother passed away two years prior to this interview process, he struggles to talk about her at all. The grief is evident and overwhelming still. Clark shares a little of his story, but is not willing to share more.

So she was diagnosed with cancer and then like November 2011 and she went through chemotherapy and stuff, but it spread. So she had this like the doctor gave her these pills --because she would be in a lot of pain-- they would help stop and she sort of got hooked on it. So like she was kind of addicted and she went to Walgreens and said that she was the doctor and tried to get the pills and then I'm not really sure what happened. But she went to this rehab center kind of thing and then she went to the hospital for like in June and then she... So she went to rehab because she kind of got addicted to the prescription drugs.. It's like --I don't know-- like she was in a rehab and then she was like in pain a lot so they like took her out of rehab to the hospital and you know...she... died.

The extended family took him into their home and under their care when his mother became ill. He does not have memories of visiting his mother in the hospital or rehabilitation center. He remembers that she was here caring for him and then she became ill and then was gone. He continues to struggle with that sadness, as would be expected for anyone who has lost a parent, but it is even more profound for a child.

Now, his blue-collar uncle has become a driving force for Clark to perform well in school. He desires to do well because he realizes both from the stories told by his relatives as well as his lived experiences that his education is paramount to his future success. This message is drilled into him by his uncle daily. Clark heeds the message.

He said like sometimes he did not do very well in school. He's like a hardworking person. He has like a tough job like irrigation stuff like sprinklers and like he works like all day for that. And sometimes he gets like kind of mad because he never went to college and he's says like he doesn't want us to go through the same way and end up in the same places as he did. That's why he wants us to go to college and get a good job.

Identity

Clark, in many ways, is a typical seventh grade student. His favorite food is Italian. He enjoys gaming and skateboarding with his friends. He enjoys travelling and spending time with his family. Clark works hard in school and enjoys a new extra-curricular activity, being a part of the school's band. He is a well-rounded student.

When asked how is it that Clark is able to be so successful in school despite the challenges he has faced, Clark responds, "It's just me." He believes that continuing to work on his goals and not allowing himself to be deterred is an inherent part of his personality and decision-making. "If I make a mistake, I try my best to correct it. I find out what the true thing is." He does not give up when he stumbles. He believes that he has the ability to overcome obstacles and is determined to do so.

He demonstrates the ability to establish goals and then achieve them. He proudly shares that he recently established a goal of being successful on the state's standardized assessment. After working hard in his classes and trying strategies offered to him, he attained commended status, a top honor. Beyond school, he establishes and achieves personal goals as well. He proudly shares that he has recently purchased a new game system after saving his money over an extended period. He sees value is delayed gratification, "Because like you've done all that work to get what you really want."

While he is quietly confident in his ability, he will readily share that he is dependent also on the support of others. Unlike others who are hesitant to seek support, Clark intentionally accesses the resources that are available to him as well as defers to the wisdom of the adults in his circle. For him, his goals have been possible due to, "Kind of with the help of other people too and myself." At an early age, he has internalized that is both independent and dependent, perhaps due to having to find a new home and support system after losing his mother.

Clark has not determined exactly what he wants to do in his adult life. He both wants to save others as a firefighter as well and move others through his new-found love of music. What he is sure of is that he will attain the goal that he has set for himself.

- I still to this day I don't know what I want to do when I grow up. But if I had a choice it probably would be a musician or something or maybe like - when I was little I wanted to be a firefighter for some reason. I don't know why. I want to be in an older band that like goes to concerts and stuff. Like basically what we do but like in the future again - kind of like a band like... a paid musician to do concerts like the symphony. I can do it.

Pathways

“A goal is something that you want to achieve in your future or in their future that you really work really hard towards and you don't let anything stop you and you work toward it.” This statement is Clark's perspective of what a goal means to him. He is not deterred when he reaches roadblocks in his path. Her perseveres through, believing in his ultimate success. He does not allow other's beliefs of his ability to determine his outcome, and chooses to discredit criticism.

I try to solve ways and not have that mess me up. Like if I were trying to do something that it wouldn't seem like I would do and people say that I can't do it, I wouldn't let that stop me. I keep trying harder.

Subsequently, Clark is able to offer tangible examples of pushing forward when met with resistance. His attack of a problem varies between self-reliance, support of his family and assistance from his teachers. However, he does not hesitate to return to the former when/if he feels the support or belief in his ability is insufficient. “I was like scared if I wasn't going to be able to complete it but I worked harder.”

Harkening to his experiences of financial struggles under his mother's care, Clark is motivated to achieve success. He fears failure and uses that fear to motivate him instead of stunt his progress.

I fear not succeeding in school and ending up in the streets because sometimes like I see that there's like at least almost one billion homeless people in the world and I think to myself like that could be me because that's pretty big numbers. And like I just think it could be anyone. It could be me.

Clark has grown to understand that the destination is more important than the origin. He is determined to have a positive outcome for his own life despite the difficulties that he has faced at the onset with the loss of both of his parents. To achieve the objectives that he has established, he has identified what he believes the formula for success is, hard work in school and connection to others.

What I want to say is like a person who grew up with nothing and like goes to school so they can grow up to have something and like they can go to a good -- go to a university to get a job and make a family so your kids -- like you won't have struggle like that at school you always -- just always pay attention and don't give up.

School Experiences

For Clark, participation in extra-curricular activities through being a member of the band has provided this student both with the opportunity to challenge himself in new skills as well as provided a safe haven and family away from his own. He thoroughly enjoys this part of his life, so much so that throughout the series of interviews, band was a constant source of sharing. To Clark, this participation provides more than an activity, it is an outlet that has increased his confidence, remarking, "And band makes me feel like

I can do well. Like it's hard to explain. Learn things what others aren't learning like music notes and things of that nature."

Clark attributes his success in school to his involvement in this endeavor, but also to the support and guidance of his teachers. "They make me feel like I would, like I can do things." He believes that his teachers help him by setting goals and helping him to achieve them. Focusing on his choices today and their impact on his future stems from the guidance of one particular teacher. He has internalized the advice given to him by her and now uses it as his own viewpoint. "She tells us that whatever at like, whatever the 13 year old youth does it affects the 17 year old you." He is determined to lay the groundwork now for a successful future.

Portraitist's Connection to Clark

Looking into the eyes of this resilient young man and understanding the grief that he must feel at having lost his mother at such a young age was difficult. The difficulty did not stem merely from the obvious hurt that he felt, but from the strain of finding the balance of trying to maintain the balance and authenticity of research against the desire of mothering him myself. Having lost my own mother as an adult, I still struggle with that loss. Consequently, the concept of battling that grief at the age of eleven is almost incomprehensible.

Beyond the loss of our mothers, albeit at different ages, Clark and I share the connection to band as an outlet beyond the struggles that we face. For me, the challenges of pushing myself and being encouraged by my directors to excel in the area of music gave me a constant source of focus. As I balanced the demands of school, band allowed an escape from the sometimes-dismal realities that I faced. For Clark, this has also become his coping tool. Clark is immersing himself in honing the skills he needs to be a successful musician. Along the way, he is developing the confidence that comes from

establishing and achieving goals. This building and quiet confidence is subsequently pouring into other areas of his life experience.

What resonated most for me with Clark was the fear that he feels of what lies ahead if he does not achieve his goals. He already projects what that would potentially look like for him, including a fear of homelessness. That fear drives him to strive all the harder to achieve his goals. It is unclear what experience that he has had that spurs these thoughts, whether it is the abandonment of his father, death of his mother, the experiences he had under her care, or the teachings of his guardians. Whatever the source, the fear of failure for Clark is real and I can understand it completely. As he grows and learns to tap into the Superman inside, Clark Kent will become his own Superhero, saving himself and others. He is already a hero to me.

Swan

Introduction

Quiet, petite, shy... these are the words that come to mind when Swan enters the room. Stepping into the life of this seventh grade African-American female, you will find a student who is serious about her studies and about pleasing her family, particularly her mother. Her name, Swan, is derived from the complex combination of characteristics that she possesses.

Though gentle may be the trait that comes to mind when you reflect upon the swan, they are powerful and represent a transformation unto the best of ourselves. This clearly describes the impression that is left when you spend time with Swan. Though she is small, she is full of a power that she is still discovering how to untap. She embodies the epitome of someone in the process of transformation into an accomplished woman.

Swan is in her second year at Promise Middle School. Reserved, she is content to quietly watch as others reach for attention. Balancing being shy with being unsure at times, Swan does not seek to be the center of attention. However, she does push herself in ways to be the best that she can be. She desires success and is willing to work for it, until it is her turn to be center stage, dancing the performance of her fulfilled dreams.

Family Structure

Swan is the only child of her mother while she is one of four girls by her father with whom she does not have a relationship. This teen from a single parent household lives a life heavily influenced by her mother's family. In interviews, she discussed multiple catastrophic and/or daily events that she fights to take in stride. These events, including mental illness, deaths and hospitalizations might deter others from focusing on their studies. To the contrary, Swan quietly goes about maneuvering through these situations as she traverses to the other side of the crisis.

Enter Swan's aunt, suffering from bipolar illness. Swan describes that the family is often caught dealing with her aunt's mood swings. She is regularly an occupant in Swan's home, requiring Swan to determine how to co-exist with her without upsetting her or causing a setback. Swan describes her aunt's moods as being exhausting at times and a source of frustration. One such crisis which caused Swan to face during the interviews was grappling with comforting this aunt who was hospitalized due to a miscarriage. This loss caused her aunt to relapse and strain within the household.

Like, okay, so my family -- some of my family is crazy like really crazy like I don't even, like sometimes I wish I wasn't a part of my family because like we -- my mom -- it's like my cousin, my aunt, and my mom, they're like the closest out of the whole family and like they stick together and everything and then it's like we expect high-level stuff and then like some of my family expects like low level and stuff like that and, yeah, sometimes my aunt she just -- I don't know. I think she's bipolar because sometimes she's all happy and stuff and then once you tick her off, like tick her off or something she just snaps and then she's like mad for the rest of the day until the nighttime and then she calms down.

Swan took some time to reflect on how/if her aunt affected her from day to day, finally saying,

Um, it's -- they affect me, um, sometimes they can have like a bad -- a negative effect on me because she's like -- like -- like anything can tick her off. Like if you spill a cup of juice on the floor she'll get mad and then she'll be happy the next moment so it can like -- I guess make you like -- make you kind of like that. Like, um, like pick up her traits or pick up how she acts. Yeah, some of her actions do affect me.

Just as significant as the prominence of Swan's aunt is her grandmother. Clearly, Swan's grandmother has the matriarchal voice that can be found in many African-American families. As she speaks, Swan describes that her mother and all others defer to her judgment. This grandmother has been recently ill and under hospitalization. This state has caused concern and panic within the family as they consider the possibility of life without her within it. "And then my grandma she was in the hospital -- she almost died also and she was in the hospital for quite some time."

Illness rears its head frequently within Swan's family and she frequently finds herself visiting hospitals. From her high-school aged cousin with frequent grand mal seizures who was recently near death, to her uncle who was hospitalized at the same time as her afore-mentioned grandmother. One of the most impactful events came as a result of the recent death of the son of her Godmother. His death saddens Swan deeply.

I don't want to talk about this but my -- my brother he died when he was six months -- six months. My -- he's not really my brother but my god brother 'cause I have a god mom and she has a sister and, yeah, so my god mom she had a child and she -- and I was over there one day and we had all rushed to the hospital for -- he went to the hospital and -- and like two hours later they came and told us that he passed away and stuff and it was a -- a sad day for like everyone and -- I really don't understand why he died.

The picture that is created of Swan's family structure is that there is upheaval and fear perpetually running as a theme within the family. How Swan processes these gravest of shifts will determine her future outcomes.

Parenting and Guardianship

Swan's mother is a force in her life who has set a high bar that Swan strives to reach. Swan's mother met her father while attending college. It's unclear if this was a

four-year university or a technical school. However, their relationship was not long-term. The result of their crossing paths was the birth of Swan. Swan's mother continued in her studies to become a surgical technician and had returned to school even during the interview period striving to become a nurse. Swan describes her mother as pushing herself to be better and not settling for where she is now. Swan is proud of her mother's hard work and accomplishments.

To that end, Swan's mother pushes her incessantly to be her best. Many times, her expectations fuel Swan's desire to be successful. It is evident that her mother expects her to do and be her best, exceeding the levels that she herself has been able to obtain.

So the first thing that was on my list is my mom and she's important to me because like she's a single parent so -- and she raised me really well like by herself. And second thing is like getting all As because my mom is like trying to make me better than she was when she was younger so she wants me to make all A's.

The heavy influence of Swan's mother manifests in multiple ways. Not only does she demand of her daughter to obtain all A's on her report cards, she also is a parent who continually communicates with Swan's teacher. This is a frustration for Swan as she feels that her mother defers to the reports of the teacher in lieu of hearing her out.

And then sometimes the parents just believe whatever the teachers say so -- but I had to explain to my mom ---- like everything teacher says she just like automatically believes and like sometimes I wish she could just be in the class like a fly on the wall like watching everything.

Further, beyond academic success, Swan's mother demands that she acquiesce in the household to the needs of others. There seems to be little room for teenage expression. Swan shared that grappling with this pressure is sometimes, too much. As

you listen to Swan, evoked is the image of a ballerina on her tiptoes, determined not to fall.

Like I like -- I like sometimes I'm like doing really well in my grades and then it'll just be like some drop and then it'll be like -- it'll be like the last day -- it'll be like the last day for report card and I think like try and make sure all my grades are As and Bs 'cause my mom doesn't care if like I'm going through a hard time. Like she knows I need -- like I can do better so she always expects me to make at least a B but she knows I can make A's so -- and it's my grades that it feels hard and sometimes it's just like the world gets on my nerves.

Perhaps the pressures placed upon Swan by her mother are meant to fill the void left by her absent father. Swan does not have a relationship with her father and throughout our interviews, she desired not to discuss it in depth. Incarcerated while her mother was in college, now free, he has not attempted to truly step into the shoes of fatherhood for Swan. His presence is non-existent and his daughter cannot conjure up an image of his face.

Well, I don't really talk to my dad at all. I think my mom met him in college or something and then like he went to jail -- I don't know why he went to jail and then he was in there for a while and then they let him out and then I saw him once -- it was like you know in the movies where it's like you can't really see their face, like it's blurred out where you can see a faint memory? I don't really have memories of doing anything with him.

Absence has not made the heart grow fonder for Swan. Instead, she has determined that she does not desire for him to be a part of her life. Her parents frequently argue, causing Swan to have to determine with whom her allegiance should lie. This

choice does not seem difficult when her mother has been her sole caretaker. In a group session, Swan provided a glimpse into the depth of emotions that she feels.

He called my mom often and they like -- they don't get along so they get into it often and he blames her for like me not being able to see him and stuff, but my mom said if I wanted to talk to him then I can, but I just don't want to. I'm not really afraid of anything it's just like I don't really want a relationship with him. It's -- I am angry at him for like leaving my mom or whatever and like leaving me.

The resentment that Swan feels for her father intensifies her desire to please her mother. Recognizing that it has been her mother who has provided her care and upbringing, she strives to maintain her approval and embrace. This desire manifests itself through Swan's identify and her conceived pathways to her wanted success.

Identity

Swan is a bird still looking for her own voice so that she can sing a song that is hers. For now, she ebbs back and forth between her mother's wishes and desires and her teachers' beliefs in her ability. While she believes that she is capable of success, the validation of others is still of significant importance to her. She does not want to make a mistake, describing these actions at times in school, "Sometimes I act dumb... Like when you pretend like you don't understand. I guess 'cause I want to make sure that I'm correct."

Swan desires her teachers' confidence and her mother's continued pride in her achievement, so much so that she gets frustrated when either the teachers or her mother express discontent or when they push her out of her comfort zone.

At school I can – but teachers they have a way – it's like they're telling you but they're not telling you. It's like they are saying you need to do this, this, this, but

they're not like critically showing you. I know you're not supposed to like give the answer, but like if it's like something that I need help with like on a question for homework or something they'll say, 'You need to multiply this by this by this.' And if I don't get the same answer then they get frustrated 'cause like they feel like I'm not paying attention or something. I know they put it back on me to figure out... 'cause they know I can do it but, when they do that, I shut down. 'Cause like if I don't understand – I don't – like if you don't help me – sometimes I'm like more independent and sometimes I'm like I feel like I need help like can you do this for me? Like I like for people to believe in me. But when they like believe in me like too much like 'I know you can do it. Why aren't you doing this? Why aren't you doing that?' – it's annoying. Like when you really know you can't do something and they're telling you, 'You can do it.' It gets annoying. It gets frustrating.

Swan's face lights up and her spirit brightens when she talks about her experience in dance. Over the previous few years, Swan had been attending dance classes. With great joy, she discusses how much she enjoys dance. She describes that when she dances, this is the one area where she feels that she needs no reassurance from an adult. "And I felt like I was the best dancer and like nobody could tell me like anything – like even if I was shy like I knew how to dance."

Therefore, it is clear that Swan has a natural affinity for dance. However, when her mother moved to this area, she has not found a new location for Swan to take classes. The one studio that is readily available has been vetoed by the grandmother, fearing the rumors about the owner molesting another child. Consequently, Swan has tabled her dream of dance and replaced it with a dream more in line with her mother's vision for her life.

I would do it as a part-time job because I know it's not going to get as paid – like paid as much. Because when I was younger I did want to be like a dancer and a singer and my mom she's very like straightforward like she's going to tell you right then. And she told me that 'What is the chance that you could make it as a professional dancer? And make like a whole lot of money?' And so then I changed my mind and I decided I wanted to be a plastic surgeon.

Pathways

Observing the effect of frequent illness and the ramifications of hospitalization and death create a natural connection to the path that Swan has chosen for her life, to be a doctor. It is not clear if the desire to choose medicine as her path is the result of the multiple medical emergencies in her family, her mother's career and belief in the medical field or from some inherent desire. Nevertheless, Swan has a vision for her future in medicine that leads through the nearby High School for Health Professions.

In the meantime, she continually sets short and long-term goals for herself and seeks to attain them. When asked about her immediate goals, Swan explained that she wanted to achieve goals rooted in academic performance and the avoidance of negative peer pressure. "Um, to, um, to make all As like the whole semester all As. Like no Bs – not even on progress reports and um, to try to surround myself with like better people."

Swan is fueled day to day by the teaching and expectation of her mother. She desires to maintain her pride and confidence. She also recognizes that her mother worked hard to be able to care for her and desires to pay that back with hard work and attention to her performance. She is not afraid to advocate for herself with her teachers when necessary, an unusual trait in a thirteen year old.

...And if like I go to my science teacher like when I had an 89 in her class I kept talking to her and talking to her and it wasn't working so then I like e-mailed her

and I was like – I act like I was an adult and I was e-mailing her telling her like – yeah. And so she gave me a 90 and then, like that time. I chose to email my teacher like parents e-mail. Talking to her wasn't working. I felt like I was a mom then.

To Swan, a goal is something that you want to accomplish. What she wants to accomplish is strong academic performance to place herself in a strong position for application to the specialty high school for health professions. When met with obstacles, Swan's response is simple. "Usually I try to fix it or if it doesn't work out then I'll just try it again. Keep trying."

School Experiences

Swan has had mixed experiences at school. While she explains that she has had some teachers who have encouraged her to make good choices because of the risk of causing roadblocks later in life, she appears to be more affected by those teachers who have not championed her efforts. When asked about her perception in relation to her school experience, these are the stories that are first revealed. Her concerns range from teachers who are not supportive to teachers being intentionally mean. Subsequently, it is unclear if these perceptions are based in factual instances due to her aforementioned need for reassurance and validation by the adults in her life. It is possible that teachers have sought the balance of pushing her toward her independence and that she is not a willing traveler down that path.

One school experience that Swan has found valid is her enrollment in AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination). This program is geared toward college and career readiness including the skills needed for success. Swan shares that she enjoys the program and the opportunities that it provides. She believes that it has made her a stronger student.

Portraitist's Connection to Swan

Swan and I have similar parenting experiences. In meeting with her both in interviews and in group sessions, the impact of her mother's high demands and her father's paltry parenthood resonated with my own experience. Similar to Swan, my achievements, no matter how great, were also perceived capable of improvement. This tremendous pressure day after day would be difficult for anyone. Swan seems to be doing her best, like me, to continue to meet the expectations to the best of her ability.

By that same token, there is a pain associated with a parent who can contact and/or spend time with you, but chooses not to that might be greater than a deceased parent. In the latter, there is not a choice in the matter. In the former, you find that you are always questioning if there is a fault on your part, a lack of worthiness, and ultimately, a lack of the love that is supposed to be natural according to every Disney movie.

The effect of these two forces manifest in a need for validation on the part of Swan. This researcher can wholeheartedly relate to that, even now. As Swan dances to the beat of other's desires, I believe that she will eventually learn to move to her own music and sit in the seat as her own judge of the worthiness of her performance. Like the Swan, her transformation will be complete when she is the star of her own show and needs no applause.

Justice

Introduction

Justice demands her name because it is exactly what she continually seeks, her power...the scales to be tilted to her perception of fairness and her voice to be heard. We step into her life as a 7th grade African American female and step out during her eighth grade year. Throughout that time period, she is perpetually fierce and not shying away from an opportunity to demand that her thoughts and needs are acknowledged. Like a lawyer in the courtroom, she does not hesitate to advocate for what she believes in. Like a judge with a gavel, Justice demands control.

Family Structure

Justice is a spunky product of a single parent household. She lives with her mother and little brother who is seven years old. As her mother attends school, Justice provides care for her sibling in her mother's absence. She also has a little sister through her father who lives with him and his girlfriend. The girlfriend also has another son who lives in the home as well. Justice, being the oldest, often finds herself expected to act in the role of caretaker.

I mean I feel like that's what sisters are supposed to do like when their mom is like busy or something or help out with our brother. I mean it's a lot of work because it has to do with me also - to take care of my brother but that's okay. It's good.

Not in the home but, living close by are other familial influences including Justice's grandparents. When she speaks, grandmother seems to be heard. It is Justice's grandmother that she leans on. Clearly this relationship is of vital importance to her well-being and success. "My grandma. A lot. Like I think that she's -- I think that she's more than my -- than my mom. Like she pushes me more than my mom."

Guardianship & Parenting

Justice's parents divorced when she was two years old. Now, her mother and father are both in dating relationships. While she and her mother live on one side of town, her father and his family live on the other. Justice lives primarily with her mother and visits her father at times on alternating weekends.

Justice is carving a place in her father's life. They had a difficult start to their relationship and now she struggles to find her place in his home with his new family. There is not a typical father/daughter relationship in that her father has been incarcerated most of her life, only being released this last time for less than two years during this study. In a focus group session, Justice shared,

I didn't have that many -- I mean, talk about -- but I didn't have that much experience with my dad when I was younger because he was in and out of jail a lot. He -- he -- he first went to jail when I was three months -- I was three months and then he came back and then he went back when I was one. And then he came back and then he went back when I was five. Yeah, 'cause I didn't see him when I was -- I didn't see him on my 6th birthday. So he stayed there for a year or so or two. Something like that. Then he came back when I was 11. He came back when I was 11 and then he never went back after that.

While Justice is adjusting to having her father as a consistent part of her life, she struggles with watching and sharing his attention with her siblings, seeking a place to call her own. Surprisingly, Justice believes that her father is the easier of her parents to talk to, opting to speak to him often. "I think my relationship is better with my dad than my mom. I don't know why but it is. I would talk things to my dad that I wouldn't talk to my my mom."

The bigger issue for Justice in her father's home comes from her sometimes difficult interactions with his girlfriend who Justice sees as a stepmother due to the length of time she has been in her father's life. Though she strongly desires to spend time with her father as much as possible, she shared multiple instances where she perceived that the girlfriend was unkind to her or intentionally mistreating her. These feelings cause a great deal of angst for Justice who can not find a way to share with her father the incidents that occur for fear of causing a confrontation between her father and his mate or, that she will lose her place in his home, even if that place is just on the weekends.

It frustrates me a lot 'cause like why talk to me and then I didn't want to tell my dad what happened 'cause my dad he will tell her and then he will be arguing with her while she's saying she didn't say that and stuff like that. He did that once so I just don't tell him things. I just keep it to myself or I tell my mom.

Justice and her mother moved back and forth between Texas and Louisiana until her mother became pregnant with her brother in another relationship. Justice's relationship with her mother is also complicated. The first element that comes to light in talking with her about her mother is Justice's pride in her mother working hard to take care of her, developing a career and recently returning to school to continue her education. Having returned to school to complete training as a physical therapy assistant, Justice's mother seemed intent on pushing Justice to make good decisions to avoid the pitfalls that she herself faced. Justice desires to follow her mother's footsteps into the medical field, seemingly in part in tribute to her. In listening to Justice talk about her home, it is clear that her mother has high expectations for her. Living up to those expectations is a source of focus and frustration for Justice.

My mom gets really upset if I bring any Cs home so it was one day that it was on a progress report and I pulled it out and bring it up, saying don't get too mad

about it. But she just went off and I was just like, you know what, I'm just tired of -- I'm going to stop trying to impress you and just do stuff for me because everything that I do -- like if I want to get my grades up it's all because my mom's there, get your grades up, get your grades up.

Justice shared the primary reasons for these incidents to either be that her mother was unhappy with a grade or teacher report. Also, of note, there were arguments that occurred about Justice spending time with her father. Justice maneuvers back and forth between these very different parents whose expectations and delivery are as different as night and day.

I think my -- I think my relationship is better with my dad than my mom. I don't know why but it is. I would talk things to my dad that I wouldn't talk to my my mom because my mom just kind of -- she said because I live with her but, I mean, I don't know. She was saying "You don't want to get your grades up." So then one day she just went off on me saying "Oh, you want to bring Cs home?" and stuff like that and then that day I -- I like -- I went outside and I just said I don't care no more. I'm just going to do grades that I want to do, 'cause I'm tired of impressing you. Or trying to impress you.

Volatility is sometimes the name of the game in the household with her mother. Justice shared several incidents that she described as either arguments or her mother hitting her as a form of correction. With the complicated relationship between the adults in her life, Justice struggles with communicating her needs with both her mother and her father. This lack of communication, combined with ongoing arguments between her parents create a recipe for turmoil at times for Justice. These issues are in Justice's perception, the hardest issues that she has to deal with outside of school.

-- 'cause I told her that I didn't want to go over there that weekend and she was like I don't care what you -- I don't care what you want to do, you're going to do what I say and stuff like that and I was like well, I don't want to go over there and then she was -- she was never asking me why I didn't want to go over there, but I just kept saying I didn't want to go over there, I didn't want to go over there, I didn't want to go over there. She was like I don't care, Justice, you're going to go over there and stuff like that and then we were just going back and forth and I know that was wrong but still I didn't want to go over there and she was trying to make me go over there and I didn't want to go over there. That was when me and the stepmom, that's when I didn't really -- get along with her. Yeah. That's why I didn't want to go over there. And she never asked me why so I never told her so -- and then she -- and then she -- she was trying to hit me and stuff but I was not going to let her hit me like that even though she's my mom and stuff, but she was just -- she was -- I think something was wrong with her that day 'cause she was just going crazy and over a little argument.

The pattern of expressing concern or feelings in anger manifested itself in more than one interview during the researcher's time with Justice. As normal as the sunrise, Justice matter of factly discussed occurrences in her household and worked to make decisions and take actions which would align with expectations. Justice's mother readily took advantage of opportunities to both stay informed as well as to advocate on her daughter's behalf. This persistent pressure required that Justice utilize the best decision-making to maintain the peace in the household.

So on Monday -- it was early in the morning and I was still sleepy but my mom had told me to -- she told me to fix my lunch early in the morning, I think it was like 6:50, 6:30, one of them. She told me to fix my lunch and I was just like,

okay. And then she was like -- she came behind me and it got like physical between us -- well, I didn't hit her back but --but she -- but she was hitting me. She said because she was fed up of -- of like me like -- of like my work and like she said I was being disrespectful, things like that. So she said that she took that out and that one time that I said, okay -- I really don't think I got a whooping 'cause she didn't -- she didn't like with a belt like it was just like her hands. Her fists or whatever. So then I called my dad and I told my dad about it and then I was telling my dad that -- that I wanted to move with him 'cause like -- it's not the first time that she did it but it was the first time she did it in a long time.

Justice lives in a universe in which her adult caretakers are unable to discuss and plan for her best interests as a united group. As a result, a cycle of confusion is created between the adults, leaving this child in the middle, feeling unable to express, both to her father and her mother, her true feelings.

My mom and her don't see eye to eye either. That's why mom was like -- when I told her that my dad said that all three of them going to have to sit down she was like well, I don't have to sit down with them like it's just in between me and your dad and not me, your dad, and his wife. And he was like -- he was just saying that the girlfriend was going to be in my life more so mom is just going to have to get used to him being with -- her being there.

Identity

Justice desires to achieve both to reach her own vision of her future as well as to achieve her mothers. "I have a lot of goals." Her goals included finishing middle school with all As and Bs and then continuing on to high school. Her number one goal was "to get a scholarship for one of my sports so I don't have to pay for my college." Justice sees herself as a scholar athlete that can succeed in sports as well as academically.

The interactions between her parents impact Justice's beliefs of who she is and what she is capable of. Justice finds herself in frequent conflict with peers or in coaching sessions about her attitude. Fully cognizant after a situation occurs where a different route may have been taken, Justice demands her power back. Consequently, this assertion of power may be an attempt to correct the imbalance of power that she feels in her relationships with her father and her mother or her inability to express the frustrations that she carries.

From Justice's perspective, however, she is not completely accountable for these responses because she is acting according to the model taught or internalized by her mother. When asked about why she often feels like she must have the last word, according to her own statement, Justice responded,

Like my mom does it a lot. I think that it's an inherited trait but I mean not really, but like, yeah, my mom does it -- my granny told me -- my granny told me that I act just like her and that she was -- she was having the same problems that -- but I will say that mom, she never had like to her mom never had to stay on her about grades or anything. I mean mom doesn't have to stay on me about grades. And my granny always tells my mom that how does it feel to raise yourself again?

Justice struggles at times with controlling her tendency to not shy away from conflict. Stepping back and looking at her through the lens of turmoil and the models that she has, one should not be surprised that she would manifest that same behavior when given the opportunity. Through the interview sessions, she began to evolve into an understanding of the root cause as she worked to better control the tendency, realizing that at times, the inappropriate interactions that she might have with peers, teachers and even her family may not be able to be excused away through her grandmother's lens of being just like her mother but, may mean more.

I really don't know why I do it, to be honest. I think that it's -- I don't really -- I don't know. I -- I really don't know. My mom -- not my mom but a lot of my friends say that it's because I like to get the last word because I don't like people trying to be over me. But like I have to let my mom like adults do that but I don't know. I don't really. Well.... 'Cause I hate being like -- like under like -- like I know that like I have to listen to adults and things like that but I do not like -- I don't like -- like my mom yells at me and things like that and I -- and I -- and I hate when she yells at me because I hate the feelings of getting yelled at or being put under like I don't understand. I don't know how to explain like being put under but like I think -- Powerless. And I like to have power.

Pathways

Justice understands that hard work is required to achieve the goals that she has set for her life which include finishing middle school and then moving on to high school, becoming part of the dance team and ROTC there. Over the course of the interviews, she achieved a short-term goal at Promise Middle School to become the dance captain. She also worked to continually improve her grades. "So I've been pushing to get my grades up even though they're already up but like I -- I just trying to get like more A's and B's than I have."

It is clear that Justice prioritizes school as the most important area of all that is on her plate. "That's the number one thing that you come to school to do- -- to be successful. And I feel like that's the thing that you should do when you come to school is be successful." She understands that the path to her ultimate goal lies through working through short term and long-term goals that are currently before her. She readily expresses her practice of finding more than one path to her desired goals.

I either try another way to achieve that same goal or that like it's A, B, and C. I -- I get into B and then I do the C and if those two don't work, then I -- then I come up with another goal that's still in with the same thing but a little different than what it -- than what the first one was.

Justice recognizes that there are benefits for her in both the short and long term for making the decisions necessary to be perceived as a successful student. She desires the reap the benefits and opportunities that are part and parcel of the package.

The benefits of being a good student is you get the opportunities to do and become successful but, you might have to give up your friends, your friendship or give up talking in class, give up having that attitude that you always have. Me talking about this reminds me of some of the things I need to do.

School Experiences

“Well, really my teachers, they challenge me because they know that I have something like brightness.” As a counterbalance to the chaos that often greets Justice outside of the school doors, she seeks sources of refuge within the school setting. Whether those opportunities are extracurricular activities, programs or adults within the building, Justice demonstrates the ability to access resources that operate in her best interest and empower her to be a successful student. “If I give up on something, they'll push me to do it or they'll -- they'll tell me oh, I found something that I think that you'll be successful in doing so I think you should do this.”

Positive Adult Relationships. The individual that most represents an oasis for Justice is her school counselor. Referred to as her mother at school, Justice shares seeking out the counselor for advice, guidance, conflict resolution and problem-solving. Ms. “Jones” wisely has taken advantage of establishing rapport with both Justice as well as her mother, becoming a trusted resource by mother and daughter, so much so that

Justice refers to her mother and counselor accordingly “they’re close as in like business partners.” This decision to build this dual rapport has served to erode her mother’s reservations on this adult’s influence with her daughter.

I think I could talk to Miss Jones about anything like if something’s going on at home or something or -- or if I’m in mess at the school or something like that then I can talk to Miss Jones about it and she’ll give me -- like she’s like my second mom. You could say that to me she is ‘cause sometimes me and my mom are not on the same page on some things and there’s some things may be Miss Jones is on the same page with my mom.

Extracurricular Activities. Justice participates in three activities that she believes are of benefit to her, the AVID Program (Advancement Via Individual Determination), Student Council and the Dance team. These organizations provide an outlet for Justice that grants her avenues for challenge and expression. During the interview period, Justice established a goal for herself of achieving the role of Dance captain. By the end of our time together, she achieved just that.

I work to be part of the dance team ‘cause it teaches me discipline and things of that nature and then also student council -- student council prepares me for higher achievement--, student council teaches me about having more responsibility and things like that so --

When asked what she does when she feels unsuccessful, Justice responds, “Tell Miss Jones. Miss Jones will -- me and her will brainstorm ways to -- for me to be successful.” Subsequently, when asked in a focus group what she would suggest to the campus principal to help students be successful, it was positive adult relationships and extra-curricular activities that were Justice’s recommendation.

Like they could have close teacher like I have, Miss “Jones”, they can have that close person that -- that will help them and things like that and something like student council is a group that will help you become successful and so will AVID. It will keep you organized and things like that.

Portraitist’s Connection to Justice

Being a lover of teenagers, my initial interactions with Justice meshed with my natural affinity for adolescents, particularly those who are at-risk. Working with that population of students means that those that cross my path manifest some of the same behaviors that manifest with Justice. Her extroverted personality was a breath of fresh air. However, as we worked to go deeper and peel back the layers, it became evident that this young woman and I have more in common that may first meet the eye.

Justice and I share the experience of having a mother with high expectations, sometimes seemingly unreasonable in nature, who also are wanting their daughter to achieve all they wished that they had with their own opportunities. Justice’s mother’s demand for performance at school was more than familiar. Justice strives to achieve her mother’s image of what she is capable of. This vision at time exceeds what Justice may naturally see as possible for herself. This demand can have one of two outcomes, either to propel or to crush. For Justice and, for me, it pushed us forward.

Additionally, I can also relate to trying to figure out how to fit into a father’s life who has a new family and doesn’t spend the time with his daughter that she desires. While my father was never incarcerated, my second class status of my teens still stains today. Justice desires that she be a priority in her father’s life and that relationship is so tenuous that it restricts her from being transparent about how she’s feeling or the disparity in treatment that she experiences, in her perception, by his mate. The result of this situation may result in having to work harder to develop the resolute confidence that

is a natural result of a two-parent, loving household. I believe that Justice will continue ultimately to develop the discernment to understand how these experiences affect her. In combination with her natural abilities and the support of educators along her journey, she will be able to maneuver past this barrier to achieve her potential.

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were conducted with the participants of this study. Sentiments shared by the participants were fused into their individual portraits. Themes were evident throughout the focus groups and must be discussed as well. The focus groups were comprised of differing participants contingent upon availability and other factors. The first and second focus group were comprised of all the male participants (Beacon, Champion, Conqueror and Clark). The third focus group was of the two female participants (Swan and Justice). Finally, the last focus group consisted of Swan, Justice and Clark.

Each focus comprised varying themes attributed to varying members and the dynamics between them. Each focus group entailed questions from a formal protocol as described in Appendix C. However, subsequent questions arose from participant's sharing their experiences in an organic manner and as emerging themes became evident. The goal of all the focus groups was to connect participants' experiences both inside and outside of school to their perceptions and corresponding actions. Consequently, participants responded to common experiences with other participants and to comments. The themes that arose from the focus groups are encapsulated in the following table.

Group Number	Theme	Dimensions
1	Identity Challenges	Spirituality; Awareness of successful traits; Service to others; Goal-oriented Family drama dysfunction; Race disparities; Unfairness.
1	Productive Actions	Adaptation skills; Resistance through reason; Invest time toward goals (as a process); Productive choices aligned with future goals.
1	Hopes	Social recognition ; Inclusion; Escape from struggles; Opportunities based on effort
2	Values	Family; Sports (formal & informal); Achievement (and studying); Life goals (short-/long-term); Selflessness; Grit; Personal connections/Support from others; Religion/spirituality; Entertainment; Material assets.
2	Life Obstacles	Relationships (family); Peer pressure (and bullying); Tests; Perceptions of challenges; Punishment; Prejudice; Basic necessities not provided; Being underestimated.
2	Self-identified Strengths	Self-motivated # (proving others wrong); Self-reliant (autonomy); Positive attitude; Productive choices; Future oriented; Service to others; Observant as adaptive skill; Emulate positive traits of others.
2	Support Systems	Family; Teachers; Friends; Extracurricular activities.
3	Values	Family; Mother; Success in school; Future orientation; Service to others.
3	Life Obstacles	Incarcerated parent; Illness/Loss; Moves/transitions; Family changes/drama; Isolation; Peer conflict; Effects of the mental illness in family on daily life; Pressure to achieve; Unsupportive teachers.
3	Productive Actions	Academic achievement; Extracurricular Activities; Short and long-term goals;
4	Values	Academic achievement; Family; Relationships; Admiration for mother's educational effort.
4	Life Obstacles	Limited parental attention by mother; Family drama.
4	Productive Actions	Investing time to achieve goals; Set and achieve short term goals; Academic achievement.
4	Hopes	Payoff for effort; Social recognition; Increased freedom; Viewed as a leader.

Table 1: Focus Group Interview Table of Themes

Note: Group participants by numbers 1, 2-Beacon, Conqueror, Champion, Clark; 3-Justice, Swan; 4-Clark, Justice, Swan

Significant Themes of the Focus Groups

Through analysis of these focus groups, several themes were saturated within the data. Though these six participants had lives that were very different, they shared a common lens that resulted in commonalities across focus groups. It is imperative to discuss the themes that was most evident.

Academic Achievement

Of vital importance to each of the participants was the aspect of academic achievement. Participants freely discussed their focus on the goals that they had established as measured not only by their report card grades but, their day to day performance as well as big rock goals in standardized testing. Each participant placed extreme value in academic achievement and was more than proud of their accomplishments along the way. From their perspective, academic achievement was a mandate that they were compelled to achieve. Diligently, each participant worked toward these both short and long-term goals, mastering them on their way to their college and career goals.

Further, it was evident in listening to the participants over the length of the study that they understood the value within the school itself of being considered successful. These participants were not disillusioned into the belief that mediocrity could be the path to achieving the goals that they had established for themselves or in attaining the dreams of their loved ones. They each expressed clarity that academic achievement was the measure that set apart the chaff from the wheat of the campus. To that end, the participants connected such matters as being noticed by high school coaches, viewed worth of Division I schools, being accepted into the top band or dance team, all extra-curricular activities to be fueled by being a worthy academic student. They connected the

two factors, making them interdependent. This is significant as many adolescents view them as mutually exclusive, believing that one has nothing to do with the other.

Finally, key in their connection to academic achievement was the pride that each experienced from it. The participants drew great fulfillment from literally making the grades that they strove to achieve. Whether these numerical grades were achieved easily or if they fought to reach them, overcoming obstacles, their gratification came from the achievement itself. These participants understood that the key to being set apart and rising above their circumstances was to develop a resume of success in academic matters. Diligently, each was focused on that endeavor on the path to their goals.

Future Orientation

To that end, each participant discussed a future orientation. Unlike many teens who might be ensconced in thoughts pertaining only to their present day, these teens individually and collectively are focused on future goals they seek to obtain. These goals were of a variety including both short and long-term. Further, the participants created goals that they not only believed were attainable but, that were a combination of shorter goals that afford them working toward the big picture goal incrementally. Each understood that the ladder to the goals must be attained one rung at a time. They have internalized that their goals are achievable with this approach. For these participants, not meeting their future goals was simply not an option available or desirable to them.

The participants in the study have been faced with numerous challenges throughout their individual lifetimes. Instead of internalizing that their current circumstances are a permanent condition, each participant expressed the desire to achieve their dream of what their successful future will be. Due to that future focus, they do not allow themselves to become mired in obstacles as they present themselves. Instead, these obstacles become fuel to be utilized to achieve their ultimate goals.

Subsequently, these obstacles have not crippled these students' abilities to achieve success. To the contrary, they have become their "in spite of" rationale toward success, not their justification of failure. Seeing beyond the right now then, is a critical component for their future success. They have been given something to look forward to which means that they can keep moving forward, even when surrounded by despair.

Being Underestimated

A source of motivation for these participants is the factor of being underestimated. Due to varying reasons including race, class, and at-risk factors such as their single-parent household or incarcerated parents, the participants are fueled when it is perceived that they will not be successful. Participants discussed, across the focus groups, instances when it would be implicitly or explicitly stated that they would be unsuccessful in a goal or endeavor. These perceptions that failure loomed for them actually served as a catalyst for their achievement. The participants were not motivated by the goal of showing the naysayer that they were incorrect. Instead, the participants felt it vital to prove to themselves that they could indeed overcome the respective issue and find their way to a victorious goal. Conqueror shared, "It's hard enough being black already in the world so don't be just unsuccessful, just like have -- don't be what the people want you to be, be something better."

Even more significant, the participants were starkly aware of the perception that the cards should be stacked against them. In their environment, they have witnessed the circumstances that they face being the source of the downfall of their peers or their family members. They are cognizant of the societal expectation that from them, it is expected, on the surface, that they will be capable of more of the same. Consequently, overcoming these perceptions is very much a source of motivation for the participants. They desire to stand above and apart from others in similar circumstances. Instead of

simply hoping to be better or different, they then utilize their energy toward achieving their goal. They will become greater than they are expected to be.

Social Adaptation and Recognition

Students in at-risk or poverty-rich environments often suffer from a lack of awareness of the necessity to adapt to varying environments and audiences. There are multiple factors contributing to this element for at-risk students including, lack of exposure and/or experiences, dearth of opportunities to interact with like-minded individuals within family and environment and just simply the lack of cognizance of how many times social behaviors can be the gatekeeper to access to better opportunities. Many times unaware, at-risk students immerse themselves in social behaviors that separate them from accepted social norms in communication, body language, appearance and demeanor. To the contrary, the participants in this study clearly understand the importance of ascribing to social norms. This awareness was captured by Champion when he made the following statement.

Smile is like -- a smile is like makeup. Like really you can just throw that on but, really, if you take it off like what are you really are? Like a person is looking at you don't know what they're going through because they're just smiling and maybe it's because they feel like they have to or maybe because they feel like it's the only thing that's going to get them through... I'm saying like just 'cause you're smiling don't mean they're happy. They are just trying to get through the day. Just to get through the day. You don't know like they could go home and just cry for no reason, just break down.

These participants are in tune with societal demands and understand the need to apply a façade when necessary to ensure acceptance. This awareness was evident in their actions from their first encounter. They understand the role of other's perceptions on

their opportunities and choose to govern themselves accordingly. Being students who are considered at-risk, they assimilate to the highest expectations in their school environment. Viewing these choices as moves on a game board of success, they are focused upon making the right moves to ensure a win for themselves and their family.

Service to Others

Overwhelmingly across these focus groups was the clear evidence of service to others as a key component to the make-up of each participants. In their perspectives, their role is to serve the needs of others whether that be their family, school or community. Narcissistic is a term that could never be ascribed to these participants. They are not self-focused or selfish. Their goals are not to simply win for themselves. They are in the race for others to win as well.

Each participant repeatedly spoke of service to the family. Through this service came the care of loved ones who are ill, the sacrifice of dealing with basic needs like food so that siblings could eat, the repeated efforts of shouldering additional responsibility to ease the burden of a parent/guardian, being a part of organizations within the school that performed community service and more. These participants view themselves as servants. When asked what he would do if he knew he would not fail, Clark replied, “I would like go on a mission to solve world hunger and world peace.”

Portraitist's Connection to the Focus Groups

Witnessing these participants discuss the impact of their experiences and how they in turn view and approach the world was an amazing experience. While very different individually, each of these participants had a light that shined bright and connected to the fire burning within my own experiences. I found that the aspects which shone most brightly from the focus groups through data saturation are very much a part of me and my perspective.

Academic Achievement

Academic achievement is at the root of my goals of success. Early on, I recognized that it was only through academic achievement that I would have an opportunity to craft a different set of circumstances from what I faced in my youth and early adulthood. Having limited opportunities due to poverty, there were not many paths out from what I faced. Since no cavalry would be coming around the bend, I had to then create my own vehicle of escape.

A child of limited circumstances is reminded daily of their plight through their observations of the disparity of what they face. You become keenly aware that your situation looks very different from those who appear to have smooth sailing toward their goals. This was just my situation. Being in poverty and in a single-parent household, I knew that the outcome could be dismal with not significant and sustained effort on my part. Consequently, academic success became my focus.

Not surprisingly, this choice becomes a cycle of continuous improvement. As I strove to attain academic success, I was then rewarded with acknowledgement and opportunities by teachers and others, even within the community. Consequently, just like these participants, I desired to achieve more and more, so that I could have the corresponding opportunities that were part and parcel of this decision. This desire for academic achievement continues to propel me through the completion of this doctoral journey. This is, indeed, my biggest academic achievement.

Future Orientation

When faced with difficult opportunities during my upbringing, there were really only two choices. First, I could accept that this was my plight, then and always. In this viewpoint then, I would become content with my circumstances and my environment, believing that that was my station in life. Frankly, this is the easier path as there is no

resistance in certain environments like the one I was raised in that implied that due to my race and class, second class status was the height to which I could raise my life long-term. Second, I could determine that the circumstances would be temporal if I took the right steps to either change or escape them. This path is chockful of obstacles that come in many forms both internal and external. However, at the end, it is most rewarding. Like these participants, I chose the latter.

Certainly, this is the easiest of the two courses. Being focused beyond your today is simply exhausting. However, it is merely not possible to make any other choice when future orientation is a key component of your viewpoint and decision-making. Each participant establishes short and long-term goals toward their desired future. This decision caused me to recall my own goals that I established when I was their age. From improving my grades to seeking to be a part of something considered next level, this future orientation was embodied by a desire for better. Each achievement made the desire to attain a brighter future as well as the belief that it was possible stronger.

Being Underestimated

Being an African-American female in a small Texas town in the seventies and eighties, it was not difficult to understand that the expectation for me were few. Separated by race and class, I like my peers was expected to achieve little. Consequently, expected to set small goals such as working a blue-collar job was the path that many of my peers chose. Recognizing this disparity before I understood it, I found that I was always focused upon being as good as or better than the person that teachers or administrators naturally perceived to be the best and strongest. I recognized when I was thought to be weaker and, I desired to prove them wrong.

For me, this desire to be “twice as good” manifested in being willing to come early, stay late and do more. Being considered equal to others, if not better, was of

critical importance. Then, and now, I find that when I perceive that a peer or supervisor believes that I can not, I am all the more determined to demonstrate the error of their thinking.

Social Adaptation and Recognition

To be successful by any measure in society, one must ascribe to the social practices. At an early age, I had to learn how to code switch to the environment in which I found myself. That meant that my language and actions within my family and community were very different from what I might have within school. Until an at-risk student learns to play this role, they will find roadblocks along their way. I learned how to use the belief that I would not be able to adapt to my advantage, receiving multiple opportunities in rewards. Sadly, when you don't fit the mold, it too often surprises the person in authority.

Students who are considered the best students are awarded with not just opportunity but, inclusion. Inclusion is a powerful tool that is easily overlooked in the daily business at hand in the school setting. However, it is a tool that can be the very factor that motivates students. In exchange for their success, they receive the opportunity to feel as if they are a part of something greater. This recognition may very well result in honors and awards but, it is just as powerful in the form of participation in extracurricular opportunities such as clubs, organizations, sports and fine arts. Through participation, comes acceptance into the positive pack of students who are striving for success.

Service to Others

When faced with risk factors, you become keenly aware of their impact on both you and others. From this awareness stems a desire to be of service to others. Whether it is a desire to improve the plight or provide essential assistance, this desire is ever present. In short, service to others recognizes that the world is bigger than its impact on you. This

servitude becomes then a component to leadership both within the family and the school. Like these participants, I recognized that though I had little, I could still help others.

Summary of Findings

In this chapter, we stepped into the lives of six participants through their portraits. These portraits provide a wholistic view of their experiences both inside and outside the school. Simplifying the term “at-risk” down to a student with significant enough risk factors that it is perceivable that they will not graduate, the participants certainly faced more than enough risk in their environment. These risks should have prompted feelings of hopelessness. However, the result was the latter.

Family Structure

Within the family structure of the six participants in this study lay some of the reasons that they qualified as at-risk. The family structure of the participants was as diverse as they were. The factors that they faced including mental illness, transient household members, divorce, absent parent, etc. Each participant’s family structure held both an obstacle and system of support.

Within these family structures, the participants took on varying roles. However, a theme that arose within the family structure was that of the participants as servants to others within their family. Taking on this role was a source of pride to the participants and gave them the belief that their contribution made a difference within the family. Acting in this role alleviated some of the pressure and became a vital source of strength. In turn, this capability provided motivation for the participants toward being able to serve their family on a larger scale, thereby positively impacting their desire for achievement.

Parenting and Guardianship

The study’s participants faced factors in their parenting that could have been crippling. Four of the six participants came from single-parent households. Two of the

participants were children of divorce. Three of the participants faced extreme poverty. Two of the participants were English as a Second Language students. Two of the participants had a parent who had been incarcerated. All of the participants were minority students. Though all of these circumstances differ, what remained true for all participants was that at least one of their parents or guardians expected that they perform well in school. These parents also reinforced that expectation by minding it closely and applying consequences when needed.

Each participant expressed the pressure that they felt to do their best academically. Their rationale in doing so was sometimes to avoid consequences but, usually because they derived a sense of pride in pleasing their parent. This sense of pride fed upon itself so that it created a desire to repeat the experience again.

Identity

Through the portraits of the participants, one of the most significant and saturated data was clear evidence that each participant believed themselves capable of achieving their goals. Though the participants faced multiple obstacles from poverty to incarceration or death of their parents, throughout the obstacles the participants continued to move incrementally or by leaps and bounds to their desired goals.

To that end, each participant possessed the behavior of continually creating and achieving their goals. They were not mired by setbacks. Instead, they utilized those obstacles as their reason to be successful in spite of the barrier. Consequently, each participant could be described as confident in their ability to achieve success in the short and long-term.

The study's participants also demonstrated their desire to be interdependent. Each of them recognized that they must have and maintain a system of support in order to achieve their goals. It is to this system of support that the participants retreated in

moments of crisis and/or obstacles. These support systems were not crutches, however. They were not utilized to minimize the responsibility upon the participant. To the contrary, they served as booster shots which allowed the participant to regain or maintain focus so that they could continue working toward their desired goals.

Pathways

Next, the portraits indicated that each participant vision for their future was encompassed by numerous goals. Participants continually established goals for the short and the long term that were academic, of course. However, the habit of goal-setting and accomplishment were so ingrained within the participants that they created and strove toward goals within every area of their lives. These goals became fuel to propel the next. Achieving these goals was a critical component of the identity of each participant.

Finally, each participant demonstrated the flexibility to augment or adjust their goals as they faced barriers to their success. They were not deterred by stumbling blocks in their journey that would justifiably halt their success. These participants demonstrate that they are willing to create multiple pathways to reach their goal. These participants were not superhuman. They failed at times but, those failures were met with another plan that they believed was better and more likely to result in success.

School Experiences

Determining the impact and possibilities of the school experience was the impetus behind this study. These participants shared four attributes that became evident in the data both in interviews and in focus groups: positive adult relationships, established support systems, inclusion, and social recognition.

Positive Adult Relationships

The participants within this study had in common that each has been impacted by positive adult relationships within the school. These relationships including current and

former teachers, school administrators, counselors and coaches. Each of the participants specifically spoke to pivotal moments that they have experienced with adults which included teachable moments. The participants took these teachable moments and internalized them into a way of thinking and a formula of action.

Further, these positive adult relationships were very different in their appearance as the participants themselves. Consequently, for some participants, these relationships were founded in exposure to new opportunities. For others, these relationships are founded in tough love while some utilize their positive adult relationships as a source of refuge. Whatever the nature of the relationship, each participant discussed profusely how vital these relationships were to their success.

Support Systems

In addition to these pivotal positive adult relationships, each of these participants established strong support systems. These support systems took many forms but, were essential to the participant's success. The participants in the study utilized these support systems to locate like-minded students who were goal-oriented that were made possible by adults within the building providing a space for the students to focus on their goals. This came through participation in extracurricular activities, clubs and organizations.

Inclusion

To that end, these successful at-risk students were not isolated. These students were a part of something larger than themselves and were proud of it. Through participation in varying clubs, organizations and entities such as sporting teams and bands, the students had a source of nourishment that fed their desire for success. Further, their participation entailed a series of goal-setting opportunities and accomplishment that resulted in increased confidence and agency for the participants.

Social Recognition

The participants also recognized that due to the efforts that they exhibited through their school experiences, there was a benefit that was attained. Because they chose to be successful students, participants were rewarded with opportunities that they would not have received otherwise. These opportunities lauded their status in the school setting as adults and their peers recognized their achievements. These opportunities included experiences from which their peers may not have benefitted. So aware of the advantage of these opportunities, participants spoke to the need of creating these experiences for other students as a tool of motivation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine what factors and attributes do at-risk students who are academically and socially successful perceive contribute to their hope. The participants in this study demonstrated through the data collection that they possessed the essential components to hope. The participants demonstrated that they had the ability to continually create both short and long-term goals. Further, the participants also demonstrated the key components essential to hope, agency and pathways.

Champion, Beacon, Swan, Conqueror, Clark and Justice all believed in their ability to accomplish their dreams, aspired to goals and visions that were as multi-faceted as they were, and were not deterred when they met obstacles along their path. When met with a barrier, these amazing participants developed new ways around or through their barrier. They also recognized that failure to meet a goal was not a reflection of their ability to do so. Instead, they made the adjustments necessary to propel themselves further along their journey toward success.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are decisions that must be made prior to any discussion on the why of the study and/or the implications. To delve into this stratosphere in which there are great disparities in the access to the curriculum as well as the tools needed to best master it, you must first decide where you stand on the topic. Do all students indeed have the inherent right to opportunity and achievement? If the answer is yes, then, what should schools and educators be willing to do to eliminate any barriers? This researcher suggests that we must decide whether we will continue to approach this problem disingenuously or will we vigorously attack it with the fidelity that is due.

This chapter will discuss the implications of the results presented in Chapter Four. First, a review on the origin and rationale which prompted the study including the research process will be addressed. Next, the research question and theoretical framework will be discussed. Subsequently, the findings of the research question and corresponding recommendations will be addressed with a connection to previous literature. Finally, the researcher will discuss the implications that are essential to consider, particularly for practitioners that serve at-risk students.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of successful students who were identified as at-risk with the goal of identifying what factors that these participants perceived were imperative contributors to the construct of hope that they possessed. Six participants were selected for the study. Through that participation, they shared their perspectives and beliefs in both interviews and focus groups. These participants were not homogenous, representing students with varying experiences. However, over the course of the study, it became clear that common themes clearly arose from this diverse group.

We have a problem that we can no longer ignore. As the achievement and opportunity gaps continue to widen, the need to identify true solutions continues to become more and more urgent. Whether in suburban or in rural settings, it is critical to identify strategies which will have an impact that will lessen the wave of students who might perceive that the path to success does not travel through obtaining education and skills. These hopeless students participate in school without engaging. Their presence consists of ritualistic engagement, doing what they feel they are mandated to do. Internally or explicitly they plan their exit from the traditions of schooling, either wishing for a miraculous event that will result in their success or so disengaged that they decide that they will remain where they are in their present level of achievement. For these students, the factors which identify them as at-risk scream so loudly that they drown out their desires for something better. Without an intentional effort to shift the dynamic, far too many of these students are lost or never benefit from the opportunity to obtain their potential.

Finn and Rock (1997) share that if a student holds a positive self-view or perception and routinely demonstrates the corresponding behaviors, that the result will be increased protective factors that strengthen the possibility and opportunity to be successful in school despite their at-risk factors. Essentially, if schools are able to create environments or opportunities that edify the belief systems that at-risk students hold of themselves and their abilities, the result will be empowering these students' ability to counter balance the weight of their risk factors with the mindset and then corresponding actions that overcome the factors that originally identified them as at-risk.

The researcher's goal in embarking upon this study was to contribute to identifying the critical components of a potential framework that would increase the likelihood of student achievement amongst at-risk students. The goal then is

encapsulated in a desire to build hope within at-risk students through identifying the common factors and attributes that are shared with respect to students' perspectives of hope. Clearly, the time has come to discover and sustain a solution that effectively shifts the dynamics of the achievement and opportunity gaps for the better.

Promise Middle School provided the setting for this qualitative study which delved into the perceptions of at-risk students regarding the factors that contributed to their success. The researcher utilized archival data to identify participants, followed by purposive sampling. The participants participated in interviews and focus groups as part of the study. Using the portraiture methodology for the study, the researcher created portraits of each participant's experiences through their eyes. The goal was to determine the critical factors that participants perceived contributes to their ability to develop and sustain hope.

The researcher's goal was to answer this research question:

What factors and attributes do at-risk students who are academically and socially successful perceive to contribute to hope?

Summary of the Findings

The answer to the research question, "What factors and attributes do at-risk students who are academically and socially successful perceive to contribute to hope?" is multi-faceted. In order to answer the research question, it was imperative to use the participants' perspective of their own lived experiences. Their perspective and meaning-making are critical to identifying the factors or events within their experience that have made an impact.

The factors and attributes that at-risk students perceive contributory to their success are positive adult relationships, social recognition, inclusion, opportunities to develop or cultivate future orientation, social adaptation and service to others. These

factors are under the scope of influence of the school, despite external factors.

Consequently, focused attention to these areas has the potential to positively impact the achievement of at-risk students.

Positive Adult Relationships

Hong and Shull (2009) conducted a study of high school students between the ages of 14-17. The goal of the study was to examine the impact of teachers' dispositions on the students' abilities to develop the ability to demonstrate self-determination. Hong and Shull found that an essential component of developing self-determination in students was that adults treat them as human beings. They further explained that students internalize the treatment of their teachers into a "powerful sense of self-belief and self-worth" (Hong & Shull, p. 269). Teacher beliefs, then, have the power to develop within students the ability to develop and maintain the self-determination that is critical to the agency component of hope. This finding was saturated throughout each of the six participants' responses of their lived experiences, many discussing how they either found or maintained their belief in their ability to be successful due to the positive adult relationships within the school.

Consequently, the necessity to create opportunities for at-risk students to benefit from positive opportunities must no longer be a hoped-for practice in schools that serve at-risk students. Hong and Shull (2009) further explained that students feel themselves more capable to achieve higher goals because of how this valuable adult feels about them. The series of actions that cause students to perceive that adults believe in their ability has the very power to fuel students' belief about themselves. These adults emulate hope through their actions and identity building support through recognition of students' inherent talents and strengths. Therefore, it must be embedded into every student-centered initiative.

Social Recognition and Inclusion

Through participation in extra-curricular activities, specialized groups and other school-based initiatives, the participants each discussed how their involvement served as a source of motivation as well as achievement. As they accomplished the goals within that entity, they developed increased feelings of confidence. Further, the participants also shared that they believed that they were a part of something greater than themselves. Further, being a part of the organizations or activities came for them with a feeling of being considered special amongst their peers due to their inclusion. Consequently, the second finding is that authentic opportunities for social recognition and inclusion are essential in building hope in at-risk students.

Renger, Renger, Miché, and Simon (2017) conducted three studies. The goal of their work was to determine if equality-based respect resulted in increased feelings of autonomy. These researchers found that opportunities for social recognition do indeed develop autonomy in students. Renger et. al., (2017) further explained that psychological experiences of autonomy are grounded in social recognition. Finally, beyond developing autonomy, Renger et. al., (2017) stated that this factor also results in feelings of well-being.

Utilizing a large sample seventh and eighth grade students, Bakadora and Raufelder (2016) examined the differences between students with a high school concept and a low school concept. Their goal was to examine the impact of socio-motivational relationship. Bakadorova & Raufelder (2016) found, beyond autonomy and well-being, that social opportunities developed achievement-drive in students. “A possible reason for this could be the competitive nature of achievement drive which might be defined as an ambition to be better than others; desire to excel or will to win.” (Bakadorova & Raufelder , 2016, p. 227).

These phenomena, increased achievement-drive, autonomy and a sense of well-being were saturated throughout the interviews and focus groups by all participants. Being a part of the varying school-sponsored organizations whether athletics, band, dance or other entities, provided the participants the benefit of challenging themselves to work toward and achieving goals as part of an organization of students. These outlets providing the participants the chance to shine as they utilized skills and talents that were cultivated by their teachers and recognized by their peers. They believed that through these opportunities, they were special, increasing their confidence.

Opportunities to Cultivate Future Orientation

Researchers Legette and Crosby (2013) utilized data from a longitudinal study in Chicago neighborhoods. The study examined the issues faced by 900 Black and Latino adolescents between the ages of 12 to 18. Legette and Crosby found that adolescents with a more optimistic view of their future opportunities have increased levels of student achievement. Similarly, Kerpelman, Eryigit, and Stephens (2008) conducted a study that examined the data of 374 African-American students in grades 7-12. The goal of the study was to examine self-efficacy, ethnic identity and parental support and their impact on future orientation. Legette and Crosby explained that a positive future orientation for students facing negative life circumstances is essential. Further, the researchers explain that future orientation also has the capacity to increase a student's feeling of self-efficacy.

McDonald and Ferrell (2012) conducted interviews with 31 underserved high school students attending an early college high school. Through their work, they were also able to validate the importance of developing future focus within at-risk students. Specifically, through the sub-theme of productivity, they found that the participants wanted to be able to contribute positively to society. They desired to make a difference and this urge was so compelling that it enabled them to set aside their concerns about the

factors that they currently faced. Further, this opportunity provided a vehicle for them to move past the distractions that might deter them from their ultimate goal. Consequently, an important finding of this research study is that schools serving at-risk students must intentionally focus on future orientation.

Each of the study's participants were intently focused on future goals, both short and long-term. As they achieved their goals, their belief that they could continue to do so became more solidified. Despite difficult circumstances such as negative family dynamics, extreme poverty and even deceased parents, each participant was focused on the futures that they were intent on creating. Opportunities for future orientation were the root of the second and third components of hope, pathways and goal achievement.

Social Adaptation

Delpit (1992) discussed the importance of teaching at-risk students the dominant discourse without dishonoring their primary one. Delpit explains that individuals are born into a discourse and will remain there without any efforts to impact the discourse. "...all discourses are not equal in status, that some are socially dominant – carrying with them social power and access to economic success." (p.297) More critically, Delpit suggests that economic status is maintained because "dominant groups in a society apply frequent 'tests' of fluency in the dominant discourses, often focused on its most superficial aspects – grammar, style, mechanics – so as to exclude from full participation those who are not born to positions of power." (p. 297) She went on to say that students who have been taught to master the dominant discourse are, in fact, liberated to be successful (Delpit, 1992).

Wheeler (2008) offers tools to be utilized by practitioners. Wheeler (2008) explains that it is imperative to teach students skills in metacognition to help them determine the needs of the time and place when considering their language. She reminds

us that students who must code-switch must think about their own language both formally and informally. “Teaching students to consciously reflect on the different dialects they use and to choose the appropriate language form for a particular situation provides them with metacognitive strategies and the cognitive flexibility to apply those strategies to daily practice” (Wheeler, 2008, p. 57). Wheeler (2008) further shares that if we teach students to reflect on their informal dialect as compared to the formal dialect, educators can embed this into practice students can do naturally. Subsequently, the next finding of this study must be that we explicitly provide students the opportunities to develop the ability to compare and contrast the social adaptation skills that they exhibit for varying settings.

Service to Others

Each participant in this study spoke at length about the pride that they felt in serving others. Whether that servitude was to their own family, church or school initiatives, opportunities to serve compelled them to believe that they, too, had something to offer to others. This offering was not limited or eliminated due to meager circumstances or because of difficult occurrences within their lives. Through service to others, each participant demonstrated an increased sense of value and confidence.

Nelson and Sneller (2011) examined multiple exemplars of schools which utilized service learning when working with at-risk students. Nelson and Sneller found that involvement in service-learning opportunities positively contributes to closing the achievement gap for at-risk students. Involvement in service learning provides students with the opportunity to develop the ability to believe in their ability to contribute to something greater than themselves. The researchers found that service learning demonstrated positives with multiple at-risk groups from English Language Learners to students placed in alternative campuses. Benefits of service-learning include increased

autonomy and competence, higher achievement scores, and reduced risky behaviors (Nelson & Sneller, 2011). Therefore, the last finding is that schools seeking to reach at-risk students to positively impact their levels of hope must incorporate service-learning as an embedded practice.

Implications and Call to Action

Schools that serve at-risk students cannot continue with the business as usual practice of investing the valuable resources that they receive to meet the needs of at-risk students to solely focus on staffing and/or academic programs. Instead, school leaders must adopt practices which fortify the opportunities that at-risk students have to develop a current identity and future outlook that is grounded in the perspective that they have the ability and will indeed overcome their present circumstances.

School systems are challenged to conduct a program evaluation to identify how they incorporate the findings within this study (positive adult relationships, social recognition and inclusion, opportunities to cultivate future orientation and service to others). It is feared that most institutions might identify with one of these components, but few, if any, will incorporate each component. In short, schools serving at-risk students must look beyond the pressing academic content so that they can first build a belief within the students they serve that they have the ability to succeed. By focusing on these endeavors, schools that serve at-risk students will create students with hope. Hopeful students, as evidenced by this work and others, are achieving and successful students.

Positive Adult Relationships

The importance of this first factor was captured by Conqueror when he shared

I just want to pass that class because I learned they don't want to see me fail. It seems like they care more for me than sometimes than like almost my AU

coaches do. But not even that, though those people, they, like, seem like – like I could have one of those teachers like my mom because they care about me like almost close to how much my mom cares about me. Because it felt like I'm in that class now – it feels like – I feel like just like how my mom's talking to me. I feel like they're my mom sometimes. And I always listen to my mom.

In this age of limited funding opportunities for at-risk students, positive adult relationships, perhaps the most valuable tool, can be provided without financial cost. Therefore, leaders must then ensure both that there are chances for it combined with the selection of staff members who value the practice and are willing to utilize it with fidelity. This consideration requires that strategies be utilized in two arenas. Not only must leaders seek educators with a desire to build relationships with students whose backgrounds might be very different from their own. It is also essential that school districts who serve the at-risk to seek strategies which enable a pipeline of like-minded talent to be sought and cultivated. Further, once the educators are found, they themselves must be filled with successful tools and strategies through targeted professional development opportunities that are ongoing and mandated.

Social Recognition and Inclusion

In serving at-risk students, educators must intentionally create social opportunities in which all students can participate and benefit. Following this practice will provide a source of focus outside of the external factors which might affect this population of students, giving them the benefit of something to focus on that is both positive and fulfilling. As students develop increased achievement-drive, autonomy and well-being, they will naturally also perform better academically and behaviorally, resulting in a win for both the students as well as the school as a whole. If one of the goals of schooling is to create productive citizens then, utilizing this practice is essential. Ultimately,

contributing citizens will be the result. At-risk students with an opportunity for social recognition and challenged and inspired to work hard, as captured by Champion,

Because that's based on my future, because, right now, it's based on my future. I'm already on JV, so, now, it's picking up things, because then next year, I should be on varsity basketball or whatever I'm doing, then that's when scholarships are going to come in, then people are looking at you. When they look at you, they're going to look at your grades, so that's why I stay on top of my grades, too, along the way. Even though, they don't talk about it that much, it's going to come up, so when they do come up, I'm already ready for it.

Opportunities to Cultivate Future Orientation

Students facing dire external circumstances must have the ability to develop a future focus. It is evident that focusing on what they presently may see as part of their daily external world could have the capacity to result in a belief that their current state is perpetual, diminishing their ability to see beyond present day. Therefore, schools must continually utilize tools that compel the students to consider their lives beyond their present day through goal-setting opportunities, college and career readiness and awareness activities, exposure to individuals with success stories that began with the same circumstances that the at-risk students need to overcome and more. Clark captured the importance of future orientation simply when he explained that goals should be thought of as, "Something that you want to achieve in your future or in their future that you really work really hard towards and you don't let anything stop you and you work toward it." Champion also shared his perspective, "I know I have to. Like 'cause I know this is what I've been building my life on. So I know that I cannot fail at this. I know I got to build it for my wife and my kids, so I can -- 'cause I want to make when I do it. "

Social Adaptation

Students who do not possess the skills to move between their two worlds face risk factors in addition to a limited success in school. They also face individuals in the society and the school who may develop unfounded perceptions of the at-risk students' identity and ability, as encapsulated in this statement by Conqueror,

Let's say it's like -- the principal's like hears a student like cussed out a teacher and then they judge you like the way your hair looks or something, oh, he -- he must have did it. People like that behave a certain way so it had to be him so - And has a hoodie. And that wears his hood a lot. Could be treated different..Yeah, sometimes they don't respect you – even if you make some good grades too.

The failure to learn to code-switch can effectively close doors of opportunity to students who are at-risk. Fair or not, the reality is that at-risk students must develop two selves, both a public and private one. In teaching students how to have both a public and a private face, it is essential that educators take care not to diminish the origin or culture of the student. Both faces have significant value. The goal should be to unlock the door to achieved potential by equipping the student with the tools to communicate with others whose background differs from their own. Otherwise, these at-risk students' potential, no matter how great, cannot be fully released because they do not have the ability to communicate both verbally and non-verbally in the more commonly accepted primary discourse.

Service to Others

Beacon explains, "I like to help people out. It's a good feeling. You can't get the same feeling when you help people than with anything else. I do believe in the thing that says money can't buy you happiness." Consequently, schools seeking to inspire their

students to be catalysts of positive change must teach their students to be servants. Through service learning opportunities, educators have the ability to generate within students that they have the ability to have a positive impact on others. It also reminds students that even if they currently have meager circumstances themselves, they are not themselves meager individuals. Through empowering students, educators have the capacity to increase school connectedness while also reminding students that they are part of a world bigger than their circumstances. Even the most at-risk student can learn that they matter.

Limitations

At the onset of the study, the researcher wanted to create a fuller portrait of the participants' experiences by stepping into their lives in every aspect. Essentially, the researcher desired to visit the participants within their home environment as well as to conduct classroom observations. However, over the course of the study, incorporating these two components was not possible due to time constraints and resistance by the parents. Not surprisingly, parents in at-risk situations had reservations about inviting the researcher into their home. Further, opportunities to visit multiple classrooms also proved difficult. However, it became clear with the establishment of trust with the participants that a picture of their experiences from their perspective was still possible.

A second limitation of the study might be found in that the students were in an urban setting. Consequently, the findings might not be transferable to rural settings. The researcher suggests, however, that as the findings are not specific to urbanicity, the findings could be utilized in schools that serve rural at-risk students.

Recommendations for Future Research

In order to extend the research, the researcher recommends that a study be completed that incorporates the findings of this study in order to validate or amend. It is

imperative that the needed formula to meet the needs of at-risk students be developed and incorporated both in urban and in rural settings. The researcher also recommends a longitudinal study of a smaller number of participants who are benefitting from the incorporation of these findings.

A second possibility for future research might be a comparison on the impact of each of the findings on a participant group of at-risk students to identify if any of the factors have a great effect than others. Ideally, ranking the findings by their level of important could empower schools to strategize as they develop their school-wide systems as well as targeted interventions.

Conclusion

Across the United States, public school bells are ringing, welcoming students from age four to nineteen. Schools are encouraging children to enter their doors and step into the promise that doing so will result in a level of success beyond school where the student will be able to make a positive mark in society as a contributing and valued citizen. No matter where these schools are located, rural or urban, affluent or economically disadvantaged, the promise is the same. Unfortunately, much too often, this promise is many times met with the disappointment that arises when it goes unfulfilled.

Ignoring the promise that has been made to all students of a brighter and better future through their efforts in school while ignoring these essential strategies which will have an impact and level the playing ground for at-risk students is educational malpractice. The promise can be fulfilled when the investment is made in developing the critical components that result in increased agency, pathways and goal-setting through the findings of this study. The origin of students should not be a predictor of their potential achievement.

Through focusing on incorporating positive adult relationships, embedding opportunities to provide service to others, embedding the ability to develop future orientation, teaching social adaptation skills and providing social recognition, schools that serve at-risk students can develop a population of students who believe in their ability to achieve their dreams. Moreover, utilizing these practices will go even further, it will allow all at-risk students the opportunity to have the dream itself. Is that not what the promise of No Child Left Behind sought to answer? This is indeed what all students deserve in the promised pursuit of happiness that schools are mandated to offer.

Hope Does Indeed Matter

An at-risk student who believes that there is no path of escape or believes that they are incapable of meeting academic expectations are forced to live out an experience that causes his/her fears to become his/her self-fulfilled prophecy. Sheehan and Bell (2011) stated, “The real problem for children in poverty may not be weak academic skill sets, poor teachers, or lesser resources, but rather a lack of hope that they can alter their life conditions through effort” (p. 44). Without hope, what is left for the at-risk student is hopelessness, less engagement, reduced potential and more. In essence, what remains is an unfilled promise.

Considering that hope can be developed in students and is a process, schools then become the prime oasis of opportunity to have a positive impact on the lives of students. Bashant (2016) reminds us that decades of research demonstrates that when students are hopeful, their rate of success increases. These hopeful students perceive that they have both the ability and the pathway to reach their desired goals. Knowing that hope is positively associated with the outcomes of self-efficacy, increased attendance, higher grades, social competence and more, it is unfathomable why this is not the chosen path for all educators who serve at-risk. Educators who are ignoring the construct of hope are

committing educational malpractice. Hope is indeed the key to open the doors to equity for all students.

Portraitist's Final Connection

Completing this doctoral process has been one of the most difficult achievements for which I have strived. It is the culmination of a dream, yes. However, for me, it is something greater. I believe wholeheartedly that I was created for this work and that in completing this research, I am empowering myself to achieve my purpose. It is my goal to empower educators to reach kids who are from where I'm from. It is my desire to be a catalyst for a process that will equip educators to take the least of them from the bottom to the top.

To write this final connection, I decided to reflect on my work through my Researcher's Notebook. Within it, I can recall the fears that consumed me at the beginning of this process. It was my desire to do right by these participants, to paint their stories, not to re-create my own. I was extremely aware of my experiences and worked intently to keep them out of my research. This was my entry after selecting my participants and leaving the campus for the third time.

I want to be mindful to keep aware of my biases and the effect of my own experiences as I listen to my participants answer questions and share their own experience. I also want to be careful not to interject with the students but to allow always them to respond from their beliefs on their influences. I'm so ready to complete this process! I want to make sure that I remain focused and not rush so that I don't miss any substantial piece of information.

Though my participants were at-risk kids, they were so diverse from one another in experiences and backgrounds. However, I could soon see, as evidenced by this entry at the mid-point, that common themes screamed to be heard. The threads could already

be tied into a tapestry that demonstrated what they felt was needed to create the hope that they felt. I continued to be mindful, too, of protecting the value of their individual stories. Here is an entry from the mid-point of this study.

When the participants talk about the absence of a father and the impact that that's had, that's something to which I can personally relate. However, I want to be mindful not to protect my own emotions and thoughts on to these situations. I want to respect their full story and hear it undocumented so that other students can have the opportunity to overcome their obstacles as well. As I speak to the participants I can tell that the relationships that they have developed in the building as well as their opportunities to be included and activities and programs is making a positive impact.

The last entry to my researcher's notebook validated for me that I was on the right track and had tapped into something powerful. My initial observations at the beginning of the journey were saturated at the end. These participants remained hopeful, future focused and productive students. When I began my study Clark, Swan and Justice were seventh graders. This was my final notebook entry, seeing them individually and collectively some time later, now the 8th graders in the middle school.

Had the opportunity to see my three eighth grade participants. The changes in them over the past year are evident. They seem older and wiser. They are retrospective and reflective about their choices. Each continues to have a focus for their future and the belief that they can and will attain their goals. Each student has relationships at school that matter to them and resources that they feel that they can count on. Each student discussed the programs available at school and it giving them a sense of connectedness. Each student discussed incentives that occur within the school. Though there has been some chaos in their lives and/or losses, the

expectation they have for themselves is unabated. Each continues to be optimistic about their future.

With everything within me, I believe in this work and, I am proud of it. Through it, it seems evident to me that true change is possible. Little girls and boys like me, who have little including limited exposure to positive experiences, need the reader to believe, too, that change is possible. Through this study, I have experienced my own continued metamorphosis from the at-risk little girl from Section 8 housing to a student thirsty for learning and, finally to a researcher with the opportunity to help others. Through this process, I have learned that the characteristics that made a difference for me are very similar to those that made a difference for these participants. I hope that I was able to tell their powerful stories in a way that honored them. I have also learned that even after all these years, these factors are still essential, reminding me that I will never completely shed the impact of my origins but, I can and will continue to overcome them. I owe, then, the responsibility to pay that opportunity forward to the next students, just like those along my own path did for me.

CHAPTER VI: PORTRAIT OF THE PORTRAITIST

In order to explain my motivation for this topic, I must first reveal some things about me. Like countless others, my origins as a member of society in the United States were meager. I am the child of a single parent, low socio-economic demographic and minority home. I was surrounded daily by reminders that I did not matter for multiple reasons... my origins, my community, the color of my skin, the circumstances of my birth. In a nutshell, due to race and class, I was not destined to make it out and, I dare not buck the established expectation of staying in my place.

To know my story, we must first begin with my mother's. Having been raised in a small town in East Texas, my mother's life was supposed to be full of promise. When she was attending her segregated high school in the 60s, she and a group of bright African-American students were chosen to be the first to integrate into the all-white high school. They were excited about the opportunity however, on the big day; my mother was the only one to show up to catch the bus. Instead of turning away, she loaded the bus and became the first black student to integrate alone. She fought through the daily attacks, verbal abuse and mistreatment and was ultimately successful in graduating, the first and only black student of her class. My mother had big dreams.

By the time of my birth, my mother's life was already not turning out as she hoped. She had the small town and made the move to the big city. While working, she met a local college student and became pregnant. Unfortunately, he was killed during the pregnancy. She then became pregnant a second time after experiencing a rape. The resulting beautiful baby boy died as an infant from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. It is easy now to understand how when she crossed paths with my father, she clung to the hope that he would be the answer to her prayers but, she soon found out that there would be no fairytale ending for her.

I was born to a single parent mother who ended up pregnant after having a relationship with a man who was separated from his wife. According to my mother, he told her he loved her and she believed they would be together. However, it didn't turn out that way. Once my mother became pregnant with me, he returned to his wife, leaving my mother alone to raise me and my older brother. Though society is now more friendly to these situations, I was constantly reminded throughout my child and adolescent years that I was, indeed, a bastard child, both implicitly and explicitly.

I was born to a single mother. My birth certificate reads Negro. The indigent hospital in which I was born, now demolished, is the current site of a Federal Reserve Bank. During my doctoral studies, my cohort travelled to the Federal Reserve on a field trip for one of our courses. During that tour, I discovered for the first time where the hospital where I was born formerly stood. It was an earthshattering moment for me as the tour guide discussed the indigent that were served there and, I stood there secretly knowing that he was talking about me. How unbelievable is the revelation that where I was born impoverished and expected to matter as nothing I later stood as a Doctoral student? As I looked around at my classmates, I instantly felt different, not necessarily better. I was immersed for a moment in an old feeling from my child and adolescent years of when I was the different one. I questioned that day, as I did in my youth, if I belonged. It doesn't feel good when you're the one that doesn't fit. That had been my life's story, it seemed.

Age 0 To 5

I believe a lack of success; having little money, three pregnancies and the death of a child pushed my mother to accept a marriage proposal during my infancy. Unfortunately, this marriage was ill-fated. My stepfather was both controlling and abusive. My only true memory from this time frame is staring down the barrel of a gun

he had pulled on my mother as I, standing in a onesie, tried to protect my mother and demanded that he leave her alone. At some point after that day, my mother finally left him.

I knew I was bright at a young age, not so much because of what I could do or for accolades in the beginning but, because my mother would go on and on about how “her baby is smart.” One of my mother’s favorite stories about me was told so many times and so vividly that the image of it is implanted in my brain. It goes that I would follow my older brother around and sit quietly next to him as he practiced his numbers and alphabet. At the age of two, my mother would describe that I climbed onto a chair at the kitchen counter next to multiple coke bottles that were there for recycling. I then, calmly, counted out the ten bottles, pointing at each specifically, though no one had taught me to count. I believe it was that day that I became my mother’s hero child, the one that was supposed to achieve the dreams that she had not.

I wish that I could share that being a bright child translated into many happy memories. However, from ages two to five, my experience was difficult. It began with experiencing what I know now is poverty, eating from a cooler because there was no refrigerator. This poverty would continue throughout my school year to graduation. Next came sadness and longing for my mother who sought help from her father and his wife to care for my brother and I during the week so that she could work and try to get on her feet well enough to create a stable home for us. My mother didn’t realize that this request would result in my emotional and physical abuse. When my mother realized what was happening, she gave up on her big city dreams, returning to her hometown and moving into Section 8 Housing where we would remain for the next ten years.

The town I grew up in was then and continues to be bleak at best. There are limited opportunities for the growth and development of students and their families.

Residential communities were separated by race and, even though it was several years later after my mother first integrated, blacks were still considered lower class and lesser than their white counterparts.

Living in government provided housing, my mother was dependent on assistance with welfare, food stamps and government subsidized food staples such as cheese, peanut butter, etc. My mother was a proud and private woman so, she managed the best she could. The ramifications of lack had a great impact both on the daily experiences in my life as well as on my outlook about my present and my future. During these years, the differences between us and others smacked me in the face.

It was the residue and cost of poverty that I brought in my backpack to begin my education. The risk factors I encountered in my home from kindergarten to graduation were intense. We endured years without the basic necessities of decent living such as clothing, food, and also, heat and electricity at times. Like most students facing dire circumstances, I desired an oasis to escape the reality of my life. That oasis should have been in school.

Though I could be described as a “good” student, escape in school was not available for me in my elementary and middle school years. Instead, the struggle continued inside the school doors. Even though I was bright, respectful, obedient and present, I found myself degraded, isolated and ignored by my teachers. I was a victim of the social system that desired to keep me relegated to the place designated for my race and class.

The Elementary Years

There are no glaring memories, either positive or negative of kindergarten through second grade. I was expected to do well in school and, that was not up for debate or discussion. I do recall having to visit my “speech teacher” who practiced sounds with

me. I apparently struggled with the “ch” sound. Though she was nice, I disliked feeling different and having to go to this class by myself. I was motivated to work hard so that these visits would end.

By this time I was in 3rd grade. The Gifted Program finally made it to town and a temporary building was added to the campus to house it. I was selected, the only black student. However, though I was placed in the class based on merit, I was not wanted by my white teacher. Ms. “Johnson” led a campaign for my removal from her class. She sought to prove me unqualified and unworthy of the gifted designation.

Most Fridays in elementary school are happy times, usually including some type of celebration. I hated Fridays because I knew that it meant that while my classmates were playing bingo on the vocabulary words that were learned that week, I would be isolated in the adjoining classroom where Ms. “Johnson” forced me to take tests, week after week. The memories of isolation and sadness are still present as I recall the cheers coming from the room next door while I stressfully attempted to get the questions right. I hated Ms. Johnson’s class.

School was not a safe place. This mistreatment continued for months until finally one Friday I told my mother that I didn’t want to go to school. My mother, surprised that her successful student didn’t want to go, pried further. I opened up to her about how my teacher was mean to me. The result was the rare occasion of my mother actually coming to my school. She put on her best suit and came to confront the teacher. Ms. Johnson spoke at length about how she’d never seen a “little black girl” as smart as me and, she just couldn’t believe it. Following that conference, the overt difference in treatment stopped but, implied disparity was still evident in this “gifted” class which should have been a place where I was propelled and inspired to achieve to maximize my potential.

For the remainder of my elementary years, I was the victim of racial discrimination that continued. Being the only black student in a sea of white faces was a lot to undergo, particularly given the external environment. In intermediate school, I was in Ms. “Burger’s” class who, to her credit, was a more polished racist than Ms. Johnson. She sought to remind me of my place by trying to crush my spirit. In her classroom she had an ongoing reading competition. With each book that you completed, you received a green caterpillar. At intervals, there was a prize of a coupon to a popular diner, owned by Ms. Burger’s family. Though my teacher should have encouraged her students equally, she overtly encouraged and celebrated my classmate’s (Andrea) accomplishments. She would clap and exclaim about, getting everyone’s attention. However, when I completed a book, she would begrudgingly toss the caterpillar on my desk as she walked by, minus any celebration. Though I didn’t understand anything about race, it was clear that my teacher liked my classmate more than me and, I did not look like her. This intersection of race and hegemony in these years was a continuous source of frustration, making me often feel powerless to fight it.

Secondary Years

Middle School

By middle school, I had adjusted to being the solo person of color. By this time, I had developed a tougher skin. I had begun to expect racism so, to counteract it, I developed new skills to assimilate with my white peers. I understood that there were differences in class and, my goal was to fit in and not be different. Whether it was language, behaviors, etc., when I was in these classes, I behaved like a “prep”. I had learned to “pass” and, I was great at it, assimilation at its finest.

Although I hadn’t explicitly been taught to do so, I understood that I could make my white teachers and classmates more comfortable if I didn’t “act black”. To my

advantage, surprisingly, was the complexion of my skin. Though I was still very much treated as black, my fairness would be constantly remarked on so, I knew it was important. Somehow in this racist environment, whites felt more comfortable with me as my complexion was in many times lighter than theirs.

The poverty in my home at this juncture was overwhelming. My father, who knew me, made a choice not to take on an active role in my life. This distant relationship throughout my years in elementary and secondary school proved difficult to accept. My risk factors (poverty, uneducated parents, single parent household).which had the capacity to eradicate my potential were ever present. I needed an escape and school had to be it.

School was the place where I received my meals, knowing that that might not be the case when I arrived home. I became very effective in making my teachers comfortable with my presence. I was helpful, often chosen to run errands, stay after school, etc. I learned quickly a way to escape my external reality was to become a joiner.

In middle school, I joined the band and, I worked hard to keep my grades up. Making these choices began to have a real effect on me in my community. Because of the class and race lines, I was expected to seek after acceptance amongst black peers who did not appreciate my success.

A particularly vivid and painful memory I have is being in the 8th grade and selected for the National Junior Honor Society. We were to have a congratulatory pizza party at the Pizza Inn. During time for pre-orders a few days prior, the four or five other black students kept evading ordering with me. Finally, I had to pre-order with Ginger, a white friend of mine. At the actual party, I got my pizza then, walked over to sit with the other black students. They looked at me and told me to go and sit with my other white friends. Sitting at the table was my own first cousin. She laughed with them and, they all

turned their backs, leaving me standing in the middle of the restaurant floor. This difficult moment was added to others that I experienced throughout middle school and high school as the others of my race perceived my desire to be successful in school as a rejection of my people.

High School

By high school, I had learned to demand my seat at the table so that racist encounters didn't deter me. For example, when my freshman honors English teacher stopped me on the first day of class as I entered, announcing that I must have the wrong class because there were "no little black girls in her class", I smiled sweetly and pointed to my name on her roll, there without any tell-tale stereotypical sounds or spellings that would indicate my blackness. While her face did the obligatory flush, I continued my path into her classroom, leaving her speechless in the hall. She followed a moment later apologizing but, of course, the damage was done. I knew that I was in Ms. Johnson's and Ms. Burger's class all over again.

I had grown to expect this dual racism however, my frustrations were pushed aside because by this time I understood on some scale that my only path out of poverty, government housing and welfare was education. I was laser-focused on escaping this racist environment where I didn't seem to fit anywhere. I just didn't know how. I had also learned to convert my language and behavior in certain settings, passing and seeking inclusion with my classmates. Now, I understand that what I had learned was how to code-switch. At that time, I was simply trying to survive.

I joined multiple organizations and took on leadership in everything ranging from Student Council to Band to Spanish Club. Unfortunately, while these behaviors helped me to be more successful and welcomed by my white peers, my fellow African American students continually accused me of trying to act white.

I also realized by this time that there were advantages afforded to students in honors classes and leadership positions. This advantage, cultural capital, was granted to me and my like peers, giving us a special treatment. Due to the capital of intelligence and being placed in the distinct class, I was able to do things such as move about the building freely, be chosen for special opportunities, etc. There were clear boundaries between classes. I understood that despite my race, I was “passing” into the more elite group.

Fortunately, it was finally in my high school years that my entrance into the school doors was met with a few educators who found something worthwhile in me to nurture. I had a fervent desire to be anywhere but in my home, my community and my town, I just did not see a real way out. These four women, at varying times, nurtured and poured into me. I am beyond grateful beyond measure for the following choices that they intentionally made which proved pivotal for me.

Señora Meta Thomas. Ms. Thomas, a black Panamanian woman, was my Spanish teacher in my junior and senior year of high school. She was a stern woman and she was not one to be toyed with unless you wanted to be demolished. She had no time for foolishness. She held the highest standards of excellence and she expected that we immerse and embrace ourselves in the Spanish language. She was brilliant and I was amazed by her, seeking to be in her presence as much as possible. Consequently, I joined and ultimately spent my senior year as president of the Spanish Club.

As an educator, I now understand that she was an ideal teacher. She provided tangible opportunities to explore the language and develop our prowess. We were forced to speak, sing, read and write in Spanish. We performed role plays, created real life application projects and more. We even raised money and were able to travel on two school trips in each of my years with her, first to San Antonio and then to New Orleans to

experience the Spanish culture up close. These experiences were a model of authentic engagement. Her love of Spanish was palpable and, I carry it in my heart to this day.

Ms. Thomas embraced me. She applauded my progress in her class and with the club. She demanded that I find and utilize leadership skills, placing responsibility at my feet and expecting me to rise to the occasion. I lived to receive a smile from her, indication that she was pleased.

Mrs. Claudie B. Williams. Mrs. Williams was my counselor. Though I didn't have a close relationship with her, she was the catalyst of my beginning to believe that college was a possibility for me. She called me to her office and told me of the Pre-College Program at Prairie View A&M University. Explaining the program to me, she demanded that I take the application to my mother to sign. She, then, sent the application off for me and, I was accepted. The result was having the opportunity to travel to this university's campus for two weeks, living in the dorm, attending classes, etc. during the summer prior to my senior year. This was a major crossroads for me because it was my first exposure to collegiate life. This immersion into the college experience made me yearn for it. Having the experience of actually being on a college campus was significant cultural capital.

Because of the traits I'd demonstrated, Mrs. Williams intentionally sought me out to make sure that I was empowered with information. She helped me complete applications and encouraged me to reach higher, ultimately entering and graduating from this same institution.

Mrs. Thalia Chaney. Mrs. Chaney was my assistant principal. I was fascinated by her because as a black and female administrator, I knew no one like her. She was fierce and she also changed my life because she changed my perception about what was possible for people that looked like me. Doing what would be considered career suicide

today, Mrs. Chaney took me personally under her wing, actually packing me into her car. I became a virtual member of her family, staying in her home in Houston on the weekends.

Mrs. Chaney was wise enough to discern that in order to have a true impact, she needed to build a bond with my mother who by this time was intimidated by my exposure to experiences about which she lacked knowledge. Many evenings, Mrs. Chaney could be found in my home, talking to my mother, raving about the meager meal that my mother had prepared and talking to my mother about her day. She built a friendship with my mother that, in turn, made my mother comfortable enough to release me into Mrs. Chaney's care.

In Mrs. Chaney's care, I was first exposed to the possibility that people in my race could experience middle-class status. I had never seen African-Americans living in middle class, brick homes with lawns, driveways and tree-lined streets. Though it may seem surprising, this was instrumental to me in demonstrating that I, too, could achieve middle class status and one day have a home of my own. Ms. Chaney's neighborhood was drastically different from "The Quarters" where I called home. I had my own room, with a bed no less. I was a welcome addition to her extended family, becoming a fixture at family dinners and weekends. I lived to go home with her. It provided a much needed escape.

Though I still had little, I now had two mothers who enjoyed tag-teaming me with a series of demands and high expectations that I be successful in school. These two mothers and everyone around me in my community made it clear to me that I bore the weight of my race on my shoulders. Through my success, the community won as well, similar to the weight that my own mother had experienced when she integrated alone.

Through my success, my mother sought vindication on the promise that she was not able to accomplish herself.

Mrs. Janet Bryant. Enter Mrs. Janet Bryant, a red-headed Caucasian teacher. Mrs. Bryant taught me that it was possible for a teacher who didn't look like me to embrace me and treat me the same as my peers. Her classroom was a haven where she encouraged us to think critically, explore our thoughts and write.

By this time in my life, the situation in my home was unbearable. I was exhausted by trying not to expose the poverty that I was facing. I had taken a job working in a paralegal office in order to provide the money needed to participate in school activities. I also paid the bills and bought the groceries for our home. At this point, we had been without hot water or heat for over two years, cooking all meals on a two-burner hot plate. Anything requiring hot water had to be prepared on this hotplate including bathing and washing dishes. Also, because there was no heat, in the winter, the three of us slept on the living room floor in front of the one space heater we had with blankets draped over the doorway to the hallway in order to keep the cold out. In the mornings, I would have to dart and dress in 20 and 30 degree temperatures so as not to expose my body in front of my older brother. I can vividly recall blue fingers and chattering teeth. I was poor. I knew it. I was tired of it. I desperately held on to the secrets of my home because I didn't want my peers to know how much lower in class that I was. Meanwhile, my mother did not want the community to know that the girl who integrated alone was doing so poorly. It was a glass house destined to crack.

So, on the particular day that I entered Mrs. Bryant's class and the writing prompt was on the board, "Write an essay about what you believe most impacts education", my pen seemed to move on its own. In the span of that class period, I wrote and submitted my essay. In it, I wrote about how I believed poverty most affected education. I talked

about being tired of living it. I talked about having lost my faith in God. I talked about getting out. When I exited the class that day, I noticed that Ms. Bryant was reading my essay with tears in her eyes and I was mortified. I had violated the cardinal rule of telling my family's business.

A week or so later, Mrs. Bryant came to find me in the band hall. She pulled me into the hall and announced that she had entered my essay into the Rotary Club essay contest. She was excited to tell me that if I won, my essay would be published in the town newspaper. I think I died in that moment. I had to go home and tell my prideful mother what I had done and what might happen. My mother was beyond livid with me that evening.

I did, indeed, win the contest and my essay was published. Now, the whole town knew what was going on behind closed doors. I could not hide the secret any more which in the end became a positive because help came to us. The church felt pressure to fix the pipe which caused us not to have hot water. They also helped with the bill so that our heat could be restored. If Mrs. Bryant had not done two things, making me feel safe enough to expose my truth and, taking a chance by entering my essay, this help would not have come. More than anything, she taught me that help could come from people who didn't look like me, perhaps most powerful of all.

Why Hope?

These educators exposed me to opportunities that allowed me to take advantage of available resources, gain recognition, showed me life outside of my current reality. They encouraged me and validated that my dreams to escape the life that had been chosen for me could be possible. It is in the footsteps of these women that I currently walk. I recognize at this point in my life that everything happens for a reason. I was forced to endure the circumstances that I faced as a training ground for the role I would play in the

lives of my students. I am currently in the role of an Associate Principal in a Title I middle school in Houston, Texas.

These wonderful women, two teachers, a counselor and an assistant principal, tilled a fertile ground that resulted in the harvest of a high school graduate with a full collegiate scholarship and a path out of darkness. They gave me *hope*. Subsequently, I recognize the critical impact of the school environment and the construct of hope. I desire to create a framework that will provide professional development to educators so that students like me will have the opportunity to experience hope despite their life's circumstances.

On a daily basis, I serve students and families who are facing the same dire circumstances which are at my origin. This Title I campus is 83% low socio-economic demographic with a large group of ESL and immigrant students. We currently have 1,250 enrolled students, over a 100 of which are designated as homeless. My students are highly mobile as a necessity for survival. Unfortunately, though my campus and district serve students of limited means, we continue to seek academically focused resources and interventions. The result is the light continuing to dim in the eyes of many of our students.

Ultimately, I find that I am continually motivated to serve as a bridge for my students to cross over, to be the link between the two worlds. Just as four women saw something in me that motivated them to expose me to more than was accessible to me, I work diligently to do the same with my students and their families.

I am humbled that God chose me to rise above my circumstances and class to be an example for others. When I think about the severe poverty that I endured and compare that to my middle-class life, I am amazed. I am proud of the skills that I have developed that allow me to move back and forth between worlds in regard to both race and class.

Creating professional development opportunities that will enable educators to recognize and positively utilize their impact to create hope in students is personal for me. I am more than aware that it is because of educators who chose to take on this mantle with me that I was able to excel in school and become the educator that I am today. I am also personally aware of the despair that takes root when educators choose to ignore or are unaware of how essential they and the environment they create truly are.

My goal in conducting this research was to create a framework that can be utilized in urban schools as a source of professional development. Now, at the end, I have been able to achieve that goal and believe that I have found the key to reaching the students that need it most. I was able to validate how conditions can be created in which hope can thrive in students. I chose not to admire the problem that we face but, to attempt to do something about it. I hope to inspire someone else to do the same.

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APPENDIX A: THE CHILDREN'S HOPE SCALE

The Children's Hope Scale is available from PsycTests but could not be distributed in this document. See Permissions information below:

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Distribution must be controlled, meaning only to the participants engaged in the research or enrolled in the educational activity. Any other type of reproduction or distribution of test content is not authorized without written permission from the author and publisher. Always include a credit line that contains the source citation and copyright owner when writing about or using any test.

Source:

Snyder, C. R. (1997). Children's Hope Scale [Database record]. Retrieved from PsycTESTS. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/t17838-000>

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT IDENTIFICATION INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Participant Identification Interview Questions

Potential participants who have scored highest on The Snyder's Children's Hope Scale will be interviewed utilizing the questions below. The purpose of the questions below is to identify the academically and socially successful at-risk students who also demonstrate the components of hope: agency, pathways and goal setting.

1. What goals have you set for yourself this year? In high school? After high school?
2. What do you do when things happen that affect completing your goals? Are you able to do this on your own or with the help of others? If with others, then who?
3. What are the things, programs or people here at school who influence how you feel about your ability to be successful? How does it make a difference?
4. Who are individuals in your life that help you believe that you have the ability to be successful? Describe how they do this.
5. How do you feel about being successful in school? What do you do when you feel unsuccessful?
6. How do your parents, teachers and friends affect your ability to be successful and make good decisions? Do you believe that they make a difference?
7. If you could give the principal a suggestion about how to help kids who struggle here in school, what would it be?

APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Focus Group Interview Protocol

Focus Group Introduction:

Thank you for your willingness to come back to talk with me, but this time in a focus group. What I will be doing today is to pose a few questions that I hope you will all be willing to engage in answering in a discussion setting. No answer is right or wrong. And you can refuse to answer any question. I will be recording this conversation, but as I have explained to all of you in the interview process, this is all confidential—no names or identifying information will be shared in my project.

General Questions:

Session 1:

1. Tell us how your week is going?
2. How do you define a successful student? Provide examples of what a success student looks like.
3. What are the behaviors and actions that a successful student must have?
4. What are the benefits and /or payoffs of being a successful student?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Session 2:

1. Do you ever have to give up something you enjoy doing in order to be successful in school?
2. Do you feel prepared each day in school to be successful?
3. What are the requirements and responsibilities of being a good student?
4. Do you feel like you connect with other students on campus? If yes, in what ways? If not, why not?
5. Do you believe that all students are given the same opportunities to be successful? Can you explain why you feel that way?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Session 3:

1. What are the sacrifices/cost involved with what you're choosing to take on to be successful in school? Do you ever have to give up something you enjoy doing?
2. What do you believe teachers believe about successful students compared to students who struggle with being successful?
3. What do successful students believe about themselves?
4. When you encounter an obstacle or barrier, what is the first thing you do? Then, what do you do next?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share?

APPENDIX D: COVER LETTER FOR TEACHERS

COVER LETTER FOR TEACHERS

Dear Teacher:

You are invited to participate in a research study titled “The Hope Factor”. This study is being conducted by Felecia Carrington and her research committee from the Department of Education at The University of Houston at Clear Lake. The purpose of this study is to identify what successful at-risk students perceive are the factors contributing to their success. This study will assist in the creation of a framework which can be used by urban schools to increase the success of their at-risk student population. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw your participation from this study at any time.

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Houston, Clear Lake. There are no risks associated with participating in this study. The survey collects no identifying information of any respondent. All of the response in the survey will be recorded anonymously.

While you will not experience any direct benefits from participation, information collected in this study may benefit the profession of education in the future by understanding the characteristics and needs of the at-risk student in urban settings. This will also lead to an increase in student achievement.

If you have any questions regarding the survey or this research project in general, please contact Felecia Carrington or her advisor Dr. McEnery. Felecia can be reached via email at ---. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, please contact the IRB of The University of Houston, Clear Lake.

By signing this letter, you are indicating your consent to participate in the study. Your participation is appreciated.

Felecia A. Carrington, Doctoral Candidate,
The University of Houston - Clear Lake

Advisor Dr. Lillian McEnery, Department of Education
The University of Houston - Clear Lake

Participant Signature

Date

Participant Name (Printed)

Contact Phone Number

APPENDIX E: PARENTAL LETTER OF CONSENT

PARENTAL LETTER OF CONSENT

Dear Parents:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor McEnery in the College of Education at the University of Houston, Clear Lake. I am conducting a research study to identify what successful at-risk students perceive are the factors contributing to their success. This study will assist in the creation of a framework which can be used by urban schools to increase the success of their at-risk student population.

With your permission, your child will participate in the following activities as part of this study

1. Your child will complete the Hope Scale Questionnaire.
2. Selected students will next be interviewed about their experiences as a student. If your child is not selected, this will be their final step.
3. If selected, your child will participate in classroom observations (2), interviews (3) and focus groups (2). The purpose of these activities is to observe your child in their classroom or school setting as well as to have them to share additional thoughts about the school experience with the researcher and/or other participants.

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to have your child participate or to withdraw you child from the study at any time, there will be no penalty (it will not affect your child's grade). Likewise, if your child chooses not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published but your child's name will not be used.

Although there may be no direct benefit to your child, the possible benefits of your child's participation in this study will benefit the profession of education by helping schools to better serve students who are at risk.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or your child's participation in this study, please contact me at ---.

Sincerely,

Felecia Carrington

I give consent for my child _____ to participate in the above study.

Parent Signature

Date

Parent Name (Printed)

Contact Phone Number

APPENDIX F: STUDENT PARTICIPANT ASSENT FORM

STUDENT PARTICIPANT ASSENT FORM

Dear Student:

I am asking you to help me with this study about the factors which create or support hope in at-risk students. The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of what schools can do to help all students have more hope.

Participating in this survey is voluntary, which means you do not have to take part if you don't want to. Nothing will happen to you if you decide not to participate.

If you agree to participate you will participate in taking a questionnaire, focus groups, interviews as well as be observed by me in varying settings. I will also interview others who interact or support you such as your teachers and your parent/guardian.

Your participation and answers during this study will be completely private. You will be assured confidentiality throughout this process.

Please read the following and sign below if you agree to participate.

I understand that:

- if I don't want to take participate in this study that's ok and I won't get into trouble
- anytime that I want to stop participating that's ok
- my name will not be known and my answers will be completely private

Signature: _____

Name: _____ (Please Print)

Date: _____

There are two copies of this letter. After signing them, you will be given one to keep. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

For further information regarding this research please contact Dr. Lillian McEnery at 281-283-xxxx, email: xxxx@uhcl.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the University of Houston Clear Lake Institutional Review Board at 281-283-xxxx.

APPENDIX G: INFORMED CONSENT - PRINCIPAL

INFORMED CONSENT - PRINCIPAL

You are being asked to participate in the research project described below. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or you may decide to stop your participation at any time. Should you refuse to participate in the study or should you withdraw your consent and stop participation in the study, your decision will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you may be otherwise entitled. You are being asked to read the information below carefully, and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

Title: **Hope Ascends**

Principal Investigator: **Felecia Carrington, M.A., M.S.**

Faculty Sponsor: **Dr. Lillian McEney**

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The specific purpose of this study is to elevate the previous research on the construct of hope to identify the factors and attributes that at-risk students who are academically and socially successful perceive contributed to their hope. By ascertaining these elements, the researcher intends to establish how schools can create the proper environment to foster student success while also developing interventions which focus on these social aspects in addition to the academic interventions which are currently being utilized.

PROCEDURES

The researcher will utilize archival data to begin to identify potential participants, followed by purposive sampling. The researcher, will then conduct participant interviews, focus groups, participant observations, as well as an interview with both a school administrator and counselor from the campus.

EXPECTED DURATION

The total anticipated time commitment for the principal and counselor will be approximately 1-2 hours of interviewing including pre and post observation conferences as needed. Student interviews, focus groups and observations will take place over a 2 – 3 month time frame.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION

There are no anticipated risks associated with participation in this project.

BENEFITS TO THE SUBJECT

There is no direct benefit received from your participation in this study, but your participation will help the investigator better understand the administrator's perspective and practices in respect to school environment, culture, climate, etc.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF RECORDS

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. The data collected from the study will be used for educational and publication purposes, however, you will not be identified by name. For federal audit purposes, the participant's documentation for this research

project will be maintained and safeguarded by the researcher, Felecia Carrington, for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. After that time, the participant's documentation may be destroyed.

FINANCIAL COMPENSATION

There is no financial compensation to be offered for participation in the study.

INVESTIGATOR'S RIGHT TO WITHDRAW PARTICIPANT

The investigator has the right to withdraw you from this study at any time.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

If you have additional questions during the course of this study about the research or any related problem, you may contact the Student Researcher, **Felecia Carrington**, at phone number **281-xxx-xxxx** or by email at **xxxxx@att.net**. The Faculty Sponsor **Lillian McEnergy**, Ed.D., may be contacted at phone number **832-xxx-xxxx** or by email at **xxxx@uhcl.edu**.

SIGNATURES: Your signature below acknowledges your voluntary participation in this research project. Such participation does not release the investigator(s), institution(s), sponsor(s) or granting agency(ies) from their professional and ethical responsibility to you. By signing the form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, and explanation of risks or benefits have been explained to you. You have been allowed to ask questions and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You have been told who to contact if you have additional questions. You have read this consent form and voluntarily agree to participate as a subject in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent at any time by contacting the Principal Investigator or Student Researcher/Faculty Sponsor. You will be given a copy of the consent form you have signed.

Subject's printed name: _____

Signature of Subject: _____

Date: _____

Using language that is understandable and appropriate, I have discussed this project and the items listed above with the subject.

Printed name and title: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON – CLEAR LAKE (UHCL)
COMMITTEE FOR PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS HAS
REVIEWED AND APPROVED THIS PROJECT. ANY QUESTIONS
REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE

ADDRESSED TO THE UHCL COMMITTEE FOR THE
PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (281-283-3015).

ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY
INVESTIGATORS AT UHCL ARE GOVERNED BY
REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL
GOVERNMENT (FEDERAL WIDE ASSURANCE #FWA00004068).