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Factors that Promote Persistence and Motivation Among Successful, High Poverty, Urban High School Students

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FACTORS THAT PROMOTE PERSISTENCE AND MOTIVATION
AMONG SUCCESSFUL, HIGH POVERTY, URBAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the factors and school-related practices/structures that students perceive as being most critical to their motivation and persistence in attaining academic proficiency. Ten grade twelve students from an urban high school in Northeastern Pennsylvania participated in this study. Five of their parents participated as well.

This research study consisted of two distinct phases, the pilot portion and the field portion. It is important to note however, that both the pilot study and field study took place at the same school and utilized the same criteria when selecting students to participate. Student and parent interview questions were developed using information gathered through a review of the literature. Resulting information was coded from all data sources in terms of which research question it addressed.

The student participants involved in this research study consisted of ten grade twelve students. These ten students were randomly chosen from an overall population of 54 students that fit specified criteria including the following: the maintenance of a Grade Point Average (GPA) that was between a 2.8-3.9 for two consecutive years, a score of Advanced or Proficient on the Grade 11 PSSA, and are of low socio-economic status. These students were the target population for this study due to their continued academic

success despite living in adverse economic conditions. During the interviews, both students and parents were asked to reflect on those things that they believed were most critical in promoting (the students') high academic achievement and overall success.

The results of this study indicated that there are critical factors that impact students' levels of motivation and persistence. Every single interview participant (both parents and students), at some point throughout the interviews, mentioned the importance of a strong connection to or relationship with a teacher or another adult in their life. The participants also repeatedly mentioned that the support, encouragement, establishment of challenging goals, and meaningful feedback that are given to students is vital to their level of success. Further findings indicated that both students and parents believe that the ability of a teacher to get children excited about learning while teaching in a way that addresses students' unique learning styles is a primary predictor of a student's academic success.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Educators now more than ever face great challenges in order to ensure that all children achieve high academic standards of proficiency. Due to the passage of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) - more commonly known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), highly rigorous standards have been outlined for school improvement. Each school must achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) overall and within specific population subgroups in order to be deemed successful (NCLB, 2002). While this label of success is critical for the future of schools and districts, it is even more critical for educators to identify and understand those factors that contribute to a student's ability to work diligently in their quest toward the achievement of academic success.

One of the most difficult challenges for educators in the midst of increased accountability surrounds the motivation of urban high school students and their ability to persist and attain high levels of academic achievement. This multi-faceted challenge can be a complex task when students come to school with an array of unique abilities, strengths, needs, and beliefs about school and his/her ability to perform. It is the job of the educator therefore, to reach each student by focusing on these vast needs. Add a second and third layer to that already existent challenge, and motivating urban high school students who are "at-risk" in some aspect or another becomes an even more daunting task.

Statement of the Problem

Urban high school students who are “at-risk,” specifically those living in poverty, have an increased likelihood of experiencing educational challenges. According to Aaron Pallas, a professor of human development at Columbia University, young people are at-risk, or educationally disadvantaged, if they have been exposed to inadequate or inappropriate educational experiences in family, school, or community (1989). Edward Rozycki, a professor at Widener University, further defines these experiences. He explains that students are at-risk when they possess certain factors such as low-income parent(s) with limited educational backgrounds, limited English proficiency, a negative self-image, and/or low self-esteem (2004). Both professors indicate that while one factor does not necessarily mean that a child will fail, the presence of one or more of these factors increases its probability. According to Pallas (1989), these underprivileged children are more likely to perform poorly in school and have a greater chance of dropping out than those from higher income households.

The level of student motivation, academic performance, and overall persistence might also depend upon the characteristics of the school and classroom environment. Characteristics such as meaningful activities which promote rigorous thinking and problem-solving, clarity of learning which includes a clear purpose for all activities, and a focus on individual needs and interests, have a direct impact on a student’s level of motivation and persistence in achieving desired outcomes (Jones, 2009). The National Research Council (2003), charged with conducting research regarding student motivation, has stated the following:

When students from disadvantaged backgrounds in high-poverty, urban high schools become disengaged, they are less likely to graduate and consequently face severely limited opportunities. Failure to earn even the most basic educational credential or acquire the basic skills needed to function in adult society increases dramatically their risk of unemployment, poverty, poor health, and involvement in the criminal justice system. (p. 1)

An essential question therefore, continues to plague schools across the country: How do educators motivate urban high school students who possess factors that place them at-risk for low achievement and potential drop out? Several educators across the country, including those within the Alexandria City Schools system, have decided not to call students “at-risk” any longer. These children are known as “at-promise” children.

We use the term ‘at-promise’ in Alexandria City Public Schools to describe children who have the potential to achieve at a higher rate than they are currently achieving. Really, all children are at-promise, because we, as educators, have made a promise to each and every child that we will work toward higher achievement for all. (Sherman as cited in Matthews, 2009)

A great sense of urgency therefore, exists in understanding what it is that motivates these young people and causes them to persist and work towards high levels of achievement. It is our collective responsibility, as educators, to make certain that every child that walks through the doors of our classrooms is given the opportunity to achieve greatness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the factors and school-related practices/structures that students perceive as being most critical to their motivation and persistence in attaining academic proficiency. A wealth of research exists surrounding the topic of motivation of high school students. Most of this research however, draws conclusions based upon what educators, community, and parents believe are the key elements in promoting motivation and an overall desire to persist. The ultimate goal of this study was to give the students a *voice*. Interestingly, the voice of the students generally seems to be a missing component within the literature surrounding this topic. Without the voice of the students, a true understanding of what drives them toward academic excellence will never truly be understood.

Research Question(s)

This qualitative research study is an exploration of persistence and motivation of successful, high poverty, urban high school students. The study examines high performing students' perceptions of what factors they believe are most instrumental in promoting these two key elements within their educational experience. This study therefore, is driven by the following research question:

1. What factors do successful, high poverty, urban high school students perceive to be the most important in contributing to their persistence and motivation in achieving academic success?

This question is an exploration of the school-related elements that students believe contribute most to their desire to work hard and remain in school. This question leads to other important questions:

2. What instructional strategies do students believe are most effective for successful, high-poverty, urban, high school students in achieving and maintaining academic proficiency?
3. According to students, what behaviors do teachers exhibit that engage and motivate them?
4. What classroom and school structures/practices do students believe are critical in the establishment of an environment which promotes student motivation and engagement?
5. According to students, what outside factors contribute most to their success?

These questions address key instructional strategies, behaviors of teachers and other school staff members, organizational structures and practices, and additional factors, including family structure/beliefs that these students believe are the most critical contributors toward their academic success.

Theoretical Framework

Research for this study began by investigating those school-related elements that have a clear connection to and impact upon a student's level of engagement, motivation, and desire to persist. Through this quest for information, several theories emerged surrounding the topics of student persistence and motivation. Resilience is a key topic in studying levels of persistence and motivation in children and specifically refers to an individual's tendency to cope with stress and adversity. Garmezy (1973) published the first research findings on resilience. He used epidemiology, which is the study of who gets ill, who doesn't, and why, to uncover the risks and the protective factors that now help to define resilience. The terminology and science of risk and resilience emerged

primarily from the health sciences and particularly from the investigation of psychopathology. The ideas came from pioneering psychologists, Norman Garmezy, Emmy Werner, and Michael Rutter, whose primary focus was on child development (Keyes, 2004)

Krovetz (1999) has also written extensively on the topic of resilience. He states that Resilience Theory can be defined as:

The belief in the ability of every person to overcome adversity if important protective factors are present in a person's life. Researchers argue a child is much more likely to develop and maintain a positive, proactive stance toward life if they live in an environment in which people care about that child; have high expectations for the child; offer purposeful, positive support; and value the child.
(p. 21)

VanBreda (2001) further defines this theory by stating that “resilience addresses the strengths that people demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity” (p.14).

Benard (1995) has conducted wide-spread research within the field of resilience as well and has identified several common characteristics of resilient children. These attributes include social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, an ultimate sense of purpose for their lives and for the future, and autonomy - an emphasis on student voice and decision-making. Resilience Theory states that most people have some of these attributes; however, it is sometimes difficult to determine if these attributes are strong enough to help individuals cope with adversity in their lives. More often, it depends upon the factors found within families, schools, and communities.

Bandura's Theory of Self-Efficacy (1977) focuses on a person's self-perceived level of competence and capacity to succeed and is one factor that impacts a level of resilience that a student possesses. Bandura defined self-efficacy as "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcome" (p. 193). In a later publication on self-efficacy, he stresses that an individual's level of motivation is primarily based on what he/she believes rather than on what is "objectively true" (Bandura, 1997, p.2). In other words, the ways in which people behave can often be better predicted by the beliefs they hold about their capabilities than by what they are actually capable of accomplishing (Pajares, 2002). His theory proposes a strong connection to motivation and is described as the one of the most important predictors of a student's academic achievement.

Bandura describes his belief that a strong sense of efficacy enhances student accomplishment and his/her overall well-being in many ways. For this reason, people's belief in what they can accomplish may be the best predictor of their attainment of success. Ultimately, students who possess high levels of confidence in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as "challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided" (Bandura, 1997, p.3).

Additionally, Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory identifies three innate psychological needs including competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which are critical to student motivation and success. An environment which stresses these components provides students with optimal challenges, continual feedback from peers and teachers, interpersonal involvement, a high level of continuous support, and

ultimately promotes resilience among students' thus improving levels of motivation and persistence.

The aforementioned theories outline the correlation of resilience to increased levels of student motivation and persistence. Key factors including self-efficacy and self-determination foster levels of resilience and are therefore linked to the motivation of high poverty, urban, high school students. Student-centered instruction which includes inquiry, problem solving, and individual goal-setting; a focus on both the affective and academic needs of students, and an environment which promotes relationship-building have all been found to be crucial pieces in students' development of an intrinsic desire to persist. Few studies however, have been found on this topic when student voice is an integral piece of the discussion. This study further sought to "uncover" some of those educational factors that contribute most to a student's motivation and desire to persist and work toward high levels of achievement.

Overview of Methodology

The goal of this research study was to identify and understand the school, classroom, and teacher-related factors that promote persistence and motivation among successful, high poverty, urban high school students. This information was ascertained through a series of interviews with students and members of their families. More specifically, the study included a group of randomly selected Grade 12 students who possessed the following characteristics:

1. Maintained a grade point average (GPA) of 2.8-3.9 for two consecutive years
2. Proficient or advanced scores on the Grade 11 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) in the areas of both reading and mathematics

3. Low socio-economic status (qualified for free and reduced lunch)

In addition to these individual interviews, observational data through the use of field notes were compiled in order to document students' actions and attitudes regarding self-motivation and persistence.

This study utilized those methods which are associated with a case study approach to research. Qualitative case studies afford researchers opportunities to explore or describe a phenomenon in context using a variety of data sources. They allow the researcher to explore individuals or organizations, simple through complex interventions, relationships, communities, or programs and supports the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena. This approach is valuable to develop theory, evaluate programs, and develop interventions (Yin, 1994).

Throughout the study, the researcher assumed the role of an observer, interviewer, recorder, and data analyst. Interview questions were developed using information gathered through a review of the literature. Resulting information was coded from all data sources in terms of which research question it addressed. The final analysis was displayed through the use of a matrix chart which identified the specific research questions and the resulting themes, categories, and relationships which aligned to each question.

Definition of Terms

The following section contains definitions of terms that were used within the qualitative study.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): An individual state's measure of yearly progress toward achieving state academic standards. "Adequate Yearly Progress" is the minimum

level of improvement that states, school districts, and schools must achieve each year (www.pde.psu.edu, 2008).

Affective Processes: Processes regulating emotional states and elicitation of emotional reactions (Bandura, 1994).

At-Risk Students: Students are at-risk when they possess certain factors such as low-income parent(s) with limited educational backgrounds, limited English proficiency, a negative self-image, and/or low self-esteem (Rozycki, 2004).

Confounding Variable: An extraneous variable whose presence affects the variables being studied so that the results gained do not reflect the actual relationship between the variables under investigation (alleydog.com, 2012).

Corrective Action: When a school or school district does not make yearly progress for four or more consecutive years, the state will place it under a “Corrective Action Plan.” The plan will include resources to improve teaching, administration, or curriculum. If a school or district continues to be identified as in need of improvement, then the state has increased authority to make any necessary, additional changes to ensure improvement (www.pde.psu.edu, 2008).

Motivation: Activation to action. Level of motivation is reflected in choice of courses of action, and in the intensity and persistence of effort (Bandura, 1994).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the central federal law in pre-collegiate education. The NCLB Act expanded the federal role in education and has become a focal point of education policy (www.pde.psu.edu, 2008).

Pennsylvania System of Student Assessment (PSSA): The standardized assessment of

students in Pennsylvania in grades three through eleven which measures academic proficiency in reading and mathematics (PDE, 2004).

Perceived Self-Efficacy: People's beliefs about their capabilities to produce effects (Bandura, 1994).

Persistence: Remaining in school, as in not leaving high school until completion (graduation). (http://vocationalpsychology.com/term_academic_persistence.htm)

Resilience Theory: A multi-faceted field of study that addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enables them to rise above adversity (VanBreda, 2001).

Socio-Economic Status (SES): An individual's or group's position within a hierarchical social structure. Socioeconomic status depends on a combination of variables, including occupation, education, income, wealth, and place of residence. (PA Department of Ed., 2008).

Urban: The term assigned to “a place and the adjacent densely settled surrounding territory that combined have a minimum population of 50,000” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 192).

Significance/Strengths of the Study

The significance of this study is clear: limited research has been found surrounding student *voice*, (specifically the voice of successful, high-poverty, urban students), in the identification of those school, classroom, and teacher-related factors and practices that promote persistence and motivation. This study therefore, responded to the need for research on this topic in order to understand the perceptions of the nation’s most important commodity – its children. The research on successful, high poverty, urban high school students provides evidence-based data, in an effort to guide parents, teachers, and

administrators in making educational decisions which are most meaningful for students. These decisions are of extreme importance for they will ultimately affect the ability of children to achieve success.

The ten students selected for this study were experiencing academic success despite the fact that are of low-socioeconomic status which often places them at risk of a decreased sense of motivation and possible dropout and/or failure. Regardless of their low socio-economic status, these students have maintained a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 2.8 to 3.9 for two consecutive years and scored at proficient or advanced levels in the areas of mathematics and reading on the Grade 11 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). Based on the data collected through a deep analysis of these students' thoughts, beliefs, and ideas, the findings could be instrumental in determining school-wide goals and practices.

Organization of the Study

The report of this research study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One provides an overview of the study emphasizing the need for *student voice* as it relates to the identification of the factors that increase their motivation and desire to persist. This study could potentially have a profound impact on the ways schools are structured, the ways educators view instruction, and is ultimately justified due to the lack of research that intensely investigates student perceptions regarding this topic.

Chapter Two presents a comprehensive yet synthesized review of the literature related to the topics associated with this study. This literature review sought to uncover some of the educational factors and practices that contribute to a student's motivation and desire to persist and work toward high levels of achievement. The studies shared similar

findings about what students believe truly motivates them. Student-centered instruction which includes inquiry, choice, problem solving, and individual goal-setting; a focus on both the affective and academic needs of students; and an environment which promotes relationship-building were all crucial pieces in students' development of an intrinsic desire to persist. The review ultimately justifies the research questions and methodology.

Chapter Three focuses on the methodology and design appropriateness of the study. This chapter presents an overview of the research problem including the research questions, research design, role of the researcher, research context, and a detailed description of the subject selection process. In addition, this chapter provides a detailed explanation of data collection through interviews and observations. The purpose of this type of methodology is to gain a deep understanding, from the students' points of view, of the reasons why students are motivated to persist in school.

Chapter Four reports on the research findings. The chapter begins with an introduction and goes on to identify and discuss the themes which emerged from the observations and interviews regarding teacher, classroom, school, and additional factors that lead to increased motivation and persistence. This chapter concludes with a summary of student and parent-identified themes.

The study concludes with Chapter Five and includes an introductory paragraph, a summary of the research findings and their link to existing research, research implications, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Summary

This study examined how successful, urban high school students, specifically those living in poverty, maintain high levels of persistence and motivation in the midst of

high levels of rigor and accountability. The study further investigated the students' perceptions of what educational factors and practices contribute most to their attainment of academic proficiency. A detailed description through literature research, classroom observations and interviews, were gained as a result of this study. The study ultimately provides insight and recommendations regarding increased student motivation, persistence, and overall academic success.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that: “every child has the right to an education that develops their personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” (American Psychological Association, 2012). If this was actually the mission of every school, then why is it that an estimated 1.3 million American high school students drop out every year?

The nation’s children are its future leaders. Education remains the major tool by which people are empowered to become these leaders and contributors to our global society. Every school’s mission therefore, should be the education of students to become knowledgeable, responsible, and contributing citizens (American Psychological Association, 2012).

One of the most difficult challenges for educators in their quest to keep children in school surrounds the motivation of high school students and their ability to persist and attain high levels of academic achievement. This challenge becomes even greater when students are faced with difficult circumstances surrounding their family and community lives. Often times these daily challenges place them at-risk for failure and eventual drop-out.

This literature review examines how successful high school students, specifically those who possess one or more factors that put them at risk for failure, maintain high levels of persistence and motivation in the midst of high levels of rigor and accountability. The study further investigates the students’ perceptions of what educational factors contribute most to their attainment of academic proficiency. This

review of the literature includes several components related to the research questions that have been outlined in Chapter One. The first section outlines the wealth of research that has been done regarding the beliefs of what truly motivates high poverty, urban high school students. Section two identifies specific qualities that place a child at-risk for possible school failure and eventual drop out. The third section revisits the purpose for the overall study by focusing on the need for the student's voice surrounding the topic of motivation. Several studies which have touched upon student voice in regards to unique populations of students are discussed. The fourth and fifth sections consist of research surrounding teachers' behaviors and methods of instruction and how these factors may directly impact the students' level of motivation. The chapter concludes with an investigation of additional factors that contribute to the desire of students to persist in their educational endeavors.

Theoretical Basis

Research for this study began by investigating the school-related elements that have a direct impact upon a student's level of engagement, motivation, and desire to persist. Through this quest for information, several theories emerged surrounding the topics of student persistence and motivation.

Resilience

The first, and overarching theory, is that of resilience. Resilience is a key topic in studying levels of persistence and motivation in children. Perhaps the earliest examination of resilience is found in the work of Garmezy (1973), who conducted research on this topic for several decades. His focus was primarily on the positive adaptation of children under conditions of high risk or of those facing multiple life stressors.

More specifically, resilience refers to an individual's tendency to cope with stress and adversity. Garmezy investigated a multitude of factors involved in children's exposure to adversity, risk and resilience. He found that even within high risk groups of children (such as those with physical disabilities or living in homeless shelters) there were some who still managed to display "ordinary or better functioning" in spite of exposure to extreme hardships and challenges (AIFS.gov., 2013).

Researchers have found evidence that resilience is contextual and is most often affected by the collection of protective factors and risk factors that are present in the families and the larger society (including culture) which make up the environments of individuals finding themselves in challenging situations. (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1991).

The work conducted by Krovetz regarding resilience provides an additional area of research which is essential to the topic of this study. Krovetz (2008) discusses resilience theory, which defines the factors that exist within the lives of successful children. His theory compares these protective factors with what is missing from the lives of students who are experiencing significant hardships. He describes that resilient children most often possess:

1. a caring and supportive environment where at least one adult cares deeply about the child's well-being and actively participates in the child's life
2. a set of clearly defined, positive expectations with the support needed to reach those expectations

Ultimately, he concludes that when the school community, in partnership with families, work collectively to build and foster resilience, children can overcome adversity and achieve great success.

Alva (1991) utilized the term “academic invulnerability” to describe those students who “sustain high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school (p. 19). In her study of high poverty Mexican-American high school students, Alva found that those students who were identified as highly resilient (invulnerable) shared common feelings and experiences surrounding their education. These students reported receiving high levels of support from their teachers and friends, were highly encouraged in their efforts, enjoyed coming to school and being involved in activities, and received positive support and structure from their family.

Benard (1995) has done extensive research within the field of resilience as well and has identified several common attributes of resilient children. These attributes include social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, an ultimate sense of purpose for their lives and for the future, and autonomy - an emphasis on student voice and decision-making. Resilience Theory proposes that most people have some of these attributes, but whether these attributes are strong enough to help individuals cope with adversity in their lives depends on the factors found within families, schools, and communities. Benard (1995) explains resilience in this way:

Research on resilience gives educators a blueprint for creating schools where all students can thrive socially and academically. Research suggests that when

schools are places where the basic human needs for support, respect, and belonging are met, motivation for learning is fostered. Reciprocal caring and respectful and participatory relationships are the critical determining factors in whether a student learns; whether parents become and stay involved in the school; whether a program or strategy is effective; whether an educational change is sustained; and, ultimately, whether a youth feels he or she has a place in this society. When a school redefines its culture by building a vision and commitment on the part of the whole school community that is based on these three critical factors of resilience, it has the power to serve as a "protective shield" for all students and a beacon of light for youth from troubled homes and impoverished communities. (p. 2)

As stated above, the level of resilience is most often affected by key factors present within students' lives. The chart below provides a visual representation of how two key factors, self-efficacy and self-determination, are related to the overarching theme of resilience. These factors are explained in greater detail following Table 1:

Table 1

Resilience Summary

Student Achievement					
↑ Student Motivation and Persistence					
↑ Resilience					
↗ Self-Efficacy			↖ Self-Determination		
↗ Past Performance	↑ Influence of Others	↖ Current Experiences	↗ Autonomy	↑ Competence	↖ Relatedness

Self-Efficacy

According to Bandura (1994), a strong sense of efficacy increases human success and personal well-being in a multitude of ways. People with confidence in their capabilities tend to approach difficult tasks as challenges to be overcome rather than as things to be avoided. When children possess high levels of efficacy therefore, they often possess a deeper interest in activities and maintain strong commitment towards them. They sustain their efforts in the face of failure and quickly recover their sense of efficacy after experiencing failures or setbacks.

Bandura (1995) describes his belief that a strong sense of efficacy directly influences the level of effort and persistence that students exhibit towards accomplishing a task. Additionally, his research also indicates that an individual's level of motivation is based primarily on what he/she believes can be accomplished rather than on what they may truly be capable of achieving. His theory therefore suggests that there is a direct correlation between levels of self-efficacy and motivation and may ultimately be one of the most important predictors of students' academic success (Bandura, 1997).

Self-Determination

Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory describes a second factor which has been shown to foster resilience among children. This theory identifies three innate psychological needs including competence, relatedness, and autonomy which are critical to increased levels of student motivation and success. Competence involves understanding how one is able to attain various outcomes; relatedness focuses on the development of strong connections with others; and autonomy refers to the ability to self-initiate and self-regulate one's own actions. When applied to the context of academics

and student learning, self-determination is associated with promoting a student's interest in learning, instilling an appreciation for the value of education, and ultimately building a sense of confidence in the student's ability to achieve success (Deci, Pelletier, Ryan, & Vallerand, 1991).

This theory proposes that students who possess intrinsic motivation for working hard in schools and who have developed autonomous regulatory styles are more likely to persist in their education, to achieve educational goals, to grasp new concepts, and to be well-adjusted. Furthermore, additional studies surrounding this topic suggest that in educational settings, providing students with choices in their learning and opportunities to participate in the decision-making process relative to these educational opportunities tends to encourage the self-determined regulation of those activities. This, in turn, produces enhanced learning and improved levels of motivation (Deci, Pelletier, Ryan, & Vallerand, 1991).

The aforementioned theories certainly support the research which has been done regarding the *beliefs* of what truly motivates high poverty, urban high school students. Student-centered instruction which includes inquiry, problem solving, choices, and individual goal-setting; a focus on both the affective and academic needs of students; and an environment which promotes clear expectations, support, and a focus on relationship-building are all crucial pieces in students' development of an intrinsic desire to persist. There does however, appear to be a gap in the research on this topic when student voice becomes an integral piece of the discussion. In other words, many research studies have focused on what educators believe motivates students. This study therefore, sought to

“uncover” some of the factors that *students* believe contribute most to their motivation and desire to persist and work toward high levels of achievement.

Defining “At-Risk”

First, is essential that one understands what is meant by the term “at-risk.” According to Aaron Pallas (1989), young people are at risk, or educationally disadvantaged, if they have been exposed to insufficient educational experiences in family, school, or community. Acknowledgement of the combination of all three sources of influence is critical to a child’s academic development. He further explains that five social factors including poverty, race and ethnicity, family composition, mother’s education, and language background are associated with a youth’s exposure to inadequate or inappropriate educational resources and experiences. While one factor doesn’t necessarily mean that a child will fail, the presence of one or more of these factors increases its probability.

Grant, Stronge, and Popp (2008) share a similar definition of children who are “at-risk.” They define the term by describing students who, because of various environmental factors beyond their control (e.g., poverty, homelessness, mobility), have an “increased likelihood of experiencing challenges in attending, succeeding, and remaining in school” (p.6). These students, along with the specifics of the case study, will be analyzed in greater depth subsequently within this literature review.

For the purpose of this literature review and the overall study, the focus was placed primarily on high school students who have an increased likelihood of experiencing educational challenges, specifically those living in poverty. Pallas (1989) further explains that underprivileged children are more likely to perform poorly in school

and have a greater chance of dropping out than those from higher income households. Therefore, a great sense of urgency exists in understanding what it is that motivates these young people and causes them to persist and work towards high levels of achievement.

Purpose - Student Voice is Critical

Much of the research surrounding high school student motivation has traditionally examined the perceptions and beliefs of educators. While these findings present a wealth of valuable data for educational decision-making, they leave out a critical piece of the puzzle – the students. Therefore, the key focus and overall purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of students. This research attempted to share students’ voices in identifying what factors they believe are the most critical in regards to their levels of motivation and persistence. The following studies were found to include the voices (thoughts/ideas/perceptions) of students on some level. The studies that were found however, did not solely focus upon the target population of this study – successful urban high school students who come from high-poverty environments.

Mike Muir (2000) conducted a study which certainly contributed to the body of research surrounding this topic. However, his research specifically focused on the motivation of middle school students. His key question was the following: “What do underachieving middle school students believe motivates them to learn” (p. 9)? Muir believes that student “voice” is critical because educators may make false assumptions about unmotivated learners, based on what they think they know about learners who are motivated: “Teachers and education will never change until they start listening to the ways kids think about the institution they share” (Davis, 1972, p. 119).

Muir conducted four case studies on two teams in two different schools. One seventh grade boy and one seventh grade girl from each team were the participants in his studies. Data collection involved a series of formal and informal interviews conducted sometime within the last six weeks of the school year. Field notes and observations were collected through the study's entirety.

Eight key ideas emerged as a result of this study: the importance of student-teacher relationships; hands-on activities; choice and student autonomy; making learning interesting and tying into student interests; contexts and connections; student goals and preparing for the future; learning styles; and high expectations coupled with helping students to succeed. It is important to note that these themes were organized in the order of significance to the students (most to least) as suggested by the data collected (2000).

Mansfield (2007) conducted a similar study surrounding student motivation. The primary purpose of the research was to identify key perceptions early adolescent students held of the school and the classroom context they encountered during their first year of middle school. It also investigated how such perceptions influenced the nature of the personal academic and social goals students pursued.

Mansfield (2007) conducted an exploratory study within a naturalistic setting. The research used qualitative techniques for data collection and analysis and focused on the cases of seven students through the first year of their middle school experience. Her ultimate goal was to investigate how contextual factors influenced the nature of the academic and social goals that seventh grade students pursued over the course of an academic year. The research involved weekly observations of the classroom and interviews with students and the classroom.

Interestingly, Mansfield's (2007) study mirrored many of Muir's findings discussed previously. The data described the critical need for teacher support and teacher/student relationships on students' feelings about school. Such relationships were found to foster students' academic and social goal pursuits. The data also indicated that students who perceive high levels of teacher support adopt more positive motivational patterns than those perceiving low levels of teacher support. Such data emphasizes the importance of students engaging in supportive relationships with teachers to maximize positive motivational patterns.

A second key finding from Mansfield (2007) was the significant influence that a system of "behavioral control" had on students' motivation. This type of environment creates a "teacher-in-charge" structure which leaves little room for student input and participation within the learning process. Students reported the negative influence that this type of management system had on their sense of school belonging, school affect, perceptions of teacher support, academic engagement, and overall effort. As a result of the data revealed in the study, schools hoping to create a more positive motivational environment may wish to re-consider the use of a "behavioral control" system and focus instead on the implementation of a system that fosters intrinsic motivation.

A final notable finding of this study stressed the students' desire for parental approval and the impact that such approval can have on the motivational goals the students pursue at school. In particular, for some students, the desire for parental approval is directly related to their academic related goals and behavior. Such information could be of benefit to teachers and administrators who could work diligently to promote and sustain a partnership with parents for the benefit of the students (Mansfield, 2007).

Most recently, Mulroy (2008), conducted a study which focused on student persistence and motivation. Her study did incorporate the beliefs of students, but focused on students who were experiencing limited academic success in school. More specifically, she attempted to identify those school-related factors that were instrumental in these students' attainment of the aforementioned qualities. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with six at-risk students, two counselors, four teachers, and three school administrators. The study took place in one school where the graduation rate for students was consistently 95% - a rate higher than other high schools locally, in Pennsylvania, and nationally. An overriding theme emerged throughout her research. This theme was one that stressed the importance of parents, teachers, and administrators as primary contributors towards student motivation, persistence, and pursuit of success:

The students described these caring adults as people who supported them both academically and socially. Students made clear that these caring adults were important in their persistence when they had difficulty with course work, language barriers, or family problems. Students viewed the adults as going out of their way to ensure their personal success. The students stated that the teachers often stayed after school, parents provided transportation, and coaches and advisors motivated them by setting high expectations. Additionally, the students identified the overall school setting as a caring "community." (Mulroy, 2001, p. 133)

In addition to this supportive school community comprised of committed teachers and parents, students identified the availability of engaging activities – both curricular and

extra-curricular, as well as strong peer support as key contributors to their motivation and desire to persist.

Teacher Behavior and Student Motivation

The seven leadership practices of Kouzes and Posner's (2003) Theory of "Encouraging the Heart" served as the conceptual framework for Larkins-Strathy (2007) research on identifying specific teacher practices that encourage and motivate students in their learning. Her case study of a single suburban middle school focused upon the teachers' and students' perceptions of these caring leadership practices and the effect they had on the level of student motivation.

Interviews of a select group of teachers and students revealed that teachers who held high expectations for both student behavior and achievement lead to improvements in academic performance and school related attitudes. Additionally, teachers motivated students by engaging in verbal praise, providing positive reinforcement, connecting to one another's lives, providing real-life experiences, and celebrating a job well done Larkins-Strathy (2007).

A recent report surrounding methods of motivational teaching revealed that there are twelve categories that are directly related to the level of a student's motivation concerning school and his/her willingness to learn. These categories were derived through research of psychological theories such as social-cognitive theory, psychotherapy methods such as motivational interviewing, suggestions of teaching experts, and the researchers own experiences as students and teachers (Malouff, Rook, Schutte, Foster, & Bhullar, 2008).

The methods have been found to have a direct correlation to a student's level of motivation. These methods include the following:

1. making content relevant to student values and goals and helping students achieve those goals through learning opportunities;
2. establishing a positive relationship with students and rewarding their achievement and learning efforts;
3. enhancing student learning and levels of self-efficacy through motivational feedback, encouragement, and engaging teaching methods.

Malouff et al. (2008) explain that the utilization of one of these methods will greatly improve the level of a student's motivation in accomplishing a task or goal. The utilization of all methods however, will make a significant impact on the overall level of a student's desire to work hard and achieve success.

Curwin (2010) has conducted a great deal of research surrounding the motivation of urban youth as well. Through this research, he has identified four pillars to building hope in the lives of so many young people who have experienced significant trials and challenges. The first pillar, and probably the most important (according to students), is directly related to the "believing in them" mentality that teachers' hold for their students (2010, p. 39). If teachers tell their students that they believe in them that is one thing. However, if they truly act upon those words and show students that they can achieve success in school and in life; students will most often strive to uphold those beliefs.

The second pillar surrounds the genuine caring that teachers have for their students. So often, urban youth have built up "walls of protection" (p. 38). These walls keep kids from dangerous homes, social and environmental dangers, school failure, and

eventual dropout. Truly caring teachers begin to build a trusting relationship with these students by tearing down tiny pieces of these walls. They listen without judgment, spend time with them, focus on things that are of importance to them, and finally provide advice and direction for them when necessary.

A commitment to never giving up on students and the belief that teachers can actually make a difference in students' lives are Curwin's final pillars. He explains that many troubled children actually find comfort in the fact that adults give up on them. This gives students the green light to withdraw from their educational pursuits for success. It is the job of teachers to challenge students and commit to holding them accountable for their life-long learning. Ultimately, there is no room for excuse-making in education. Everyone can make a difference in the lives of students. It is however, a conscious, calculated, and consistent effort that is required for this to happen.

Motivation Through Instruction

A United States Department of Education (2004) survey of 42,000 American schoolteachers revealed that 48% of teachers described student apathy as a serious or moderate problem in their classrooms. Educators attempt to reduce this problem by focusing on an element in which they believe they have the most control – their individual instructional practices. According to Knapp and colleagues (1993), teachers need to first and foremost access those instructional practices that target children who are low-performing or at risk for failure. They conducted a three-year study which analyzed 140 classrooms in 15 different schools. Their research posed this question: “What specific teaching practices influence student motivation, positive academic outcomes, and increased achievement for disadvantaged students?”

Throughout this study (Knapp, Shields, & Turnbull, 1993), qualitative data were developed from the classrooms that had been intensely studied. Information was gathered through several means including classroom observations, teacher and administrative interviews, and a detailed examination of the instructional materials and teacher logs. The findings of this study dispelled the myth that challenging academic work needs to be delayed until children of poverty have mastered basic skills. On the contrary, the study found that teachers must engage these students in multiple modes of instruction which include a combination of traditional (behavioral) and alternative (constructivist) methods. Student involvement in methods of instruction which promote inquiry and problem-solving is a key factor as well.

The purpose of a similar study conducted by Grant, Popp, and Stronge (2008) mirrored this same question. Their goal was to deeply examine what constitutes effective teaching – teaching that is particularly effective with highly mobile and/or high poverty students. Their research questions focused on two main elements. The first looked to define effective teaching and its connection to student learning within the context of working with highly mobile and/or high poverty students. Their second question specifically explored the identification of behaviors and practices that characterized the teachers of these students.

This study (Grant, Popp, & Stronge, 2008) was conducted by gathering on-site classroom observational and interview data from identified teachers. The individuals studied were teachers of highly mobile and/or high poverty students who were identified as highly effective teachers through winning a national and/or state award. Specifically, the case studies focused on:

1. teacher background characteristics (e.g., years' experience, highest degree earned),
2. teacher in-class behaviors, including instructional techniques, questioning strategies, student engagement, and cognitive levels of instructional activities associated with qualities of effective teachers
3. one interview with each teacher
4. one classroom observation of each teacher

Data gathered as a result of this analysis attempted to reveal specific qualities that are possessed by effective teachers of at-risk students.

The qualitative findings of this study (Grant, Popp, & Stronge, 2008) were quite extensive. A close link emerged between the affective and academic needs of the students. The teachers found it difficult to separate the two and saw students as unique individuals with unique needs. They collectively agreed that academic success required a relationship with their students. According to one teacher, "What motivates the students to stay in class is the personal connection to the teacher and I make it a point to get to know my students as learners. I do not teach English, I teach students" (Grant, Popp, & Stronge, 2008, p.78).

A second theme that emerged related to the utilization of assessment to guide the teachers' instruction. "Assessment was not a separate task but rather a fuel for planning" (Grant, Popp, & Stronge, 2008). Additionally, the assessment was not a mechanism to be used at the beginning and end of learning but rather as an ongoing, multi-faceted tool that continuously informs and guides the teacher.

Teachers within this study were also found to possess a keen awareness of the basic needs of students and realized when those needs were not being met. Not only were they aware of these individual needs, but were prepared to address them. While an acknowledgement of these needs and a plan to remedy them existed, the teachers studied did not make excuses for students. One teacher expressed her thoughts this way, “failure of a child is a reflection on you and your teaching methods, not on the child” (Grant et al., 2008, p.52). Therefore, the fact that no excuses existed for teachers or students was a common theme which emerged from this study.

An additional example of qualitative research that underscores the need for specific quality instructional practices was conducted by Webb (2008). The purpose of her study was to develop an understanding of how a rural school within a high poverty area managed to increase the academic achievement of all students which ultimately caused them to achieve an “excellent” rating on the district’s report card. Her research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How does a high poverty rural school achieve excellence in student achievement?
2. How did the school develop a culture of excellence for all students?
3. What evidence exists for a relationship between specific instructional strategies and student achievement?

These questions were instrumental in driving her case study of this school consisting of 278 students where over one-half of students were economically disadvantaged.

Data were collected through interviews, reviews of curriculum documents, and observations. This data revealed four instructional strategies that appeared to be linked to

increased student achievement. The first strategy focused on the setting of goals and the continuous monitoring of student progress. Students played an integral role in this process. Additional strategies incorporated the use of multiple graphic organizers, kinesthetic instructional approaches, and the use of time on task. The creation of a master schedule which emphasized optimal time for teaching was a crucial element of the school's success (Webb, 2008).

Webb (2008) stressed the fact that the school's success was not brought on by the use of any particular strategy used in isolation. On the contrary, the strategies were "intertwined" with an emphasis on school culture where everyone had bought in to a collective vision of success for students. High expectations, curriculum alignment, and a collective emphasis on explicit instruction had a profound impact on the students within the school.

Chapter Summary

This literature review sought to reveal those educational factors that greatly contribute to a student's level of motivation and desire to persist and work toward high levels of achievement. All studies shared similar findings about what students believe truly motivates them. Student-centered instruction which includes inquiry, problem solving, and individual goal-setting; a focus on both the affective and academic needs of students; and an environment which promotes relationship-building were all crucial pieces in students' development of an intrinsic desire to persist.

Several theories have emerged surrounding the topics of student motivation and persistence. The overarching theory describes resilience of children and how levels of resilience are most often affected by feelings of self-efficacy and self-determination.

When a school redefines its mission and commits to building upon these key elements, students have been shown to experience high levels of success.

Research certainly has been done regarding the beliefs of what truly motivates high school students. A substantial part of the research however, has focused on educators' beliefs surrounding this topic. Students themselves have been contributors to such findings but no research can be found which seeks the voice of the targeted population for this study. Some studies did focus upon students' perceptions but rarely focused upon the population of high school students who are academically successful and are of low socio-economic status. Therefore, a great deal more may be added to this body of research if these students' "voices" becomes an integral piece of the discussion.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

As described throughout Chapter 1, the purpose of this research study was to examine the school, classroom, and teacher-related factors and practices that students perceive as being most critical to their motivation and persistence in attaining academic proficiency. This information was ascertained through a series of interviews and observations conducted with a group of urban high school students who were chosen according to a predetermined set of criteria. In addition to individual student interviews, observational data through the use of field notes were compiled in order to document specific student actions found to be associated with student motivation and persistence.

This chapter presents the research methods which were selected and utilized throughout this study. Specifically, it presents the research problem and questions, the research design, the role of the researcher, and the research context. It continues with a discussion of the selection of participants, and a description of the instrumentation and data collection. The chapter concludes with a section describing the trustworthiness of the study and a final summary.

Overview of the Study

This research study was conducted in a large urban high school found within Northeastern Pennsylvania. This high school consists of approximately 3,400 students in grades nine through twelve. Students were selected by the researcher and administration using an established set of criteria. Students who fell within this set of criteria were randomly selected and represented members of the senior class at this high school.

Research Problem

Much research has been done surrounding motivation of high schools students. However, there is a need for more research surrounding the topic when the utilization of student voice is an integral piece of the discussion. This study further sought to “uncover” some of those educational factors that students perceived as contributing most to their motivation and desire to persist and work toward high levels of achievement.

Research Questions

This research study is built upon a key question:

1. What factors do successful, high-poverty, urban high school students perceive to be the most important in contributing to their persistence and motivation in achieving academic success?

In searching for an answer to this question, other questions arose:

2. What instructional strategies do students believe are most effective for successful, high-poverty, urban, high school students in achieving and maintaining academic proficiency?
3. According to students, what behaviors do teachers exhibit that engage and motivate them?
4. What classroom and school structures/practices do students believe are critical in the establishment of an environment which promotes student motivation and engagement?
5. According to students, what outside factors contribute most to their success?

For the purpose of this study, the focus was placed primarily on “at-risk” high school students who have an increased likelihood of experiencing educational challenges,

specifically those living in poverty. According to Pallas (1989), underprivileged children are more likely to perform poorly in school and have a greater chance of dropping out than those from higher income households. Therefore, a great sense of urgency exists in understanding what it is that motivates these young people and causes them to persist and work towards high levels of achievement.

Research Design

This study utilized those methods which are associated with a case-study approach to research. Robert K. Yin (1994) defines the case study research method as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23). Ultimately, findings gained through this approach may provide a basis for the application and possible expansion of learned information and ideas.

Role of Researcher

Throughout the study, the researcher assumed the role of an observer, interviewer, recorder, and data analyst. Interview questions were developed using information gathered through a review of the literature. Resulting information was coded from all data sources in terms of which research question it addressed. The final analysis was displayed through the use of a matrix chart which indicates research questions and the resulting themes, categories, and relationships.

The Research Context

This study takes place in one high school within a school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania. It is one of the largest urban school systems of the 499 districts in the

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. A diverse district of close to 18,000 students, the student population represents 43 countries and speaks 26 languages. Twelve percent of the students are considered to have limited English proficiency. The ethnic distribution of the student body of this high school is as follows: Hispanic 57%, White 22%, Black 20%, Asian and Pacific Islander 1%, and Native American & Native Alaskan less than 1%. Approximately 82% of the students are eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch, with the state average at 33% (greatschools.org, 2013). Per pupil expenditure in 2010-2011 was \$5,881, which is the lowest out of 495 school districts in the Commonwealth (Allentown School District, 2011).

In regards to performance on the 2011 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), 59% of all grade 11 students scored at Proficient or Advanced levels in mathematics. 49% of the students scored at Proficient or Advanced levels of performance in reading. The school district is designated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education as a school system in “Corrective Action II” under Adequate Yearly Progress government guidelines. Nine of the twenty schools within this district have achieved 2011 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmarks, as mandated by the *No Child Left Behind* federal legislation and administered through the Pennsylvania Department of Education. None of the secondary schools (middle schools or high schools) attained AYP status (Allentown School District, 2011).

Selection of Participants

The participants involved in this research study consisted of ten grade twelve students. These ten students were randomly chosen from an overall population of 54 students that fit specified criteria including the following: the maintenance of a Grade

Point Average (GPA) that is between a 2.8-3.9 for two consecutive years, a score of Advanced or Proficient on the Grade 11 PSSA, and are of low socio-economic status. These students were the target population for this study due to their continued academic success despite living in adverse economic conditions. Investigation of these students' beliefs and ideas produced profound results which can extend the literature on the topics of student motivation, persistence, and academic success.

Ten students were selected for this study after reviewing current research surrounding an appropriate and adequate sample size for research of this nature. According to research conducted by Baker and Edwards (2013), a small number of cases, or subjects, may be extremely valuable and represent adequate numbers for a research project. This is especially true for studying hidden or hard to access populations such as the target population within this research study. Here, a relatively few students, such as between six and a dozen, may offer insights into such things as those instructional practices and school structures which most impact the motivational levels of high school students.

Research Study Phases

This research study consisted of two distinct phases, the pilot portion and the field portion. It is important to note however, that both the pilot study and field study took place at the same school and utilized the same criteria when selecting students to participate. A chronological listing is provided in the table below to explicate the narrative explanations which follow in the remaining sections of this chapter.

Table 2

Research Phases

Phase	Task	Participants	Data Source	Data
I	Pilot Study	3 students randomly selected by school administration and researcher 2 parents selected based upon willingness to participate	One-on-one interviews held in school conference room 2 parent interviews held in the home/school	Audio Tape/Transcript Notes
II	Field Study	10 students randomly selected by school administration and researcher 5 parents selected based upon willingness to participate	One-on-one interviews held in school conference room 3 parent interviews held in the home/school	Audio Tape/Transcript Notes
III	Field Study	8 students – classes randomly chosen according to student schedules	Individual observations conducted in random classes	Field Notes

Phase 1 – Pilot Study

The pilot study served as a “pre-study” (Woken, 2008), one which was intended to accomplish the following:

1. establish content validity by accessing student feedback as well as obtaining an expert(s) to review the interview questions and the extent to which the questions measure what they intend to measure
2. change, revise, or develop new hypotheses

The pilot study took place at one large urban high school within Northeastern Pennsylvania. Three grade 12 students (one female and two males) and two parents (one female, one male) were asked to participate in this pilot study.

Students were selected (using the specified criteria) by the administration at the school as well as the principal researcher. This pilot study assessed the clarity of instructions, administrative procedures, and terminology and content associated with the interview questions. The invitation to participate was explained in a face-to-face format. The principal researcher explained the purpose of the study, the possible impact that the findings could make on future students, as well as indicated that participation in this research study was voluntary.

Pilot study – Informed consents. Prior to beginning the pilot study, the principal researcher provided the superintendent of the school district as well as the high school principal with informed consent forms. Once approved, the principal researcher provided the selected students and parents with informed consent forms. Parents of selected students were contacted via phone and then sent the informed consent forms via U.S. Mail. Once returned, similar consent forms were explained to the students and given to them at the conclusion of the face-to-face initial meeting. Each participant was asked to sign two individual consent forms (1 copy for the principal researcher; 1 copy for the participant). By signing the form, the participant indicated his/her agreement to participate in the pilot study (see Appendices A and B).

Three students (fitting the pre-determined criteria) and two parents were invited to participate in the pilot study. A face-to-face format was utilized. The principal researcher

explained the purpose of the study, the possible impact that the findings could make on future students, as well as indicated that participation in the study was voluntary.

Pilot study – Permissions and authorizations. The principal researcher sought IRB approval from both East Stroudsburg University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The principal researcher also secured authorization from the school district superintendent and building principal in order to conduct research within their organization. Once approved, the principal researcher provided a copy of the East Stroudsburg University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania's IRB - approved, stamped consent documents to the school district superintendent and high school principal.

Pilot study – Data collection. The student and parent interviews were scheduled at a mutually agreed upon time. All interviews were held in the high school conference room or alternate location of the parent's choosing. Prior to beginning the interview, the researcher and participant reviewed the consent forms, which indicated his/her agreement to participate. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview consisted of various questions relating back to the principal researcher's research questions (see Appendix C).

The pilot study ultimately assisted the researcher in the following:

1. knowing approximately how long each interview would take
2. identifying key questions that needed to be refined in order to increase the quality of the data from the field study. (These changes consisted primarily of the rewording of questions as well as the inclusion of follow-up questions.)

3. identifying the need to take notes in addition to audio-taping throughout the entire interview

Overall, the pilot study served as a critical step in creating a more effective plan for the transcription and understanding of the data gathered.

Phase 2 – Field Study

Upon completion of the pilot study, the researcher and administration of the research site (high school), using the Sapphire Student Data System, identified those students who fit the aforementioned study criteria (54 total students). Through a simple random sampling technique, the names of the 54 individuals meeting the criteria were placed on two separate lists (separating males from females). The list of names were then cut and placed individually into a box. A balance of five females and five males were selected using this random sampling technique (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2009). The ten individuals selected were contacted in a face-to-face format and were then invited to participate in the research study. Similar to the pilot study, the principal researcher explained the purpose of the study, the possible impact that the findings could make on future students, as well as indicated that participation was voluntary.

If any individual student were to decline participation at that time, then the principal researcher would have selected another student name (of the same gender) from the respective box. The interview sessions were conducted in a private conference room in a one-on-one, face-to-face format. The length of the sessions lasted approximately 30-45 minutes per interview.

The study involved high school participants and therefore required prior approval from the Institutional Review Board. Initially, permission requests to participate in the study were acquired through the Superintendent's office and the building principal (Appendix C). Forms, including an invitation and permission to participate in the study, were provided to all participants and parents (Appendices A, B, and E). Participants received a letter of explanation and were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Field study – Informed consents. Prior to beginning the field study, the principal researcher provided the superintendent of the school district, as well as the high school principal, with informed consent forms. Once approved, the principal researcher provided the selected students and parents with informed consent forms. These forms were distributed following a face-to-face explanatory meeting with the students. Each participant was asked to sign two individual consent forms (1 copy for the principal researcher; 1 for the participant). By signing the form, the participant indicated his/her agreement to participate in the field study (see Consent Forms).

Ten students (fitting the pre-determined criteria) and their parent/guardian(s) were invited to participate in the field study. A face-to-face, one-on-one interview format was utilized. The principal researcher explained the purpose of the study, the possible impact that the findings could make on future students, as well as indicated that their participation in the study was voluntary.

Field study – Permissions and authorizations. The principal researcher sought IRB approval from both East Stroudsburg University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The principal researcher also secured authorization from the school district superintendent and building principal in order to conduct research within their organization. Once approved, the principal researcher provided a copy of the East Stroudsburg University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania's IRB - approved, stamped consent documents to the school district superintendent and high school principal.

Field study – Data collection.

Student interviews. A series of student interviews were conducted throughout this research study. These in-person, question and answer sessions were the basis for the findings of the study. The interview questions were linked to the research questions and were based upon the theories and research studies surrounding the topics of student motivation and persistence. The interview questions often led to follow-up questions which were found to be critical in acquiring a deeper understanding of the research. The interviews were followed by an observation of eight out of the ten students. (These observations occurred within one month of the student interview.)

The one-on-one student interviews were scheduled at a mutually agreed upon time and were held in the high school conference room. Prior to beginning the interview portion of the study, the researcher held a small group meeting with all of the student participants. At this time, the research study was explained and the potential participants had opportunities to ask questions. During this meeting, the researcher relayed how

important their involvement was and how significant their thoughts and ideas were to the findings of the study.

Prior to beginning the actual interview, the researcher and participant reviewed the consent forms, which indicated his/her agreement to participate. The interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview consisted of various questions relating back to the principal researcher's research questions (see Appendix F). The principal researcher asked follow-up questions when appropriate or when clarification was necessary.

A combination of structured and unstructured interview questions was utilized throughout the research study. Traditionally, structured interviews are done in a face-to-face format utilizing a standard set of questions to obtain data that can be coded. Identical questions are asked of each participant. Conversely, unstructured interviews are typically conducted in a face-to-face format in an effort to get participants to share their stories. The researcher asked open-ended type questions and strived to be sensitive to how participants explained their views, ideas and their overall perspectives of things (McLaughlin, 2003). Several questions resulted in follow-up questions to clarify meanings and expand upon answers that are provided. Audio tapes and written transcripts were used to record all student responses.

Interview guides (Appendices F and G) were developed to provide a consistent framework for the interviews. The student interviews consisted of 16 questions. The first five interview questions (1a-1e) related to the first research question dealing with those educational factors that contribute to student motivation and persistence in their quest for high academic achievement. The next five interview questions (2a-2e) aligned with the

research question surrounding specific teaching strategies that engage and motivate students. Questions 3a-3d were associated with specific teaching behaviors and their relationship to student motivation and persistence. Question 4a dealt specifically with the importance of classroom and school structures that impact student performance. The final question (5a) focused upon any outside factors that were major contributors to a student's desire to remain motivated and to persist in their quest for educational excellence.

Parent interviews. Interviews were also conducted with the parents of the students who were selected as participants within the study. The initial consent form was sent via U.S. mail after an initial phone conversation. Parents either sent the forms back to school with their child or mailed them back to the researcher. The forms were signed (by all ten participants) but only five actually participated in the interview. Interestingly, all parents initially appeared to be very excited to participate (and to have their child participate) in the study. Several attempts were made to reach out to the parents but ultimately, only five agreed to participate in the interview.

Two parent interviews were held in the home and three were held in school. All interviews were held in a face-to-face format and lasted approximately 40 minutes. The interview questions sought to reveal parents' beliefs surrounding their child's academic success, level of motivation, and persistence. Some questions provided general information to the researcher whereas others provided a deeper understanding of the parent's feelings and perceptions of the teachers, classrooms, school, and education overall. Similar to the student questions, the parent interview questions were linked to the research questions. The questions were also constructed based upon the theories and research studies surrounding the topics of student motivation and persistence. The

interview questions often led to follow-up questions which were found to be critical in acquiring a deeper understanding of the research.

The parent interview portion of the study consisted of 13 questions. Questions 1a and 1b related to the first research question concerning key educational factors that impact student motivation and persistence. Interview questions 2a-2d aligned to the second research question which sought to uncover specific teaching and learning practices and behaviors that impact these same elements. Interview questions 3a-3d related to specific teaching behaviors and their impact upon student motivation and engagement in learning. Interview questions 4a and 4b were linked to research question four surrounding school practices that encourage student motivation and persistence. The final interview question aligned with research question five. This section focused upon any additional factors that contribute to student success.

Observations. Classroom observations were utilized throughout the research study. Eight of the ten students were observed in one of their scheduled classes. (Each student agreed to be a part of an observation, but only eight could be held due scheduling constraints.) Classes were chosen based on student feedback as well as their class schedule. The purpose of the observation was discussed with every student at the conclusion of their personal interview. Each observation lasted approximately 40 minutes. Teachers were also notified via email prior to the observation. In this email, teachers were given an explanation of the overall research study and how their willingness to allow their student to be observed was greatly appreciated. They were also given the researcher's contact information to discuss any concerns or questions that they may have had.

The observations ultimately assisted the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of what was learned throughout the interviews and were also used to validate the research findings. The Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist developed by the International Center for Leadership in Education, was utilized for all student observations (Jones, 2009). The checklist served as a tool to determine the degree to which students exhibited engaging behaviors, regardless of what was being taught. The section of the checklist that was utilized included only the direct observation portion of the checklist. This portion was based on direct observation of the students and included the following criteria: positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, student confidence, and fun and excitement. While the checklist was originally intended to be utilized primarily by administrators and instructional supervisors, it directly aligned to the research questions that were asked throughout this study.

Detailed field notes were gathered and recorded during the course of study. Specific attention was placed on students' behaviors and levels of motivation in response to teacher methods and practices. Teacher and student interactions and relationships were a primary focus as well. Ultimately, the data gained from the observations served to validate the information that was provided during the interviews. Much of what the students (and parents) said about themselves and their children in regards to teaching and learning was witnessed throughout the observations.

Coding of the Data

Ultimately, all interview responses and observational data were coded and placed into thematic categories. According to the Center for Qualitative Data Analysis, "coding" is an interpretive technique that organizes the data and provides a means to

introduce the interpretations of that data into certain quantitative methods. Most coding requires the researcher to analyze the data and identify segments or elements within it. The segment or element is labeled with a "code" – usually a word or short phrase that suggests how the associated data segments aligned with the research questions. When coding is complete, the researcher summarizes the prevalence of codes, and determines any patterns across the resulting data (2010).

The data resulting from both the interviews and observations within this study were ultimately categorized according to the research question and theory that they related to. Table 3, listed below, provides a visual representation of the above-mentioned information:

Table 3

Student and Parent Interviews

Related Research Question	Student Interview Question (s)	Parent Interview Question (s)	Related Research Theory	Student Observations**
Research Question 1: What educational factors do successful, high poverty, urban high school students perceive to be the most important in contributing to their persistence and motivation in achieving high academic success?	<p><i>1a. Describe what you have done throughout high school that has resulted in academic success.</i></p> <p><i>1b. Describe techniques you use to solve a very difficult problem or task.</i></p> <p><i>1c. Describe a time when you received praise or positive encouragement when you worked hard. Is this an important part of your willingness to persist? Explain...</i></p> <p><i>1d. Did you ever consider quitting</i></p>	<p><i>1a. Describe why you believe your child has been so successful in school.</i></p> <p><i>1b. Did your child ever consider quitting school when he/she was in 10th or 11th grade? Why or why not?</i></p>	<p>Resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support • respect/caring • involvement • expectations <p>Self-Efficacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • past experiences • encouragement • feedback <p>Self-Determination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • competence • autonomy • relatedness 	<p>Consistent Focus</p> <p>Participation in Activities</p> <p>Student Confidence</p> <p>Interest Enthusiasm</p>

Related Research Question	Student Interview Question (s)	Parent Interview Question (s)	Related Research Theory	Student Observations**
	<p><i>school when you were in 10th or 11th grade? Why or why not?</i></p> <p><i>1e. If you could identify other factors that contribute most to your school success, what would they be? Who or what helped you to persist?</i></p>			
<p>Research Question 2: What strategies (instructional – the way teachers teach; learning – the way students learn) are most effective for high poverty, urban high school students in achieving and maintaining academic proficiency?</p>	<p><i>2a. How do teachers adjust what they do in class to how you like to learn part (focus on specific learning style, interests)?</i></p> <p><i>2b. Describe your daily routine for completing homework assignments.</i></p> <p><i>2c. Describe your routine for completing long term assignments such as research papers.</i></p> <p><i>2d. Does the way in which your teachers teach have a direct impact on your desire to learn? Explain your answer...</i></p> <p><i>2e. Describe the types of assignments that motivate you.</i></p>	<p><i>2a. Describe your beliefs about education</i></p> <p><i>2b. Describe your child's beliefs about education.</i></p> <p><i>2c. Describe an event that made you realize that your child was very bright.</i></p> <p><i>2d. Describe how your child learns best. Do you think the teachers know this about your child?</i></p>	<p>Resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cooperative learning experiences • active participation • high expectations • challenging work <p>Self-Efficacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positive experiences • coaching • feedback <p>Self-Determination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • challenging/yet attainable goals • feedback 	<p>Involvement in cooperative learning activities</p> <p>Active overall participation</p> <p>Asking and answering of questions</p>
<p>Research Question 3: What behaviors do teachers exhibit that engage and motivate students?</p>	<p><i>3a. Describe an exceptional teacher that you have had. Describe techniques that they used that made them exceptional.</i></p>	<p><i>3a. Describe an exceptional teacher that your child has had. Describe what you believe made them exceptional.</i></p>	<p>Resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support • respect • care • encouragement • expectations 	<p>Positive interactions</p> <p>Asking and answering of questions</p>

Related Research Question	Student Interview Question (s)	Parent Interview Question (s)	Related Research Theory	Student Observations**
	<p>3b. How do teachers encourage you to share your thoughts, ideas, and questions? Is this important to you? Why or why not?</p> <p>3c. Describe what teachers do to make school interesting.</p> <p>3d. Describe things that teachers should do to motivate student learning.</p>	<p>3b. Do your child's teachers communicate with you? How and how often? Is this important to you? Why or why not?</p> <p>3c. Describe what teachers do to make school interesting for your child.</p> <p>3d. Describe things that you believe teachers should do to motivate student in their learning.</p>	<p>Self-Efficacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positive climate • individual praise • constructive feedback • coaching • involvement in challenging yet attainable activities <p>Self-Determination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatedness (Interactions with others) • Competence • Autonomy 	<p>Positive responses to feedback that is given</p> <p>Self-initiation of tasks</p> <p>Excitement for learning</p>
<p>Research Question 4: What classroom and school structures/practices are critical in the establishment of an environment which promotes student motivation and engagement?</p>	<p>4a. Describe the single most important thing that people (teachers, parents, administrators) can do to motivate you in your learning and cause you to work hard.</p>	<p>4a. Describe your expectations of your child's teacher and school overall.</p> <p>4b. Describe the single most important thing that teachers can do to motivate your child in their learning and cause them to work hard.</p>	<p>Resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supportive environment • encouraged to engage in risk-taking • respectful environment <p>Self-Efficacy</p> <p>Self-Determination</p>	<p>Respectful Interactions</p> <p>Engagement in learning activities</p>
<p>Research Question 5: What outside factors contribute to the success of these students?</p>	<p>5a. Describe the person or persons who are responsible for your success in school.</p>	<p>5a. Describe the person or persons who are responsible for your child's success in school.</p>	<p>Resilience</p> <p>Self-Efficacy</p> <p>Self-Determination</p>	<p>Communication between home/school</p> <p>Involvement in outside activities</p>

****Key behaviors that are linked to student motivation and persistence**

According to Guion, Diehl, and McDonald (2012), triangulation of data is a method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies by analyzing a research question from multiple perspectives. Ultimately, the triangulation of

data shown above utilized different sources of information (student interviews, parent interviews, field notes, and observations) to increase the validity of this study.

Limitations

This qualitative research study included a specific population within one urban high school and therefore may include findings that may not be representative of a different school population. However, this study revealed rich data stemming from the often hidden voices of students and parents. Therefore, it is this researcher's belief that the reader is able to generalize the resulting information to one's own context and life situation.

Additionally, this school is very large in that it houses over three thousand students in grades nine through twelve. The size, in itself, may cause unique circumstances for the students who attend. For example, one student mentioned that she had never even met her guidance counselor until mid-way through her senior year. The fact that over three thousand students attend this school may make it nearly impossible for the guidance counselors to meet consistently with each individual student and therefore, may present students with distinctive circumstances.

The ethnic distribution of the student body of this high school, as previously stated, is quite diverse. Approximately 82% of the students are eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch, with the state average at 33% (greatschools.org, 2013). A study seeking student input from a school which possesses a different ethnic and socio-economic breakdown may yield different results. Also, the population of students who were included in this study included the most academically successful population in this

school. The findings may be different if the voice of underachieving students were included.

Identifiable information (accessed from the schools' student information system) was used for the purposes of the study. There was, therefore, the potential for a breach of confidentiality. Additionally, participants were asked to engage in personal interview questions. These questions, at times, required the participants to engage in personal discussions. The principal researcher reiterated the fact that respondents could cease participation at any time throughout the interviews. This researcher however, did not anticipate the risks associated with answering these questions to be greater than any risks encountered on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, threats to the validity were possible if the responses did not reflect a true random sampling of the selected school population.

Trustworthiness/Credibility of Findings

Researcher bias was certainly a consideration throughout the research study. Having worked in this school district for ten years, the researcher continuously reflected upon the potential for bias during the interviews as well as throughout the analyzing and coding of the responses. Awareness of such potential bias greatly heightened the researcher's sensitivity to this possibility.

At the same time, this researcher believes that due to the strong experience and knowledge that she had of the target population, a strong rapport and trust was established among all participants. This enabled the researcher to dive deeply into the thoughts, opinions, and ideas of all participants. The relationships that were established throughout this study far exceeded any risk of potential bias on the part of the researcher.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the research methods which were selected and utilized throughout the entirety of this study. Specifically, it presented the research problem and questions, the research design, the role of the researcher, and the research context. It continued with a discussion of the selection of participants, and a description of the instrumentation and data collection. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the trustworthiness and credibility of findings. Chapter Four follows this section and will provide a deep analysis of the data, discussion of the interviews and observations, as well as a description of emerging themes

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that promote motivation and persistence among successful, high poverty, urban high school students. More specifically, the true intent was to give students (and parents) a voice into what they believe are the most critical elements within a student's educational experience.

The interview questions evolved through an investigation of the literature surrounding elements that have a clear connection to and impact upon a student's level of engagement, motivation, and desire to persist. Through this quest for information, several theories seemed particularly appropriate regarding the topics of student persistence and motivation.

Study Findings and Their Link to Existing Research

The basis for this study stemmed from existing research surrounding the topics of student motivation and persistence. Crucial elements linked to these topics involve a student's level of resilience which is often directly impacted by students' feelings of self-determination and self-efficacy. The responses given by both the student and parent participants throughout this study validated much of what has previously been found regarding these topics.

Researchers have argued that children who possess high degrees of resilience are often the students who are more successful in school and in their future lives. Children who develop and maintain a positive stance toward life are often surrounded by people who have high expectations for them, offer purposeful and positive support to them, and truly value them as unique individuals (Krovetz, 1999).

Self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2000) is one factor that has been shown to foster higher levels of resilience in students. Primarily, self-determination relates to the psychological needs that children require in order to be motivated in their quest towards success in school and in their lives. Paramount to this quality is a child's level of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. These topics were referred to multiple times across all participants' interviews. Students collectively believed that teachers especially, have a unique and powerful role when it comes to their attainment of the aforementioned qualities. It is within their classroom walls where teachers and students can build trusting relationships, promote a risk-taking environment created through mutual respect, and foster an atmosphere of engaging teaching and learning opportunities. According to Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch (1994):

It appears that for adolescents, a sense of emotional security with teachers and utilization of teachers as emotional and school supports is associated with greater sense of self-control, autonomy, and engagement in school. In this sense, schooling is an interpersonal as well as a cognitive enterprise. And, more specifically, the real-world importance of students' underlying beliefs that teachers represent sources of interpersonal support. (p. 244)

Bandura's Theory of Self-Efficacy (1977) is a second factor that impacts a student's level of resilience. Self-efficacy proposes a solid connection to motivation and is therefore a strong predictor of a student's academic success as well. A student's level of self-efficacy has much to do with his/her belief in their ability and capacity to succeed. As displayed through the student and parent interviews, a "believe in yourself mentality" often comes through a strong support system at home. Consistent encouragement from

parents and other family members appears to be a dominant factor present within this study. Interestingly, all participants believed that a support system present at school was equally important (to that of one at home). It is the job of educators therefore, to realize and act upon this unique opportunity to positively impact and alter a child's life.

School systems therefore, have a critical role in the establishment of children who possess such high levels of resilience. Administrators, teachers, and staff must focus upon the creation of a strong support system across their years within the educational system. This must include the establishment and clear communication of challenging yet realistic goals, a clear focus upon active student participation and decision-making, and an environment which promotes risk-taking and trust.

This study has validated much of the research surrounding the topics of student motivation and persistence in working towards high levels of achievement in schools. Prior research has indicated that teachers must work diligently to foster student-teacher relationships, include hands-on activities, promote choice and student autonomy, make learning interesting by tapping into student interests, make personal connections, mutually identify student goals and plans for the future, address specific learning styles, and establish high expectations coupled with helping students to succeed. Ultimately, research has indicated that students who perceive high levels of teacher support adopt more positive motivational patterns than those perceiving low levels of teacher support. Such data emphasizes the importance of students engaging in supportive relationships with teachers to maximize positive motivational patterns (Muir, 2000; Mansfield, 2001).

Throughout this chapter, the findings of this study are presented and the analysis of data is provided. Information was ascertained through an initial pilot study consisting of interviews and observations. Three grade 12 students, two males and one female, and

two parents participated in this portion of the study. This pilot study served to establish content validity by accessing student feedback as to the extent to which the interview questions measured what they intended to measure. The field study consisted of a series of face-to-face interviews with ten students (five males and five females) and members of their families, as well as classroom observations. Field notes were compiled in order to document participants' perceptions and attitudes regarding self-motivation and persistence.

Throughout the study, the researcher assumed the role of an observer, interviewer recorder, and data analyst. Interview questions were developed using information gathered through a review of the literature and were slightly revised following the pilot portion of the study. Question revisions occurred after finding that several questions were repetitive in nature and others needed follow-up portions. Observations focused on the behaviors of students including levels of participation, focus, confidence, questioning, overall engagement, and body language.

Parent and student responses to interview questions were analyzed and coded according to the research question to which it was linked (coding occurred after reading the transcription notes and listening to the audio recorded interview sessions multiple times). Resulting data were triangulated from all data sources (interviews, field notes, and observations) in terms of which research question it addressed. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this triangulation of data uncovered a greater depth of meaning and ultimately validated the findings. The final analysis is displayed through the use of a matrix chart which indicates research questions and the resulting themes, categories, and relationships.

Descriptive Characteristics of the Interview Participants

The criteria for selecting students to participate in the study were based on the following characteristics:

1. Proficient or advanced scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) in the areas of reading and mathematics during their eleventh grade year
2. Low socio-economic status (qualifies for free and reduced lunch)
3. Maintained a grade point average (GPA) of 2.8-3.9 within their tenth and eleventh grade years

Using an electronic student information system (Sapphire), the researcher and administration identified students who fit the aforementioned criteria. From that population, ten twelfth grade students were selected, with a five to five ratio of males to females. A simple random sampling technique (Businessdictionary.com) was used to select the 10 individuals interviewed.

Demographic information for each individual is shown in Table 4. This table also lists the student's Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA), Proficiency Level on the Grade 11 PSSA, and the Socio-economic classification based on whether the student received free or reduced lunch. The participants are identified using the numerical identification code assigned to them at the selection phase of the study. The numerical code assigned to each of the participants is used to identify that individual when discussing the research findings for the remainder of the study.

Table 4

Student Participants

ID	Gender	GPA	PSSA Level (Math/Rdg.)	SES
Student Participant 1	M	3.29	Adv./Adv.	Reduced
Student Participant 2	F	3.53	Pro./Pro.	Free
Student Participant 3	F	2.85	Pro./Pro.	Free
Student Participant 4	M	2.99	Pro./Adv.	Free
Student Participant 5	F	3.72	Adv./Adv.	Free
Student Participant 6	F	3.41	Pro./Pro.	Free
Student Participant 7	M	3.85	Adv./Pro.	Free
Student Participant 8	M	3.66	Pro./Pro.	Reduced
Student Participant 9	F	3.90	Pro./Pro.	Free
Student Participant 10	M	3.62	Adv./Pro.	Free

Note. ID = Student Participant. GPA = Grade Point Average (cumulative average across freshman through senior year, marking period one). PSSA Level – Proficient or Advanced on the grade 11 PSSA for the subjects of math and reading. SES = Socio-economic Status – indicates if the student qualified for free or reduced lunch.

Analysis of Student Interview Questions

The following information summarizes the responses to each of the five questions as they relate to the educational factors that are associated with students' persistence and motivation in achieving high academic success.

Student Interview Summary of Research Question 1: Educational Factors that Contribute to Student Motivation and Persistence

In this portion of the interview, participants were asked to reflect upon personal characteristics that they believe have enabled them to be successful in school. They were also asked about the people or things that they believed were instrumental in their educational success. According to Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (2000), Bandura's Theory of Self-Efficacy (1977), and multiple theories regarding the topic of resilience, students who possess intrinsic motivation and high levels of self-efficacy and resilience are more likely to persist in their education and perform at higher levels of achievement than those who do not. It was essential therefore, to ask students key questions that focused on these personal characteristics.

Research Question 1

What educational factors do high poverty, urban high school students perceive to be the most important in contributing to their persistence and motivation in achieving high academic success?

Interview Questions Related to Research Question 1 (1a-1e)

(1a.) Describe what you have done through high school that has resulted in academic success.

The first student participant in this study believed that in order to be a successful student, one cannot get “stressed out” and worry about things that he or she must complete. Four students (2, 3, 4, and 6) echoed this belief and stated that it is important for students to stay focused and not “lose themselves” (participant 2) as many students seem to do at her school. Additionally, participant 4 mentioned that his initial course placements were not challenging enough for him and he “knew he was capable of so much more.” This, he believed, demonstrated how important focus and determination were for him.

Three students (5, 7, and 9) mentioned the importance of their decision to hang out and get involved with the “better crowd” at school. While all three students mentioned that they had different types of friends, they stressed the positive impact that the “good ones” had on them. Students 3 and 6 believed in the importance of working hard and getting involved in things that the school has to offer as well as in outside activities. Surprisingly, these were the only students that mentioned involvement in outside activities as contributors to their success. Additionally, students 7 and 8 mentioned the importance of being active participants in the classroom and participants 9 and 10 both stated that they have worked hard and have maintained a positive attitude throughout their years in high school.

Four out of ten students interviewed stated that they were very competitive and strived to take challenging (AP) classes. Out of these four students, two stated that a lot of pressure existed. When asked from where the pressure stemmed, both said it came mainly from the teachers.

Four students (1, 3, 4, and 8) mentioned that their success came mainly from their deep desire to work hard and be successful. All of these students mentioned a parent that [they] had that experienced a great deal of hardship throughout their life. These hardships arose mainly due to the choices they made when they were young. Student participant 4 expressed it in this way:

My dad was a very intelligent student but made some poor choices while still in high school. It was those choices that determined the direction he went in life. He never had the big opportunities but he made sure to show me the right ways...the ways that he never chose. (January 3, 2013)

Student participant 8 echoed this by saying:

I want an easy going life and I want to get my education. My mom was a single (mom) with five kids. She has always told me to go for a better life and to keep on going because she knows I will get there and believes that I can do it. (January 3, 2013)

(1b.) Describe techniques you use to solve a very difficult problem or task.

The first two student participants (1 and 2) explained that they solve difficult tasks by slowing down, analyzing what they are asked to do, and by taking it step by step. Student participants 3 and 4 noted the importance of taking notes and asking a teacher for help when necessary. The fifth student also focused on the importance of paying attention in class.

Student participants 6, 7, and 9 explained that they are often seeking ways to “figure things out.” Even when things are extremely difficult, student 7 admits that he searches for a way to understand the task. Student participants 8 and 10 described their

need to conduct their own research and approach tasks independently rather than asking others for help. Generally these students had a collective understanding of the need to look at the task at hand, clarify any confusion that existed, and take a step-by-step approach to work until completion.

Four out of the ten students (2, 6, 8, and 9) said in one way or another that they were not afraid to ask others for help. Whether it is teachers, peers, or family members, they believed that this is a crucial thing to do if they did not understand something.

Student participant 8 explained it in this way:

I look for help. I don't need to do it on my own if I don't understand. It is important to look for help through teachers, other students, or other individuals that are knowledgeable in that area. The AP classes present me with difficult material. These classes are extremely difficult and sometimes the only way that I get through it is through my teachers and class partners. (January 3, 2013)

In summary, the answers to this question were divided. Four out of ten students said that they often seek help when necessary whereas six students, in some way or another, figure it out on their own.

(1c.) Describe a time when you received praise or positive encouragement when you worked hard. Is this an important part of your willingness to persist? Explain...

The first student participant explained that students often receive more praise from their peers than from their teachers. He believed that if kids received more encouragement and praise from their teachers, they would want to work harder. He also believed that if students are really motivated and/or like the subject area, then one doesn't need a whole lot of motivation and support from teachers. However, if it's something that

is difficult or non-interesting, then it is crucial that they receive support and encouragement from teachers. This participant captured his feeling through his final statement: “If they don’t care...why should we?”

Student participant 2 explained that she receives praise and encouragement from her parents. She said that they both had a difficult life and want more for her. Student 3 stated that she has several “cool” teachers that encourage her to work hard. She stated that she receives tangible rewards like certificates in addition to verbal praise and encouragement. She admitted to the enjoyment that she feels when she receives those things from her teachers, however she did state that she believed that she would be successful even if she didn’t receive it. “It’s just who I am...”

Student 4 expressed that he receives encouragement from his brother who is a contractor. “He had to work hard to be successful and he is an example to me now.” This student believed that if he did not have his brother, he would not be as successful. He believes that “when you have someone who believes in, you want to do better.”

Student participant 5 said that she usually receives encouragement in her art classes. She also receives positive criticism focusing on how to get better at things in that class. She stated that she did well in other classes but did not receive a lot of praise from any of those teachers. She stated it in this way,

I don’t think they have the time to go to every student and tell them that they’re doing well. So, instead, I try to push myself and don’t find that I need a teacher’s approval or praise to do well. It’s just in my nature to look at people and want to do better than them. My parents motivate me to do a lot of things. (January 3, 2013)

Student 6 said that her mom praises her when she makes the honor roll. She stated that she really loves doing well and thinks she likes to make people proud but also want to do well for herself. The seventh participant mentioned that he gets very excited when teachers “notice” that he has worked hard. He doesn’t receive a lot of outward praise, but knows that his teachers are aware of his diligence.

I want to keep going and give 110%. I’m tired of the ‘black people can’t make it’ mentality. Growing up in NY, you’re seen as a ‘gang banger’. That wasn’t me ... I wanted to make something of myself. (January 3, 2013)

Student participant 8 believed that if he didn’t have parents or teachers that gave praise and encouragement, he would not do nearly as well in school:

I would be just another person complaining about not being allowed to wear hats or listen to iPods in school. I would only care about things like hanging out with my friends after school. My family told me that schooling is an important step in life. Without that guidance and guidance from teachers and counselors, I wouldn’t be where I am today. (January 3, 2013)

Student participants 9 and 10 both felt that if students don’t receive praise or positive encouragement in some ways, it is very difficult to do as well in school, but both believed that you can still do it. One participant put it in these words: “If you see that nobody pays attention to you, you may at some point just give up. Some people are very focused on what they want but most people aren’t like that and rely on others for help.”

In summary, eight out of ten students interviewed stated that they believed it would be very difficult to be as successful as they are without some form of praise and positive encouragement from parents, teachers, or another significant adult in their lives.

Interestingly, the two remaining participants believed that they would still be successful students without such encouragement but, at the same time, admitted that they have at least one positive role model/supporter in their lives.

(1d.) Did you ever consider quitting school when you were in 10th or 11th grade? Why or why not? Did anyone ever try to persuade you to give up?

Eight of the ten students interviewed for this study said that they never considered dropping out of high school. Students 1 and 6 admitted that it has crossed their minds at least once mainly due to the work load and difficult material that is often presented in their AP classes. Student 8 stated that one of his friends talked to him about dropping out. This student, however, turned the tables on his friend and tried instead to persuade *him* from dropping out.

Students 3 and 5 mentioned that dropping out was “not an option.” Expectations were set for them by their parents at an early age. Completion of high school has always been expected, and attendance at a college is part of that plan as well.

All ten students believed that their options were greatly limited if they did not complete school.

(1e.) If you could identify other factors that contribute most to your school success, what would they be? Who or what helped you to persist?

Student participant 1 explained that the people that have cared about him most, his girlfriend, friends, parents, and teachers are the ones that have contributed the most to his school success. He went on by saying that the things that they say and do encourage him daily. The second participant believed that she has been very “lucky” because she has had many friends who have helped her to be so successful. She specifically

mentioned those that she studies with, indicating that they all “push each other to do better”.

Participant 3 mentioned that several of her teachers have been contributors of her success. She mentioned that there was one, in particular, that put the responsibility of learning on the kids which, in turn, caused her to want to work harder. She also mentioned that her role as the president of the high school key club requires her to work hard. The fourth participant mentioned that his desire to do well and work hard came from the fact that he saw other students with more difficult classes than he had and saw their level of success. This, he said, motivated him to take more difficult classes and to work harder than he had ever worked before. He also mentioned that several of his “really good teachers made him want to do better.” Student participant 5 mirrored 4’s response when it came to working as hard or harder than grade level peers. This participant wanted to prove that she could surpass her classmates. In her words, “I am just a very ambitious person. I want to do better than everyone else.”

Participant 6 mentioned that her involvement in sports, her sister, and her youth group at church have all been contributors to her success and willingness to persist in her education. Participants 7, 8, and 10 all mentioned that their teachers have been instrumental in their educational successes. Two out of the three used the phrase “connection with teachers” when describing the teacher(s) that made a great impact in their lives. Participant 9 stated that her sister was the key person that contributed most to her success.

Throughout this section of the interview, student participants were asked to think deeply about personal characteristics that they believe have contributed to their success in

school. They were also asked about the people or things that they believed were instrumental to this success. For these students maintaining a clear focus, approaching tasks in a systematic and organized fashion, making connections with teachers, and receiving care, praise and positive encouragement were all instrumental factors in their educational accomplishments. The section that follows specifically relates to teaching practices and strategies and their impact upon student motivation and persistence.

Student Interview Summary of Research Question 2: Teaching and Learning Strategies that Contribute to Student Motivation and Persistence

In this portion of the interview, participants were asked to identify key instructional (teaching and learning) strategies and practices that teachers use to positively impact a student's willingness and desire to learn. Several research studies (Knapp, 1993; Grant, 2008; and Webb, 2008) have indicated that there are several teaching practices that truly motivate students. Student-centered instruction which includes inquiry, problem solving, and individual goal-setting; a focus on both the affective and academic needs of students; and an environment which promotes relationship-building were found to be crucial pieces in students' development of an intrinsic desire to persist. It was essential therefore, to construct interview questions that focused on these elements.

Research Question 2

What strategies are most effective for high poverty, urban, high school students in achieving and maintaining academic proficiency?

Interview Questions Related to Research Question 2 (2a-2e)

(2a) How do teachers adjust what they do in class to how you like to learn part (focus on specific learning style, interests)? Do most of your teachers do this? How often?

Student participant 1 explained that some teachers adjust their teaching to students' needs. He did feel that fewer teachers do this than those who don't adjust their styles. According to him, "most teachers just teach from the book with a monotone voice." Participant 2 said that *she* was the one that typically "adjusted to the way that teachers teach. Most teachers don't seem to care how I like to learn." Students 3 and 4 both explained that they have had a few teachers who have really seemed to care about how the students like to learn. Student 3 gave an example of a teacher that made students get into a circle to take turns throwing a stuffed animal when it was their turn to share their ideas or ask a question. According to this student, "at first it seemed a little weird to the kids, but now everyone loves when we do that."

Student 5 believes that teachers think about themselves more than about the students. She gave the example of how often times one of her teachers uses a power point presentation. According to this student, her teacher "skims through the lesson and doesn't really explain anything. She seems to just want to get through the lesson."

Participant 6 explained that she has had both kinds of teachers.

Some ask for our opinions and input. Some teachers just kind of teach the way they want. It's hard to pay attention in some classes because the kids are not paying attention or they just don't show up. I do love my art class, though. That teacher gives you guidelines but kids have the freedom to make decisions.

Everyone loves that class. (January 3, 2013)

Student participants 7 through 10 felt as though some of their teachers truly care about how the students like to learn while others do not. Participant 8 explained it in this way:

Some are book strict – this is what you have to learn and how. Others seem to take time listen to kids and how they like to learn. These teachers take time to understand what kids are going through. They listen...they treat you like you are their family. (January 3, 2013)

Participant 9 did feel that both types of teachers existed. Although according to her:

Some teachers do and some don't. My algebra class is so messed up the way it's structured...I don't think she even has the time to worry about how we learn. I think it's hard for teachers so I think we have to adjust to them. I just figure stuff out because I know I have to regardless of how they teach. (January 3, 2013)

Participant 10 explained that some of his teachers do give him “choices” when learning new things

(2b) Describe your daily routine for completing homework assignments.

The answers to this interview question varied in regards to the amount of homework that students received on a daily basis. Interestingly, what did not vary, was the ways in which these students went about completing tasks.

Participants 1 and 4 stated that they rarely receive homework and when they do, they finish it in class. Even though participant 1 believes that his caseload is difficult, he believes that his assignments are “relatively easy”. The second and third participant both

said that it depended upon the class, however most classes do not require that they complete homework outside of class.

The fifth participant answered this question by saying: “I am a procrastinator. I know it’s a bad quality and it can get me in trouble. Somehow, I still manage to get things done.” Participants 6 and 7 both explained that they relax when they get home before doing anything related to school work. Once beginning they do the most difficult assignments first. The eighth participant responded similarly, however he stated that instead of doing the most difficult task first, he completed the assignment of greatest importance first. In contrast, participant nine explained that she “does the easiest assignment first so I get it out of the way and so I have time at the end for the hard assignments.” The final participant mentioned that he is often given time to work on assignments in class however, when he does get homework, he does it immediately after school.

(2c) Describe your routine for completing long term assignments such as research papers or graduation projects.)

In relation to the completion of long term assignments, the first participant stated that he creates a schedule and then works hard to “stick to it.” The second and third students believed that organization was a key component in their ability to complete long term assignments and tasks. The fourth participant chuckled when he answered this question. He explained it in this way: “I have definitely bettered my strategy over my high school years. I used to procrastinate but I have realized the importance of taking things step by step.”

Participants 5, 6, and 7, explained that they usually begin researching a topic immediately after it is assigned. They do, however, find themselves working up until the very last minute. Participant 8 explained that he spreads out the work as much as he possibly can. At times, he finds that he procrastinates but always seems to get it done on time. Participant 9 stated that she strategically plans out all tasks when they take a considerate amount of time. She explained that she doesn't like stress on her and therefore, plans out everything. The final participant also mentioned the need to complete long-term projects in "steps." He doesn't like it when he is rushing at the end. He wants to do well so he believes that it is crucial to take your time and plan your task accordingly.

(2d) Does the way in which your teachers teach have a direct impact on your desire to learn? Do you think you would still be so successful even if you felt the teacher was not very good? Explain your answer.

The first student participant felt very strongly that the way teachers teach affects a student's desire to learn. He went on to say that he didn't feel that he would do nearly as well if he couldn't relate to or be motivated by his teacher. The second participant explained it this way: "Some teachers make me want to learn even more. Others just tend to give you information. The classes I like the most are when we get to say what we think and when we get to interact with each other."

The third student participant explained her feelings by saying,

Most of the time, yes, the way they teach is important to me. Sometimes certain teachers use things like video clips, skits, etc. to get kids involved in the lesson. Some though...the way they teach is so boring. They write everything on the

board...it just doesn't get in our heads. I am still successful though (in the boring classes) because I am motivated to make myself successful. (January 3, 2013)

The fourth student truly believed that there is a direct correlation between his teachers and the degree to which he is successful. He clearly stated that the classes [where he connects to teachers] are those in which he is most successful. Participant 5 echoed this response:

Yes...the more a teacher wants to teach, the more I think I want to work hard and make them proud of me. I think I would not be as successful if a teacher wasn't trying. If they're not trying, then why should I? (January 3, 2013)

Participant 6 stated that she does well in the classes when she gets involved. She went on to say that she greatly respects those types of teachers. She admitted that she tended to struggle more in the classes that did not get her involved. Participant 7 admitted that he "prefers teachers that can teach well." He did say that he believed he would still do well even if they were not very good teachers: "my mindset for school is to learn...I'll find a way to figure it out even if the teacher doesn't explain it well."

Student participant 8 gave the following response:

I believe that there are many teachers in the school that have their own way of teaching. The way these teachers teach is easy for some and hard for others...and for those kids, they may completely blow off the class. For me, I am more into the classes that I enjoy and am interested in. The subject may be difficult, but if the teacher works hard to get you interested in it, you may do better. If I didn't have any great teacher, I wouldn't be as stellar as I am now but I would still be a pretty good student. I still have my family to connect with. In order to be a

stellar student, you need persuasion on both sides....family and teachers. It's like a house. If you only have the roof, you have protection from the rain but you will be cold...if you have only the walls, you have some warmth but you don't have the roof to protect you from rain. In order to be completely protected you need both. It's kind of the same thing to have both good teachers and parents. (January 3, 2013)

The ninth participant stated that she would not be as successful if she didn't have at least one good teacher. While she believed she could still do it, she indicated that a great teacher can make all of the difference. The final participant stated it in this way:

I am more interested in learning things when the teacher connects it to our life. I also like some subjects more than others. The key is having someone to build your knowledge and to do it in a fun way. (January 3, 2013)

(2e) Describe the types of assignments that motivate you. Why?

This question, at times, was repetitive in nature. As a result, it may have been covered in a prior interview question. Participants 1 and 2 stated that the assignments that motivate them the most are those that are fun and interesting. Participant 3 answered the question in this way: "I am motivated by the things that come easily for me or things that I am interested in. If it is difficult for me, I try to understand it on my own and then ask the teacher for help." Participant 4 indicated that he greatly enjoyed learning through the use of group projects. He stated that he often learns so much from the kids that he works with.

The fifth participant utilized the word "connection."

I am motivated when something taught is actually connected to the world. So often, you learn things that you will never actually use. This is why kids are not interested or consider dropping out. They just don't see the point. (January 3, 2013)

The seventh participant enjoys when projects and lessons are "creative" in nature.

"Creative assignments get kids really interested. We like it when teachers give us choices in how we figure things out. We like them to think "outside-of-the-box. We like to think analytically."

Participant 9 answered in this way:

We like it when teachers give the kids feedback...go over things. We get homework and we never go over it. When we have group work I guess I like to work by myself instead. I don't like it when I have to do all of the work by myself when we are in groups. Teachers should focus on ways to group the kids but assign tasks so there is accountability for all of the kids. (January 3, 2013)

The final participant mentioned group work as well and stated that when it's done the right way, it can be really motivating. He mentioned how important it is to learn from your classmates as well as being given a choice as to the type of work/learning experiences that are given in the class.

Throughout the second portion of the interview, student participants were asked to identify key instructional (teaching and learning) strategies and practices that teachers use to positively impact a student's willingness and desire to learn. Interestingly, students agreed on the importance of specific methods of teaching (active involvement, positive environment, cooperative learning) but very few of their teachers employed these

methods. Additionally, only a few of these students' teachers adjusted their teaching to how students like to learn or to how they learn best. However, the few that did were described as being exceptional by their students.

Summary of Research Question 3: *Teacher Behaviors that Impact Student Motivation and Persistence*

In this segment of the interview, participants were asked to identify teaching behaviors that impact students' motivation and persistence. Several research studies have indicated that there are clear behaviors that teachers can exhibit that have a direct correlation to these topics. Curwin, (2010), found that those teachers who possess a "believe in them" mentality, a genuine care and concern for students, as well as a commitment to never give up on students are the types of teachers that can really reach kids. Similarly, Larkins and Strathy (2007), demonstrate in their research that teachers who hold high expectations for students, encourage students with praise and encouragement, find ways to connect to students' lives, and provide real-life experiences for students are the teachers that directly motivate students in their learning. Finally, Malouff et al., (2008), conducted research that confirmed the aforementioned information. Teachers that make content relevant for students, form positive relationships with them, reward their achievement, engage them, and provide them with continued encouragement are successful in their efforts to get students involved in and excited about learning. It seemed crucial, therefore, to construct interview questions and explore participants' feelings regarding topics that focused on specific behaviors of teachers.

Research Question 3

What behaviors do teachers exhibit that engage and motivate students?

Interview Questions Related to Research Question 3 (3a-3d)

(3a) Describe an exceptional teacher that you have had. Describe techniques that they used that made them exceptional.

The first student participant indicated that students enjoy when teachers get involved with the kids. This is apparent when they try hard to make class interesting, joke around with them, and really show that they care about them. The second student could not think of an exceptional teacher that she had throughout her high school career. The third student stated that the teachers who “make learning fun” by incorporating real-life information, video clips, and explanations rather than notes into his/her teaching are the best teachers. She also stated the following: “Kids really know those teachers who are committed to their jobs and those who are not. Teachers don’t think we know this but we really do. Usually if they want to be there, so do we.”

Participant 4 stated that teachers who incorporate humor into their teaching are the exceptional ones. Participant 5 believed that “great teachers push everyone, but do so in a positive way. They also tell kids real-life stories that show that teachers have been in their shoes.” This student also mentioned that there is very little “down-time” in those classes. The expectation is that students begin working as soon as they enter the classroom. Participant 6 explained that the best teachers got the students involved in the class lessons. She had a teacher like this who had students create posters and engage in hands-on activities. The students always had to *produce* something. They didn’t just sit in class and listen to the teacher talk. This student also mentioned that students often worked together in small groups to discuss course information.

Participant 8 stated that teachers who possess a positive outlook are the best ones. He gave this analogy:

It could be a really horrible, snowy day and none of the teachers or students want to be in school. I have a teacher who walks into school on a day like this and is the only one who's happy. She makes the kids happy too, just by her attitude. And ... the way she teaches ... well ... she takes the time to really explain things to you even if you're the only one who doesn't get it. She'll continue to take her own time to explain until she knows you get it. She even changes the way of explaining it until she knows you've got it. (January 3, 2013)

Participant 9 stated this:

The good teachers care, that's it. The kids know who they are. They don't just give you the work and say do this, do that. They make sure that you know what you're doing. They also give you everything you need to be successful. (January 3, 2013)

The final student's thoughts mirrored a few others' beliefs regarding this question. He stated that the best teachers are those that get excited about learning. He believed that these teachers "love teaching and love working with the kids. Teachers should be happy and excited about being at school. If they're excited, then I'm excited. Great teachers also share their personal experiences including times that they have failed."

(3b) How do teachers encourage you to share your thoughts, ideas, and questions? Is this important to you? Why or why not?

Interestingly, all ten student participants believed that it was very important that teachers seek input from the students. The answers varied however, when it came to the

number of teachers that actually do this. Four out of ten students said that they have teachers that make it a point to ask for student questions and input. The first student referred to this type of teacher as one that “actually talks to us and doesn’t just tell us everything she wants us to know.” Student participant 2 mentioned that

when a teacher does ask us for our thoughts and opinions, that teacher makes it a lot easier to participate in class. You’re not afraid of looking dumb in the class. It has so much to do with the environment that is in the class. (January 3, 2013)

Of the students who did not have some or even one teacher that sought student input and participation, Student participant 5 stated:

Most teachers don’t do this is my experience in high school. Most kids however, wouldn’t take advantage of this because they don’t want to look dumb. Many teachers think the kids always understand and are prepared - especially in the higher-level classes. So we, more than any of the kids, are afraid to ask questions and share our opinions. (January 3, 2013)

Student participant 8 mentioned that he felt confident asking questions when it is with a teacher that he has established a good relationship. He explained that he is typically a pretty “open kid” but when he is in a room where he isn’t as highly regarded, he doesn’t often participate.

This same student stated the following and seemed to summarize many of the other participants’ feelings:

I believe that everyone needs to be able to share their opinions and questions or they won’t be able to learn or comprehend as well. AP Government is filled with really smart kids. I went from being the smartest kid in my other classes to an

average or lower average student in this one. I was really nervous and worried that if I asked questions or shared my opinions, I would be laughed at. I would often wait until the end of class. But then, my teacher began to ask me to share my questions during class so that others could hear them as well. I was told that they were great questions and that they were important for the others to hear. I then realized that we were all thinking the same thing. We were all afraid to ask. I didn't realize this until I had a teacher that encouraged me to share my frustrations and questions. (January 3, 2013)

(3c) Describe what teachers do to make school interesting.

(3d) Describe things that teachers should do to motivate student learning.

The last two questions within the segment of teaching behaviors were either combined by students or one or the other was skipped because it became redundant in nature. Therefore, in reporting the findings, the answers to these questions will be combined.

The first student participant mentioned the importance of teachers making learning fun in order for students to truly be motivated to learn specific content. The second participant focused upon the fact that teachers truly need to make their teaching "personal." "They shouldn't just teach us, they need to interact with us." A third student mentioned the importance of incorporating projects and fun activities.

Just because we're older kids doesn't mean that we don't like to have fun. Also, teachers should tell kids that they can do it, but have to be willing to do it (whatever they're asking us to do) themselves. Most teachers won't do this. (January 3, 2013)

Participants 4 and 5 stated the importance of teachers being “personal” with kids. Student 5 specifically stated it this way:

Try to connect with us in some way. When teachers do this, I want to work harder and do better in their class and I don’t feel as much pressure. Many teachers scold or yell. Some don’t have to do this but still have control of the class. Everyone knows the teachers that respect them. (January 3, 2013)

Student participant 6 stated that it is very simple:

Tell kids that they can do it. Teachers don’t do this enough. Actually show the kids how to do things. The teachers that offer help during or after school are the best ones. Also...I think it’s important to give us praise and rewards. We still love stickers and little gestures that make us feel good about ourselves. (Personal Communication, January 3, 2013)

Participant 7 strongly believed in the importance of motivating students in a positive way:

Criticism has part to do with it (a student’s lack of motivation). If your work isn’t good enough, sometimes a teacher will put you down. We won’t care as much about that class or that teacher. Instead, teachers should build us up and show us how to do something better. (January 3, 2013)

Participant 8 gave an in-depth response to question 3d:

Even though there are a lot of people who want to learn, there are always people who don’t agree with what the teachers and principals are trying to do. Most of that comes from their raising, their family. They don’t have anyone to explain to them how important school is and how it will be in the long run. Parents may not

pay attention to their kids and every day they go home to the same thing. Like sometimes there are families that don't have enough food, so kids come to school and they're focused on how they are going to get their next meal. I have an idea though that even though they don't have the necessary motivation at home...they can get it somewhere else. Every person has one person that they remember that they actually had a connection with. If there is anything that could possibly happen that could change the way the kids think, it could be where the teacher and student spend time bonding with one another ... outside of school. I know it's probably not allowed, but kids would love going over to the teacher's house where they could talk and hang out with them. That way, they actually have a connection with an adult that actually wants them to succeed in life instead of going to a home where no one pays any attention to them whatsoever. (January 3, 2013)

Participant 9 also mentioned that life at home plays a critical part in a student's performance at school:

I think it's half and half. I think that some of the kids are at school just because they have to be, but it is these kids that take time away from the kids that really want to be there. Where does that inner desire to want better come from? In my case, it came from home...seeing my mom struggle. Life at home is huge and will really influence kids' decisions. (January 3, 2013)

In conclusion, teachers' behaviors clearly influence students' beliefs and attitudes regarding school and life-long education. As shown through the student interview

responses within this section, students want to be highly immersed in, engaged, and connected to the tasks in which they are involved.

Summary of Research Question 4: Classroom and School Structures/Practices that Impact Student Motivation and Persistence

Throughout the interviews, participants were asked to identify specific classroom and school structures or practices that directly relate to a student's level of motivation and persistence. Several research studies have indicated that when a school creates a collective vision of success for students and works diligently to create a school-wide structure which promotes such success, students are the greatest beneficiaries (Webb, 2008). The section that follows focuses specifically upon the structural pieces found within school and classrooms that students believe are crucial for their quest toward excellence.

Research Question 4

What classroom and school structures/practices are critical in the establishment of an environment which promotes student motivation and engagement?

Interview Questions Related to Research Question 4 (4a)

4a. Describe the single most important thing that people (teachers, parents, principals) can do to motivate you in your learning and cause you to work hard.

In relation to this question, the first student participant mentioned the importance of “not stressing out the students.” He claimed that it is important to have high expectations but not to have them so high that students feel pressured. The second student stated the importance of providing support to students:

Support us; encourage us; give us advice, don't just teach us. It's ok to tell us when we're doing something wrong but let us learn from our own mistakes. I see teachers as parents – guide us with care. (January 3, 2013)

The third student echoed this response and added that teachers and parents should “set goals with the kids and not for them. They should help us stay focused on our goals.”

Participant 4 stated that it was important for teachers and parents to share their personal successes and failures and how these experiences benefited and helped to shape their lives. He believed that seeing his brother become successful was a true motivation for him. Student 5 knew that the choices she makes now will affect her future: “If I don't keep going in school, I won't do as well as others. Watching my parents struggle made me not want to give up. My focus is on the future.”

The sixth participant stated that it is critical for teachers to keep their students focused. He/she should try to “wrap the class into whatever they're talking about. Make it real-life...something the kids really understand and are interested in.” Participants 7 and 8 both believed that teachers and parents should teach kids the importance of education. Student 7 specifically said that adults should let them know that without an education, their choices are very limited. “Teachers need to be very clear about this because sometimes kids just don't know.” Participant 8 also said the following: “Teach us that we shouldn't be afraid. Challenge us...tell us you want to see us do well. It's like exercise...no one really wants to do it but we will do it if we see the benefit of it.”

The ninth student participant answered this question in this way:

Teachers should make learning fun and if you do something good...provide more encouragement (both tangible and verbal praise). Also, get to know who we are. I

have to say that I never even met my guidance counselor until last year and I'm a senior. I didn't even know who it was until this year. It is important to make connections early on with kids. People need to do a better job at that. How are you going to give me guidance if you don't even know me? I have seen some people that just give you classes without even talking to you. Talk to kids and find out what we want or what we like. There is no point taking a class when you need to do a lot of work and if, at the end, you are not even going to use that information. I can't believe how simple that is but some people just don't get it. (January 3, 2013)

The tenth participant believed that adults should spend a lot more time making connections with kids. He also stated the importance of starting after-school programs because often times kids learn a lot better in small-group situations or when working one-on-one with a teacher. "Personal contact with teachers is important. It makes you feel like you're someone that is important too."

In summary, the students' collective belief is that the role of the teacher should be more than just a teacher or deliverer of curriculum. Teachers, therefore need to provide students with support, encouragement, clear expectations, realistic yet rigorous goals, and consistent feedback. According to the students, teachers make lasting imprints in their lives - both in the present and the future.

Summary of Research Question 5: Outside Factors that Impact Student Motivation and Persistence

In this portion of the interview, participants were asked to identify any additional factors that directly influence a student's level of motivation and persistence. Research

has shown repeatedly that there are many factors that enable children to attain greatness in their lives. Despite hardships, these children have developed a level of resilience which primarily comes from a caring and supportive environment where at least one adult has cared deeply about them (Krovetz, 2008). This theme is echoed in the responses found below.

Research Question 5

What outside factors contribute to the success of these students?

Interview Questions Related to Research Question 5 (5a)

(5a) Describe the person or persons who are responsible for your success in school.

Originally this question was phrased in a way that focused on the person that contributed most to the students' success. While this question was asked of all participants, follow-up portions often led to discovery that these people possessed common traits that were instrumental in the student's achievement of academic and overall success.

The first student mentioned that there is usually one person in their lives that students hope to make proud of them. He believed that this person is often the most important piece of someone's level of success. The second student participant believed that her parents (and the attributes they possessed) were the biggest contributing factors to her success: "My parents are strong people and they have taught me to be hardworking, dedicated, and motivated. Without them, I wouldn't be this way."

The third participant stated that people (whether they're parents, grandparents, teachers, or other adults in kids' lives) are the crucial ones in motivating kids to be successful individuals. She believed it was critical to keep kids focused on their goals and

provide them with opportunities to experience success. Participant 4 stated that his parents and brother served as models for him. He saw his parents struggle to survive and his brother experience high levels of success. He wanted what his brother had and knew he could do the same. The fifth participant also mentioned a parent model:

My mom is the one that encouraged me the most. Ever since I was young she taught me how to read and made learning fun for me. She always motivated me to do things with my best effort at home and I guess it just carried over to school.
(January 3, 2013)

Participant 6 mentioned the importance of making her father proud of her. “He dropped out of college and wanted more for me. I know this and want to give back to him.” Participants 7 and 8 both mentioned family members as well. According to student 7:

My entire family has been the reason for my success. Without them, I definitely wouldn’t be here. I had a tough childhood, but from that I was able to build upon my experiences. I enjoy hanging out with my dad, my aunt, and my mom. I get good criticism from all of them. My teachers are great too. They make me laugh and I make them laugh. We have fun. My family and teachers inspire me to be who I am. (January 3, 2013)

The final participants (9 and 10) both stated that anyone with whom they make connections with inspire them to be their best. They both spoke of how they have been able to form connections with family, friends, and teachers, and therefore has a great level of support in their lives.

It was clear that support from family and school was the single greatest contributor to the students' success. Some students believed that they had support at school whereas others did not. The single factor shared by *all* ten student participants was the fact that *all* they had support from home. Several students believed that this support, when received from both sources, provides students with the greatest likelihood of reaching their utmost potential.

Analysis of Parent Interview Questions

The original intent of this study was to interview at least one parent or guardian of every student participant. After multiple attempts via written and verbal phone contact, five parents agreed to be involved in an interview. Interestingly, all ten parents/guardians signed the consent forms for their child to participate and all but two (initially) indicated that they would like to be interviewed.

The following information summarizes the responses to each of the five research questions as they relate to the educational factors that are associated with the parents' perceptions regarding their child's persistence and motivation in achieving high academic success.

Research Question 1

What educational factors do successful, high poverty, urban high school students perceive to be the most important in contributing to their persistence and motivation in achieving high academic success?

Parent Interview Questions Related to Research Question 1 (1a and 1b)

(1a) Describe why you believe your child has been so successful in school.

Three out of the five parents interviewed used the word “initiative” when describing their child. All five parents indicated in one way or another that their children were hardworking and set high goals for themselves. They all indicated that their children wanted to do well and that, in some ways, it was just “inside of them” to want to do their absolute best. Two parents used the term “focused” when describing their child’s dedication to their academic achievement.

(1b) Did your child ever consider quitting school? Why or why not? (If appropriate, do you think you, as the parent, had anything to do with that decision?)

Four out of five parents interviewed stated that their children had never considered dropping out of school. They believed that they were instrumental in that decision as one parent clearly stated “that was just not an option for my child.” Interestingly, the parent of one of the students that mentioned that he had considered dropping out stated exactly the same thing. She knew that her son had considered this option but stated it in this way:

I am proud of him for choosing the other pathway. I knew my son had friends who were dropping out of school and who were having babies way too early. I knew that he wanted better for himself and I also think he wanted to make his family proud of him. He has seen a lot of struggles in his life and he needs to have better...a lot better. (Parent Participant 4, February 22, 2013)

Research Question 2

What instructional strategies are most effective for high poverty, urban high school students in achieving and maintaining academic proficiency?

Parent Interview Questions Related to Research Question 2 (2a-2d)

(2a) Describe your beliefs about education.

Three out of five parents (participants 1, 3 and 4) interviewed explained that without an education you will not “survive.” They used that term at least twice throughout their interview. The other two parents (2 and 5) agreed that you cannot get very far in life without it but did not utilize the term “survival.” All participants agreed that education is essential and two parents (4 and 5) stated that having educational opportunities is a “privilege.” Interestingly, the children of these two participants echoed this theme throughout their interview as well. They did not use that exact word (privilege), but it was definitely implied throughout the discussion.

(2b) Describe your child’s beliefs about education.

All five parents stated that their children believed the same thing that they did regarding the importance of education. One parent stated it in this way:

We all know that without an education your choices are so limited. Really...you won’t get anywhere in your life if you are not educated. We have taught our son that he needs to do something that will be important and that will impact others. We have told him this since he was a kid. (Parent Participant 4, February 22, 2013)

Another parent mentioned the fact that her son has seen them struggle because neither one of them was college educated and she had dropped out of high school when she was a sophomore. According to this parent, “We were never even sure where our next meal would come from. This impacted him a lot. He can do so much more and he knows this...we know it too.”

(2c) Describe a time or a single event that made you realize that your child was very bright.

The parents answers varied a bit on this question however they all, in some way or another, mentioned that they had always known this. They also stated that other people had often told them their children were bright. It may have been other family members, friends, teachers, etc. The first parent participant phrased it in this way:

Through his educational career, I have always been told that he is bright and has a vivid imagination because of the way that he writes his stories. He has always displayed brightness and motivation for different subjects. It was mainly the teachers that told us this. (February 18, 2013)

The third parent stated the following:

My child was always interested in how things worked and always asked a million questions. She was a curious kid and loved it when she was able to figure things out. So...I guess I've known this since she was a baby. (January 28, 2013)

Parent participants 4 and 5 also acknowledged that they too saw signs of their child being bright when he/she was little.

(2d) Describe how your child learns best. Do you think the teachers know this about your child? (How did you know which teachers knew this about your child?)

The first parent participant was able to clearly describe the way in which her child learned best and then went on to explain her views on whether or not his teachers knew this:

I think he is more hands-on and sometimes maybe visualization is strong for him. Some teachers knew this and others didn't. I knew which ones did by the way he

talked about them (the teachers) and their classes. He doesn't do as well with the textbook-type of teaching. He is better with hands-on stuff. He also seems to do better in the classes that teach like this and in the classes that he likes best.

(February 18, 2013)

Participant 2 gave a quick answer to this question and, even when giving follow-up type questions, she was very limited in what she said. She replied that very few teachers know how her child learns best. In her words, "she seems to do well without them knowing this though. There are some (teachers) that connect with her but many don't. She knows what needs to be done and she is able to figure it out."

The last three parents indicated that some of their children's teachers truly care about how they learn best. They explained that this is one of the reasons that their children have done so well in school. Interestingly, when asked the first interview question surrounding reasons as to why their children have been so successful in school, not one parent mentioned anything about the quality of their children's teachers.

Research Question 3

What behaviors do teachers exhibit that engage and motivate students?

Parent Interview Questions Related to Research Question 3 (3a-3d)

(3a) Describe an exceptional teacher that your child has had. Describe what you believe made them exceptional.

The first parent described her son's theatre teacher as an exceptional teacher. "He is always so involved with the kids. He is real with them and really cares about what they think. My son likes this so much about him. He often talks about him." The second parent indicated that she couldn't think of a specific teacher that was exceptional. She did

mention that her child does best when “she likes the teacher and when the teacher likes her”.

The third parent identified that her child’s art teacher has made a significant impact in her daughter’s life.

She really makes learning fun and interesting for the kids. She is definitely committed to her job because she does anything and everything to make sure they learn and love it while they are learning. (January 28, 2013)

The fourth parent mentioned that her son likes his teachers when they make learning fun.

I can always tell when he (her son) has had a good day in one of his classes. He doesn’t stop talking about what they did in class from the time he comes home until the time he goes to bed (February 22, 2013).

The last parent mentioned that her child has some teachers who really work to make school fun and interesting for the kids. She also stated that, “there are some though, that don’t seem to care that much.” Interestingly, this parent’s comment was almost a complete duplication of her daughter’s answer to a similar question.

(3b) Do your child’s teachers communicate with you? How and how often? Is this important to you?

All five parent participants mentioned that their childrens’ teachers did not communicate with them very much. For the most part however, they did not see this as a negative thing. Rather, they sensed that this was pretty typical and thought that if they did communicate with them it may be more negative than positive. The first parent stated it in this way:

His teachers do not communicate with me too much. It's really not that way in high school unless your kid is doing awful. I did have communication from the theatre teacher that I mentioned. Communication is important to me though whether or not they are doing well. I don't want to be told just about the bad stuff. I like it when I can help push them or when I can be proud of them. (February 18, 2013)

Interestingly, all five parents believed that communication with teachers is very important but the parents did not seem bothered by the fact that they all had very few teachers who actually communicated with them regularly. The fifth parent believed that the teachers in her child's school have way too many other issues to deal with. When asked what issues those were, she explained that "the kids who misbehave take up most of the teachers' time. The good kids just keep plugging away and the bad kids are the ones that get all of the attention." The parent did not blame the teachers for this; she just believed that this is how it is in their school. "The good kids just adapt."

(3c) Describe what teachers do to make school interesting for your child.

The first parent participant explained that some of her son's teachers work hard to find ways to make school interesting.

In some classes teachers actually reenact events...things that really happened so that kids get a real-life look into how things came to be. These classes are exciting for kids. They don't just sit and listen to a teacher talk for an hour but actually get involved in learning. (February 18, 2013)

The second parent participant echoed this response saying how important it is to get kids excited about learning: "very few teachers seem to have time to really connect with

kids. They should work to develop a personal relationship with each student that they have.”

The third parent believed that the teachers did work hard to get to know the students. She stated that they did this through breaking away from the “standard way of teaching” and focused more on having fun with the kids. The fourth parent also mentioned the impact that a “stand and deliver” type method of teaching has on students. “The kids don’t benefit from listening to a teacher talk at them all of the time. Some actually tell stories and really know how to connect with the kids. These are the teachers that the kids love and respect.”

According to parent participant 5:

Yelling at kids is what really turns them off. They know the teachers that respect them. That’s all you need to do as a teachers. If you care about and respect my kid, she’ll love you for life. (February 22, 2013)

(3d) Describe things that you believe teachers should do to motivate student learning.

This question, in most of the interviews, ended up repeating much of what was asked and discussed in the previous question. The parent that did not elaborate extensively in question 3c provided a unique response to this question.

All a teacher has to do, in my opinion, is let the kids know that they are important and they can do it. The teachers that actually learn alongside of the kids are the ones that the kids love to have as a teacher. Some teachers actually stay after school to work with the kids. One would think that kids would just take off and not want to do this. It’s actually the opposite. Kids love the teachers who spend

this extra time with them. These are the teachers that make them *want* to work harder. (Parent Participant Three, January 28, 2013)

Research Question 4

What classroom and school structures/practices are critical in the establishment of an environment which promotes student motivation and engagement?

Parent Interview Questions Related to Research Question 4 (4a-4b)

(4a) Describe your expectations of your child's teacher and the school overall.

It was interesting that when asked this question, ALL parent participants, at some point, mentioned the importance of safety for their child while at school. The first parent stated the following:

I expect everyone at school to care for my child and give him the same amount of time as they would anyone else. I want them to make sure that my child is safe.

Too much time is spent on discipline issues...teachers are often too busy dealing with the bad kids and not focusing on the good ones. They need to respect the students as much as they want to be respected. I expect the school to think of my child as their own. They are the ones that are with them most of the day. They should also take the time to sit, talk, and listen to them. (February 18, 2013)

The four other parent participants did not provide such a detailed answer as the first parent but all mentioned that safety and the well-being of their children was the most important thing to them. Parents 3 and 5 also used the word “respect” in regards what they expected for their child. They mentioned that if their child felt supported and respected that he/she would continue to perform to the best of their ability. The fourth

parent stated that she wanted the teachers and school to challenge her child and make him work to his greatest potential.

(4b) Describe the single most important thing that teachers can do to motivate your child in their learning and cause them to work hard.

Three out of the five parents interviewed believed that first and foremost, a child must be cared for and supported by their teachers. The fifth parent stated it in this way: “

My child will work hard regardless of the teacher. However, if my child knows the teachers truly care about her, she tries that much harder. Things have always come fairly easy for her, but it is really obvious how bright she is when a teacher cares about and pushes her. (February 22, 2013)

The first and third parent believed that the factor that truly motivates students to achieve is when a teacher shows a true “interest” in them.

Research Question 5

What outside factors contribute to the success of these students?

Parent Interview Questions Related to Research Question 5 (5a)

(5a) Describe the person or persons who are responsible for your child’s success in school.

Of the five parents interviewed, only the second participant mentioned that she felt that she was directly responsible for her child’s success in school. The other four participants mentioned factors such as successful siblings, friends, and outside programs like summer camps and after school/extracurricular programs. The fourth parent mentioned these things as well and then went on to provide a more extensive answer:

My child has always been encouraged and motivated by his brother who is now a successful contractor. He has always been involved in extra activities (outside of school) too. But most of all, I would say that *he* is the one who is most responsible for his own success. He may have had good examples around him, but he really could have gone down a different path. Many of his friends chose that path. Somehow, someway, he chose differently. (February 22, 2013)

Parents collectively believed that teachers are major contributors to their students' success. These responses mirrored those of their children. All parents mentioned that there was at least one teacher throughout the student's schooling that made a significant impact in their life. As shown in a table 5 below, eleven references were made by parents indicating that the care and compassion that is displayed by teachers is crucial and is believed to be one of the greatest factors in students' attainment of success.

Discussion of the Student and Parent Interviews

The analysis and evidence presented in this chapter were taken from the interviews of the students and parents of an urban high school in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The themes of supportive and caring adults, motivating and engaging teachers who hold high expectations for students, adults who positively connect with students, positive and constructive feedback on performance, and a strong emphasis on and an appreciation for learning were reported. The following section will present these themes in greater detail as they surfaced throughout the course of the parent and student interviews.

Themes Identified in the Interviews

Student-Identified Themes

Throughout the student interviews, several themes surfaced which relate to previous research conducted surrounding the topics of motivation and persistence of high school students. As demonstrated in the tables below, students repeatedly identified the importance of possessing skills associated with theories surrounding self-determination, self-efficacy, and resilience:

Table 5

Themes that Contribute to Student Motivation and Persistence During Student Interviews Using Ryan and Deci's Self Determination Theory (2000)

Motivation and Persistence Themes (Student Identified)	Number of Times Referenced
Competence	
Feels Challenged	8
Receives Prompt Feedback	10
Autonomy	
Willing to Explore	4
Takes Initiative	5
Works to Solve Problems	6
Takes Things Step-by-Step	9
Asks Questions/Share Thoughts	10
Relatedness	
Importance of Feeling Supported and Listened to	6

Table 5 (Continued)

Themes that Contribute to Student Motivation and Persistence During Student Interviews Using Ryan and Deci's Self Determination Theory (2000)

Motivation and Persistence Themes (Student Identified)	Number of Times Referenced
Importance of Feeling Connected	17
Importance of Receiving Encouragement	20

Twenty references were made regarding the importance of students receiving encouragement from family and/or school educators. Interestingly, this factor was the most often cited by the interview participants. Additionally, several students indicated that when such support is received from both the home and school environments, a student is more successful than his/her counterparts that do not receive the encouragement from both sources. Specific examples of encouragement included verbal and tangible praise, the establishment of positive expectations and challenges, a “believe in you mentality”, and help, support, and feedback when needed.

The importance of making a connection with school and school staff was cited by students seventeen times. Interestingly, the actual term “connection” was utilized by students eleven of those times. The students often used this term to express their belief that when teachers actually connect with them, students are more interested in and excited about learning new material. Even if a topic is one that is generally unknown or uninteresting, a teacher who connects it in some way to the student’s life or one who is able to gain the student’s interest is most often successful in doing so.

In regards to personal characteristics, several citations were made surrounding the topics of autonomy and competence. Ten references were made to students feeling comfortable in sharing their thoughts and asking questions when presented with academic tasks and materials. Nine references were made to solving problems through a “step-by-step” process. Ten references were made by students who believed that they receive prompt and positive feedback while nine references were made indicating that they feel challenged when presented with academic tasks.

Self-Efficacy

The interviews also indicated and validated research claims that students who possess high degrees of self-efficacy tend to be highly motivated as well. Albert Bandura provided a framework surrounding factors that contribute to levels of self-efficacy. This framework is utilized in coding student responses and placing them into thematic categories. These results are listed in the table below:

Table 6

Themes that Contribute to Student Motivation and Persistence During Student Interviews Using Bandura’s (1977) Theory of Self-Efficacy

Motivation and Persistence Themes (Student Identified)	Number of Times Referenced
Performance Outcomes (Past Experiences)	
Positive Performance Experiences	9
Vicarious Experiences (Modeling by Others)	
Affected By Others’ Positive Experiences	7
Affected By Others’ Negative Experiences	12

Table 6 (Continued)

Themes that Contribute to Student Motivation and Persistence During Student Interviews Using Bandura's (1977) Theory of Self-Efficacy

Motivation and Persistence Themes (Student Identified)	Number of Times Referenced
Verbal Persuasion (Coaching, Encouragement, and Feedback)	
Coaching	11
Feedback	9
Physiological Feedback (Emotional Status)	
Engagement in Difficult Tasks	8

The students most often cited that they have been, in some way, affected by others' negative life experiences. In most cases, students explained that they had witnessed their parents or siblings endure hardships due to the choices that they had made in their lives. Every single student that reported this stated that these circumstances made them want more for their own lives. Remarkably, many of the students that said that were deeply affected by observing their loved ones struggle, were also affected by seeing others' positive life experiences. As one student eloquently stated, "I knew greater things were possible for me. I don't know if I would have known this if I wouldn't have seen it with my own eyes."

Students also reported multiple times that, as students, they have engaged in difficult tasks which have resulted in positive experiences for themselves. They also indicated that they often receive positive feedback and coaching when involved in task

demands. These personal experiences, as shown through research, are indicative of someone who possesses high levels of self-efficacy.

Resilience

The student interviews went on to demonstrate that the students within this research study tend to possess high degrees of resilience. Research conducted by Krovetz and Benard provides a structure by which student responses were coded and placed into thematic categories. These results are listed in the table below:

Table 7

Themes that Contribute to Student Motivation and Persistence During Student Interviews Using Krovetz's (1999) and Benard's (1995) Work Associated With Resilience Theory

Motivation and Persistence Themes (Student Identified)	Number of Times Referenced
Receives Support/Encouragement from School Staff	10
Receives Support/Encouragement from Family/Friends	13
Feels Respected	2
Feels Cared For	3
Involved in School/Outside Activities	5
Holds High Expectations for Themselves	16
Has High Expectations from Others	6

The most frequent response related to characteristics of resilience was the level of expectations that the students held for themselves. Sixteen references were made

regarding the high expectations that are held for themselves as opposed to the six references that were made regarding expectations that are held for them by other people.

The levels of support and encouragement were high in that ten references were made in regards to feeling supported and encouraged by school staff and thirteen were made by students feeling the same by family and friends. One student, in particular, summarized it in this way:

I have my family *and* my teachers. You need support from both sides. It's like the house analogy; you need the roof and the walls to be fully protected from the harsh weather. It's like life...you need support and encouragement from both groups. I am the lucky kid because I have them both. (January 3, 2103)

Parent/Guardian-Identified Themes

Throughout the parent/guardian interviews, several themes surfaced which relate to previous research conducted surrounding the topics of motivation and persistence of high school students. While the data gathered from the parent/guardian interviews can be linked to several theories, it was more general in nature (than the resulting data from the student interviews). Therefore, the chart below provides a general summary of the thematic categories as described by the parents and guardians.

Table 8

Themes That Contribute to Student Motivation and Persistence During Parent/Guardian Interviews

Motivation and Persistence Themes (Parent Identified)	Number of Times Referenced
Key Qualities of Successful Children	
Initiative	2
High Expectations for Him/Herself	8
Focus	4
Positive Outlook	2
Supported By School Members	2
Supported by Family/Friends	5
Educational Beliefs	
Parents Belief in the Importance of Education	7
Child's Belief in the Importance of Education	5
Learning Styles/Strengths	
Hands-On Learning	4
Engaged Learning	8
Visualization	1
Solves Problems	2
Takes Things Step-by-Step	3
Asks Questions/Shares Thoughts	2

Table 8 (Continued)

Themes That Contribute to Student Motivation and Persistence During Parent/Guardian Interviews

Motivation and Persistence Themes (Parent Identified)	Number of Times Referenced
Connection to School	
Importance of Communication	5
Importance of Care and Encouragement from School	11
Importance of Making School Interesting	4
Importance of Safety	7
Importance of Respecting Students and Families	5
Importance of Feeling Connected	5

Throughout the parent interviews, participants exhibited their beliefs that a strong connection to school is critical. Five references were made regarding the word “connection” and eleven references were made regarding the importance of care and encouragement received from school members. Safety was also very important to parents as it was referenced seven times by parents.

Another interesting finding related to the topic of student engagement and its connection to student success. None of these parents were employed within the educational field, but eight people used the term “engage” or “engagement” throughout their interview. They explained that when their children are uninterested or not engaged in what the teacher is teaching, they rarely do as well. While all of their children exhibit

great amounts of self-motivation, the parents explain that when their child is excited and engaged in the learning, they always perform better.

As displayed in Table 8, the parents' responses truly reflected the value and importance of education. This theme was repeated several times even within a single interview. In most cases, parents told stories of their own lives or the lives of their siblings. Collectively, they all wanted more for their own families. They too possessed a great sense of pride in knowing that their children have been so successful in school and in life overall.

The prevailing elements therefore, within both groups' interviews, were the importance of feeling engaged in learning, connecting to the staff, and receiving encouragement and support by both school and home. Several student and parent interview participants stated their belief that possessing one of these characteristics improves a child's chances for feeling motivated and persisting in their school endeavors. Possessing all of them however, provides that same child with an even greater opportunity for educational excellence and overall success in life.

Student Observations

Following the student interviews, a series of eight student observations occurred. The classes which were observed were selected based upon individual student's schedules as well as feedback from the student. Observations were held in a variety of classes ranging from related arts classes to content-specific classes such as AP English. Each observation lasted approximately 45 minutes and focused upon student behaviors including levels of participation, focus, body language, and overall engagement.

- Teachers of students who were observed were informed prior to the observation via email correspondence. They were given an opportunity to share any questions or concerns that they had.
- A non-participant observation was utilized throughout this study. This type of observation is often used to study focused aspects of a setting and to answer specific questions within a study. This method can yield extensive detailed data, over many subjects and settings, if desired, to search for patterns or to test hypotheses developed as a result of using other methods, such as interviews. It can thus be a powerful tool in triangulation (Savenye & Robinson, 1996).
- Observational data was coded into categories and themes.

Classroom observations assisted the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of what was learned throughout the interviews and helped to validate the findings. The Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist developed by the International Center for Leadership in Education, was utilized for all student observations (Jones, 2009). The checklist served as a tool to determine the frequency in which students displayed engaging behaviors, regardless of what was being taught. The section of the checklist which was utilized included only the direct observation portion of the checklist. This portion was based on direct observation of the students and included the following criteria: positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, student confidence, and fun and excitement. While the checklist is typically used by administrators and instructional supervisors, it directly aligns to the research questions which were investigated throughout the course of this study.

Detailed field notes were gathered and recorded during the observation portion of the study. Specific attention was placed on students' behaviors and levels of motivation in response to teacher methods and practices. Teacher and student interactions and relationships were a primary focus as well. The table below indicates the findings for this portion of the research study:

Table 9

Student Engagement Characteristics During Student Observations

Student Engagement Characteristics	Number of Times Observed
Positive Body Language	
Consistent Eye Contact	7
Attentive Towards Teacher and/or Other Students	8
Leaning Forward (Majority of Observation)	4
Leaning Backward (Majority of Observation)	4
Consistent Focus	
Clear Focus on Learning Activity	7
Appearing Distracted	1
Appearing Uninterested	0
Verbal Participation	
Expression of Thoughtful Ideas/Answers	4
Asking Thoughtful/Appropriate Questions	3
Sharing Opinions	5
Student Confidence	

Table 9 (*Continued*)

Student Engagement Characteristics During Student Observations

Student Engagement Characteristics	Number of Times Observed (of students)
Initiation/Completion of Tasks	5
Active Participation in Team-Based Work	3
Fun and Excitement	
Exhibits Interest	8
Exhibits Enthusiasm	6
Uses Humor	3

Throughout the student observations, participants consistently exhibited characteristics which are indicative of true engagement within the lesson or activity. Interestingly, 100% of students were attentive to their teachers/classmates and exhibited interest in the lesson in which they were observed. (They were only marked positively in these categories if they exhibited these characteristics more than 80% of the time observed.) Additionally, seven students maintained consistent levels of eye contact with the instructor as well as six who exhibited high levels of enthusiasm. The lowest areas of engagement included the following areas: asking thoughtful/appropriate questions, active participation in team-based work, and the utilization of humor within the lesson. It is important to note that out of eight observations (and eight teachers), only four opportunities existed for students to engage in team-based work. Therefore, that number

is actually high considering four opportunities existed for team-based work and three students engaged in these opportunities.

The interviews, observations, and field notes, in combination with one another, provided a sense of authenticity and trustworthiness that may have not been present if only one data source was utilized. The observations verified much of what the students and parents stated were important elements within the process of learning and regarding students' overall levels of motivation. The students specifically believed (and demonstrated throughout the observations) the importance of a clear focus, thoughtful and active participation, and an overall commitment to the learning process. Ultimately, this triangulation of data provides a greater depth of understanding of the research findings.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Four presented the research findings for this qualitative research case study. The findings indicated that the ten students studied possess high degrees of self-determination, self-efficacy, and resilience. These characteristics, as presented in the literature portion of this study, are reflective of individuals who most often have high levels of the school-related engagement, motivation, and a desire to persist. Additionally, the themes of supportive and caring adults, motivating and engaging teachers who hold high expectations for students, adults who positively connect with students, positive and constructive feedback on performance, and a strong emphasis on and an appreciation for learning were reported by both student and parents.

These findings are further discussed in Chapter 5. Critical research conclusions are identified and serve as the framework for the discussion. The implications of these

conclusions for educators, parents, and students are presented. Changes that educators can make to improve the classroom environment, instructional delivery, and overall school structure will be proposed. Finally, suggestions are made for future research that may build upon and extend what is already known surrounding the topic of motivation and persistence of urban, high school students.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Motivation of urban high school students is a critical element within a student's decision to persist in school and work to his/her utmost potential. Most often educators recognize this, but often struggle in their efforts to promote and sustain a student's level of motivation.

Creation of a highly engaging classroom environment for all students is quite challenging and becomes even more difficult when students come to school with economic hardships. According to the National Research Council (2003), "when students from disadvantaged backgrounds in high poverty, urban high schools become disengaged, they are less likely to graduate and consequently, face severely limited opportunities" (p.1). It is our charge therefore, as educators, to uncover and implement the most effective instructional strategies, practices, and school structures that will provide students with the greatest possible opportunities to experience educational and life-long success.

Summary of Research Findings

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify the school-related and external elements that promote motivation and persistence of high poverty, urban high school students. The study consisted of a series of sub-questions which focused upon effective instructional strategies, teaching behaviors, classroom/school structures, and additional factors including family structures and beliefs.

The findings of this study were quite powerful. While many of themes expressed by students confirmed much of the existing research surrounding the topics of student

motivation and persistence, the deep levels of student understanding regarding these topics was extraordinary.

Discussion of Question One

Students' Perceptions Related to Research Question One

The first research question within this study sought to determine the educational factors which contribute most to a student's level of motivation and persistence surrounding their educational endeavors. Only two out of ten students even considered dropping out of school and this mainly stemmed from the fact that all students studied had a support system from home, school, or both settings.

Students collectively mentioned that they wanted better for their lives because they had witnessed friends or family members struggling in one way or another. This factor seemed to give them the motivation to work hard because they knew that through hard work, focus, and high levels of dedication, their chances of being successful in life increased dramatically. This did not however, appear to be an isolated trait possessed by these students. While the students seemed to possess an innate desire to work hard, all ten students were also told or shown by family or school staff members that they could achieve at high levels and attain greatness. They were consistently challenged and encouraged (either from home, school, or both) to work to their highest potential.

Parents' Perceptions Related to Research Question One

In relation to research question one, the parents echoed the responses of the students. Four out of five parents mentioned the struggles that they have had throughout their lifetime and the impact that these hardships had on their children. Parent participant one stated:

Somehow my struggles were positive for my children because they now want better for themselves and for their families. We have a closeness as a family that we might never have had if things would have been easy for us. Our struggles in life drew us closer to one another. (February 18, 2013)

Parents also collectively mentioned that the talents and gifts that their children possessed were major contributors to their educational successes. They cited several attributes including focus, drive, initiative, and dedication when describing their children. Interestingly, when asked if they had anything to do with their children being so successful, only one stated that it was mainly due to the support that she provided to her child.

Discussion of Question Two

Students' Perceptions Related to Research Question Two

The participants within this study were able to specifically identify several characteristics that set the outstanding teachers apart from those that are mediocre. They overwhelmingly believed that teachers who are able to connect with and form strong relationships with students are the teachers that deeply motivate them to work to their greatest potential. Every single interview participant (both parents and students), at some point, mentioned the importance of a strong connection to or relationship with a teacher.

Students also strongly believed that the way in which a teacher teaches has a direct impact upon a student's desire to learn. Sadly, students collectively mentioned that they had only one or two teachers that actually inspired them to learn and get excited about the opportunity to do so. During the interviews, several students had to pause to actually think about a dynamic teacher that they had within their educational career.

Some students were immediately able to think of one or two and were excited when describing these teachers.

These effective teachers were described as ones who adjusted to the students' unique learning styles. Students also mentioned that the best teachers made learning fun for the kids and encouraged them to work, think, and solve problems together. Student participant 8 seemed to summarize the participants' thoughts through the following statement:

The kids love my art teacher. She gets involved with us, jokes around with us, tries hard to make the class interesting and fun, challenges us, and most of all, really cares for us. I don't know of any teacher that is respected more by the kids than her. (January 3, 2103)

Parents' Perceptions Related to Research Question Two

Several parents mentioned that their children often talk about those teachers that positively impact them and make them want to work hard. Interestingly, they also collectively stated that their child performs best in these types of classes as well. Parent participant 1 stated her son is highly motivated by those teachers that teach the way in ways that get him excited about learning. She stated that he needs to learn through a "hands-on approach, not a textbook approach."

Parents also echoed the students' responses by continuously stating that the best teachers were those who not only encouraged the students to work hard but who challenged them in a myriad of ways. They described these teachers as being able to get the students to think differently about topics and to instill a belief in them that they could accomplish very difficult tasks. One parent (participant 1) strongly stated her belief by

saying, “I wish there were more teachers like that. If they only knew the power that they have in making kids love or not love school. All they have to do is connect with our kids and let them know that they are something special. More students would be just as successful as my child if this would happen.”

Discussion of Question Three

Students’ Perceptions Related to Research Question Three

Question three focused upon the behaviors that teachers exhibit that directly impact a student’s desire and motivation to learn. Students repeatedly echoed the importance of receiving care and encouragement from school staff and parents. These topics were mentioned twenty-six times throughout the student interviews. Several participants believed that their academic successes primarily stemmed from the fact that they received these two elements from both sources - school and parents. Several participants also stated their strong belief that if they had not received such care and encouragement consistently throughout their lives, they would have never reached such a high level of success.

Students also repeatedly mentioned the need for teachers to provide positive criticism and feedback to the students. Student Participant 9 phrased it in this way:

The good teachers truly care and want you to be successful. They don’t just give you the work and say do this, do that. They make sure that you know what you are doing and give you everything that you need to be successful. It’s important though that students feel comfortable asking teachers for help and for their feedback. There are some teachers that we are afraid to ask for help. We wouldn’t dare raise our hand in those classes. (January 3, 2013)

Parents' Perceptions Related to Research Question Three

Parents collectively believed that teachers can make school more interesting for students if they break away from the more traditional lecture/textbook style of teaching. They believe that teachers who get kids involved in the process of learning and connect the learning to their own lives and their futures are the ones that are the most successful.

All five parent participants believed that communication between school and home is critical. Parents often cited that their children were “good kids” and so they rarely received communication from parents or administration. Parent participant 4 mentioned that schools are often too busy dealing with the “crisis situations” and rarely communicate with the parents of the children who are doing the right things.

Maybe this is why we don't have more students who are successful and want to stay in school. Sometimes parents are turned off to schools because it's always the bad kids and families who get the attention. If we, as parents feel this way, imagine the way that the kids feel. (February 22, 2013)

Discussion of Question Four

Students' Perceptions Related to Research Question Four

Research question four sought to uncover the most important thing that schools can do to promote student motivation and persistence in school. Students repeatedly mentioned that the support, encouragement, and feedback given by the teachers is crucial to the students' level of success. The students want teachers to set challenging goals for them. Student Participant 2 stated it in this way: “I see teachers as parents. I want and expect them to tell me how rough it is going to be. I want to be prepared for life. This is sometimes tough for kids to hear and to understand, but it's the best thing for us.” Student

Participant 7 echoed this response by saying “Push us to keep learning and let us know that without an education our options for the future are very limited. Teachers need to be clear about this.”

Parents’ Perceptions Related to Research Question Four

In response to question four, parents repeatedly stated the importance of support, care, and genuine concern being shown to students. They believed that when teachers display these attributes and couple them with a sincere respect for their child, students reap the greatest benefits. Parents also echoed the students’ responses when it came to “seeing teachers as parent figures.” Parents collectively wanted their children to feel safe in school and wanted teachers to take the time to talk to and listen to them about things that were important in their lives.

Discussion of Question Five

Students’ and Parents’ Perceptions Related to Research Question Five

Research question five focused upon the factor (person or thing) that contributes most to a student’s desire to work to their utmost potential and remain in school. Student and parents responses were almost identical and are therefore combined in this section.

Student and parent participants repeatedly mentioned the importance of connecting with someone. Whether it be a parent, sibling, teacher, guidance counselor, etc., a child must have someone to count on, consistently communicate with, and relate to. Interestingly, all of the participants within this research study, believed that this single element is crucial in the success of children. Parent 5 phrased his belief in this way:

I guess it’s possible for someone to achieve greatness in life without someone cheering them on. I personally, have never seen it though. The most successful

and well-adjusted kids I have ever seen have had someone in their corner telling them that they could make it. And ... the most successful kids are those that get that encouragement from both places ... home and school. (February 22, 2013)

Discussion of Findings Related to Classroom Observations

Throughout the student observation portion of this study, participants consistently displayed characteristics which are indicative of true engagement within the lesson or activity. These characteristics were used in accordance with the Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist created by the International Center for Leadership in Education (Jones, 2009). These characteristics include positive body language, a consistent focus on the learning activity, verbal participation, student confidence, and a display of interest and enthusiasm.

Interestingly, 100% of students were attentive to their teachers/classmates and exhibited interest in the lesson in which they were observed. (They were only marked positively in these categories if they exhibited these characteristics more than 80% of the time observed.) Additionally, the majority of students maintained consistent levels of eye contact with the instructor as well as exhibited high levels of enthusiasm for the task or lesson activity. The lowest areas of engagement included the following areas: asking thoughtful/appropriate questions, active participation in team-based work, and the utilization of humor within the lesson. It is important to recognize however, that these areas are primarily facilitated by the teacher. For instance, if the teacher does not provide opportunities for students to ask questions or share their thoughts, then this obviously will not occur.

Research Implications

The interviews conducted throughout this study resulted in several key findings in regards to factors that impact students' levels of motivation and persistence. Every single interview participant (both parents and students), at some point, mentioned the importance of a strong connection to or relationship with a teacher or another adult in their life. The participants also repeatedly mentioned that the support, encouragement, establishment of challenging goals, and meaningful feedback that are given to students is crucial to their level of success. These students certainly possessed high levels of intrinsic motivation and resiliency and this researcher would argue that it is primarily due to the encouraging and supportive systems that they had within the school, home, or both settings. Finally, the students and parents believed that the most effective teachers were ones who adjusted to the students' unique learning styles and, at the same time, made learning fun for the students. Within this type of environment, teachers should consistently provide students with meaningful opportunities to work, think, and solve problems together.

Based on these findings, there are several implications for educators and the way in which we structure our classrooms and schools. First, and perhaps most importantly, we must prioritize the professional development that we currently provide for school staff and administration. Often times these "trainings" provide a one-shot focus upon a current initiative that a district is working on. It may be the delivery of curriculum-specific information, differentiated instructional practices, or other related topics surrounding the topics of data, school safety, etc. While all of the aforementioned topics are critical and necessary for the inner workings of effective schools, are they the topics that will truly

and deeply cause students to be motivated in the learning and their quest for educational excellence?

So this, I believe, is the key question. Where should our focus be as educators? Even though this question was not directly asked during the interviews, the participants overwhelmingly responded and agreed upon a single answer. Our primary focus must be on sustained professional development surrounding the topics of student motivation which include: the formation of critical relationships with our students, the creation of a safe environment where students are encouraged to take risks, and the development of a sensitivity to and an understanding of the unique backgrounds and talents that each student possesses. Our focus must shift therefore, to those reform efforts which will directly impact the students the most. Our students are clearly telling us that they learn the best when they know their teachers care about them. They want to work hard when a teacher connects with them and gives them choices in their learning. A teacher can have the deepest knowledge about content-specific material, but if this same teacher cannot relate to and engage kids, what is the point? Our efforts, as an educational system therefore, are often misdirected. Why don't we just listen to our kids?

A second implication for educators is to create school-wide structures which will align to the above-described focus on sustained professional development. Several student and parent participants mentioned the possibility of creating mentor-type programs within the schools. It is these types of programs more than any other, that participants believe will foster critical relationships between school and home. When we truly focus on the whole student, which includes tapping into the unique gifts and talents that each child possesses, it is then when we will see motivational levels rise.

It is the sincere belief of this researcher that most teachers wish that they had more time to build these types of deep relationships with their students. So often however, teachers feel overwhelmed by the curricular demands and time constraints, and therefore are unable to do much else. It is the job therefore, of administrators, to create school structures which allow for these types of relationship-building opportunities for teachers and students. It is important to realize that schools often do not have to look outside of their own districts for “experts” within the field motivation and relationship-building. Sometimes the most dynamic “experts” are those teachers found within our own school walls.

A third implication is one that focuses upon the hiring practices found within the educational system. As mentioned previously, a candidate may have all of the “book knowledge” in the world but if he/she is unable to connect with students and get them excited about learning, what is the point? We must look deeply and critically at the process by which school districts hire staff, all staff, including teachers, support staff, administrators, custodians, etc. If school districts are sincere about their quest to educate children and promote a deep sense of love for life-long learning, then every single staff member must share that same vision and commitment.

A critical element within this district-wide focus is follow-through. Once the most effective employees are hired, districts must make every effort to provide sustained learning and growing opportunities to all staff members. Central to this, is maintaining a clear focus on the unique learning needs of staff and promoting a sense of ownership and pride. The vision of the district must be consistently articulated, communicated, and

celebrated. It is this researcher's sincere belief that when staff members love to come to work every day, kids do to.

Maehr (1991) has argued that school systems should begin to restructure in ways that will deeply effect changes in the entire school environment as well as in the individual classroom environment. According to Schank & Cleary (1995), we must begin to measure the success of our educational system by whether or not we are producing students who have internalized the ability and desire to learn. They believe that the best sign of a successful educational system is one where the students want to go to school and remain excited about learning once they get there. Ultimately then, they are prepared to creatively respond to the kinds of open-ended problems they will actually face in the world.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study sought to identify factors that promote motivation and persistence among successful, urban, high school students. In order to make the findings of this study more representative of other schools and settings, the researcher would suggest that a replication of this study be conducted in different settings with a diverse group of participants. All of the students within this research study were high-achieving students from high-poverty backgrounds. It would be interesting to study the opposite sub-group of students, underachieving students from affluent backgrounds. This study could also be replicated in a rural location or in districts of high socio-economic status.

In addition, a study surrounding this topic could glean additional data if a greater number of students were studied or if specific ethnic subgroups were studied. A large-scale study which combined surveys and open-ended interviews may be appropriate and

provide the researcher with powerful implications for the ways in which to structure schools. Focus groups may also provide the researcher with additional information as well. While this researcher believes that participants were very open and willing to give powerful information, small group discussions with students or parents may have provided further information. At times, a group setting may be less intimidating to students and parents than a personal interview.

Additional research could also explore the impact (on levels of motivation and persistence) of students who come from a strong family structure versus the impact of children who receive little support from home. This type of study may provide valuable insight for future educational programming.

Further research could also focus upon specific educational structures and practices that may have a direct correlation to student motivation and persistence. For example, one of the recommendations resulting from this study includes the great necessity for schools to find ways to develop more personal relationships with their students. Therefore, future research should focus on specific strategies for reviewing and restructuring the roles of school guidance counselors and support staff. According to student participant 9:

I never met my guidance counselor until last year and I'm a senior. I didn't even know who it was until this year. It is important to make connections early on with kids. People need to do a better job at that. How are you going to give me guidance if you don't even know me? I have seen some people that just give you classes without even talking to you. Talk to kids and find out what we want/like...there is no point taking a class when you need to do a lot of work if, at

the end, you are not even going to use that information. (Student Participant
,February 11, 2013)

Shouldn't the roles of guidance counselors and support staff then, have a stronger emphasis upon building relationships with students and providing them with a realistic, yet promising plan for the future?

This task however, may be overwhelming in very large urban high schools, especially one that houses almost 4,000 students. It is not realistic to think that counselors within a school this size could consistently meet with that many children throughout the school year. Even with five counselors, that would mean that each counselor would be responsible for meeting consistently with 760 children. Therefore, future research could also focus upon effective strategies for involving families and communities in taking active roles in developing relationships with the students. For example, the creation of mentor programs/partnerships with families and outside organizations may be a starting point in fostering educational connections between home and school. This added layer of support may be what is necessary for students to be truly engaged in learning and motivated to remain in school.

Additionally, the researcher would suggest studying the overall physical organization of schools that have successfully implemented a structure which promotes and focuses on student support, interests, and relationship-building. Perhaps a structure which includes small learning communities or career-specific learning academies in which students can, from the start of their high school years, study the subjects which will best prepare them for life.

A final recommendation for future research involves the examination of the settings, environments, and school conditions under which highly effective teaching and learning occurs. For example, are there specific classroom practices that merge meaningful, rigorous learning experiences with positive and motivating activities? Is there brain research which specifically targets adolescent learning and if so, are there explicit pedagogical strategies that work more effectively than others with these students? Additionally, are there specific pedagogical strategies that teachers can receive training on that will increase student motivation and engagement in learning? According to the National Research Council (2003):

Teachers that are already working in the high school cannot possibly meet the needs of their students if their own needs for professional development are not met. (p.214)

Knowing this, our collective focus may not always have to be on how to make the kids better students, but rather, on how to better prepare our teachers.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this research study was to identify the school-related and external elements that promote motivation and persistence of high poverty, urban high school students. The study consisted of a series of sub-questions which focused upon effective instructional strategies, teaching behaviors, classroom/school structures, and additional factors including family structures and beliefs.

This particular study has certainly added to this body of research but has also, and perhaps more importantly, indicated that the voice of academically successful students may be equally if not more important than any other. These students, at the young ages of

seventeen or eighteen, were able to articulate in thirty-five minutes what it has taken educators years to figure out. We know how to promote student motivation and excitement for learning. Why is it then, that we are not consistently doing these things? Perhaps we need to shift our focus back to what we know is right and ultimately best for our kids.

More specifically, the analysis of the data gathered during this study indicated:

1. The overwhelming importance of teachers forming connections and strong relationships with students
2. The need for adults to continuously provide encouragement and be closely involved with students in both formal and informal ways
3. The need for teachers to provide positive criticism and feedback to the students.
4. The importance of increased communication between school and home
5. The need for children to feel safe in school and for teachers to take the time to talk to and listen to them about things that are important in their lives.
6. The identification and implementation of efforts to restructure traditional teaching practices to provide a greater focus on unique learning styles, student voice, student choice, and cooperative/engaging learning opportunities for students
7. The great need for a clear school-wide vision which promotes relationship-building and the establishment of a safe and nurturing learning environment

Finally, it is our collective duty, as educators, to engage and motivate all students.

This researcher believes that the ability to do this is the single-most important attribute of any educator:

I am certain that most teachers have nothing but the best intentions for students. I worry, however, that much of what we do is driven by tradition, and not by reflecting on the ebb and flow of young minds. I am disturbed when I hear some teacher say that students need to adapt to school, when students are not in school by choice (they are there by law) and schools are supposed to be providing a service to children (not the other way around). Only through better understanding what motivates each child to learn can we provide that service to all children. (Muir, 2000, p. 184)

This then, must be our collective focus. Will we view all of our students as students full of “promise” or continue to do what we have been doing for so many years without sizeable results? Ultimately, will we listen to the voices of our students?

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Appendices

Appendix A

INFORMED ASSENT – STUDENT PARTICIPANT

For a Research Study entitled

“Factors That Promote Persistence and Motivation among Successful, Urban High School Students”

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Lori Kuhns, a doctoral student in the Administration and Leadership program offered by Indiana University of Pennsylvania in collaboration with East Stroudsburg University. This qualitative research study is an exploration of persistence and motivation of successful, urban high school students. The study examines high performing students’ perceptions of what educational factors they believe are most instrumental in promoting these two key elements within their educational experience.

Participants will be involved in a series of interviews and observations. The interview session(s) will last approximately 30-60 minutes. All sessions will be audio-taped. The audio-tape will be transcribed after the interview session. At a later date you will be given an opportunity to review the transcript record for accuracy. During the interview session(s), you will be asked questions about your personal feelings regarding structures of your classrooms and school as well as teacher methods and behaviors that motivate you. I do not anticipate the risks associated with answering the questions to be greater than any risks you encounter on a day-to-day basis.

This study could potentially have a profound impact on the ways schools are structured and the ways educators view instruction. Ultimately, this study could guide parents, teachers, and administrators in making educational decisions which are most meaningful for students. These decisions are of extreme importance for they will ultimately affect the ability of students to achieve success.

There is no compensation for your participation in the study.

Any information you provide as part of your participation in this study will be kept confidential. The research records will be kept private and will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office. The researcher will be the only individual to have access to the research records.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time by leaving any interview session.

This project has been approved by the East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about the study, please ask them now or contact Lori Kuhns by e-mail at lkuhns@esu.edu. You may also contact her faculty advisor, Dr. Douglas Lare by e-mail at dlare@esu.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the East Stroudsburg University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by phone 570-422-3336 or e-mail at sdavis@esu.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE
WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY.
YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

Participant signature _____ Date _____

Participant name (printed) _____

Principal Researcher signature _____ Date _____

Principal Researcher name (printed) _____

Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT – PARENT PARTICIPANT

For a Research Study entitled

“Factors That Promote Persistence and Motivation among Successful, Urban High School Students”

You and your child will be invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Lori Kuhns, a doctoral student in the Administration and Leadership program offered by Indiana University of Pennsylvania in collaboration with East Stroudsburg University. This qualitative research study is an exploration of persistence and motivation of successful, urban high school students. The study examines high performing students’ perceptions of what educational factors they believe are most instrumental in promoting these two key elements within their educational experience.

Participants will be involved in a series of interviews and observations. The interview session(s) will last approximately 30-60 minutes. All sessions will be audio-taped. The audio-tape will be transcribed after the interview session. At a later date you and your child will be given an opportunity to review the transcript record for accuracy. During the interview session(s), participants will be asked questions about their personal feelings regarding structures of their classrooms and school as well as teacher methods and behaviors that promote student motivation. I do not anticipate the risks associated with answering the questions to be greater than any risks that are encountered on a day-to-day basis.

This study could potentially have a profound impact on the ways schools are structured and the ways educators view instruction. Ultimately, this study could guide parents, teachers, and administrators in making educational decisions which are most meaningful for students. These decisions are of extreme importance for they will ultimately affect the ability of students to achieve success.

There is no compensation for participation in the study.

Any information that you or your child provide as part of your participation in this study will be kept confidential. The research records will be kept private and will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office. The researcher will be the only individual to have access to the research records.

You and your child’s participation in this study are completely voluntary. If you and your child decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time by leaving any interview session.

This project has been approved by the East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about the study, please ask them now or contact Lori Kuhns by e-mail at lkuhns@esu.edu. You may also contact her faculty advisor, Dr. Douglas Lare by e-mail at dlare@esu.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the East Stroudsburg University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by phone 570-422-3336 or e-mail at sdavis@esu.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE
WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY.
YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

Participant signature _____ Date _____

Participant name (printed) _____

Principal Researcher signature _____ Date _____

Principal Researcher name (printed) _____

Appendix C

Cover Letter to Signed Consent

Superintendent, Allentown School District

February 24, 2012
Allentown School District
31 S. Penn Street
Allentown, PA 18105

Dear Dr. Mayo:

This letter is being written to request your permission to conduct research at your institution.

This qualitative research study is an exploration of persistence and motivation of successful, high poverty, urban high school students. The study examines high performing students' perceptions of what educational factors they believe are most instrumental in promoting these two key elements within their educational experience. Your school will be the only school participating in the study pending your approval.

This study is being done in partial fulfillment of a doctoral degree in Administration and Leadership offered by Indiana University of Pennsylvania in collaboration with East Stroudsburg University. By granting me permission to observe and interview a select group of students, you will be contributing to the body of knowledge surrounding high school student motivation and persistence. This study could potentially have a profound impact on the ways schools are structured and the ways educators view instruction. Ultimately, this study could guide parents, teachers, and administrators in making educational decisions which are most meaningful for students. These decisions are of extreme importance for they will ultimately affect the ability of students to achieve success.

There is no compensation for your institution's participation in the study.

The researcher will be working with Dr. Landis, William Allen's building principal regarding the recruitment of participants. The researcher will send hold an initial informational meeting with selected participants detailing the nature of the study and the data collection procedures. The researcher will indicate to the participants that their participation is completely voluntary. Dr. Landis has agreed to work with the researcher in scheduling a day, time, and location for the administration of the initial meeting and will reserve a location for the follow-up open-ended survey and interview session(s).

Participants will be involved in a series of interviews and observations. The interview session(s) will last approximately 30-60 minutes. All sessions will be audio-taped. The audio-tape will be transcribed after the interview session. During the interview session(s), participants will be asked questions about their perceptions regarding structures of their classrooms and school as well as teacher methods and behaviors that motivate them. I do not anticipate the risks associated with answering the questions to be greater than any risks that they encounter on a day-to-day basis.

Any information collected in relationship to this study will be kept confidential. The research records will be kept private and will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. Only the researcher will have access to the research records.

In order for me to move forward in this process, the East Stroudsburg University IRB is requesting receipt of a signed consent form on your institution's letterhead. I am providing the consent form for your printing and signature. The consent form should be sent to: Lori Kuhns, Principal, 800 Blue Mountain Drive, Walnutport, PA, 18088.

My ability to conduct and complete this study is dependent on the cooperation of individuals such as you. I want to sincerely thank you for your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Lori A. Kuhns

Appendix D

Cover Letter to Signed Consent

Principal, William Allen High School, Allentown School District

February 24, 2012
Allentown School District
31 S. Penn Street
Allentown, PA 18105

Dear Dr. Landis:

This letter is being written to request your permission to conduct research at your institution.

This qualitative research study is an exploration of persistence and motivation of successful, high poverty, urban high school students. The study examines high performing students' perceptions of what educational factors they believe are most instrumental in promoting these two key elements within their educational experience. Your school will be the only school participating in the study pending your approval.

This study is being done in partial fulfillment of a doctoral degree in Administration and Leadership offered by Indiana University of Pennsylvania in collaboration with East Stroudsburg University. By granting me permission to observe and interview a select group of students, you will be contributing to the body of knowledge surrounding high school student motivation and persistence. This study could potentially have a profound impact on the ways schools are structured and the ways educators view instruction. Ultimately, this study could guide parents, teachers, and administrators in making educational decisions which are most meaningful for students. These decisions are of extreme importance for they will ultimately affect the ability of students to achieve success.

There is no compensation for your institution's participation in the study.

The researcher will be working alongside of you as William Allen's building principal regarding the recruitment of participants. The researcher will send hold an initial informational meeting with selected participants detailing the nature of the study and the data collection procedures. The researcher will indicate to the participants that their participation is completely voluntary. Your assistance will be greatly appreciated in identifying a day, time, and location for the administration of the initial meeting as well as reserving a location for the initial open-ended survey and interview session(s).

Participants will be involved in a series of interviews and observations. The interview session(s) will last approximately 30-60 minutes. All sessions will be audio-taped. The audio-tape will be transcribed after the interview session. During the interview session(s), participants will be asked questions about their perceptions regarding structures of their classrooms and school as well as teacher methods and behaviors that motivate them. I do not anticipate the risks associated with answering the questions to be greater than any risks that they encounter on a day-to-day basis.

Any information collected in relationship to this study will be kept confidential. The research records will be kept private and will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. Only the researcher will have access to the research records.

In order for me to move forward in this process, the East Stroudsburg University IRB is requesting receipt of a signed consent form on your institution's letterhead. I am providing the consent form for your printing and signature. The consent form should be sent to: Lori Kuhns, Principal, Blue Mountain Drive, Walnutport, PA, 18088.

My ability to conduct and complete this study is dependent on the cooperation of individuals such as you. I want to sincerely thank you for your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Lori A. Kuhns

Appendix E

SUPERINTENDENT/DISTRICT LETTER OF APPROVAL (CONSENT)

Dear Superintendent and Principal:

My name is Lori Kuhns and I currently serve as a principal within the Northampton Area School District. I have been working toward my doctoral degree in a joint program offered through East Stroudsburg University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I am currently conducting research surrounding the topic of urban high school student motivation and persistence and am seeking approval to gather data in reference to my study. I would greatly value the opportunity to conduct my study within your school district and would appreciate your willingness to support my research. My hope is to involve approximately ten students and six teachers within my study. Research will be compiled through student and teacher interviews and observations. If you have specific questions regarding this study and request, please do not hesitate to contact me at the number or email address found below. Thank you so much for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Lori A. Kuhns
Principal, kuhns1@nasdschools.org
Northampton Area School District
Educational Leadership Doctoral Student
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

AGREEMENT: Permission is granted to participate in the research study described above.

Signature of Superintendent: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature of Principal: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix F

Student Interview Guide

Number of Sessions: 1-2

Duration of Sessions(s): 30-60 minutes

Research Question 1: What educational factors do high poverty, urban high school students perceive to be the most important in contributing to their persistence and motivation in achieving academic success?

Interview Questions:

1a. Describe what you have done through high school that has resulted in academic success.

1b. Describe techniques you use to solve a very difficult problem or task (Think about one of your most difficult classes...)

1c. Describe a time when you received praise or positive encouragement when you worked hard. Is this an important part of your willingness to persist (to keep going when things are hard?) Explain...

Do you think if you didn't receive that encouragement that you would have done so well?

1d. Did you ever consider quitting school when you were in 10th or 11th grade? Why or Why not? (Did anyone ever try to persuade you to give up?)

1e. If you could identify other factors that contribute most to your school success, what would they be? (anything or anyone) Who or what helped you to persist? (If a certain person is mentioned, ask what it was about that person that made them work so hard?)

Research Question 2: What strategies (instructional – the way teachers teach; learning – the way students learn) are most effective for high poverty, urban high school students in achieving and maintaining academic proficiency?

Interview Questions:

2a. How do teachers adjust what they do in class to how you like to learn part (focus on specific learning style, interests)? Do most of your teachers do this? How often?

2b. Describe your daily routine for completing homework assignments.

2c. Describe your routine for completing long term assignments such as research papers or graduation projects.)

2d. Does the way in which your teachers teach have a direct impact on your desire to learn? Do you think you would still be so successful even if you felt the teacher was not very good? Explain your answer.

2e. Describe the types of assignments that motivate you. Why?

Research Question 3: What behaviors do teachers exhibit that engage and motivate students?

Interview Questions:

3a. Describe an exceptional teacher that you have had. Describe techniques that they used that made them exceptional.

3b. How do teachers encourage you to share your thoughts, ideas, and questions? Is this important to you? Why or why not?

3c. Describe what teachers do to make school interesting. (Depending upon previous student answers, this question may be redundant and therefore may be eliminated.)

3d. Describe things that teachers should do to motivate student learning. (Depending upon previous student answers, this question may be redundant and therefore may be eliminated.)

Research Question 4: What classroom and school structures/practices are critical in the establishment of an environment which promotes student motivation and engagement?

Interview Question:

4a. Describe the single most important thing that people (teachers, parents, principals) can do to motivate you in your learning and cause you to work hard.

Research Question 5: What outside factors contribute to the success of these students?

Interview Question:

5a. Describe the person or persons who are responsible for your success in school.

Appendix G

Parent Interview Guide

Number of Sessions: 1

Duration of Sessions(s): 30-60 minutes

Research Question 1: What educational factors do successful, high poverty, urban high school students perceive to be the most important in contributing to their persistence and motivation in achieving academic success?

Interview Questions:

1a. Describe why you believe your child has been so successful in school.

1b. Did your child ever consider quitting school when he/she was in 10th or 11th grade? Why or Why not? (If appropriate, do you think you, as the parent, had anything to do with that decision?)

Research Question 2: What strategies (instructional – the way teachers teach; learning – the way students learn) are most effective for high poverty, urban high school students in achieving and maintaining academic proficiency?

Interview Questions:

2a. Describe your beliefs about education.

2b. Describe your child's beliefs about education.

2c. Describe a time or a single event that made you realize that your child was very bright.

2d. Describe how your child learns best. Do you think the teachers know this about your child? (How did you know which ones knew this about your child?)

Research Question 3: What behaviors do teachers exhibit that engage and motivate students?

Interview Questions:

3a. Describe an exceptional teacher that your child has had. Describe what you believe made them exceptional.

3b. Do your child's teachers communicate with you? How and how often? Is this important to you? Why or why not?

*3c. Describe what teachers do to make school interesting for your child.
(This answer may have been covered in question 3a.)*

*3d. Describe things that you believe teachers should do to motivate
student learning.*

Research Question 4: What classroom and school structures/practices are critical in the establishment of an environment which promotes student motivation and engagement?

Interview Questions:

*4a. Describe your expectations of your child's teacher and school overall.
(This is what I expect from the teachers..., This is what I expect from the
school...)*

*4b. Describe the single most important thing that teachers can do to
motivate your child in their learning and cause them to work hard.*

Research Question 5: What outside factors contribute to the success of these students?

Interview Question:

*5a. Describe the person or persons who are responsible for your child's
success in school.*

Appendix H

Parent Informational Script Initial Discussion

I am a doctoral student in a joint program offered through East Stroudsburg University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I am currently working on my dissertation and will be conducting my study at your child's school. The purpose of the study is to gather beliefs and ideas from successful students to determine what it is that has motivated them to work hard and stay in school. Your child certainly fits the criteria for this study and am hoping that you will allow him/her to participate with me. The study will involve interviews with you and your child to figure out what you believe has contributed to your child's success in school. I also hope to sit in some of your child's classes with him/her to learn things about them as a truly motivated learner. If you and your child agree to participate, you both will play a vital role in my research, as well as potentially help educators learn more about ways to provide successful learning experiences for students. Please know that there will be little or no risk to you or your child and all of your responses will remain confidential. Your willingness to participate in this study will be of extreme importance and will be valued greatly. Thank you so much for considering my request.

Appendix I

Student Informational Script Initial Discussion

I am a doctoral student in a joint program offered through East Stroudsburg University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I am currently working on my dissertation and will be conducting my study at your school. The purpose of the study is to gather beliefs and ideas from successful students to determine what it is that has motivated them to work hard and stay in school. You certainly fit the criteria for this study and am hoping that you will agree to participate with me. The study will involve interviews with you to figure out what you believe has contributed to your success in school. I also hope to sit in some classes with you to learn things about you as a motivated learner. If you agree to participate, you will play a vital role in my research, as well as potentially help educators learn more about ways to provide successful learning experiences for students. Please know that there will be little or no risk to you and all of your responses will remain confidential. Your willingness to participate in this study will be of extreme importance and will be valued greatly. Thank you so much for considering my request.