Conceptualizations and Impacts of Achievement: A Case Study Analysis of an Urban Northeastern School

Michael D. Corral
University of Connecticut - Storrs, michael.corral@uconn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://opencommons.uconn.edu/dissertations

Recommended Citation
https://opencommons.uconn.edu/dissertations/1969
Conceptualizations and Impacts of Achievement: A Case Study Analysis of an Urban Northeastern School

Michael D. Corral, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2018

Combining Anti-Deficit Achievement (Harper, 2010) and Critical Race Theory (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002) frameworks, this research draws upon case study methodologies (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013; Yin, 2008) to examine how youth conceptualize ideas of “achievement.” To do this, I engaged youth and school-based adults (e.g., teachers, counselors, paraprofessionals, etc.) from an urban northeastern public school. The school is categorized as underperforming and resides in a historically underperforming district. Data for this study was gathered through semi-structured interviews, school-based observations, and document analysis. All analyses in this study were anchored in the youths’ perspectives and voices. A diverse population of youth participants ensured that experiences along the entire spectrum of state-defined achievement levels (i.e., above average, average, high-need) were given voice and representation. This inclusive group of participants helped identify how youths from all levels – not just high academic achievers or those labeled as gifted or talented - situate their own academic performances while also appreciating others’ perceptions of their performance. In understanding the perspectives and experiences of the youths, this study was designed to identify and highlight talents, resources, and supports that enable some students to achieve academically. It is critical to recognize that the youths in this study persevered through, and were provided the resources to be academically achieving within, the current oppressive structures of American schooling. However, this study also intended to contribute to research
that disrupts dominant White-American and Eurocentric schooling norms and definitions of achievement (Ravitch, 1990).
Conceptualizations and Impacts of Achievement: A Case Study Analysis of an Urban Northeastern School

Michael D. Corral

B.S., Eastern Oregon University, 2010

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Connecticut

2018
Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Conceptualizations and Impacts of Achievement: A Case Study Analysis of an Urban Northeastern School

Presented by

Michael D. Corral, B.S, M.Ed.

Dissertation Chair and Advisor

Jennifer E. McGarry, Ph.D.

Dissertation Committee

Suzanne M. Wilson, Ph.D.

Jason G. Irizarry, EDD.

Erica Fernández, Ph.D.

Mark Kohan, Ph.D.

University of Connecticut
2018
DEDICATION

First and foremost, I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The passion I have for serving my community and people stems from many places, but Christ has always been at the center of who I strive to be like. I have fallen short many times throughout life, yet the love and strength that Christ continuously provides me is infinite. Second, esta disertación es para mi mamá, mi papá, y mi esposa - I could not have made it to the finish line without your unconditional love and support. Mom, I could never thank you enough for the love and sacrifices you have made for me. Dad, you pushed me when I did not want to be pushed and showed me how to accept nothing less than excellence. Courtney, you have showed me how to love and respect without limitations or fear—thank you for lifting me up every time I doubted myself.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members and mentors that include Dr. Suzanne Wilson, Dr. Joseph N. Cooper, Dr. Erica Fernández, Dr. Jason Irizarry, and Dr. Mark Kohan. You all have given me so much strength and guidance throughout this process. Your kind words, encouragement, and belief in me got me to finally believe in myself. Without each of you taking time to challenge me in my thinking, while guiding me along in the process, this dissertation would not have come together the way that it did. I cannot thank each of you enough for the time, effort, thought, and love that you all invested in me.

I am also thankful for my UConn and Husky Sport family. My experience over the last four years would not have been the same without the great conversations, the learning, the collaboration, and the time invested in the Hartford Community. Also, to all the young people that I have been blessed to work with, from Arizona to Connecticut, thank you. Finally, to Dr. Jennifer McGarry, thank you for guiding me through every step of this journey. Thank you for believing in me, thank you for letting me dream, and thank you for being the amazing leader that you are.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.................................................................................................................. iv
ACNKOLEDGEMENTS.................................................................................................... v
TABLE OF CONTENTS................................................................................................... vi
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION......................................................................................... 1
  Statement of the Problem.......................................................................................... 2
  Purpose of the Study............................................................................................... 3
  Research Questions................................................................................................. 4
  Significance of the Study......................................................................................... 5
  Definitions of Terms............................................................................................... 6
  Summary of the Chapters....................................................................................... 7
CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW............................................................................. 9
  Part I: Resources, Strategies, and Supports.............................................................. 11
    Parental Engagement and Academic Achievement.............................................. 12
    Critiques of parental engagement theories......................................................... 13
  Part II: Non-cognitive Traits................................................................................... 15
  Part III: Theoretical Frameworks............................................................................ 19
    Anti-deficit Achievement (A-DA)......................................................................... 19
    Critical Race Theory (CRT)................................................................................... 21
    Counter-Storytelling (CST)................................................................................... 23
    Critiques.............................................................................................................. 24
    Rationale.............................................................................................................. 26
    Summary............................................................................................................. 27
CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY.................................................................................. 28
  Researcher’s Subjectivity Statement...................................................................... 28
  Research Design..................................................................................................... 30
  Setting..................................................................................................................... 34
  Participant Selection............................................................................................... 35
  Participant Profiles................................................................................................ 37
  Data Collection Methods....................................................................................... 43
    Interviews........................................................................................................... 43
    Observations....................................................................................................... 45
    Document Analysis............................................................................................. 46
  Data Analysis......................................................................................................... 47
    Analysis I – Youth Participants.......................................................................... 51
    Analysis II – Adult Participants.......................................................................... 55
    Analysis III – Observations................................................................................ 57
    Analysis IV – School-based Document Analysis.................................................. 59
  Triangulation.......................................................................................................... 62
  Methodological Challenges.................................................................................... 62
  Summary................................................................................................................. 65
CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS.......................................................................................... 66
  Introduction............................................................................................................. 66
Section I – “I can’t learn here” .................................................................68
Section II – “Achievement means a lot” ...............................................77
Section III – “My mom stays on me but it’s because she wants better for
me” ........................................................................................................87
Section IV – “They don’t know I can draw like that” ..........................92
Section V – “I want more things to do” ..............................................98
Section VI – “We just get away with whatever we want in there” ....104
Summary ................................................................................................111
CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS........112
Discussion ..............................................................................................112
  Conceptualizations of Achievement ......................................................112
  Achievement Categories and Self-Perceptions ......................................114
  Strategies Employed to Facilitate Achievement ....................................116
  Conclusion ............................................................................................118
Theoretical Implications ........................................................................120
Implications for Policy and Practice .....................................................122
  Practical Implication I: Spaces and Climate .......................................122
  Practical Implication II: Mentors .......................................................123
  Practical Implication III: Courses and Extracurricular Opportunities ....124
  Practical Implication IV: Counseling and Psychological Services ......125
Future Research ....................................................................................126
Lessons Learned ...................................................................................129
REFERENCES ........................................................................................131
APPENDICES .........................................................................................146
State Achievement Level Categories ....................................................146
Data Analysis Process Matrix ...............................................................147
Youth Interview Protocol ......................................................................148
Adult Interview Protocol ......................................................................151
Recruitment Email Transcript ..............................................................153
Class Recruitment Transcript ...............................................................154
Adult and Youth Participant Conformed Consent ...............................156
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“As my mom be sayin’, you can never give up. People gonna tick you off. Don’t let that get into your head. You gotta move away from that [negativity]. When they tick you off, you gotta be like, you gotta know, that you can beat them. Not with your fists though. You gotta beat them with your words and with your passion” - Cameron, youth participant from EVC School #1.

Throughout the U.S., low income communities and families suffer from poor educational opportunities and outcomes (Coley & Baker, 2013; Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). Data consistently validates a reality where children from low income backgrounds complete fewer years of school, have fewer opportunities to accumulate wealth, rely on public assistance at higher rates, and experience more health issues than their wealthier peers (Coley & Baker, 2013). For instance, there is a $100,000 difference in Connecticut between median household incomes for families that qualify for federal free/reduced lunch programs versus those that do not (CCER, 2015; NAEP, 2013). Unfortunately, these same income gaps mirror academic opportunity gaps for Black and Latinx students in standardized testing and education completion rates (Coley & Baker, 2013; NAEP, 2013). The results of educational inequities have created, and continue to create, a nation where communities are hyper-segregated along income and race dimensions (Orfield & Ee, 2015).

Under the current national conditions, many communities endure institutionalized inequities that result in poverty and unequal access to resources and opportunities. One city in particular, East Valley City (EVC; pseudonym), is no exception. The needs of one EVC neighborhood are so high that a federal-level organization has stepped in to aid in the improvements of education, health, and economic outcomes (EVC Promise Zone, 2015). In
historically low income, segregated, and marginalized communities, high levels of academic achievement are challenging without strong systems in place that require cohesive family, school, and neighborhood alliances (Ford, 2006; Irizarry & Raible, 2011; LeChasseur, 2014). However, even in these challenging environments, many youths achieve at high academic levels with minimal access to essential supports like strong and caring teachers, positive peers and mentors, and high expectations that echo throughout the community and home (Harper, 2012, 2015). Research has been unable to explain the phenomenon of some youth successfully overcoming their circumstances when peers in identical environments cannot do the same. However, listening to the youths’ perspectives may be key in the process of better understanding this phenomenon and illuminating how and why achievement occurs at such drastically different levels - even when access, resources, and environments are equivalent.

**Statement of the Problem**

Historically, racism and discrimination have been at the forefront of the U.S. public education system (Gillborn, 2014). Eurocentric epistemologies⁶ that privilege the White-American narrative of history have set the standards for access, opportunity, and school curricula (Ravitch, 1990). From the ideologies of Americanization in the late 1800s (Valencia & San Miguel, 1998), to Jim Crow laws spanning into the 1960s, the playing field of education is built upon unequal, prejudiced, and constitutionally unjust foundations (Bell, 1980; Payne, 1984).

An examination of Connecticut’s cities, composed of racially and economically segregated communities, reveals that the inequities are neither accidental nor resolved (Coley & Baker, 2013; Enrich, 2003; Gotham, 2002; Ross & Yinger, 2002). If progression towards an equitable society is in the future, an equitable education system must be made a priority. To
accomplish this, every stakeholder must take collective responsibility -- parents, citizens, scholars, and politicians alike (Anyon, 2014; Ravitch, 2013).

The history of racial and economic injustices that have shaped inequities in education have specifically impacted EVC through issues of: 1) redlining policies - a practice that denied home ownership for People of Color in specific neighborhoods in the 1930s (McGann, 2014), 2) de facto segregation that endured into the early 1990s (Sheff v. O’Neill, 1989), and 3) inequitable funding for urban Communities of Color across Connecticut’s public schools (CCJEF, 2016). Some of these constitutionally unlawful acts, such as inequitable funding models, have been covertly supported through government policy from the 1960s until as recently as 2016 (CCJEF, 2016; Enrich, 2003). With little stoppage, Connecticut has allowed racism, oppression, and inequities tear down certain communities while upholding the privileges of others (CCJEF, 2016; Sheff v. O’Neill, 1989).

Many of the challenging circumstances faced by Connecticut’s youth stem from poverty. The percentage of Connecticut’s youth living in poverty nearly doubled over the last 15 years from 19.5% to 36.2% (Orfield & Ee, 2015). Exacerbating issues of poverty, most Black and Latinx youth in Connecticut attend a school where 63.1% of their peers live in poverty. At the other end of the spectrum, the average White youth in Connecticut attends a school where only 22.3% of their peers live in poverty (Orfield & Ee, 2015). In a similar matter, 73.6% of Latinx and 65.4% of Black youths in Connecticut are enrolled in intensely segregated schools. These high concentrations of poverty and racial segregation have also impacted graduation rates. A national report found that in 2014-15, only 74.8% of Latinx youth and 78% of Black youth graduated high school on time in Connecticut. In that same timespan, White youths graduated at a rate of 92.7% (Building a Grad Nation, 2017). Furthermore, recent research has identified
correlations between increased income inequalities and increased educational gaps (Akerhielm et al., 1998; NAEP, 2013). In general terms, as income gaps continue to increase across the nation, educational and opportunity gaps are increasing at similar rates. Therefore, examining the Black and Latinx experiences in a low-income and under performing school are critical in the process of establishing a more comprehensive understanding of what high achievement means - and what it takes to be just that - within different contexts.

**Purpose of the Study**

By combining Anti-Deficit Achievement (A-DA) (Harper, 2012) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Sólorzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002) frameworks, the desired outcomes of this study were to understand how a specific population of youths (i.e., middle school youths at EVC School #1) made sense of “achievement.” By understanding what achievement meant through a youth-focused perspective – and secondarily through the perspectives of influential and caring adults in the youths’ lives – this study also looked to identify tangible, meaningful, and education-based practices that empower and support EVC’s youths. Finally, this study aimed to highlight and expose how nuanced the process of understanding and addressing the needs of a specific community can be. By understanding how every community, neighborhood, and school is situated and context-specific, this study looked to identify how the formulation and implementation of interventions and resources often need to happen at micro levels (i.e. school-based) rather than at macro (i.e. district), levels.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore and gain insight on how the youths at EVC School #1 conceptualize academic achievement. Secondarily, this study explored the youths’ understandings of achievement, how they exhibit high achieving behaviors, and if being labeled
at a certain level of achievement impacts the perceptions they have of themselves and/or their peers. To investigate these inquiries, the following questions were constructed:

**RQ1.** How do the youths at EVC School #1 conceptualize achievement?

**RQ2.** How does being categorized into a state-defined achievement level impact the self-perceptions of youths at EVC School #1?

**RQ3.** What strategies have been employed by youths and adults to facilitate the achievement of youths at EVC School #1?

**Significance of the Study**

This study provides an in-depth examination of narratives that are often excluded from the research. With middle school youth center stage, emergent themes can help bridge gaps in the literature that often generalizes all marginalized communities and youth as needing similar interventions, supports, and resources. Additionally, this research provides information and voice that allow for a stronger understand of what is needed to support the unmet needs of the EVC School #1 youths at individual, organizational, and sociocultural levels. Second, the examination of youths at different academic achievement levels provides an opportunity to expand traditional ideas of “high achieving” youth. Findings from this study can reshape how “achievement” is operationalized within communities that face systemic issues around segregation, racism, poverty, and inequitable educational opportunities (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Yosso, 2005). Finally, the study identifies resources, support systems, and community assets that can redefine what EVC School #1 personnel provide for their youths. The data found from this study has the potential to influence policies at the district level while impacting practices at the school level. At the school level, this research can help identify the areas of highest opportunity
and highest need. At the district level, this research can guide the creation of new policies that enable individual schools to address the specific needs of their unique youth populations.

**Definition of Terms**

1. **High-Need or Low-income** - High-need and low-income refers to certain communities and neighborhoods that have been unjustly forced to endure generations of institutionally supported poverty, segregation, discrimination, and marginalization.

2. **People/Youth/Communities of Color** - A person or community of people the represents a race or ethnicity that is of non-European or non-White descent.

3. **Black** - A person or group of people that have origins to any Black African racial groups, who identify as Black, African American, or Afro-Caribbean.

4. **Latinx** - A person that represents Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or any Latin American descent. The “x” in the term represents a gender-neutral version of the masculine, generally used term, Latino.

5. **Achievement** - For this proposed study, achievement is defined according to state standards of achievement levels.

   - **Above Average Achiever (i.e., High Achiever)** - Youth in this category have scored “exceeds” in one subject and a minimum of “Meets” on all other subject tests

   - **Average Achiever (i.e., at grade level)** - Youth in this category have scored “Meets” or “Approaches” on all subject tests. While these are two categories, the difference in scores within these two categories are often minimal

   - **High Need Achiever (i.e., below grade level)** - Youth in this category have scores “Does Not Meet” in half or more of their subject tests.
6. **White-Eurocentric epistemologies** - The foundations and justifications within society that place White values, culture, and language as the superior standard. Once established and normalized, these White-Eurocentric epistemologies required conformity in all ways of speaking, teaching, learning, and thinking to be able to survive and achieve (Smith, 2008; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Freire, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The implementation of Eurocentric epistemologies came by way of a deculturalization process that stripped away culture, language, and history from non-White populations (e.g., Latinx-Americans, African-Americans, Native Americans, and Asian-Americans), through legislation and educational curriculum (Smith, 2008; Delgado Bernal, 2002).

**Summary of the Chapters**

This first chapter provides the dissertation’s background and rationale. Additionally, Chapter One summarizes the structure and layout of the dissertation chapters. Chapter Two provides a thorough review of the literature along with an explanation of how the literature serves as a foundation to investigate the research questions. The literature reviewed focuses on analyzing prior research that has tried to interpret how some youths excel and achieve while others do not. Part of Chapter Two’s critical literature review provides data that uncovers how the research community often holds all youths - regardless of their circumstances - to a biased, racist, and discriminatory set of standards. Through an Anti-Deficit Achievement and Critical Race Theory/Counter-storytelling framework, this study invalidates deficit-based narratives. This deficit-based literature often, unintentionally or not, further oppresses marginalized Communities of Color. Moreover, Chapter Three provides a detailed account of the methodology, research design, participant information, and data analysis. Chapter Four describes the findings and
emergent themes across all data points. In Chapter Five, I discuss the results, reflecting on their implications for policy, practice, and future research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Through critical scholarship on the history of American public education, it is known that the U.S. has upheld an education system that strips and/or redefines cultures, ethnicities, and identities of non-White populations (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). Racial stereotypes, and the racism that accompanies these stereotypes, are an unfortunate component of the U.S. society. Historical scholars have found that stereotyping and racism were accepted as an early U.S. strategy to, “provide evidence of the inhumanity of Black and Native American peoples so as to justify brutality against them” (McGee, 2016, p. 1629). These inhumane belief systems have carried on throughout society and been sustained by the U.S. education system through curriculum and policy (Valenzuela, 1999). As a consequence of these racist underpinnings, many Youths of Color, their families, and communities have been forced to give up their identities and cultural values (Bereiter & Engleman, 1966; Deutsch, 1963; Hess & Shipman, 1965; Valenzuela, 1999).

Subsequently, a portion of White America still upholds inaccurate assumptions about People of Color lacking the intellectual ability and capital required for social mobility (Yosso, 2005). As this belief has perpetuated over time, people in positions of power - who are predominantly heterosexual White males that ascribe to Eurocentric epistemologies⁶ - continue to operate from deficit-based perspectives. White America’s deficit-based perspectives often conceptualize People of Color as folks that need help to overcome their menial levels of knowledge, abilities, and skills (Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2005). In education, this has taken the form of repeated efforts to “fill up” disadvantaged youths with cultural knowledge and abilities from the dominant group (i.e., White-Eurocentric epistemologies). These deficit-based reform
efforts do not address the actual issues that need reform. Reform policies continuously focus on the individuals enduring oppression and marginalization rather than working to address larger societal inequities and racist policies that cyclically suppress and divide (Yosso, 2005). Unfortunately, the current educational approaches in the U.S. continue to marginalize Youth of Color, specifically Black and Latinx youths, through teachings that uphold false ideas about the superiority of White-Eurocentric epistemologies (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Malone & Barabino, 2009).

These educational inequities for marginalized Black and Latinx youths are compounded under the country’s current social and political conditions. However, one small part of the solution is to disseminate evidence that informs society how it is inequities -- not individuals’ ability -- that cause “educational gaps” between Youths of Color and White populations (Burris & Welner, 2005; Carter & Welner, 2013). Nevertheless, some youths still overcome difficult obstacles in their lives and reach high levels of achievement despite a lack of opportunities and resources. These examples of exceptional youths inspired this study: How do they achieve despite living in their challenging environments?

Part one of this chapter discusses the literature that investigates how youths overcome environmental factors like poverty and low-quality schooling without specific supports in place (e.g., firm parenting, organized extracurricular opportunities, and positive adult mentorship). The second section of part one summarizes research that identifies criticisms of this research, including -- for example -- how Parents of Color are often depicted as bad or disengaged. The inaccurate characterizations towards Parents of Color from low-income backgrounds often emerge from research that excludes the perspectives, experiences, and voices of non-White middle-class parents (Yosso, 2005).
Part two discusses how certain non-cognitive traits (e.g., motivation and grit) are often identified/measured in youth that overcome challenging social and/or economic challenges. At the conclusion of part two, the second critique section discusses how non-cognitive trait theories can covertly place the blame of academic underachievement on individuals (i.e., Youth of Color from low-income backgrounds) rather than highlight and place the actual blame on inequitable, racist, and discriminatory systems that continuously oppress Youth of Color from low-income backgrounds (Irizarry, 2009; Picower, 2009).

Lastly, in part three a comprehensive description and rationale for the theoretical frameworks used in this study is provided. This section discusses how Anti-Deficit Achievement (Harper, 2010) and Critical Race Theory Counter-Storytelling (Sólorzano & Yosso, 2002) work towards similar outcomes by resisting deficit-oriented perspectives (Furco, 2013; Irizarry, 2009). These combined frameworks prioritize and uphold asset-based language and perspectives, a stance used throughout the research design, data collection, methodologies, language, and analyses.

**Part I: Resources, Strategies, and Supports**

One commonly proposed solution to aid in academic achievement for youths in challenging environments is to provide additional resources and supports (Banks & Litchenberg, 2015; Clark, 2003; Jacob & Ludwig, 2008, Tough, 2014). Unfortunately, most schools and communities that are the highest in need, have the least amount of access to resources. The past research that investigates the academic achievement of Youth of Color in low-income, high-crime, high-stress communities and schools has discovered specific intervention strategies that show promise in helping youth navigate these environments. Suggested findings include early identification and intervention systems to prevent disengagement, early childhood education
programs, school-based personnel that serve as mentors and role models, strong parental support, organized community-based mentorship programs, consistent high expectation cultures and norms from home and school, and positive and safe school climates (Balfanz, Herzog, & Maclver, 2007; Harper, 2012, 2014, 2015; Howard & Assoc., 2017; Howard, Douglas & Warren, 2016; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Of all the tangible youth achievement interventions, one of the most researched methods is parental engagement. Previous literature on parental engagement indicates that when parental engagement is present at a high level, youths achieve in their school and social settings at high rates.

**Parental Engagement and Academic Achievement**

No matter the environment, strong parental and home support has been found to greatly enhance the outcomes of youth academic achievement. Parental engagement within educational research has been defined as a parent’s effort and work with their children and their children’s school faculty, with intentions of promoting positive academic development and outcomes (Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates & Pettit, 2004). This general idea of parental engagement includes a variety of actionable practices that “engaged” parents employ, which fall mainly into two categories: 1) home involvement strategies, and 2) school-based involvement strategies (Epstein, 2001; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey, Ice, & Whitaker, 2009).

The positive effectiveness of both home-based and school-based parental involvement has been validated by several reviews and meta-analysis longitudinal studies (Fan & Chen 2001; Henderson & Mapp 2002; Jeynes 2005, 2007; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack 2007). Hoover-Dempsey, Ice, and Whitaker (2009) have described home-based parental engagement as a
parent’s willingness and ability to help with homework, the parents’ ability to re-teach and review content, and their knowledge of school performance. As for school-based parental engagement, this has generally been described as parents’ ability and willingness to work with their children’s school personnel on a semi-regular basis. According to this research, when parents are engaged and involved at both the school and home levels, a psychological message is sent to children that school is important. When this message is received, children subconsciously adopt the same mentality, which then leads to improved achievement outcomes on standardized tests, coursework, attendance, and grade completion (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

**Critiques of parental engagement theories.** Positive parenting techniques that help children achieve in life and school, on the surface, comes across as a silver bullet. However, there are also many areas where this research falls short. First, nearly all the foundational literature on parental engagement excludes the voices, experiences, and stories of Parents of Color (Lynn, et al., 2006; Weis & Fine, 1993; Yamamoto, 1997; Yosso, 1992). By being excluded from this research, Communities and Parents of Color might be misrepresented in the data and findings. To wit, Parents of Color’s methods, values, knowledge, and actions of supporting their children’s educational attainment have been silenced, marginalized, ignored, and (at times) identified as harmful (De Carvalho, 2001; Hong, 2011; López, 2001; López & López, 2010; Olivos, 2004, 2006).

The limited views and understandings of parental engagement have created biased accounts that present narratives of Parents of Color not invested in their children’s education. In reality, there has been an absence and suppression of cultural and social values that -- if better understood -- could help scholars and practitioners understand how to best build upon the many
positive methods that Parents of Color use to empower and support their children, as well as to help white educators understand -- instead of misunderstand -- alternative norms of parental interaction with children. However, this perspective rarely exists in the literature, creating a divide in what is “universally” understood as parental engagement. Parents whose behaviors fall outside of the White-Eurocentric epistemological spectrum have been cast as inferior, which has lead to the wrongful representation of Parents of Color from low-income backgrounds engaging in poor parenting practices that academically and socially their children at a disadvantage (Yamamoto, 1997; Yosso, 1992).

Additionally, while there is valid data to show that Black and Latinx populations in impoverished circumstances fall behind in educational achievement measures, the disproportionate disparities begin with the U.S.’s inequitable and racially-driven systems. These inequitable systems have continued to marginalize and trap low-income People of Color in perpetual cycles. The U.S. myth of the individual pulling one’s self up by their bootstraps often blinds the general public to the powerful influence of these social structures. Obliviousness to these aforementioned inequities is upheld and “… strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all” (McIntosh, 1988). Destructive cycles of poverty and oppression are the cause of disparities in educational outcomes -- not a lack of support and value towards education by People of Color (Fernández, 2015; Stovall, 2005, 2006; Yosso, 2002, 2005). When communities, parents, and Youth of Color that have been systemically marginalized do not understand or culturally agree with the expectations and norms of teachers and schools, or lack the ability to bridge communication gaps with school stakeholders, distinct disadvantages are placed upon Youth and Parents of Color (Monkman, Ronald & Théramène 2005). In order to understand the current
realities of youths that are enduring these challenging circumstances, it is important to highlight and connect the historical and contemporary social structures at play throughout this study.

**Part II: Non-Cognitive Traits**

A substantial and growing body of research examines the mental psyche of youth in challenging environments. This literature attempts to pinpoint how youth achieve through the exploration of non-cognitive characteristics such as motivation or -- of particular interest in current research -- resilience and grit (to name a few) (Alva, 1991; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Luther, 1991; Rutter, 1984; Werner & Smith, 1982). This research identifies how youth achieve in schools when there are daily environmental barriers and high-stress conditions (Alva, 1991; Constantine, Benard & Diaz, 1999; Wang & Gordon, 2012; Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1994) by identifying individual characteristics that may account for the student’s success (despite the odds). Based on findings from multiple studies, these non-cognitive characteristics likely evolve from personal and environmental resources that youth inadvertently or inadvertently have access to (Alva, 1991; Compas, 1982; Garmezy 1981; Garmezy & Rutter, 1983). Also, each characteristic is slightly different and -- in most cases -- the isolated presence of any one of these characteristics (e.g., resilience and motivation) has been found to be non-advantageous (Martin, 2002). In general terms, someone with only motivation or only resilience may not be any better off than someone with neither.

Earlier research focused on demonstrating how motivated youth have a high likelihood of achievement no matter the circumstances (Martin, 2001; Martin, Marsh, & Debus, 2001a, 2001b; Meece, Wigfield, & Eccles, 1990; Schunk, 1990). Being motivated is described as having the energy, drive, focus, and commitment to see a task through to the best of one’s ability. More recent research has nominated resilience -- the process of successfully overcoming failure or
taking on a task that is extremely challenging with high likelihood of failure (Howard & Johnson, 2000; Martin, 2001) -- as crucial. Regarding academics, resilience refers to the ability to “deal effectively with academic setbacks, stress, and study pressure” (Martin, 2001, p. 35).

The difference between these two characteristics is distinct. Motivation internally pushes the high achieving youth to do or perform something that will improve their outcomes. Resilience is the ability and mindset of a young person to fail at something and keep trying until they get a positive outcome. In other words, a motivated person may not find success because they do not have the resiliency to keep trying after failure. Alternatively, a resilient person may never maximize their potential because they lack the initial motivation it takes to engage in new self-improvement processes or actions. In many cases, one characteristic without the presence of the other is not necessarily beneficial.

The most recent candidate trait that has garnered a lot of attention is grit, which is associated with Dr. Angela Duckworth and defined as “the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals” (Duckworth et al., 2007). Some attributes associated with grit are determination, perseverance, patience, the ability to set goals and the ability to collaborate strongly with others (Barile, 2014; Duckworth et al., 2007). Essentially, grit attempts to encompass multiple non-cognitive traits like resilience, motivation, and goal orientation into one characteristic. Where grit varies from motivation, resilience, and other non-cognitive traits is that it is less a measure of success and failure and more about having an ability to focus on a single goal or task over long periods of time; whether that be weeks, months, or years. Duckworth found that when young people have an ability to formulate a clear long-term goal, stay focused on completing that goal, and commit to the work it takes to complete that goal, they have a high likelihood to be successful in most areas of their life (Perkins-Gough, 2013). Put
differently, grit is a measurement of the process more so than the measure of a specific outcome or specific personal characteristic (e.g., resilience).

Each of the non-cognitive traits has experienced periods of popularity, taken up by teachers, scholars, and the popular press. When the idea spreads rapidly, it loses some of its distinctiveness because its meaning is stretched in ways that go well beyond what the empirical evidence suggests. Each also is the target of criticism. For example, while the notion of grit has pride of place in current education and policy circles, scholars point out that it lacks the research and validity that it improves youth/student outcomes and also romanticizes hardships (Gorman, 2017).

No matter the construct -- resilience, motivation, grit -- pinning down when and how these traits are learned or taught has been elusive (Barile, 2014; Dweck, 1984, 1986; Elliot, 1999; Harackiewicz, Barron & Elliot, 1998). Some recent research on Boys of Color living within low-income communities suggests that resilience and motivation-related characteristics are likely learned behaviors from parents and adult mentors -- but this is only a hypothesis based on interviews (Harper, 2010, 2012; Howard & Assoc., 2017).

Duckworth posits that grit can be taught through a reframing of ways that educators praise and challenge youth in the classroom. This pedagogical shift, according to Duckworth’s team, will eventually build an endurance and eagerness to expect excellence from themselves (Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Duckworth et al. 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Perkins-Gough & Duckworth, 2013; Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014; Von Culin, et al., 2014). Grit has been compared to Dweck’s theory of a “growth mindset” (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) in the sense that a non-cognitive traits or abilities can be learned and intelligence/ability is not confined to a set group of characteristics at birth or developed during childhood. Nonetheless, even Duckworth
admits that teaching and measuring a child’s ability and growth in areas like “grit” or “motivation” is a bad idea (Duckworth, 2018), noting that there is not enough evidence to understand and evaluate if teaching and learning these non-cognitive traits in a classroom setting is possible.

In conclusion, non-cognitive factors have long been acknowledged as relevant to understanding achievement. They have also drawn considerable criticism, including by Critical Race theorists (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) whose work has revealed how non-cognitive explanations for achievement can be detrimental to the narrative of Youth of Color from low-income backgrounds because the characteristics (i.e., motivation, resilience, grit, etc.) are founded upon assumptions that achievement is based on individual effort and draw from White epistemologies about success (Golden, 2017). When research attributes achievement to an individual’s ability -- whether it be motivation or anything else -- the research fails to consider the generational, systemic, and oppressive structures that cyclically work against the efforts of People of Color from low-income backgrounds (Weis & Fine, 2012). Under this guise, the narrative becomes one that erases awareness and the acknowledgement of inequities throughout U.S. history. When scholars associate achievement to an individual's ability, a shift happens where the gaps appear to be with “outputs” versus “inputs” (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Golden, 2017; Milner, 2010). In other words, when Youth of Color from low-income backgrounds are evaluated by non-cognitive traits, they are often identified as unmotivated (i.e., lazy), lacking grit (i.e., disengaged), or lacking resilience (i.e., undisciplined). Through this skewed, culturally laden lens, the youths are measured by their “outputs” instead of the inequitable amounts of “inputs” that marginalized and oppressed groups of people have had to endure for hundreds of years.
Part III: Theoretical Framework

This study combines two frameworks to explore the research questions. First, Harper’s (2012) Anti-deficit Achievement (A-DA) framework was used as the primary lens to outline the language and direction of all observations, interviews, and analyses. Second, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was employed using the specific methodology of counter-storytelling (i.e., CRT-CST) (Delgado, 1990; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005, 2006). Together the frameworks work to reveal the roles of race, racism, and inequity in ways that push society to shift towards socially just norms, policies, conceptualizations, and actions (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Anti-Deficit Achievement (A-DA)

To begin, A-DA (Harper, 2010) uses a lens that intentionally highlights and uplifts the ways marginalized and/or oppressed individuals overcome oppression. The A-DA framework grew out of research on the structural factors that came into play for young Men of Color growing up in urban and poor communities. According to Harper (2015), the A-DA is;

...guided by a belief that despite what is consistently reported in media, peer-reviewed academic journals, and research reports, there are many Black male students who enter post-secondary institutions with high levels of academic preparation, support, and motivation, which enables them to succeed academically, accrue social capital and activate it for personal and professional advancement, benefit in myriad ways from leadership and engagement opportunities on their campuses, and ultimately persist through degree completion (Harper, 2015, p. 142).

Put another way, the A-DA framework is an alternative approach to deficit perspectives. This non-traditional perspective focuses on understanding how Youths of Color successfully
navigate the American education system - despite their various challenges (e.g. systemic racism, negative stereotypes, etc.). Further, this framework identifies, “policies, practices, and structures, as well as individual, familial, cultural, and communal resources that help Black men succeed educationally” (Harper, 2015, p. 142). With the youths that make up the student body of EVC being nearly 100% Black and Latinx, it is important to reference past research that empowers and supports Black and Latinx youth.

The general tenets that form the A-DA framework are: 1) a focus on understanding how achievers from diverse and challenging backgrounds operate, 2) discovering strategies that marginalized Youth of Color employ to resist the internalization of discouraging misconceptions about members of their racial groups, and how they respond productively to stereotypes they encounter at school, 3) inviting minoritized achievers to name the persons, resources, experiences, and opportunities to which they attribute their achievements instead of continually having them identify all the barriers to persistence and success, 4) explaining how academically thriving Youth of Color negotiate culturally foreign, unresponsive, politically complex, and overwhelmingly White environments, 5) understanding how achievers develop their identities, how their confidence in specific academic or community spaces is developed, and how recognition of competence in certain tasks leads to various forms of achievement in others, 6) recognizing Youth of Color as experts on their own realities and empowering them to offer counternarratives concerning their academic success, and 7) taking account of which experiences afford high achievers opportunities to envision themselves in long-term positions of success (Harper, 2010, 2015; Harper & Newman, 2010).

The A-DA approach taps the cultural knowledge of marginalized “others” to identify learning assets that have historically been treated as irrelevant, unimportant, and detrimental
(Zipin, 2009). An A-DA approach to research and teaching provides the foundation to transform “students’ diversities into pedagogical assets” (Moll & Gonzalez, 1997, p. 89). The more society can recognize that marginalized youths, their families, and their communities are achieving every day -- and are experts at addressing challenging circumstances -- the more policymakers and educational leaders can work towards providing adequate and equitable supports and resources for America’s highest need populations.

**Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

Within education, CRT has served as a theoretical and analytical framework that “challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourse” (Yosso, 2006, p. 74). At its core, CRT challenges White Eurocentric epistemologies. Scholars Sólorzano & Yosso (2001) believe CRT has roots connecting back to the turn of the 20th century with foundational components gaining inspiration from the work of DuBois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The literature describes CRT as a form of grounded research that,

a) centers race and racism in all aspects of the research process; b) challenges the traditional research paradigm, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color; c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination, d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color; and e) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, humanities, and the law to better understand the experiences of students of color. (Sólorzano and Yosso, 2001, p. 24)

While CRT’s lineage may come from the work of early Black scholars like DuBois (1903), the modern idea of CRT originated from legal scholars that were “interested in studying and transforming the relationships among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001,
The formal CRT framework sprang up in the mid-1970s as a reaction to the lack of civil rights progress that begun in the 1960s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). It was during this era that NYU Professor Derrick Bell -- widely acknowledged as the founding father of CRT -- began a style of scholarship that analyzed American law through a critical lens with race and racism at the center (Bell, 1992). Additional early supporters of this framework included scholars like Alan Freeman (1988), Richard Delgado (1989, 1995), and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995).

Matsuda (1991) describes the CRT method of research as “the work of progressive legal Scholars of Color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination” (p. 1331). Broadly, CRT has been viewed as a framework that allows researchers to understand societal oppression. These race-focused lenses help highlight injustices and generate societal and individual transformations within that society (Tierney, 1993; Yosso, 2005).

As a lens, CRT highlights the realities of U.S. institutions – such as public education – and how they privilege White-Eurocentric epistemologies that systematically and consistently oppress People of Color (Yosso, 2005). By limiting the voice of marginalized and oppressed groups, it becomes impossible to understand what is happening, or not happening, within marginalized Communities of Color. Yosso (2005) supported this stance in her research when she stated, “deficit-informed research often ‘sees’ deprivation in Communities of Color” (p. 75).

In other words, Yosso’s work helped to support how People of Color endure misrepresentations of their excellence, authentic voice, experiences, and expertise. By shifting the lens away from narratives of Communities of Color as places of poverty and disparity, the focus can become asset-based, emphasizing gifts, talents, knowledge, and community expertise (Solórzano &
Solórzano, 1995; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997; Sólorzano, Villalpando & Oseguera, 2005). The CRT lens promotes discussions where White Eurocentric middle class standards can be challenged and problematized (Yosso, 2002, 2005). This shift in perspective allows for “critical race scholars to ‘see’ multiple forms of cultural wealth within Communities of Color” (Yosso, 2005, p. 82), creating a space and platform where Communities of Color can be centered in research, pedagogy, and policy formulation.

**Counter-Storytelling (CST)**

Counter-storytelling (CST) is a method that stems from some of the earliest CRT scholars Yosso (2005), Ladson-Billings (2000) and Delgado Bernal (1998, 2002). These scholar began to ask questions like: a) whose knowledge, perspective, voice, capital, and talents truly matter, and b) whose knowledge, perspective, voice, capital, and talents was perpetually silenced and/or disregarded. Their questions illuminated how White Eurocentric epistemologies were prioritized and upheld throughout America’s history. As a result, there was a constant assumption that “People of Color ‘lacked’ the social and cultural capital required for social mobility” (Yosso, 2005, p. 70; see also Harper, 2009, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Many school structures and support systems were also predicated on these false presumptions. Yosso (2005) argues that school systems often began working from a positionality of needing to “help” disadvantaged students whose race and class background left them lacking the “necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities and cultural capital” (p. 70). In reality, the only disadvantage that many People of Color exhibited was not being born into the White middle class category of America.

With CRT scholars beginning to ask and investigate these inaccurate and biased patterns throughout society, CST emerged as a method that could provide marginalized groups with a
platform to define their own realities be allowing for their authentic voice, knowledge, and experiences to be heard by the masses (Delgado, 1990; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005). Through the use of counter-stories, youth and other marginalized could be equipped with the tools to challenge and redefine dominant discourses that often limit, dehumanize, and further oppress them (Sólorzano & Yosso, 2002). CST resists deficit frameworks that inaccurately place People and Youth of Color in a negative light (Sólorzano & Yosso, 2001). According to Stovall (2006), “a counter story is needed to identify the desire for said communities for quality education despite mainstream accounts that depict communities of Color as ‘anti-school’ or ‘anti-intellectual’” (p. 244). The central purpose of CST is to include the voice, knowledge, and contributions from People of Color to create an accurate and factual account of history and culture in America that is inclusive (Stovall, 2005). Providing a platform for People of Color to direct their own narrative enables educational policies and practices that affect equity and social justice.

As America’s racially-biased systems and structures have continuously marginalized and silenced the valuable voices and knowledge from People of Color, CST has been used as a tool to bring these lost voices to the forefront of social, educational, and policy conversations. Through the use of CST, the previously lost and silenced voices have now emerged through scholarship and policy analysis in forms of “Outsider” knowledges (Hill Collins, 1986), mestiza knowledges (Anzaldúa, 1987), and transgressive knowledges (hooks, 1994) that change the ways in which society understands the circumstances and challenges faced by America’s highest-need communities and people (as cited in Yosso, 2005).
Critiques

There are two primary avenues where scholars have found critiques in this conceptual framework. One area of critique and limitation comes from the use of CRT in general and then the second area or critiques comes from the use of the method of CST. In reference to CRT, the criticisms that found generally focus on CRT’s gloomy outlook for future change (i.e., racism is ordinary and aberrational), the inaccurate foundation that all Whites are a homogenous group in positions of power and privilege (Maisura, 2008), the actual impact that CRT scholarship has had on our society thus far (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005), and the potential over reliance of storytelling as a method of delivery for CRT (Ladson-Billings, 2005). This last point brought up by Ladson-Billings (2005) rolls into the main critiques that were found on the usage of CST.

Similar to the point that Ladson-Billings brought up in 2005, Fernández (2015) points out that CRT and CST have become a very common approach in the CRT process of analysis. As a result, opportunities to impact educational injustice through other more appropriate CRT techniques are likely being missed. This does not mean that CST is invaluable, but rather that researchers should expand the goal of understanding the experiences of People of Color using multiple tools and approaches. Examples of other CRT methodologies include critical race spatial analysis (Sólorzano and Velez, 2007) and critical race testimonios (Huber, 2008; Yudice, 1991).

While this critique is valid, the use CST in this study allowed the words and stories of the oppressed to come across with powerful messages. In the words of Freire (2010), “The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption” (p. 54). For marginalized and oppressed groups to overcome the historical injustices that have been placed upon them, their voice and presence must be present.
Additionally, there are many critiques on the value and idea of storytelling and individual voice. One of the main critiques is that there is no single voice that could represent entire groups of people (Kennedy, 1990). The individual stories told by marginalized people that counter dominant narratives could never represent an entire race, ethnicity, or community. For example, Kennedy (1990) talks about how there are Black conservatives, Black neoconservatives, Black radicals, and a growing Black middle-class that could live in the same community and each have different perspectives, experiences, and priorities. However, while critiques like Kennedy’s are valid, there are common experiences of racism, discrimination, and inequalities that People of Color share. Contrary to Kennedy’s theory (1990), these shared traumatic experiences can be represented through multiple voices that produce a powerful and aligned narrative (Delgado, 1990; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). With so few voices and alternate perspectives heard by the dominant groups, it is important to use voice strategically. Counter-storytelling has allowed marginalized and silenced voices to be heard. The more it emerges in research the more society can gain an accurate view of the realities in America.

**Rationale for A-DA+CRT/CST**

The two frameworks were used together to ensure that all protocols, interview questions, observations, and analyses were grounded in a perspective that identifies assets and successes rather than deficiencies. In particular, the A-DA framework ensured that asset-based language and perspectives were used throughout the study’s processes while CRT helped to reveal acts of courage, effort, and intelligence that EVC School #1’s youths exhibit within a discriminatory, racially charged, and inequitable society, specifically through the use of counter-storytelling (CST). CST helped to structure the research and data collection by giving the youths a platform to define their own realities and conceptualizations of their school, community, and homes.
(Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002; Yosso, 2002, 2005, 2006). As a form of resistance, CRT’s purpose of CST was to provide the youths a platform to be heard, their understandings and perspectives valued, and their realities to be used in the process of shifting the dominant – and often racially and economically oppressive – norms that exist throughout their schooling experiences (Sólorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Summary

In summary, the goal of this study is to provide a platform for the voices and experiences of Youth of Color as a means for illuminating what education, learning, and achievement can look like within Black and Latinx communities (Freire, 2010; Fernández, 2015; Lopez, 2011). Improving systems for populations that have unjustifiably been forced into positions of high-need, requires understanding where and how they can be supported the most, not from the perspectives of “others” (including the traditionally dominant White-Eurocentric perspective) but through the eyes and ears of Youth of Color themselves. A central goal, then, of this research is to understand what the intelligent and powerful youth already bring with them every day.

Multiple perspectives -- culturally and communally -- that reflect varied value systems, religions, and familial factors ought to influence how we understand and enable achievement. A-DA and CRT-CST allowed me to explore the many -- often hidden and silenced -- positive dynamics, talents, perspectives, and conceptualizations around achievement.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study explored the conceptualizations of achievement from Youth of Color that live in a low-income community. The purpose of this chapter is to describe and explain the methodology and methods used in the investigation. A subjectivity statement is first provided and then followed by a broad review of qualitative research and rationale about why this type of research is warranted. Following this overview, more information concerning the setting, the site, the participant selection process, and the challenges that are associated with this methodology is provided. In the chapter’s conclusion, a discussion of the efforts taken to enhance the study’s trustworthiness and rigor, as well as the study’s limitations is given.

Researcher Subjectivity Statement

In interpretive research, it is important for the researcher to be self aware and transparent. Peshkin (2000) eloquently argues that one’s subjectivity is both a strength and a limitation. Here I consider both possibilities.

I was raised by two undocumented Mexican parents who had little formal education. The inspiration for my research stems from my desire to work with and in communities I identify with and love. As I have worked in the school and community that this study took place, I have seen many youths with undeniable gifts and talents. For reasons I cannot always understand, I have witnessed youths overcome very challenging situations and environments to find success in their school and community. As I see a reflection of myself in many of the youths throughout the school and surrounding neighborhood in this study, I am both inspired and determined to understand what can be done to better support the youth at EVC School #1. While I know of the trends and statistics for Black and Latinx youth in schools and the legal system throughout the
nation, there are many bright and talented youth that exist in every school and community. I am passionate about understating these bright spots – these high achievers – and what can be done to create spaces where high achievers are the norm, rather than the exception. And to help others understand the triumphs of Black and Latinx youth, not simply the trials and tribulations.

My interest and passion to this research kept me engaged and committed throughout the entire process. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the case study approach is lengthy, time-consuming, and difficult. Issues arise -- trying to coordinate meetings, appointments, and conversations with students, parents, teachers, administrators, the school and school district, and other community stakeholders, for example -- when things do not go according to plan. At times, I was tempted to take a less rigorous approach to this study, but my commitment and compassion for these amazing young people held me to my original aspirations for the study.

As a first generation Mexican-American, high school graduate, and college graduate, I identify with many of the young people in this study. Many of them are confronting challenges I also once faced. Thus, we have similar childhood and adolescent experiences. In the area of the city where many of these high achievers live and go to school, there is a poverty rate of 49.35%, a low high school completion rate of 38.3%, and a predominantly Black and Latinx population of residents. It is likely that many of these students are coming from homes and situations similar to what I experienced as a young child and adolescent (NHPZ, 2015). Here too this aspect of my subjectivity may be a strength. With a similar upbringing, I may see, hear, recognize, and feel things that outsiders without such experience would not recognize or comprehend. Sensing my familiarity with their lives and circumstances, participants might have also opened up to me in ways that they would not to those less familiar with the context.
While my passion, commitment, and connection is one of my greatest strengths, I was aware throughout the study that it could also be a limitation. I could not presume that the case study participants and I had or experienced our lives in similar ways. My own assumptions, that is, could as easily obscure as enable my ability to hear and see. Although I went into the study believing that I did not want to tell my story but instead their story, my passion could also have led me to hear what I wanted to say, rather than learn from the participants in new ways.

I monitored how my personal experiences and inherent biases might serve as an obstacle or distorting filter throughout my time in the school. The ability to be as grounded as possible in this research was vital in the process of gaining valid knowledge and understandings around the phenomenon occurring with these high achievers. I return to this theme in the chapter’s concluding section when I discuss my approaches to ensuring trustworthiness.

**Research Design**

Through an exploratory qualitative case study, this study examines the conceptualizations of achievement from youth who have displayed a range of academic achievement. While there is a range of ways to conduct case study research, this study used an exploratory approach, as defined by Yin (2003). With this approach, a phenomenon was explored in order to provide a deeper understanding rather than working to identify concrete and predictive relationships. Moreover, the exploratory case study approach encourages the researcher to examine the uniqueness of personal and situational circumstances rather than trying to come away with findings from large aggregates of diverse human data. Larger data sets often dilute the findings when analyzing voice and experience (Stake, 1995). This methodology promotes immersing one’s self in the culture of the study and environment. The required immersion aligns with the
researcher's commitment to establish close and meaningful relationships with the cooperating participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Guba, 1981; Stake, 1995).

Traditional case study methodology calls for multiple data sources. This study includes multiple sources that come from youth academic measures (e.g., states test scores, district formative assessments), school-based observations, youth and school stakeholder interviews, and document analysis (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Using multiple data points, acknowledging biases, including rich and thick quotes from the participants, and engaging in member-check protocols provided data triangulation and methodological strategies that enhances the trustworthiness and validity of the study’s findings (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2003). The research design involved nine cases of students (and their affiliated teachers and parents) within one school (see Figure 1).
Figure 1: Within case study design
This study took an interpretive approach that relied on qualitative data to identify shared experiences while investigating differences between and within participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). These shared experiences were obtained by establishing relationships with a diverse set of youths that were experiencing educational achievement at different levels. Regarding this study, each youth served as an individual unit of analysis within the case study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The study design ensured that voices from youths that have a variation of experiences and outcomes in the school setting were represented.

This approach provided a holistic picture of how youths conceptualized achievement and the impacts it had on them (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013; Yin, 2003). The final layer of this model called for a within-case analysis approach (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013). This within-case analysis component was fitting because it enabled a comparison model that examined the youth participants against each other to assess similarities and differences amongst the youth’s conceptualizations and experiences.

Lastly, a formal case study database that included case study notes, case study documents, field notes, and narratives was created. I maintained a chain of evidence and data to further increase reliability of the findings through a sequentially gathered and stored set of data (Yin, 2003). The organized chain of evidence and data allowed for an efficient member-checking protocol that verified all findings, interpretations, and conclusions with the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013). The researcher conducted two phases of member-checking with youth and adult participants. The first phase included a review of the interview transcriptions while the second phase included a review of the analysis and findings from the interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The case study was bounded
(Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003) within one school and area of EVC to allow for the identification of resources and supports that were accessible to this specific population.

**Setting**

Purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2013) was used to identify the site for this case study, ensuring the selection of an information-rich site that could provide both efficiency and effectiveness. Efficiency must be made a top priority when facing limited time (the academic year) and resources (solo researcher) (Patton, 2002) - both of which played a significant factor in completing the data collection and analysis phases. The selection of the school and participants was limited to one specific area in the city of EVC where prior partnerships and relationships had already been established between the administration, teachers, youths, and myself. These preexisting relationships allowed for access to the school and youth population that this study was looking to gain insight about.

The school (i.e., EVC School #1) is in one of the highest-need and lowest performing school districts in Connecticut based off of state test scores, student demographics, free lunch rates, absenteeism data, pass/fail rates, and behavior data. The study is situated in an urban PK-8 traditional neighborhood public school in Connecticut (i.e., EVC School #1). The school is part of a district that is undergoing large-scale changes under the direction of a newly appointed superintendent. Over the next three years, four of the district’s PK-8 schools are scheduled to close because of declining enrollment numbers, low levels of academic achievement, and budget cuts that are dramatically impacting high-need districts throughout the state. As of the 2016-17 school year, the school serves approximately 383 students. This number will increase significantly moving into the 2018-19 school year as EVC School #1 has been designated as a
school that will take in displaced students from a neighboring school that is closing down, in part because it has one of the more updated buildings in the district.

Currently, 100% of students in the EVC District receive free lunch under the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch program. Moreover, 77% of the youths identify as Black, 19.6% as Latinx, 3.4% Mix Race, 11.5% of the youths are classified as English Language Learners (ELL); and 15.1% of the youths are part of the Special Education program. EVC School #11 is under its second year of a new administrative team that has been tasked with navigating the school consolidation process. Currently, the youth at EVC School #1 differ significantly from every other school in the district. EVC School #1’s Black population is 77% versus the district average of 30.1%; the Latinx population is 19.6% versus the district average of 52.8%; and the majority of the ELL students have a first language of Jamaican Patois versus most the district school’s having a majority Spanish-speaking ELL population.

**Participant Selection**

Purposeful and convenience sampling was used to identify the youth for this study (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Palinkas et al., 2013; Patton, 2002), allowing for the identification of youth participants who best addressed the research questions (Patton, 2002). The middle school youth at EVC School #1 were selected as the population of focus for a few reasons. To start, with the district realignment and consolidation efforts, one of the heaviest hit age groups was the middle-school grades. This is due to some PK-8 schools completely closing, some PK-8 schools taking in new students from closing schools, some PK-8 schools turning into PK-5 schools, and hundreds of middle-school youth being dispersed into multiple sites.

When combining the displacement of EVC middle-school youth with the research that identifies how critical it is for a young person to be academically prepared upon entering high
school, it is easy to understand why an unacceptable 70% high school graduation rate exists in the EVC District (CSDE, 2016). With all these factors taken together, I chose to focus this study on youths in grades 7 and 8 at EVC School #1 who were about to be displaced into various middle and high schools throughout the city within the next year. For many of these youths, this final year of middle school and first year of high school will have lasting impacts on their ability to graduate within four-years and be college and/or career ready. While graduating high school is important, without the foundation of a strong middle school and first year of high school experience, graduating high school can become nearly impossible for some. Additionally, the focus on this age group is important because while past literature reveals promising academic achievement support mechanisms for high school and college age populations (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; Downey & Vogt Yuan, 2005; Harper, 2012, 2014, 2015; Howard, & Assoc., 2017; Howard, Douglas, & Warren, 2016), there is a dearth of research that focuses on the resources and supports needed by middle school youth (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Therefore, in the beginning of the selection process, the study was presented to all youth in the 7th and 8th grades at EVC School #1. On a rolling basis, any interested youth had to return a parental consent form to become a participant. Along with the parental consent form, a descriptive survey was completed by the parent/guardian to collect participant demographic information such as race, ethnicity, city, neighborhood, and date of birth. The descriptive data were collected to provide the context of the neighborhood, community, age group, and school that the youth were coming from.

After receiving parental consent, one of the school administrators filtered through student data to identify which participants were: a) above average level academic achievers, b) average level academic achievers, and c) high-need academic level achievers (as defined in Appendix A).
After the school administrator reviewed the information from the youth who returned the parental consent, the administrator sorted out which youths had: 1) attended EVC School #1 or a public school within the same area (approximately three square mile radius) for over two years, 2) had at least two consecutive years of achievement levels in an identical state test category (Appendix A), and 3) fit into one of the designated categories of high achievement (i.e., exceeds), average achievement (i.e., meets/approaches), and low achievement (i.e., does not meet) in an equally distributed fashion. In other words, the administrator separated the eligible participants so that one-third of the participants came from each of the three levels of achievement with equal gender representation.

The final population sample comprised of nine youth; five female and four male youth participants with three youths in each of the three achievement level categories (i.e., 3/3/3). Next, each of the nine participants selected one school-based adult they identified as a trusting and caring person. This ultimately created a sample size of eighteen (N=18); nine youth participants as the focal point of each case and nine adults identified as caring and trusting by the youth.

**Participant Profiles**

The following section provides brief descriptions of the nine youth participants. The descriptions draw upon hundreds of hours of observation, interviews, survey data, and document analysis (see Table 1). The names of the participants, city (i.e., EVC) and neighborhood (i.e., HB, EN, AU, ES) are all pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The researcher also paid particular attention to the neighborhood where the participants lived to be sure they were not bussed to school from outside of EVC.
Table 1: Youth demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>City (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lat</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>EVC</td>
<td>HB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treyjan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>AA/Mixed</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>EVC</td>
<td>HB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lat</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>EVC</td>
<td>EN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lat</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>EVC</td>
<td>EN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breanna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Carr</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>EVC</td>
<td>HB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>EVC</td>
<td>AU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lionel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Carr</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>EVC</td>
<td>AU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Carr</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>EVC</td>
<td>HB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylynn</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Carr</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>EVC</td>
<td>HB</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: AA = African American; Lat = Latinx; Carr = Caribbean

**Samantha.** Samantha was a bright young lady, both in attitude and intelligence, but her emotions would often alienate her from her classmates. Even so, she was emotionally intelligent enough to understand what happened and when she was at fault for causing trouble (e.g., spreading rumors and saying mean things on social media). Samantha had some very tough situations outside of school that likely impacted her in-school behaviors. As an only child, she admitted that her single mother spoiled her. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that there was a strong mother-daughter bond, and that Samantha adored her mother. At multiple points throughout the interview, Samantha referred to her mother as her “best friend”. Samantha was very aware of her mother’s struggles, from work to broken relationships to the stress of being a
single mother, and Samantha seemed to bear some of that weight on her shoulders, too. Academically, Samantha had good and bad days. About half of the time, she could be one of the only students who were completely on task in class. However, the other half of the time Samantha could be the catalyst for two of her classmates wanting to fight her and in those moments, schoolwork and school performance were not a priority.

**Treyjan.** A male youth that is raised by a very supportive mother and stepfather, Treyjan was one of the first youth to get his parental consent form signed and returned to me. On any given day, Treyjan could be a laying his head down on a desk sleeping for the entire class, making fun of his classmates and shouting inappropriate words across the room, 100% engaged in completing the class assignment, or drawing in his personal art notebook. Treyjan was not particularly close to any adults in the school building, but also was not a student who caused enough trouble or mischief to notice. According to Treyjan, his achievement levels were not necessarily high, but he did care and he did put in effort despite what people thought of him. In many regards, Treyjan seemed more misunderstood than anything.

**Cynthia.** Of all the participants, Cynthia seemed to have the most challenging circumstances. Her mother worked multiple jobs, her father had been incarcerated and she has no contact with him. The teachers also often expressed concern for her overall well-being. Even so, Cynthia was often identified as one of the most trustworthy and caring persons by many of her peers. Academically, she often had a difficult time with the content but she is generally willing to try hard, no matter how challenging a task was. Many times, Cynthia would be off in the corner or curled up under a desk because, according to her, she is more comfortable on the floor. Her self-confidence seemed to fluctuate, but overall, Cynthia is an extraordinary young lady who is
creative, loves to draw, and wants to do well in school to pay her mom back for all the sacrifices
she makes.

Cameron. Cameron is an EVC School #1 native and is one of the few students who has
attended EVC School #1 from Pre-K to eighth grade. His biological father died when he was 10,
and now his mother, grandmother, and a supportive stepfather raise him. Cameron displays
maturity well beyond his years. You can find Cameron often talking about his future, his dreams,
and how he is going to get there. For the most part, Cameron is on task in class the majority of
the time. Very rarely is he in trouble or involved in negative activities that some of his closest
friends often get caught up in. Cameron can be a jokester, but I never observed him being mean
or bullying other students. In fact, quite the opposite. Teachers, school staff, and his peers all had
a great respect for Cameron. In terms of academic achievement, Cameron was average.
However, according to one adult that is close to Cameron’s mother, Cameron has been through a
lot and for him to be able to show up everyday with a smile on his face is, “inspirational” (EVC
Adult #5).

Breanna. Breanna was a loud and lively presence in every space she was in. Raised by a
single mother and her grandmother, Breanna, her three siblings, and her mother arrived in EVC
when she was in the third grade, having immigrated from Jamaica. It was easy to notice that she
was well respected by her classmates even though Breanna did not always complete her work,
would get sent out of class fairly often for disrupting the class and teachers, and could be very
hostile at times which would make it hard for the rest of her peers to learn or pay attention.
Nonetheless, when Breanna felt like being the amazing natural leader that she is, she was one of
the strongest and most respected leaders in the school. When Breanna was given the space to be
a positive leader, on multiple occasions, she could lead a class as well as some of the teachers.
Breanna was a confident young lady that seemed to believe in herself and her potential, despite her standardized tests and grades (which were not high).

Nikki. Probably the student that most adults in the building loved the most, Nikki was genuinely nice and well liked. Having been born and raised in EVC, she had attended EVC School #1 since kindergarten. Nikki had a very supportive home life where both her and her younger brother received a lot of support from both mom and dad. All of the adults at EVC School #1 identified Nikki as a high achiever; she was never observed being off task, disrespectful, or unengaged. Whether the task was copying down notes word-for-word for an hour straight, or doing multiple monotonous crossword puzzles, Nikki was likely the first or only person to complete the assignment in her class. When chaos was going on around her, like a fight or screaming match between her peers, she had the ability to block it out and stay focused. While her levels of intelligence were impressive, her level of focus and determination to complete whatever was in front of her was even more admirable.

Lionel. Also an immigrant, Lionel was a young man that moved to EVC from Jamaica when he was nine years old to live with his father’s parents for, what Lionel describes as, a chance for a better future. Even though Lionel was now being raised by his grandparents, he saw his mother -- who was back in Jamaica -- as the most supportive person in his life. A bright young man in terms of his academic abilities, Lionel felt a lot of pressure at home to do well in school, although he was hardly ever acknowledged or rewarded by the adults in his life for good grades and test scores. This made it hard for him to always keep up his motivation, especially when he sees many of his friends not trying in school. “What’s the point?” (Lionel, EVC School #1), he asked in one interview. However, Lionel has big goals and even at his young age, he talks
about wanting to be a successful business owner so he can afford to move his mother out to EVC and buy her a home.

**Tommy.** Similar to many of his classmates, Tommy immigrated from Jamaica when he was in the third grade. When Tommy first moved to EVC, he bounced around to a couple of different schools. Tommy and his family did not know how to navigate the open-enrollment and school choice programs, which caused an unstable transition from his Jamaican to his EVC schooling. Nonetheless, Tommy is identified by pretty much everyone as a high achiever, in every sense of the word. It does not take long to notice that Tommy is, as one teacher described him, “a genuinely good person” (Miss Guadalupe, EVC School #1 teacher). Intelligent, academically gifted, and respectful of teachers and peers alike, Tommy often volunteers to read in English class or explain how he got his answer in math, and he scored highly in regards to his academics.

**Taylynn.** Taylynn was another Jamaican-born youth that came to the U.S. with her mother, sister, and grandmother from Jamaica when she was around eight years old. She had the potential to be a very strong student, although her achievement levels were not always high. There were many times that Taylynn would literally be one of the only youths in her class to be on task working on the day’s assignment. On some days, Taylynn’s peers would be incredibly loud, off task, and rather disruptive, yet Taylynn could still work through it when she wanted to. On other days, Taylynn would not even try, even though it was clear that she wanted to get good grades in every class. Somewhere along the line, Taylynn began adopting attitudes similar to those of her classmates who put little effort into school. Even with a sister in high school who was described as a straight A student, and a very supportive mother, it became hard for Taylynn to keep pushing herself when it seemed like very few of her classmates were.
**Data Collection Methods**

Data was collected using traditional qualitative methods that included direct and participant observations, interviews, and document analysis. Less formalized data came in forms of artistic expressions and photographs produced by the youth participants. While each added data collection method made the analysis more complex, it was vital to collect multiple layers of data so that the voices and perspectives of the EVC School #1 youth could be accurately represented. In-depth details that cover the approach and rationale for each data collection method are discussed in subsequent chapters.

Five major data sources were used for this study: individual interviews, direct observation, participant observation, quasi-sociological photography techniques, and school/district produced document analysis. These aforementioned data sources elevated the levels of accuracy through the convergence of analyses and themes across the data (Yin, 2003).

**Interviews**

In total, four semi-structured interviews were conducted for each youth participant case (protocols found in Appendix B & C). Three interviews with each youth participant and one interview with a school-based adult made up the four interviews. Interviews lasted between 15-45 minutes for all participants and followed a specific interview protocol designed by Seidman (2003), which calls for a series of three time-limited, themed interviews. However, the three-interview structure is loose, allowing for adaptability based on the participant population and situation. The flexibility in this trusted interview protocol allowed for the adaptation and alterations appropriate for this study. Thus, the interviews with adults and youth took on two separate -- yet similar -- approaches. These approaches will be outlined in the following sections.
The youth participants each had three interviews, on three separate days, with a 30-minute limit for each interview. The youth interviews focused on three overarching topics during each day/interview that included: 1) discovering information about their life history (e.g., describe your childhood), 2) hearing about the participant’s current experiences in and out of the school setting (e.g., describe how you do in school) and 3) having the participants make meaning of their current life situations (e.g., Why do you think some students do better on state exams than others?).

In alignment with the youth interviews, the adult interviews stayed true to Seidman’s (2003) three-theme approach. The main difference with the adult interview series was that it was completed in one session versus three. The difference from the youth protocol took place because the adults had very limited availability, were often busy before and after school, and they had the endurance to sit and remain focused over a longer time. Furthermore, staying consistent with the three themes and set time limits, the adult interviews incorporated three distinct themes with the discussion of each theme having a firm 15 minutes time limit. By implementing three distinct categories with equal time limits for each, the adult interviews stayed true to Seidman’s (2003) design. The adult interviews took place at the completion of the youth participants’ third interview. The rationale for bringing in adult perspectives was to add depth and perspective to the youth participant data. The three themes for the adult interviews were: 1) the relationship with the student participant, 2) knowledge of the youth participant’s abilities in school/learning, and 3) understandings of the participant’s overall disposition (i.e., attitude, confidence, motivation, etc.).

Additionally, a quasi-visual sociological (Harper, 1988) technique was used throughout the interviews for select students who chose to engage in this activity. The technique is
considered a *quasi* version of visual sociology because it does not follow the traditional parameters of visual sociology as defined by Harper (1988), Newberry (2011), and Pauwels (2010). In the traditional sense, visual sociology is the use of, “photographs, film, and video to study society and the study of visual artifacts of a society” (Harper, 1988, p. 54). In this study, the was a mix between the researcher photographing the youth in and throughout the school in different settings -- in a traditional visual sociology sense -- and the youth producing their own artistic representations of their passions and interests -- an additional component that has not traditionally been part of the visual sociology technique. This approach was a voluntary option for youth participants to supplement their verbal interviews and provide deeper insight on who they are, what matters to them, and where they find their motivation. While every student did not take part in producing artistic expressions, the technique provided in-depth perspectives on five of the youth participants and helped them express feelings and emotions they could not verbally communicate in the interviews. These types of outcomes are common when using visual sociology strategies and Harper (1988) argues that photography expands and aids in the rethinking of assumptions that researchers often make in sociological contexts. With a goal and framework that sets out to reframe ways that Youth of Color from low-income backgrounds are often portrayed, this was quasi-visual sociology technique was a vital component of the study.

**Observations**

I used a mix of direct and participant observations of the youth to gain an understanding of the youths’ perceptions and abilities in different spaces like math, art, choir, and athletics (Erlandson et al., 1993; Yin, 2003). Participants and their peers were observed roughly four hours per day, three to four times a week, over a 20-week period (see Table 2) . It should also be noted that while data could only be officially collected over this 20-week period, informal
observations were conducted for roughly a year and a half before the data collection period began. Over the previous 1.5 years, I had various roles -- from leading a boys’ intervention program to an informal tutor. These previous roles served as a significant factor to the overall access to the site.

Direct observations took place in core content spaces where adults engaged the youth in instruction, learning, and practice. Participant observations occurred sparsely when school personnel would request support with learning objectives (e.g., check work or sit with a youth to help them focus) or engaging the youth in mentorship opportunities (e.g., coaching a sport or tutoring). Additionally, observations took place in spaces where faculty and community members gathered such as school meetings, community events, and informal parent-teacher conversations. The adult observations added support in the triangulation and validation process of emergent themes and findings. During every observation session, hand written notes were taken and then later transcribed into the observation database via an electronic word processing program. The hand written notes, combined with added reflection at the end of each day, provided a sequential set of data that could then be coded during the analysis phase of the study.

Table 2: Sample observation schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:30A-1:30P</td>
<td>12:30P-4:00P</td>
<td>8:30A-1:00P</td>
<td>8:30A-12:30P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 hours</td>
<td>3.5 hours</td>
<td>4.5 hours</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Document Analysis

The document analysis phase brought together school and student performance documents to identify, understand, and analyze: 1) the school’s history, 2) state categorization of youth performance outcomes, and 3) the different messages that the district and school
emphasized throughout the school and community. Relevant documents included school report cards, performance reports, improvement plan templates, disciplinary reports, absenteeism reports, demographic data, district summative test results, and state standardized testing data, as well as historical and current photographic records.

All of the documents and data were retrieved from the public access state accountability distribution website. Other documents, like photographs and student artifacts, were observed in public places such as classroom bulletin boards, hallway postings, and school trophy cases. The information from these documents helped guide and design interview themes (i.e., children and school-based adults), identify emergent themes from the descriptive data (e.g., age, race, ethnicity), and provide insight on how the school and community were perceived based on statistics and benchmarks that are often associated with negative academic and social outcomes (e.g., high absenteeism rates, suspensions, low standardized test scores, etc.). The analysis process for all documents is described in the following section.

**Data Analysis**

For consistency, all data (i.e., interviews, observations notes, photography/art, document analysis) were analyzed through the same content analysis approach with the raw level, first order, second order, and finally the discovery and identification of emergent themes (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis & Sparkes, 2001; Miles, Hubberman & Saldana, 2013). Further, a four stage coding process for all interviews, observation notes, and document analysis was implemented that included open coding, axial coding, comparative coding, and selective coding (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Patton, 2002).

The open coding process took place with Nvivo 12 Data Analysis software and included a line-by-line analysis of the raw data, which led to comprehensive lists of open codes from the
participants’ interview responses, the observation notes, and the document analyses. Using in-vivo coding processes to capture the participants’ verbatim words and patterns amongst responses in the open coding phase (Ryan & Bernard, 2000), there were 2,187 open codes observed that addressed the interview questions, the research questions, and/or provided in-depth and unique perspectives of their experiences and dynamics existent at EVC School #1.

The axial coding process consisted of integrating the 2,187 open codes (i.e., 1261 youth interview codes, 415 adult interview codes, 416 observation codes, and 95 codes from the documents analysis) into broader encompassing categories and themes (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Tashakkori, Teddlie & Teddlie, 1998). This process narrowed down the open codes from the four data points into 89 consistent and relevant themes. To identify the codes that had a similar meaning and value, the researcher analyzed the open codes for two full rounds to identify these second-level patterns across the various sources of data.

The third phase of the coding process is the comparative stage. The stage called for the comparison of the data to be cross-referenced against the 89 axial codes to find even more significant emergent themes. In other words, this phase of coding calls for the analysis of the codes against all data within each data set (i.e., within and across the youth interviews, within and across all adult interviews, etc.). Additionally, this comparative coding process was performed in two separate phases: once within each data resource set (e.g., youth interviews) and then a second time at the end of the data collection, across all data sources (e.g., youth interviews vs. adult interviews, adult interviews vs. observation notes, etc.). This second phase of comparative coding allowed the researcher to identify the most definitive emergent themes in the overall study.
Finally, the last stage of the coding process called for the discovery of the final sets of emergent themes that comprehensively summarized the original 2,187 open codes, to 89 axial codes, then to 38 comparative codes, and finally to six selective codes that were identified across all four data sources. In other words, six (6) emergent categories were consistent across youth interviews, adult interviews, observation notes, and the document analysis. Any themes or statements that were contradictory to the overall consensus of the data was analyzed for further explanation and eventually merged into an appropriate theme. By completing this thorough investigation with a consistent process across all forms of data, potential biases and misinterpretations of the data were greatly reduced. This analysis process ensured that the findings were grounded in the data and that the conceptualizations of the youth were accurately represented and translated (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Gratton & Jones, 2010).

For trustworthiness and validation of the findings, methodological triangulation was incorporated throughout the collection, interpretation, and analysis phases through the use of multiple data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mathison, 1988). Both inductive (insights from the data) and deductive (insights from literature and theory) approaches were implemented to identify and codify thematic patterns (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Patton, 2002). This qualitative approach provided a structure where the collection and examination of data sequentially progressed from a raw data level to the final phase of discovering emergent themes (Miles, Hubberman & Saldana, 2013). This approach also ensured that the emergent themes were grounded in the lived experiences and voices of the youth participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Further, to ensure that authentic and accurate voices of the youth participants were represented, three member-check sessions took place that included every youth participant. Each session
lasted 15-30 minutes and consisted of the researcher asking the youth participants for feedback on the emergent themes. During these sessions, the researcher explained the what was found throughout all of the interviews and if it was consistent with what the youth participants were meaning to say during the interviews. Furthermore, the youth participants were able to provide any feedback or last thoughts that they felt were important for the school leadership and community to know. The member-check sessions validated the emergent themes through the review of all findings that surfaced in the final phase of the analyses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013).

The documents and artifacts that were analyzed originated from observations, interviews, school and community produced documents, and photos. During the observation process, a book of fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) was created. The process of tracking and recording these fieldnotes consisted of hand writing notes in real time followed by digitally documenting the notes into a word processor with added commentary after each observation session. During times that the researcher was unable to actively take notes, such as when he was asked to help with classroom lessons or tutoring, then notes were taken at the end of the class period. For organizational purposes, a case study database was created to store all field notes (Yin, 2003). As additional data was collected throughout the study (e.g., observation field notes and document analysis), ongoing reviews were performed to revise codes and themes through in vivo coding procedures. As the collection of interview data grew, in vivo coding allowed new themes to emerge based on direct quotes from the participants that emphasized their perspectives (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2000).
Analysis I - Youth Participant Interviews

The primary data collection procedure for this study was a series of individual interviews with the youth participants. Initially, nineteen youth participants were interviewed, on three separate days, covering three different achievement levels (as detailed above). 57 total interviews took place (19 youths x 3 interviews per youth). However, the structure of the study called for an equal representation across the three achievement levels so an administrator identified nine students that equally represented the three categories of academic achievement and also met the selection criteria. For efficiency, I interviewed every youth that returned a permission slip to be a part of the study. This resulted in 19 youths being interviewed three separate times (i.e. 19 youths x 3 interviews per youth = 57 youth interviews). The administrator was then able to focus on those 19 youths to parse out the nine total youth participants that met the selection criteria.

I had designed the interviews to examine three domains. The first domain investigated the participant’s life history, domain two investigated the participant’s experiences in and out of the school setting, and domain three explored how the participants made meaning of their current life situations. While each interview was taking place, I analyzed responses for themes and compared them against the emergent themes of other interviews. All interviews were digitally recorded and sent out for transcription by a professional and secure third-party company. Once the interviews were transcribed, I then began the thematic coding analysis process. The thematic analysis of each interview transcription consisted of an open, axial, comparative and final selection of emergent themes coding process (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Patton, 2002).

The open coding phase included line-by-line analysis of each individual interview transcription. This first phase allowed me to identify the unique experiences and conceptualizations related to the research questions in the study. In vivo coding was used
throughout every phase to ensure the participants’ voices were guiding the formulation of each open code. The in vivo coding inductively guided me to identify the initial emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). One example of an open code during this phase was “High achieving is when you are determined to get somewhere” (Lionel - youth participant). Lionel was describing how he defined the term “achievement.”

After completing all interviews and analyzing every transcription, I quantified the open codes to begin the process of identifying larger thematic relationships and move into the axial phase (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The open coding process for the nine selected youth participants resulted in 1,261 open codes (1,261 open codes over 27 interviews). Next, using both inductive and deductive reasoning, I identified more distinct themes that merged the 1,261 open codes into 22 axial codes. An example of this process is the open codes of “I need structure in class” and “What my friends need to be successful” merging into the axial code of “What helps my school and community.”

The third phase, comparative coding, involved reviewing the axial codes from each youth interview and comparing them to the other eight youth participant interviews (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Patton, 2002). This comparative phase allowed for an investigative consolidation process to reveal which themes were consistent across all the interviews. The outcome of this process narrowed down the 22 youth interview axial codes into 21 comparative codes. While this phase did not result in a significant amount of codes being clustered more tightly, this phase signaled that there were some very consistent themes emerging across the interviews. One example of the transition from axial to comparative codes includes the axial codes of “Standardized tests don’t show how smart I am” (17 open codes) and “We don’t get the same opportunities as those other
Finally, this coding process concluded with the identification and emergence of selective codes. This phase of the process required me to analyze the previous codes and themes to identify deeper levels of commonalities that summarize the meanings and inferences made in the interviews. An example of this phase of the study was the comparative codes of: 1) “How I define achievement” (67 open codes), 2) “What it takes to achieve” (8 open codes), 3) “respect” (3 open codes), and 4) “My friend in class pushed me to do better” (3 open codes), merging into the selective code of “Achievement means a lot” (81 open codes). All codes merged from an in-vivo approach where the youth participants were expressing similar ideas using different words. I used quotes from the youths that he felt best encompassed the main message that the majority of the youths were expressing. All selective codes were analyzed and confirmed through the member-checking phase (which is described further down in greater detail) to ensure I was making accurate conclusions about what the youths were expressing.

At the conclusion of the youth interview analysis phase, there were six emergent themes (see Figure 2 for graphical representation of six selective emergent themes). These six themes provided the foundation for assessing the adult interviews, observation notes, and document analyses. The final six emergent themes (i.e., selective codes) within the youth interviews were: 1) “I can’t learn here” (225 open codes) (i.e., school is a hostile environment with negative interactions), 2) “Achieving means a lot” (81 open codes) (i.e., Why I achieve and how I prove it), 3) “My mom stays on me but it’s because she wants better for me” (163 open codes) (i.e., motivation and supports system), 4) “They don’t know I can draw like that” (115 open codes) (i.e., unnoticed talents and unique abilities), 5) “I want more things to do” (28 open codes) (i.e.,
recommendations and inequities), and 6) “We just get away with whatever we want in there” (16 open codes) (i.e., adults in the building not holding the youth to high expectations). Also of note, there is a difference in the quantity of open codes between the total open codes identified at the onset (1261 open codes) and the amount of codes identified in the five emergent categories (628 open codes). This can be explained by some of the open codes being double and triple-coded due in part to their relevance and fit into multiple themes. For example, there were multiple times when youths would reference their mothers as their main source of support as well as how they have come to understand what achievement means in their lives. In a situation like that, the quote would be coded into themes #2 (i.e., Achieving means a lot) and #3 (i.e., My mom stays on me but it’s because she wants better for me).

![Figure 2: Coding analysis visual](image-url)
Analysis II - Adult Participant Interviews

The second data procedure for this study was the individual interviews with school-based adults. The adults were selected by the youth participants seeing them as a “caring and trusting adult.” All interviewed adults in this study had an official position at EVC School #1. Put differently, I asked each youth participant to recommend an adult at EVC School #1 that they viewed as someone who cares about them and that they could trust to talk to if they ever needed anything. With the focus of this study being on the voices, experiences, and conceptualizations of a diverse set of nine youths at EVC School #1, logically there were nine adults that were also interviewed. As previously detailed, I interviewed adults one time, for 20-45 minutes, with questions that focused on the youth that selected them.

Similar to the youth interviews, the adult interviews were designed to examine three domains. The first domain investigated the relationship history between the adult and youth, domain two explored the adult’s knowledge of the participant’s academic abilities, and domain three explored how the adult’s viewed the youth’s overall disposition. During each interview, I was analyzing responses in real time for common themes that arose throughout the data collection processes. Again, all interviews were digitally recorded and sent out for transcription by a professional and secure third-party company. Once the interviews were transcribed, I began the thematic coding analysis process. As with all pieces of data in this study, the thematic coding analysis of each interview transcription was done in a process of open, axial, comparative and final selection coding that identified the most emergent themes (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Patton, 2002).

The initial open coding phase included line-by-line coding that allowed me to identify themes that either aligned or diverged from the youth interviews and their conceptualizations.
Again, I used in vivo coding throughout the analysis so that common themes and descriptions used by the adults could be directly compared to the youths’ interviews. (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). One example of an open code during this phase was “I really don’t feel safe here, I feel bad for some of the kids” (Adult #1). This open code came about when Adult #1 was describing how difficult it is for youth and adults to teach and learn in the school.

All of the data was analyzed across all youths and adults so that findings could be representative of the entire middle school population versus nine individual and possibly unique cases.

After completing the nine adult interviews and analyzing the transcriptions, I quantified the open codes to identify larger thematic relationships and cluster the open codes into axial level codes (Tashakkori, Teddlie & Teddlie, 1998). The adult interview analysis produced 415 open codes (415 open codes over 9 interviews). Using inductive and deductive reasoning again, I identified distinct themes that merged the 415 open codes into 30 axial codes. An example of this process are the open codes of “If a student needs me, nothing in the school will interrupt our time” and “I just worry about the things I can’t control for them” merging into the axial code of “commitment to our kids.”

The comparative coding involved an analysis of the 30 axial codes being compared between all the individual adult interview codes (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Patton, 2002). This phase consolidated the axial codes into consistent themes found throughout all the interviews. As a result, 21 comparative codes were established. Once again, this phase did not result in a significant amount of consolidation but it signaled that there were consistencies across the data. An example of axial codes moving into a comparative code are the axial codes of “the motivation just isn’t there” (6 open codes) and “the environment is just really toxic” (13 open codes), merging into the comparative code of “I wish we could do more” (54 open codes).
To conclude, the analysis of the adult interviews identified three selective codes. Similar to the coding process of the youth interviews, the codes took form based on an in-vivo approach where I used a quote that best captured the overall message that the adults were collectively saying. An example of how the selective phase took form is: 1) “I wish we could do more” (53 open codes) and 2) “this is a toxic environment” (30 open codes) merging into the selective code of “Learning can’t happen here” (83 open codes). The additional selective codes were, “We need so much more” (85 open codes) (i.e., recommendations and inequities) and “Mom just wants the best for him” (111 open codes) (i.e., motivation and supports system). Similar to the youth interview outcomes, some open codes were double or triple coded in the initial phase of the analysis and occurred with quotes and findings that addressed multiple themes. This explains the difference in the quantity of open codes identified at the first phase (415 open codes) versus the amount of codes identified in the three selective categories (279 open codes).

Analysis III - Observations

During every observation, I took fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Additionally, after each interview, I digitally recorded summaries of each day’s observations, saved them as audio files, then created daily observation logs using a word processor. The transfer from handwritten fieldnotes and audio files to a word processor allowed the observation data to be analyzed with the NVivo 12 Data Analysis software package.

The purpose of completing observations was to assess how the youth engaged with others in their natural environments and then compare those observations with the interview data. As touched upon in previous sections, official observations took place over a 20-week period. Over the 20 weeks, roughly 260 hours of observations took place at EVC School #1. Remaining consistent with the other analysis protocols, the observation data was analyzed and coded using
the four-stage approach of open coding, axial coding, comparative coding, and selective coding (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Patton, 2002).

Phase one of the coding process included a line-by-line analysis of the raw data that identified 416 open codes. This phase was inductively analyzed to remain grounded in the voices and perspectives of the youth (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The thematic process in this initial stage sought to identify the frequency of observations that aligned with emergent themes found in the interviews. Examples of open codes from the observation analysis were “Disengaged adult,” “Adult frustrated and exhausted”, and “Hostile peer interaction”.

Next, the axial phase enabled me to merge the 416 open codes into 30 axial codes. Examples of axial codes from observation data are “Being on task is not rewarding” (five open codes) and “Bullying” (four open codes). Following the axial phase, the comparative phase condensed the 30 axial codes into seven comparative codes. For the comparative phase, I only compared observations made between the nine youth participants. The seven comparative codes merged into themes like “Toxic environment and/or interactions” (69 open codes) and “Student leadership” (31 open codes).

Finally, the selective coding phase was applied and fused the seven observation comparative codes into five selective codes (see Figure 3). The final five selective codes found in the observations were in alignment with the youth interview selective codes. The five selective codes identified in the observation data analysis were: 1) “I can’t learn here” (154 open codes) (i.e., school is a hostile environment with negative interactions), 2) “Achievement means a lot” (116 open codes) (i.e., Why I am a high achiever and how I prove it), 3) “My mom stays on me but it’s because she wants better for me” (31 open codes) (i.e., motivation and supports system),
4) “They don’t know I can draw like that” (48 open codes) (i.e., unnoticed talents and unique abilities), and 5) “We just get away with whatever we want in there” (26 open codes) (i.e., adults in the building not holding the youth to high expectations). Again, the difference in open codes between the first and final stages comes from some codes being double or triple coded.

Figure 3: Coding analysis graphic

**Analysis IV - School-based Document Analysis**

The final data collection procedure was a review of school and district produced documents, community-produced documents posted within the school, photographs, and youth-
produced artistic artifacts. The purpose of the document review was to provide a context of the
eighborhood, messages that the school and district were trying to uphold and prioritize, history,
and culture of the community. Documents reviewed in this process included: 1) EVC District
climate and Culture plan, 2) EVC School #1 student and parent handbook, 3) EVC School #1
school profile and data report (i.e., testing results, absenteeism rates, suspension rates, etc.), 4)
EVC School #1 history report, 5) four classwork worksheets, 6) two posted community
advertisements, 7) three youth produced artistic expressions, 8) six photographs showing the
historical racial demographics and shift of the community population between 1920s to the
1970s, and 9) seven photos of youths engaging in different spaces around the school.

Most of these documents contained written data and statements. The documents that did
not have words (e.g., photos and artwork) were only used as visual references and were not used
to interpret or represent anything more. Photos and artwork can take on many different meanings
to different people - it is interpretive by nature. Therefore, I did not want to project my own biased
perspectives on to interpretative sources of data. The documents containing written data were
analyzed using the same coding process as the interviews. The first phase began with a line-by-
line coding of each document. I used an inductive coding approach to ensure that findings from
the document were grounded in the data found in the youth interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 1990;
Glaser & Strauss, 1967). An example of an open code from this analysis is “Bullying behavior is
strictly prohibited.” This open code reveals the awareness of chronic bullying and sends a
message that offenses will be taken seriously. In a similar vein as the other three data analyses, I
quantified common themes found in the language, data inferences, and intentions of the
documents. In total, there were 95 open codes identified.
Once I identified the open codes, the axial coding process began. From the 95 original open codes, I narrowed the codes down to 16 axial codes. Examples of axial codes were “Adults failing students” (two open codes), “Bully policies” (12 open codes), and “Juxtapositions of policies and practices” (15 open codes). The axial coding process was followed up with the comparative coding phase. The comparative phase involved me analyzing the open and axial codes and comparing them with all other documents. Through this comparative process I was able to merge the 16 axial codes into five comparative codes. The five comparative codes were identified as themes that encompassed: 1) holistic student well-being (13 open codes), 2) school culture and climate (48 open codes), 3) academic performance data (10 open codes), 4) community engagement (eight open codes), and 5) inequities and improvement (24 open codes).

In the final phase of the coding process, I connected back to the other data resources and merged the codes into three selective codes. These final three selective codes represented the most salient themes that emerged from the 95 original open codes. The selective codes were inductively compared against the dominant themes found throughout the other sources of data to ensure consistency and accurate interpretations were being made (Patton, 2002). The final three emergent themes were in alignment with the study’s overall dominant themes of “I can’t learn here” (48 open codes) (i.e., school is a hostile environment with negative interactions), “Achievement means a lot” (31 open codes) (i.e., Why I am a high achiever and how I prove it), and “We just get away with whatever we want in there” (24 open codes) (i.e., adults in the building not holding the youth to high expectations). The difference in open code quantities from the first phase to the fourth and final phase is explained by double and triple coding when it was necessary.
Triangulation

This exploratory within-case analysis integrates a concurrent triangulation design that involves the simultaneous collection of data using multiple methods (interviews, observations, photography/art, document analysis) (Creswell, 2009). This triangulation design allows for a simultaneous examination of the phenomenon while using multiple methods that provide a holistic perspective with richer descriptions of patterns and correlations (Greene, 2007). Furthermore, I provided valid and valuable findings by, “seeking convergence, corroboration, and correspondence of results from the different methods’’ (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989, p. 259). Likewise, triangulation is a strong practice to apply due to its ability to test the consistency of emergent themes that a researcher identifies across different data sources and methods (Greene, 2007).

Finally, the greatest impact of triangulation is the validity and trustworthiness it adds to research. Triangulation and the use of multiple data collection methods enhance the researcher’s confidence in understanding and explaining the phenomenon being studied (Greene, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002; Roulston, 2010). Moreover, triangulation has been regarded as a multi-method approach that allows researchers to achieve better and more accurate results (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Given the complexity of the phenomenon of interest, and the multiple factors that may influence the units of analyses, it was critical that the I apply multiple methods to ensure accurate findings that help better understand the phenomenon (Greene, 2007).

Methodological Challenges

One glaring issue in research is the value of one methodology over the other. In regards to qualitative versus quantitative research, many scholars in the social science and policy fields have firm beliefs about one form of research holding more value and validity. In response to
these critiques, many researchers attempt to use a mixed methods approach to combat the criticisms of using one methodology versus the other. However, there are also challenges within that approach. Thus, one limitation of this study--some might conclude--is that it exclusively uses a qualitative research technique. However, based on the questions being explored in this study, a true qualitative approach was the most effective route to unearth findings and allow the youths’ stories, perspectives, and insights to be heard. Therefore, while some within the research community may find qualitative research to provide insufficient data, it was the only approach that allowed this study to answer the research questions appropriately and accurately. It was only through this exclusively qualitative approach that the voices of the youths could reimagine and define what achievement means and looks like through their realities.

Yet, in trying to understand and reflect upon areas that may be seen as challenges, there is a self-reporting and individual perspective nature to this study that could be critiqued. While this could be a limitation, the research and data in this study is founded upon a principle that the youth are the holders and creators of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002). The youth that attend EVC School #1 live, exist, and successfully navigate through the environment that was studied, so they are the experts on understanding what truly goes on in that world. To also help verify, compare, and support what many may consider subjective data, I implemented multiple data points. These multiple data points enhanced the validity, trustworthiness, and consistency of findings. However, even with strong triangulation techniques, qualitative case studies are often accused of lacking rigor (Yin, 2003).

In theory, with the multiple data points and methods being used, the rigor is high and would yield strong and trusted findings. Yet, researchers are often careless with their data collection processes and allow, “equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the direction of
the findings and conclusions” (Yin, 1984, p. 21). Another challenge with qualitative case studies is that they provide little basis for generalization to populations even though providing such results is hardly ever the goal for qualitative research. Nonetheless, many researchers believe validity is synonymous with generalizability. Generalizability is difficult within qualitative research case studies because, for one, they regularly use a small sample size within a bounded setting (Tellis, 1997; Yin, 1984). For this case study, there was a total sample size of 37 (N=37) but only nine youths served as the focus. However, case studies do allow for generalization to be made within theory, which aligns well with the goals of this study. With an aim of gaining insight around a specific group of youths within one school/neighborhood/community and understanding how they achieve and exist, this qualitative approach is valid and reliable.

Findings from this case study may not change the nation’s education disparities but it can help change the educational experiences for this specific population. Nonetheless, qualitative case studies are meant to elevate the voices of specific people--this project did just that. The study’s findings can also provide insight on underperforming schools that are not apparent from surface-level perspectives.

To conclude, case studies are generally considered time consuming, difficult to conduct, and capable of producing massive amounts of documentation and data (Yin, 1984). An abundance of data becomes a problem when there is a single researcher that must perform the analysis on their own. The issues arise when large amounts of data are not managed and organized systematically (Yin, 1994). While the case study approach is timely, exhaustive, complex, and demanding, the potential positives far outweigh the challenges. Thus, when systematically approached and implemented, along with an organized plan and structure, the case
study method and all of its components allow for a comprehensive and holistic analysis of the phenomenon of interest (Yin, 2003).

**Summary**

This chapter summarized the research design for this study. I formulated this qualitative approach to provide an in-depth examination of how youth within a specific context conceptualize and exude high achieving outcomes. The multiple theoretical approaches used to guide this study provided a comprehensive lens to examine the unique individual and collective lived experiences of Youth of Color that attend a state-defined low-income community and underperforming school. Also captured in this chapter was the rationale for and strategies used to employ the various methods to collect and validate the data.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

“YEAH BUT... ACHIEVING IS MORE THAN THAT”

Introduction

The purpose of the current study was to understand what achievement means and how it manifests for youths that attend an underperforming school in a low income neighborhood. To accomplish this objective, I set out to answer the following questions: 1) How do the youths at EVC School #1 conceptualize achievement?, 2) Does being categorized into a state-defined achievement level impact the self- perceptions of youths at EVC School #1?, and 3) What strategies have been employed to facilitate the achievement of youths at EVC School #1?

The findings from this study provide an alternative perspective of achievement. While it is important to hold all youth to high academic standards regardless of the setting or circumstance, context matters. All youth deserve and need an education that prepares them for college and/or the workforce - that is not in question. Yet, how some youth demonstrate high achieving behaviors can look drastically different in dissimilar spaces. For example, some youths may feel pressure to score high on all standardized tests but have the home and school resources and supports to assist them in reaching those high level outcomes. While the youths in other communities, like Taylynn at EVC School #1, understand that what she and her classmates have access to is neither equal nor equitable. Based on Taylynn’s vantage point, her community has to be better and stronger at so many more things:

I'm not saying that this is a bad neighborhood or anything but most neighborhoods are way better than this. The schools have... Other schools have way more money than we do, but we work with what we have and well, most of the kids, most of us try to take
charge of our education and we do what we have to do. But I feel like if we were getting stuff that the other schools got, we'll be way smarter. Like programs to, like learn new things and stuff like that.

According to state public education reports (Edsight, 2018), EVC School #1 is considered underperforming because of the standardized achievement rates of the students. However, this study reveals the many challenges that EVC youths have to overcome, the brilliance they see in their peers, the excellence they see in their school, and the astute understanding of how they exist in a society that privileges some people over others based on wealth, race, ethnicity, and language. The youths at EVC School #1 seemed to all understand the measuring stick that they are held to in regards to state and national academic standards. However, more importantly, the youths at EVC School #1 also expressed that the value their families and community place on them is not solely dependent on a grade or label.

Moreover, chapter 4 addresses the research questions through the emergence of six selective themes that were identified across the four sources of data (i.e., youth and adult interviews, observations, document analyses). Each of the following six sections will discuss one of the emergent themes: 1) “I can’t learn here” (i.e., school is a hostile environment with negative interactions), 2) “Achieving means a lot” (i.e., Why I achieve and how I do it), 3) “My mom stays on me but it’s because she wants better for me” (i.e., motivation and supports system), 4) “They don’t know I can draw like that” (i.e., unnoticed talents and unique abilities), 5) “I want more things to do” (i.e., recommendations and inequities), and 6) “We just get away with whatever we want in there” (i.e., adults in the building not holding the youth to high expectations).
Section I: “I can’t learn here”

One of the most remarkable observations throughout this study was the ability of some youths to stay focused on their school-related activities. Across all the data stress, anxiety, and hostility were constantly present, making it difficult for youths to learn or focus on their schoolwork. Whether it was adults in the building feeling unsafe, to youth feeling like they have to act aggressive to be respected, these negative emotions and feelings were clearly present. This theme (i.e., I can’t learn here) encompassed the following subthemes: 1) the inability to focus on classwork, 2) stress and unimportance of standardized testing, 3) youths feeling unsafe, 4) youths feelings of hostility towards peers, 5) bullying, 6) poor school culture and climate, 7) adults feeling unsafe and unable to teach and engage, and 8) feelings of both teachers and youths not feeling like they are receiving the support they need to be successful. Of the identified themes across the data, descriptions of a toxic and hostile environment were the most significant. As one adult put it:

It’s not safe up here, it just isn’t. It’s not safe for the teachers, it’s not safe for the students. I mean, I’ve worked in some really [challenging] schools and cities and… I’ve never felt unsafe at a school ever. In some of the worst cities around. And honestly, I don't feel 100% safe here. Even in the building, I don't. (Adult #1)

Subthemes 3, 4, 5, 6 (Safety). The EVC district knows how the school environment has evolved over the years with technology and how youth interact with one another. Districts and schools across the country are working to address bullying and other negative behaviors to promote safe learning environments for the youth. EVC School #1 is also aware that these types of bullying and hostile behaviors exist and have addressed them throughout their student handbooks and school policies. Between two documents published by the district and school, the
root word of “bully” appears 132 different times. Table 3 shows the primary policies in place that directly address social, emotional, and/or physical safety:

Table 3: Policies on bullying, climate and culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1) The EVC Board of Education is committed to creating and maintaining a physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe educational environment free from bullying, harassment and discrimination.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2) The Board expressly prohibits any form of bullying behavior on school grounds; at a school-sponsored or school-related activity, function or program whether on or off school grounds; at a school bus stop; on a school bus or other vehicle owned, leased or used by a local or regional board of education; or through the use of an electronic device or an electronic mobile device owned, leased or used by Board of Education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) The Board also prohibits any form of bullying behavior outside of the school setting if such bullying (i) creates a hostile environment at school for the student against whom such bullying was directed, (ii) infringes on the rights of the student against whom such bullying was directed at school, or (iii) substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Students who engage in bullying behavior in violation of Board Policy #5141 and the Safe School Climate Plan shall be subject to school discipline, up to and including expulsion, in accordance with the Board's policies on student discipline, suspension and expulsion, and consistent with state and federal law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) &quot;School climate&quot; means the quality and character of school life with a particular focus on the quality of the relationships within the school community between and among students and adults.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Each school is responsible for developing a positive behavioral approach to improve the quality of school climate as defined within a particular school. Strategies should align with annual School Accountability Plans. This is not an exhaustive list of the language that the district and school has used to present the message of how serious they want to come across regarding the culture and climate of their schools, but it is apparent that the EVC District and schools have the policies in place to address - and hopefully deter - negative school behaviors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even with a proactive plan in place, there were observations and comments from adults throughout the building on how situations where bullying, fighting, and other aggressive behaviors were not handled properly according to school and district policies. Adult and youth opinions were consistent and as one adult in the building put it:
… there needs to be discipline at this school. You cannot run a school with this type of behavior without following through and they [teachers and admin] just don't anymore. They've just stopped and there's nothing that we can do at this point. - EVC

Adult #1

Furthermore, one of the youth, Breanna, expressed how she could rarely even enjoy coming to school anymore.

… School nowadays is not even good because it’s just… Well, it’s not even the school, it's the kids. Because the kids are so mean and annoying. Every day I come to school and I see them, I just want to go home… They won't shut up. They get us in trouble. They’re a whole bunch of drama.

Breanna, who admitted to being overly mean to her classmates in the past and was probably considered a bully, expressed her observation of the hostile behaviors she regularly sees:

I’ve been seeing a lot of bullying. And I think everything is so bad now because when people get called something, they’ll do it back to make them [other youth in the class] mad cause it channels their anger, and then they don't feel as bad because they got them back and the other person can feel what they felt.

Even the academically excelling youths expressed their frustrations with not being able to focus at school. Nikki stated, “It’s hard for me to focus because people they laugh, they making jokes, being outrageous… Focusing is hard for me here.” This was important to highlight because Nikki is a bright young lady with a very supportive home system that is strict about her academic performance and school behavior. When someone like Nikki is having a hard time being able to focus at school, it speaks to how difficult it is for many of her peers who do not have those same
support systems in place. An example of how difficult it can be for even the high academic performers can be seen in Lionel’s remarks:

> It’s hard to want to keep trying so hard to do the right things and be smart because you look at the other people and you say “why can't I do that stuff too?” Like why do I gotta stay in school and keep getting good grades? It’s hard because I feel like sometimes I can’t defend myself. But I’m just waiting for my time to come where I can have fun in school but still get my education.

Through Lionel’s words, like those of many of his classmates, it was clear that the culture of EVC School #1 did not positively influence and push the youth to excel. In fact, four of the adults at EVC School #1 expressed how they felt bad for their highest academic performers because they knew they were not being challenged and pushed to the levels they should be.

**Subtheme #8 (Lack of support).** Another theme that emerged primarily from classroom observation data was how connected the youth felt to their classroom experiences. Often times, some of the youths would physically attempt to block everything out to stay focused. Most of the time this resulted in the youths, even the most studious ones, using their phones as tools to focus and be able to work or not fall asleep. When Tommy was talking about some of the challenges he faces as a high academic performer, he said “One of the challenges here at EVC School #1 is they only have one way of teaching. They just put stuff on the board most of the time and we just copy it down.”

This lack of engagement did not happen every day and in every class, but there was truth to Tommy’s statements. Many times, even if teachers were trying to implement an engaging lesson, plans would get derailed for several reasons that usually included youth engaging in off-task
behaviors. The off-task behaviors often included talking out of context, making loud random noises, or shouting across the room trying to get attention from their peers.

When trying to describe how hostile the classroom environment was, along with how adults in the school tried to address unruly behaviors, one youth participant expressed that the classrooms and school building often “felt like what jail probably feels like” (Cynthia). Cynthia made this comment because youth at EVC School #1 are supposed to be in their classrooms, in seats, doing schoolwork, and not talking to anyone for nearly 80% of their day. The youth at EVC School #1 do not get to go outside, do not get breaks between classes, and do not get to be active and move around outside of the physical education class, which only happens twice a week. In a similar tone, Nikki made the comment “Now, we don't do no learning because everybody is getting in trouble all class and it’s just boring so why not get in trouble?” Between the lack of engagement the youth felt and the constant issue of never having a space to focus and learn, it was common to hear how frustrated EVC youth were about their educational experience.

Over the 260 hours that I was able to observe youth at EVC School #1, there were 39 instances where at least one of the youth participants, an adult, or the entire class was noticeably disengaged from what was going on in the class. Nearly 40% of those observations were of the adults not paying attention or not actively observing the youth to ensure that expectations and learning objectives were being met for the day. As for the youth, when they were disengaged it was blatantly obvious. The observations of disengagement were based off of blatant acts that both the adults and youths made. It was normal to observe classrooms where multiple youths would physically appear disengaged with earphones in or their backs turned to the teachers while carrying on with their own conversations. With adult disengagement, it was common to observe a classroom where the teacher would sit behind their desk occupied by their phone or computer.
for extended amounts of time (10+ minutes). It was never known when the teachers/adults were conducting school-related use of their computers or cell phones but according to the district policies, “using work time to conduct personal matters (e.g. personal telephone calls, personal email) or any use (whether before or after work) of Board equipment (telephone, email, internet) for non-work reasons is prohibited.” (EVC District Employee Handbook, 2017). Cameron, who was always respectful and willing to take part in class work, even talked about difficulties feeling interested in his school work and learning.

'Cause sometimes, my mind’s just not into the teaching. Like I said, the teaching should be a little bit more fun. Sometimes it's just boring. You go into class, you gotta read a page, and that's it. Alright, we read that chapter, let’s do something that's actually fun. Not just... "Alright, you read the chapter, or you heard the chapter, now just answer these questions." That's boring, I just lay it back and just do the work, but I won't, put a lot of effort into it.

It is unfortunate to observe youth like Cameron, who describe themselves as being very engaged and interested in their education and future, not having a school that maximizes their potential. Throughout the entire study there were brilliant youth with incredible abilities that did not feel engaged or invested in their education. Part of this was because few people would acknowledge how brilliant they were so they felt as if there was no place for them to succeed in the school space. The other reason for disengagement seemed to be because many of the youths felt that the school had a culture and climate that did not prepare them to achieve their dreams.

**Subthemes #6, 7, 8 (Poor culture).** Both youth and adult participants commented on the blatant lack of respect that existed in the school. The youths expressed how they would witness disrespect amongst their peers, towards adults in the building, and even between the adults in the
building. The adults in the building echoed many of those same comments. Below is a table with examples of direct references to disrespectful words and actions from the data (see Table 4).

Table 4: Student comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>“This school is not good. It's because of the students. They're crazy, they don't listen, they're always disrespectful.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>“My classmates make it hard sometimes to keep doing well. I don’t think they always respect me because I want to do my best all the time in school.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Cynthia | - “There’s a lot of lack of respect here at EVC School #1”  
- “People be so disrespectful in this school. Teachers and kids” |
| Nikki    | “Being respectful to one another is the biggest problem around here.”       |
| Cameron  | “It’s hard because, sometimes, kids these days, they’re disrespectful to everyone.” |
| Breanna  | “I wouldn’t call them a high achiever cuz they can be so disrespectful sometimes.” |
| Lionel   | “Sometimes we just be so disrespectful in his class and for no reason. He is nice and cares about us but he doesn't have everyone’s respect. I mean he has our respect but the way some people treat him, it doesn't seem like it.” |
| Adult 5  | “They [youth] don't have any respect for the adults up there [middle school hall]. But then also, I don't think some of us adults have a lot of respect for the kids either.” |

One of the contributing factors to this widespread lack of respect was the language used throughout the building. The youth at EVC School #1 would often shout inappropriate names and language (i.e., curse words and derogatory terms) across the hallways and classrooms. In a
school and district that have clear policies around respect for others and themselves, the inappropriate and toxic language was clearly violated on a daily basis. Making matters worse, being in a school that housed youths from the ages of four to 13, very young students were often exposed to the derogatory and inappropriate language that was often used by the middle school youths. The inappropriate language was directed towards other youth but on multiple occasions the youth directed the language at adults. Throughout the observations, there were 32 documented instances where youth directed inappropriate language at each other and/or at adults without consequences.

Regardless of what the school policies for appropriate language were, how youths were allowed to speak contributed to a negative school culture where engaged learning could not happen. The adults throughout EVC School #1, even the strictest ones, accepted inappropriate language as part of the culture. However, it should be noted that this normalized culture of disrespect existed in certain spaces more frequently than in others. For example, in one classroom where the teacher would address inappropriate language in a firm and consistent manner, there were much fewer incidents of the youth using inappropriate and aggressive language. Specifically, the one classroom where youths were held accountable for the way they spoke to one another only accounted for roughly 5% of the observed occurrences. The other 95% of the incidents took place in other classrooms and hallways. For the adults who did not address language issues, language use was an issue they did not want to fight. However, language was consistently causing disruptions and contributing to a lack of respect for one another. In the following quote by Nikki, she explains how language impacts her and her classmates. Even when language may not appear to matter, it does.
When I hear everybody around me cussing and talking rude and stuff, it rubs off on me. I start to do it too. And we don't get no learning done because everyone is worrying about who just got called out or who won the fight last period.

Adults in the building expressed how they obviously never wanted this culture to perpetuate throughout the school and year. However, the adults’ lack of consistency in addressing hostile and toxic behaviors, like inappropriate language, allowed for a negative culture to thrive and worsen as the year went on.

Section II: “Achievement means a lot”

Throughout the interviews and observations, the youth had concrete ideas about what being a high achiever meant. Interestingly, being successful with academics was important, as it should be, but it was not the most important factor found through their conceptualizations of achievement. According to past research, achievement is broadly defined as an outcome based on measures of classroom grades, standardized assessments and behavior (Gajda, A., Karwowski, M., & Beghetto, R.A., 2017; Hattie, 2009). The youth at EVC School #1 conceptualized achievement as something much deeper than grades, scores, and behavior.

Conceptionalizations of a high achiever. The following are excerpts from the youth participants’ interviews about how they defined and viewed high achievement. The ideas that the youths provided on this topic were essential to answering the first research question of “How do the youth at EVC School #1 conceptualize achievement?” In this first example, Treyjan explained high achieving as a fluctuating measurement dependent on the person:

High achieving is when you are determined to get somewhere and you try your best to get to the highest spot. If you feel like, “This is the highest spot that I can possibly be at. This is my goal. This is what I want. This is what I'm happy with,” then that's high achieving.
Breanna expressed that she did not believe achievement had a concrete definition. Instead, Breanna understood that achievement was different for everyone. She believed the ways in which she wanted to achieve were no more important, valuable, or difficult than ways in which her peers were trying to achieve.

I feel like it's [achievement] different for every person. 'Cause everybody has their own mindset, everybody has their own goals in everything. So it would be what you can achieve, the high stuff that you can achieve. A person can achieve high stuff too, but not as high as you do, 'cause people work at a different task, people are growing at different rates and stuff like that. So, I feel like it's different for everyone.

When youth participant Cameron spoke about achievement, he talked about the difference between effort and outcomes. With most definitions of achievement, outcomes are the final measure. However, in the challenging and hostile environment of EVC, Cameron believed factors like effort and determination were some of the most important abilities that a high achiever embodies.

It’s more important to try hard and try your best, because you can be not that good in a lot of things, but if you try your best, it's gonna be easier for you [to be successful someday]. I can suck at social studies right now but if I keep working, I never go up, yeah, I’ll be something someday.

Additionally, when Cameron talked about achieving at high levels, he never measured achievement with a certain standard that the state or school placed upon him or his peers. Cameron repeatedly talked about setting his own goals, having dreams, and reaching them. To him, that was what high achievement meant.
What is high achieving? Well, to me, it's setting a goal and passing it. Excelling it, going more than what you thought you was gonna go. We all have our own goals. So achievement looks different for all of us.

When Tommy, was asked about achievement he also veered away from a standards-based definition.

High achieving is…. I’d say it's when you finish what you start. You achieve [finish] the goal that was set. Everyone has a different goal that they can be a high achiever with. Just because they have a low grade right now doesn't mean they aren’t the smartest or the best. Grades don't show very much. Sometimes they do. But a lot of time they don't.

This was an interesting statement to hear from Tommy because throughout all the observations, Tommy was a young man determined to excel in school. Tommy completed nearly every assignment even if nobody else in class would. He would study for exams in his moments of free time, and he would not let activities like sports deter him from wanting to get the highest grades possible. Yet, even Tommy knew what defined him as a high achiever was not what also defined everyone else. Tommy saw and understood that situations and circumstances, both in and out of school, were different for everyone. For example, Tommy had a cousin at EVC School #1 that was not as strong of a student but also did not have the same home life. Both Tommy and his cousin immigrated to the U.S. together but Tommy stressed that his cousin’s father was always working and that his mom was still living in their home country. Whenever Tommy mentioned his cousin he made sure that it was clear that Tommy’s home support system was much more available to support and take care of him than his cousin’s home life. Never once did Tommy talk about him being smarter or more intelligent than his cousin in the same grade. Instead,
Tommy understood that what they each had access to was not equal and that if he were in his
cousin’s shoes, he’d probably have much different outcomes in school as well.

Nikki shared similar sentiments to Tommy. Even though Nikki seemed to breeze through
her class work and tests and could remain focused when her classmates could not, she expressed
a belief that achieving in school was different for everyone:

High achieving is basically trying your best. Having a mindset that wants to be there in
whatever you’re doing. Like, setting your goals, whatever that is, and reaching it… High
achieving is different for everyone. Because some people, they have different goals than
me. That's not a bad thing. Maybe they want to play football and reach the NFL.
Someone else wants to get good grades and go to college. They’re both big goals.
They’re all hard and take a lot of hard work. Both of those people I bet are really high
achievers. They’re probably very similar, actually.

Throughout the interviews and observations it was discovered that Nikki’s family constantly
reminds her about the importance of school. Nikki has a strong support system at home that she
knows many of her peers do not have. She genuinely understands that her academic achievement
in school can be attributed to her parents’ influence on her, specifically her mother. Nikki
noticed how many of her peers, particularly the males, did not have the same level of support
that she did. She also made the connection that these peers tended to gravitate toward sports..
Through the interviews, with Nikki being as observant and understanding as she is, she talked
about how she sees the high achievement of some of her peers even though their attitudes and
grades in the classroom may not reflect the same achievement she can attain. Nikki made the
comment:
I notice how obsessed some of them [male peers] are at getting better at basketball. They play 24/7. They are crazy. They never get bored of it. That’s what a high achiever is. Sometimes it looks like that, sometimes it looks like studying for a test all night. They both the same, really.

Cynthia also expressed a fluctuating definition of achievement. Throughout the interviews with Cynthia, she expressed how she was not a strong academic performer. She cited a language barrier, a tough home life, and some confidence issues that were likely the reasons she has such a hard time in school. Yet, when asked about achievement she was able to formulate a definition that allowed herself to fit into it.

Achievement… could be in or out of school. Right? Like, I think I’m a high achiever because… I don’t give my mom any more stress than she already has. I am a good daughter. And… My grades. I have gotten my grades up. I went up in math a whole grade level. I am good at some math and suck at some math. Like division, I suck at it. But I went up a whole grade level. That was hard. So yeah, that’s what achievement is.

Cynthia’s perspective distinctly critiqued the ways achievement is conceptualized in schools with labels and scores. Cynthia would likely not be identified as a high achiever, based off of her feedback from the interviews. However, for the challenges that Cynthia goes through on a daily basis, she is remarkable young lady. Cynthia endured challenges like her mom constantly working to provide for her and her sisters and being made fun of at school for not having the cleanest or most expensive shoes and clothes. Yet, through all of that, Cynthia was able to persevere and show academic growth throughout the year. Regardless of what people thought of her, or even sometimes what she thought about herself, Cynthia had enough confidence to find the positives in her circumstance and view herself as a high achiever.
Similarly, Taylynn was a youth participant that was an excelling student. When Taylynn was asked to describe what “high achievement” meant during one of her interviews, she did not really know what to say. Taylynn’s first reaction was to connect achievement to grades but as the response came out of her mouth, she quickly cut herself off and went into thought. Taylynn, a confident and outspoken young lady, looked around the room trying to find words that would help her describe what she was thinking. Eventually, throughout the interview, Taylynn figured out what she was trying to say.

So, achievement is when you have an A [grade], but you try your best to keep it that way. Like, when you don't get an A [grade] on your test but you do extra credit to get back to that grade you had. ‘Cuz you could be high achieving if you had a C [grade] too. A “C”, or an F, whatever you get, it's not necessarily failing if you truly tried. Because you could work to get that grade up if you want it bad enough. You can go up from an F to a D, or if you work really hard an F to a C maybe even. It's not about the A or the F, it's about what you did to get there.

Again, through Taylynn’s powerful words, the youth understood how achievement for these exceptional youth was not strictly about the outcome. Instead, achievement was more about the route and effort one was willing to take to get there.

One of the male participants, Lionel, had a firm understanding of how he saw achievement. Lionel was a very intelligent young man. Yet, he had a hard time feeling engaged and connected in class. I would observe Lionel looking like he was asleep or disengaged on his phone rather than working on his assignment - but many of the times it was because Lionel was done with the assignment. Talking or being disruptive was not really Lionel’s way to participate but he would definitely get off task easily, especially if he was having a bad day. However, when
asked about how to describe what a high achiever was, Lionel responded as if it was something he had thought about for a long time.

You don't have to have straight A’s [grades] to be a high achiever in school. If you’re a high achiever, it just doesn't have to be limited to academics. You can be involved in sports or something. You can be a really hard working and a good player in sports. You can be someone that really listens and respects the teachers. Someone that tries their best every time.

During Lionel’s interview, when he was given the time and space to voice his wisdom, it was obvious that this young man was as gifted and talented as any other student in the school, regardless of his grades or state test scores. In fact, during Lionel’s third interview, he brought a picture and a poem he had written to express himself even more. The excitement was evident on Lionel’s face when he placed the artifact on the table for me to see. The poem read:

Decisions are key to success in life, we always struggle but keeps thoughts in our head, afraid to be embarrassed publicly so west and meditate in our bed. Even though it's hard to create a motivational force, it has come easy for me and I will help advise for others because my voice is never course. Sometimes it's hard to decide, but right or wrong tears me up inside. (See Figure 4)
Figure 4: Lionel’s poem

Finally, there was Samantha, the last female participant. Samantha was a bright young lady, both in attitude and intelligence, but her emotions would often alienate her from her classmates. Even so, she was seemed to be emotionally intelligent enough to always understand what happened and when she was at fault. Adults throughout the building, from administrators to counselors and teachers, knew and expressed how intelligent they felt Samantha was. However, there was often a lot of frustration with Samantha because of the negative situations she would put herself in. Some negative behaviors could likely be explained by Samantha facing tough situations outside of school. I noticed her perspective differed slightly from her peers. Samantha, more so than any of the other youth participants, had a much more mature perspective. When
Samantha talked about achievement, her mind went straight to adulthood. Samantha was an only child being raised by a single mother and knew of her mother’s struggles. From work, to broken relationships, to the stress of being a single mother, Samantha seemed to take on many of the stresses that her mother endured.

Achievement… Being a high achiever is having a good job, being able to support your family, having a lot of money to give your family when they need it. Kinda, just being happy. But money isn’t everything. You gotta enjoy what you’re doing for work and what you’re good at. But you also gotta be nice, you gotta respect people because when people look up to you and respect you, you gotta give that respect back.

Samantha pointed out, similar to the other participants, that being a high achiever was a multi-dimensional ability. Yet, when school systems are looking to label and identify high achievers, they often look at one dimension - how the person did on a test or report card.

Considering everything that Samantha brings to school with her, on both her good and bad days, she brings a level of resiliency and socioemotional intelligence unrivaled by her peers. This is not to say that the core content subjects (i.e., math, science, reading, writing, and social studies) should be deemed unimportant. Rather, it is abilities like Samantha’s daily resilience to get up and go to school and her obvious high levels of socioemotional intelligence, that are possibly more important to a young person’s future levels of achievement and should be recognized as such (Elias, 1997; Gibbs, 1995; Goleman, 1995).

High Achieving School. According to the data published by the district and state, EVC School #1 is an underperforming school. EVC School #1 is not the lowest performing school in the district but the difference between the highest and lowest performing traditional neighborhood schools in the district are minimal (Edsight, 2018). As far as behavior and
discipline records show, EVC School #1 was in the top three schools (of the 18 traditional PK-8 schools in the district) for occurrences of “personally threatening behavior” (Edsight, 2018). Based on the observations and interviews, this discipline behavior data aligned with the emergent themes discovered in the study. Nonetheless, it was interesting to still hear how the youth at EVC School #1 could still see the endless potential of their peers.

In one interview, Cameron expressed some profound ideas about his peers, school, and community.

Is EVC School #1 a high achieving school? I would say, test scores... I really don't know if it is, but test scores might show something, but the kids in this school are very smart. They might not show it 'cause how the test look and how the test are, but if you really was to answer them and ask them questions... They will show you different ways that they are smart. Some people might have different strengths like I said. If you tell a kid, "Go make a jump shot." Some of them might make it. If you tell a kid "Go read ten pages in five minutes." Some kids could do that. They got different strengths. So I'd say yeah, that this school is a high achieving school.

Even Treyjan, who often felt bullied and frustrated by his classmates, felt that his school was high achieving overall.

I do believe EVC School #1 is a high achieving school because we all want to be the best we can be. It’s not easy for us, but if it was easy it probably wouldn't be worth striving for.

Breanna also felt there was a lot of untapped potential in her peers and that overall, the school was a high achieving school.
To be honest, I do think EVC School #1 is high achieving. I feel like everyone here has potential and everybody is smart in here, but it's just that they need to take their work and be more serious about it.

Similarly, the strong academic performer Nikki felt the same about her school.

I really do think EVC School #1 is high achieving. Like, I’ve seen all of us do really well in all the classes. Just not all the time. I don't know if it’s always their fault either. But we are all smart here. It just don't always look that way. I don't know how to explain it.

Throughout the data collection process, the youth of EVC School #1 showed a sense of pride for their school. Whether through verbally expressing this pride or through the collective support they would show at events like the school basketball’s team run the city championship game. The youths saw how high achieving their peers were regardless of how voices on the outside viewed them.

… Sometimes, I can't lie, kids can be lazy. Sometimes, I may be lazy, but it's not because we aren't smart. It's not because the kids here don't have the potential to do as good as kids from other places. It's because sometimes, parents don't stay up with their kids. Sometimes, they don't have teachers caring about what’s going on at home. Sometimes we ain't got a mom or dad that even be saying "Oh, how was school today?" And ask some questions about school. But we smart, a lot of us be struggling be we still here. I don't know what it’s like in other rich cities but, for what we got over here, we rising up over a lot of things.

The above quote from Cameron reveals a genuine understanding and belief in not only his own potential but also the amazing potential of his peers and community. The youth at EVC School #1 had a firm and realistic understanding of who they were and what they were capable. At the
same time, they universally understood that they could only control so much and that they had to
do the best with what they had.

Section III: “My mom stays on me but it’s because she wants better for me”

The influence and impact of having a strong parental unit is well researched. For example, when parents avoid using poor quality parenting strategies like harshness, low warmth, and a lack of monitoring, there are often high academic achievement outcomes for their children (Patterson, Reid & Dishion, 1992). These factors are compounded for families and youth that are being predominantly raised by a single parent (Pleck, 1997). However, there has been a growing body of research that reveals strong associations with mothers and their children’s achievement abilities (Dumka, Gonzales, Bonds & Milsap, 2008).

This mother-focused research finds that mothers, whether co-parenting or parenting on their own, often have a significant impact and influence on their children’s academic and social outcomes. In this same research by Dumka and Associates (2008), there were sometimes associations with fathers having a significant influence on boys. Though, more consistently, it was mothers that significantly influenced the school-based outcomes (i.e., behavior, academic achievement, grades, attendance) for their children. This research is significant because throughout the data collection period, it was clear that mothers were the reason the students wanted to be so successful. For example, Lionel attributed all of his hard work and motivation to his mother even though he rarely got to speak or see her since she was still living in another country.

One night when I was younger, back in Jamaica, before I went to bed, I told my mom that I’ll make money like my grandfather and take care of us one day. Even though she is not with me, she is who I do this all for.
Lionel referenced his grandfather many times because he wanted to be successful like him. Lionel’s grandfather started his own taxi business and was able to take care of most of the family through that business. The fascinating and inspiring part about Lionel was that his desire to become financially successful did not come from a desire for material things like cars, clothes, and nice homes - something that many of his peers often talk about. Lionel’s desire to be successful came from wanting to bring his mother to the U.S. so they could be together again and so that he could take care of his family like his grandfather does. That desire and motivation at the age of 12 may not be measurable on a standardized test but it motivates him every day to do something positive with his life.

**Biggest Supporter.** Between all nine of the youth participants, three were being raised within a two-parent home and six were being raised by a single parent. Among the 19 interviewed youths, roughly 80% were being raised within a one-parent household. However, most of the youths identified other family members that helped raise them. These other family members included grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Yet, no matter what the parent dynamic was, no matter who was identified as the “cooler” parent, it was the mothers that were repeatedly identified as the biggest supporters. It was the youths’ mothers that put the most pressure on them to be respectful, to do well in school, and to do something positive with their lives.

For example, Samantha, who would admittedly let her grades and behavior slip, talked about how her mom was consistently monitoring how she was doing in school. Samantha’s mom would demand to see her grades, would keep track of assignment with a phone app that shows updated progress reports, and talk to Samantha about having a brighter future than she ever had. Part of what made Samantha’s mom so special to her was that, she knew her mom was making sacrifices so that Samantha could have everything that her mom never did. One comment
Samantha made was, “I know my mom doesn’t like her job. And I know she keeps it and shows up to it every day so that she can support me and make sure I have a home to go to every day.”

As evidence of the important of the youths’ mothers, I performed an analysis on the 27 interviews with the nine youth participants to quantify how many times they referenced the word “mom.” I asked no questions that led to or hinted to their mothers, and the youths said the word “mom” 596 times. Quantifiably, there was no other reference to a guardian (e.g., parent, dad, grandma, guardian, sibling) that came close (see Figure 5). Furthermore, Table 5 demonstrates how significant the participants’ mothers were in their lives.

![Parent Reference](image)

Figure 5: Reference of influential adults
### Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>“I always trust my mom. We’re always talking about life. The hard stuff, the good stuff, I always trust her.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treyjan</td>
<td>“She [mom] is like the enforcer. She expects me to always try. Even if it’s hard, she says she’ll always have my back, but I gotta try.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>“My mom is very strict with me but I am a good kid. She works so hard and I am going to make her proud with what I do with my life.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>“My mom is basically my life influence. She takes two to 20 different jobs. She could take 20 different jobs and she'll still do it, but she'll have time to meet with us.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breanna</td>
<td>“Even in bad situations, she [mom] stays strong, and she tries very hard, and stuff like that. And that's what I like about her, because most people would give up, but she doesn't give up.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lionel</td>
<td>“My mom always told me if I do my work and get good grades, I would eventually go to college and I would be a better person. And I could help get her up here [to the United States]. There was better life up here [in EVC] for me that she wanted to let me have a chance at.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>“I think part of the reason I try so hard is, my Mom works really hard for us and wants us to go to a good high school, finish school, and have a good job someday.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>“For me, I see some of my future, not all of it because you never know. But my mom she helps me see the future, she always tough on us too. She won’t let us slide with things. She taught me to be a mature boy. A young man. From an early age.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylynn</td>
<td>“She [mom] just wants us to get in a good school and achieve what we wanna achieve.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The trend of the mothers being the youth participants’ biggest support system was also recognized by the adults throughout the school. While not all the feedback or remarks from the
school-based adults came across in positive ways, they referenced the youths’ mothers significantly more than any other guardian. Here again, I ran an analysis to quantify the times that the nine adults referenced a mother versus any other guardian (i.e., father, grandparent, aunt, etc.). The graphic below (Figure 6) reveals the amount of times a mother was referenced throughout the interviews versus any other influential adult in the youths’ lives.

Figure 6

Section IV - “They don’t know I can draw like that”

Another common theme throughout the data was the adults failing to recognize motivation and talents of the youths. The youths talked about this in many contexts but it emerged as a theme where they could see the strengths of their peers that the adults did not seem to agree with. The youths recognized the different abilities in themselves and their peers that adults in the building did not see. For example, Breanna felt like she was one of the highest achievers in school because she knew how respected she was by her peers, she knew how hard
she would try sometimes in her classwork, and she knew she was a great leader. However, many adults throughout the building perceived Breanna as a behaviorally challenging young lady that could cause just as much bad as good in a classroom setting. But according to the other youths in the school, Breanna was one of the most trusted and caring people - a characteristic that adults in the building could not see or comprehend from their purview.

Two more powerful examples that fell into this theme came from Cameron and Treyjan. First, during Cameron’s second interview he talked about many of the challenges he sees in his school and community. Cameron even referenced how he hears gunshots going off nightly. One time, Cameron and his friend were riding their bikes to the corner store and Cameron ended up witnessing a man get shot as they were walking out of the store. Cameron was referencing these difficult circumstances to frame what he and his classmates have to go through on a daily basis. They endure these stressful events and then are expected to show up at school and sit there silently while a “boring” lesson takes place. Paying attention and being on task was not usually a problem for Cameron - for whatever reason - but he empathized and stood up for many of his classmates that were unable to go into class with the same demeanor as him. As Cameron was talking about how his classmates were smart and have lots of potential, he paused and thought about one of his peers that most adults had seemed to give up on. Tyler (pseudonym) was the classmate that Cameron focused on and talked about. Tyler was a youth that would hardly stay put in class, was labeled as special education with ADHD, and was the kid that teachers expressed excitement when he was not in class. Sometimes Tyler even knew that the adults did not want him in class or at school. Tyler did not want to be there and the adults did not know what to do with him. Most of the time, I observed even Tyler’s getting annoyed with him -
Cameron included. Even so, Cameron saw the strengths in his classmate that adults did not want to take the time and see.

So you know Tyler right? He's a high-achieving kid. Probably not in his schoolwork, because he don't got that much attention in schoolwork and stuff like that. He looks like he don’t care and stuff but if you give him what he like-- So he be talking to me, he be telling me, "Oh--I want a fast car". You give him a car-- Let's say, me and him was to build a car. If me and him was to build a car engine by ourselves, bang in some money, and mentor him on how to do it, he'll be calm and he will actually like to work on that.

He likes to do that stuff-- Now, schoolwork, he not into that. Even though he has to go to pass [school] and all, that he's not into that. That's not his mindset. His mindset is he want money, he want a car, he wants to chill out here, own his own car dealership and stuff like that. If you give him a car, you give him skills so he can put work into the car, he will do that. He will actually get entertained and listen to you. Now, if you give him a book and be like, "Hey, read this, read this page and answer the two questions," he's not going to do that. He will be like, "Oh, I don't want to read. I can't do that." Now, if you give him a book and you be like, "Read this little paragraph, and then once you done with that paragraph you go do the engine," and he'll work with you. And there's math and reading and everything in that. He’d do all that and be the best in the class probably.

What Cameron was trying to express was that, there are certain methods and pre-established ideas of how kids should learn and what they should be learning. Cameron was challenging the ways school systems teach and how they are expected to learn. Cameron knew it was unrealistic to believe that every youth in every city and neighborhood would learn the same way. Through Cameron’s insight of knowing his community, knowing his school, and knowing
his peers, he had realized that the school system was not designed to engage every person—especially not Youth of Color like himself and his peers. By talking about Tyler’s intelligence, even when adults cannot see it, and how the school is not helping bring that intelligence out, Cameron saw the larger picture. At only 14 years old, Cameron understood how the schools are failing the youths rather than the youths failing school.

The other example comes from Treyjan. Treyjan is an extremely talented artist but his talent goes largely unnoticed because of his quiet nature and private doodle book (as he calls it). When Treyjan was told that he could bring an artistic representation of himself to supplement his interviews, his eyes lit up. At the beginning of the third interview, Treyjan reached into his backpack and handed over some artwork saying, “So, this is me. Pretty much.” (see Figure 7).

As touched upon previously, Treyjan was not seen as the strongest or brightest youth at EVC School #1. I often observed him with his head down or doodling in his book not paying attention to the teachers. With Treyjan being such a naturally gifted artist, it would have made sense he finds his niche and solace in art class. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Instead of Treyjan finding a space where he felt the most talented, the art teacher felt that he was challenging her because he did not always follow exactly what she said (according to Treyjan). Treyjan retold his memory of one particular story:

Well, this situation was actually the second time she got mad at me. She told everyone to gather around her so she could demonstrate what we were supposed to do. I already knew the technique she was trying to show us so I stayed near the back of the group. She kept telling me to come closer, so I took a step. Then she said to move closer again and I took another step. I wasn’t sure what the big deal was, I was still with the rest of the class. Anyway, she eventually gets annoyed and yells, “You think you’re so good. Do you think
just because you can doodle in your book that you’re better than me?!" I didn’t get it, the one class I thought I could be the best in, I wasn’t. I just shut down after that. What’s the point? If I try to do my stuff she just thinks I’m trying to show her up. I just want to express myself with my art. But I guess that’s not what art class is for.
Figure 7: Treyjan’s artwork
Treyjan’s retelling of the story represents a somber reality for many youths in schools like EVC School #1. When youth’s creativity become restricted by a curriculum or protocol, such as the case with Treyjan, their passions and interests in education often disappear. Treyjan eventually expressed that he did not see himself as a high achiever in anything, not even art. In the one thing he had confidence with, the one area that he excels in over all his peers, he could not even see himself as a high achiever because the class was limiting his creativity and ability. Similar to the message that Cameron expressed, it was difficult for Treyjan to excel in a system that was not designed for him to excel. Treyjan felt stuck in an education that did not want to build him up, did not want to help him reach his potential, and that did not care if he enjoyed his experiences at school or not.

**Section V: “I want more things to do”**

This theme emerged through the interviews and observations with all the youth expressing they wish they had more opportunities and options for classes and activities at EVC School #1. The youth at EVC School #1 often felt, as touched upon previously, that their courses were disengaging and monotonous. The theme stemmed from youths repeatedly expressing how they did not have access to programs, activities, and opportunities at school that they were passionate about or interested in. For example, there was only one sport offered for the entire year, one robotics club, one choir group, and one community service program (as recalled by the youth in the interviews and advertisements posted throughout the school). The youth had no options to take classes they may be interested in, did not have organized tutoring opportunities, and few after-school programs like athletics, dance, art, etc.

The youths articulated that school might not be so bad if the four classes their four mandatory classes actually “mixed things up” (Tommy - EVC School #1). For many of the class
activities, the youth said they did many of the same things every day. On some days, they even repeated assignments because the teachers would forget they had previously given those assignments. Furthermore, on 14 different days/occasions in at least one class over the 20-week observation period, teachers gave youths variations of word-based puzzles to complete. These puzzles mainly comprised crosswords and word searches (see Figures 8 and 9). Only a few of the youth, usually between two to five, could stay focused as teachers asked them to complete menial work like the examples below (Figures 8 and 9). However, for most of the youths in the classes, they could not remain engaged and focused on these types of activities for an entire 70-minute class period. At a certain point, when nothing engaging was happening between the teacher and youths, they would become off-task by either talking to a friend or getting out their phones to play games and listen to music. On roughly 21 different observations, a teacher had the youths copy down notes for at least half of the class. On five observations, a teacher had the youths copy down notes, word for word, for the entire 70 minutes of class. These observations occurred within the 20-week observation period and happened in at least two separate classrooms.
General Animals 3

Play this puzzle online at: http://thewordsearch.com/puzzle/6/

Figure 8
Outside of issues with the classroom and instruction, every youth participant expressed a desire to have more options for classes and extracurricular opportunities. The youths expressed that they wished they had language classes (e.g., Spanish or Japanese), mechanic/shop classes, tutoring, more sports besides basketball once a year, and more arts like theatre and dance. One of
the youth participants, (Tommy) expressed, “I could probably be doing better in school, honestly. There are some empty spaces in my learning and I bet kids in Whiter schools know more because they have more programs and classes which we continue with the same topics everyday and just do more of the same.” Tommy never expressed where his visions for a “White” school came from. However, Tommy was very socially aware about what would go in the media, from the presidential election issues to police brutality against Youths of Color. It is possible that Tommy’s insight of what these “other” schools looked like were based off what he could gather from the media and news that surrounds he and his classmates on a daily basis. Or maybe it was the adults around him that were informing him about how under resourced his community was. Throughout all adult and youth interviews, there was a reference to programs they needed or desired, over 28 different times.

More specifically, both the youths and adults brought up programs that had a mentorship component. For example, Breanna expressed how she thought having a high school mentor program would be a positive experience for her. Breanna felt she had no one to look up to or to help her know what to expect going to high school in EVC.

I feel like they should be like some older kids and... I feel like they should have older kids who know, older kids who grew up in this school and around this neighborhood and stuff like that. And they know how hard it is growing up like us and stuff like that, they should come here and sit down and talk to us individually, a group of them should come and talk to us, the kids, individually and understand where they're coming from, just listen to them and try to give them advice and maybe if they feel they're safe, and they feel they have a voice, and they have someone they need to talk to and someone who understands them, they won't feel they just have to reject everything and reject the world.
The youth and adults at EVC School #1 referenced “mentors” and the need for more of them at the school, 23 different times. All of the youth participants except Tommy and Cameron expressed that they did not have an older person in their life, that was not their parent, that they could talk to and look up to.

The norm for EVC School #1 youths was to go to school and then home with little interaction or opportunities to meet teenagers or young adults they could look up to and learn from. None of the youths were part of an after-school program and the only extracurricular activity that any of the youths were engaged in was the school basketball team. Within a two-mile radius exist three different community centers that offer, at least some, youth programming. Unfortunately, of all 19 youths that were interviewed, not one of them had the means to take part in any of the after-school community-based programs in or around their neighborhood. The youths did not have transportation, could not afford the costs, or did not have the knowledge and resources to take part in the programs. As a reference of the resources that the community offers, a map has been provided (see Figure 10). The green pin represents EVC School #1 and the red pins represent the surrounding youth resource centers within a five-mile radius.
Section VI: “We just get away with whatever we want in there”

The findings from this theme emerged primarily through youth interviews and observations. Consistently across the youths’ perspectives, they felt that a significant reason for feeling like they could rarely focus, listen, and learn in class was because adults in the building did not hold them accountable. Adults also expressed similar frustrations and echoed the youths’ perspectives about the youth being able to act and do as they pleased. Even when youths directly violated school-wide policies, they rarely endure consequences for their actions. The only times I
observed any consequences were when youths would get into physical altercations with one another

One of the biggest issues was the youths’ use of cell phones in class. According to the school handbook, cell phones are required to be put away and not in use during the school day. The handbook states, “...during the school day (from the time a student arrives to school until the end of school) the cell phone must be turned off and cannot be visible.” (EVC School #1 Student Handbook - Cell Phone Policy). In fact, there is a full page dedicated to the expectations and protocols that take place when cell phone violations are made (see Figure 11).

The reason phone use in the classroom is such a large issue that must be addressed is that it serves as one of the largest distractors in the classrooms. Throughout their interviews, the youths admitted that their cell phones were a huge factor in them not being as focused as they should be in class. For example, Samantha - a habitual phone user even though she knew better - revealed how she felt about the phone policies in her interviews:

Samantha: You just have to be hard on students because if you have these bad kids that are always in classroom on their phones, they’re not going to get anything done. Me included. And Adult #1 don’t play around.

Interviewer: That's how Adult #1 is?

Samantha: Yes, she'd be like "Give me your phone, you all can get it back." I'm like, "Okay."

Interviewer: You think that if the rest of the teachers were like that the overall school would be better, overall? They would do better in school, they would listen more?

Samantha: Yes. Absolutely. Like Adult #4, it's like he would let us on our phones and he's like, "I don't want to see the phones in the classroom." I'm like, "Okay." and just
keep it out still using it. Now, he trying to take our phones away and he never used to do that. He’ll probably stop trying after a couple of days.

Similarly, when Breanna was asked what were some factors that held her and her peers back from learning and paying attention in class, she stated:

Cell phones. Mostly cell phones because some of them [classmates] can't concentrate. They hear a little sound, then they start checking everything. Then that happens over and over all class. That happens to me too.

When Cynthia was asked what could help her the most to be the best student she could be, she responded with:

If I didn’t have this [holds up cell phone]. I used to never have a cell phone and I used to get much better grades, from fifth grade to sixth. Now, I got bad grades. They are really bad sometimes. I get in trouble. I just be checking it in class too much, it’d be under the table, beside me. And the teachers just stare at me like, “What is she doing?” But they never take it away or check.
Cell Phone Policy

Enforcing the School District Cell Phone Policy has become more challenging as new technology develops and as our students become more creative in attempting to "get around" the policy. The most troubling aspect of this situation that has developed recently involves students who, when found to be in violation of the cell phone policy, have simply defied the authority of school personnel by refusing to surrender the cell phone. We cannot provide the organization and order necessary for a safe school climate and good classroom learning environments when students are refusing to comply with the instruction of faculty and staff who are doing their jobs by enforcing school policy.

1. A student is allowed to have a cell phone in his/her possession on school grounds. However, during the school day (from the time a student arrives to school until the end of school) the cell phone must be turned off and cannot be visible.

2. The only reasons for school personnel to ask a student to surrender a cell phone would be: if the cell phone rang or vibrated (which would mean that the phone was turned on), or if the teacher saw the cell phone (which would mean that the phone was visible).

1st Offense: If a student is found to be in violation of the cell phone policy and refuses to surrender the phone to the teacher when asked, an SPO or an administrator will be called to confiscate the cell phone. The student will be given the cell phone back at the end of the school day. Students will be given a warning.

2nd Offense: If a student is found to be in violation of the cell phone policy and refuses to surrender the phone to the teacher when asked, an SPO or an administrator will be called to confiscate the cell phone. When a cell phone is confiscated after a second violation, the phone is kept by administration until a parent comes to pick it up. Student may receive a detention.

3rd Offense: If a student is found to be in violation of the cell phone policy and refuses to surrender the phone to the teacher when asked, an SPO or an administrator will be called to confiscate the cell phone. When a cell phone is confiscated after the third violation, the phone will be kept until the end of the school year. A parent conference will be held. Student may be suspended.
With such a juxtaposition between the school’s policies and the majority of EVC School #1 adults not carrying out those policies, the few adults who tried to uphold policies and expectations eventually found themselves burnt out. As the year progressed, this caused an outcome where the youths realized they could increasingly get away with more and more. When adults began pushing back less and less, most policies and rules were futile by the end of the year. From dress code to the cell phone policy violations, the youths knew what the expectations were but also knew they could all get away with policy violations. Eventually nearly every youth regularly violated policies (e.g., cell phones, tucked in shirts, inappropriate language, wearing bandanas or d.u rags). By the end of the year even the most consistent and respected adults expressed their exhaustion and frustration and expressed feelings of surrender.

Let's get through these last weeks of school. That's where we're at right now and it's disappointing that that's where we're at. I've honestly never been like this. I've been teaching a long time... I have never reached this point where I'm at this year with that class. I'm just like... You win. Be on your phone. Wear your hoodie. I just I have nothing left anymore. - Adult #1

To quantify major policy violations, I reviewed observation notes to identify the most frequent violations. Below is a graph (see Figure 12) that summarizes the most commonly observed policy violations throughout the 260 hours of observation. There were 77 occurrences where inappropriate or hostile language was observed, seven dress code violations, four bullying situations, and 86 phone violations.
This is not an exhaustive or exact count of how many observed violations took place. At times, multiple violations would happen (e.g., multiple youth engaging in an argument using very inappropriate and aggressive language) where not every youth or individual incident was counted. With every observed violation accounted for in the graph, there was never a consequence for the youth or youths that were responsible for the violation(s). However, I did observe situations where adults would send the youth(s) out of the classroom for policy violations. On those rare occasions, the youth(s) would return within 10-20 minutes as if nothing happened and there were no consequences given out. Some teachers would call an administrator or security to let them know that a student was wandering the halls but there was really no way to know for sure where the youths would go during those times.
Additionally, many of these violations happened in a few places around EVC School #1 (e.g., certain classrooms, hallways, cafeteria) consistently. There were also spaces where these instances would happen much less frequently and the adults in charge of those spaces were consistent with their protocols and follow through. In other words, in some spaces, the youths knew they could not get away with certain behaviors and conducted themselves in manners that differed from the ways they acted in other less strict spaces. In conclusion, when Adult #5 - who is a well respected community and school advocate - was asked about what needs to improve so that the youth at EVC School #1 can have a better school experience, her response was:

I think, it’s consistency. Structure and trust. I get so angry a lot of times because if they acting up on that third floor, and I go up on that third floor, they're running to get back to class, they putting they phones up. You know, right? And I wish that the adults up there had that same… Respect… Now they say, they do it with me 'cause they respect me. They don't have any respect for the adults up there. But then also, I don't think some of the adults up there don't have any respect for them either. So I've done workshop with the [adults] and with the students, trying to bridge it together, but I think it's a little bit too late now. I think it's a little bit too late now. So that's why I got to run all the way all over the school.

Everyone in the school--from adults to youths and paraprofessionals to school leaders--knew there was a lack of structure, consistency, and follow through. Adults were observed and heard feeling unsupported, administrators felt like teachers often ignored advice and instruction, and the youths felt like nobody really cared that much to do anything about it. In the end, between the six emergent themes, there was a school building with a lot of bright and talented youth that did not feel like they had a place that supported them becoming the best versions of themselves.
Summary

This fourth chapter presented a detailed account of the results from the four data collection points that I used throughout the study (i.e., youth interviews, adult interviews, observations, document analysis). These data collection methods yielded six overall emergent themes present across all the forms of data. The six emergent themes were: 1) “I can’t learn here” (225 open codes) (i.e., school is a hostile environment with negative interactions), 2) “Achieving means a lot” (77 open codes) (i.e., Why I achieve and how I do it), 3) “My mom stays on me but it’s because she wants better for me” (163 open codes) (i.e., motivation and supports system), 4) “They don’t know I can draw like that” (115 open codes) (i.e., unnoticed talents and unique abilities), 5) “I want more things to do” (28 open codes) (i.e., recommendations and inequities), and 6) “We just get away with whatever we want in there” (16 open codes) (i.e., adults in the building not holding the youth to high expectations).

The study was grounded in, and anchored by, the youth interviews. I gathered the additional data for triangulation. Through the process of a four-stage coding scheme (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Patton, 2002) and data triangulation (Creswell, 2009) between the multiple data points, any potential biases were greatly reduced.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The following chapter summarizes the research questions and findings (i.e., discussion), recommendations, and areas of future research. As reiterated throughout the chapters, the purpose of this study was to elevate the voices of the youth at EVC School #1 and explore how they conceptualize the idea of achievement. I used an in-depth qualitative approach to explore the different areas of the youths’ lives, both in and out of the school context.

Discussion

This dissertation focused on three central research questions: 1) How do the youths at EVC School #1 conceptualize achievement?, 2) Does being categorized into a state-defined achievement level impact the self-perceptions of youths at EVC School #1?, and 3) What strategies have been employed youths and adults to facilitate the achievement of youth at EVC School #1? Through the use of an Anti-deficit Achievement (Harper, 2010), Critical Race Theory, and Counter-storytelling (Delgado, 1990; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005, 2006) technique and approach, the voices and perspectives of the youth could be centered and elevated.

Conceptualizations of Achievement

The first research question was formulated in a way that it could organically lead into the other two questions. Additionally, the first research question provided the basis for how the study was designed and analyzed. This initial research question gets to the heart of the study, which aimed to gain an understanding of what achievement meant to the youths that attend EVC School #1. The youths were given complete autonomy, and even encouraged, to define what achievement meant from their own perspective and experiences. As a result, at no point in the
study was achievement directly connected to a particular outcome like academics, grades or the like.

The findings showed that the participants’ conceptualizations of achievement were determined by much more than standardized test scores or grades. In fact, whenever the youths were describing what high achievement meant to them and this school and neighborhood community, academic outcomes were at the bottom of the list. Even for youths that admitted to being motivated to do well on standardized tests and get the highest grades in class, they valued other non-cognitive traits above academic performance. Traits like hard work ethic, respect, politeness, loyalty, and perseverance were all referenced as qualities that a high achieving person possesses. This is not to say that the youths at EVC School #1 did not value their education and learning outcomes, because they absolutely did. However, when EVC youths referenced academics being a part of achievement, it was not regarding high test scores or being the brightest students in school. Rather, the youths at EVC School #1 placed value in the ability to grow from one point, whether that be a letter grade or a certain standardized test score, to a higher point. The youths repeatedly talked about how it was irrelevant where they started or ended in terms of academic measures. To them, it was more important about what they did in between the starting point and the outcome. In other words, they placed more value in what someone did between a failing grade at the beginning of the quarter and what they did to ensure they had a passing grade at the end of the quarter. If they worked hard, if they overcome a lot of adversity, if they always asked for help, if they were giving their best effort, then they were a high achiever.

Most intriguing was the empathy that the youths expressed towards their peers, school, and community. The youths at EVC School #1 knew they did not get the same resources and
opportunities as the youth that live in and attend schools in wealthier cities. They knew a lot of their peers were going through a lot of adversity in their home lives. They knew they had to endure and overcome a lot to be regularly present and focused at school. Between the 19 interviewed youth for this study (only nine were used for the focus of the case study), many of them were living with single parents, roughly half of them had immigrated from Jamaica for a chance at a better life, two youths’ fathers were in prison, one youth’s father had committed suicide, and many of the youths talked about regularly hearing gunshots go off in the neighborhood. The youth at EVC School #1 seemed to know that their daily levels of determination and “achievement” could not be measured or graded on a multiple-choice test. These findings reinforce the notion that many Youths of Color from low-income communities are exhibiting excellence, intelligence, and other high achieving characteristics in ways that standardized testing and school curriculum are not designed to acknowledge, value, or measure. While a Eurocentric American education system has long defined what success and high achievement looks like, the youths that attend EVC School #1 redefine those notions on a daily basis (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Yosso, 2005).

**Achievement Categories and Self-Perceptions**

The second research question helps to gain an understanding of whether academic labels impact self-perceptions of the youth at EVC School #1. Based off findings from the first research question and how all the youths placed value in characteristics and outcomes outside of being the highest academic performer (i.e., best grades in class or highest standardized test scores), it was surprising to hear how the youths allowed achievement levels/labels to impact their self-perceptions. The youths at EVC School #1 were able to redefine narrow academic-based notions of achievement when assessing their peers but could not seem to apply that same lens to
themselves. All but one youth, Breanna, did not see themselves as a “high achiever.” Even when the youths exhibited many of the characteristics they all valued, when talking about themselves, nearly half of the youth participants did not see themselves as high achievers. The primary reason the youths did not view themselves as high achievers was because of their grades in certain classes or how they ranked in terms of standardized test scores compared to their classmates. Ultimately, it seemed that the youths were consistently reminded of their rank and order—even when it was not expressed in demeaning ways. The “smart” youths were given more freedoms, often praised, and were regularly reminded of their “excellence”.

As much as the youths at EVC School #1 understood that their worth, abilities, excellence, and potential were not defined by grades or standardized test score, they were still impacted by how the school system labeled them. Even with the youth participants that were high academic performers, they all expressed that they did not have straight A’s (grades), and therefore they felt they could not be considered a high achiever. For the youths that often had a hard time in some or all of the classes, regardless of how hard they tried, they could not imagine themselves being a high achiever. Essentially, all of the youths at EVC School #1 could point out and see the good in all of their peers but not themselves. From peers with constant behavioral challenges to peers that seemed to not care about school, the youths saw the good in them but had difficulty seeing their own excellence.

One specific example of this was with Treyjan. When Treyjan was asked if he was a high achiever, he quickly replied with a “No.” Treyjan did not feel like he was really that good at any school subject. He did not feel like he was good at sports and the one thing he thought he was good at—which was art—the teacher made him feel like he was incompetent in that as well. Treyjan, the amazing artist that produced Figure 7, could not even recognize his own artistic
excellence. The school system had identified Treyjan as a low-average level achieving youth when in reality, Treyjan should have been acknowledged and recognized for the amazing talent he is. Yet, when ideas of education and achievement are not built on the fundamental belief that every child has excellence and it is the school’s responsibility to bring that excellence out, examples like Treyjan’s happen far too often (Lipman, 1995).

**Strategies Employed to Facilitate Achievement**

The third question in this study focused on identifying key factors that positively influence the overall achievement of EVC School #1 youth. Across all forms of data, there were no intentional or significant factors that the EVC School #1 personnel had implemented to ensure achievement for the youths. However, through the in-depth qualitative approach taken in this study, it was discovered that the youths - both consciously and subconsciously - were using self-initiated strategies. Even though there were few programmatic or formal strategies that the school had in place, the youths had their own methods and strategies to become high achievers. This is a phenomenon not unique to the youths at EVC School #1 and was similarly observed by Harper (2010) and Howard (2017) in other parts of the country. When observed together, these strategies reveal the true perseverance and hunger for excellence from populations of youths that have been historically labeled as disinterested, lazy, and intelligent (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Harper, 2010, 2015; Howard et. al., 2017)

One method that many of the youths employed to reach their individual ideas of achievement was to block out everything around them. Many of the youths at EVC School #1 would use earphones and turn music on so they could block out the distractions that were constantly going on around them and focus on their schoolwork. This approach was technically against the school’s policies but from their perspective, this strategy was one of the few ways
they could escape the classroom chaos and not get distracted. With basically only one teacher that consistently addressing the cell phone policy, it was hard for me to know which youths were on their phones to focus and which youths were on their phones because they were disengaged. Through observation, at one time or another, nearly every youth would sometimes end up being distracted by the phone and would sometimes be able to use it as a tool to focus on a task and block out distractions.

Another method that the youths would regularly implement was to control their proximity. Only one of the four classrooms had a consistent assigned seating arrangement, so the youths had the autonomy to sit wherever they pleased. Even though this provided the youths with some freedom, it also left the youths in a position to make daily poor judgments about where and with whom they should sit. Nonetheless, on roughly 17 different occasions I observed one or two youths move to a remote location in the classroom so they could focus on their assignment or the teacher. When asked why the youth isolated themselves by getting up and moving when nobody asked them to, they would always reply with reasons related to wanting to focus more, not wanting to be distracted, wanting to get their work done, or needing to get their grades up. Ten different youths throughout the year were observed using this “removal” strategy to try and focus on their schoolwork. It was unfortunate that the youths at EVC School #1 had to make these mature actions on their own accord. Such actions showed--what could be considered--a level of maturity and social intelligence/awareness that is only present in “high achievers”.

The third example of a youth-initiated strategy focused on the reliance of peers for academic support. There were roughly 15 observed incidents where the teachers became frustrated because the youths in the class would not be paying attention to directions or the content. When this dynamic emerged in the classroom, the teachers would often become less
willing to address the youths’ questions after an assignment was given. In other words, there would be youths working and focused on an assignment and because the teachers were frustrated, they would not answer questions that the youths would have.

When this would happen, multiple youths in the class would step up and serve as the interim teacher. Every time this was observed, the youths who heard the directions or understood how to complete the assignment, would step up and help their peers. It was as if there was an understood responsibility that they all had to do what they could to help each other. In circumstances like these, the youths at EVC School #1 become a stronger collective unit. Even between youths that did not usually get along for whatever reason, when help was needed and adults were unwilling to help, the youths stepped up. The collectiveness of the youths and desire to want better for themselves and their peers, despite the challenges and shortcomings they felt they faced, was often observed. Again, throughout the literature, this type of communal responsibility has been observed and documented before with youths enduring challenging circumstance while living in low-income communities (Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008, Harper, 2010, 2015; Howard et. al., 2017).

Conclusions

The design of this study grounded the findings in the voices and experiences of the youth and also legitimized the youths’ voices through multiple data points. Using adult perspectives, observations, and document analysis served as a method of verification to ensure that all emergent themes were consistent across the multiple data points.

Through this study, I found that the youths at EVC School #1 were much more powerful, intelligent, resilient, brave, and disciplined than any standardized test or class grade could measure. The counter-stories of the youths throughout the study constructed an alternative view
of what it takes to be a valued and respected member of their community - both in and outside of the school building. For the youth at EVC School #1, this did not mean that academic performance was not important. However, the youths recognized the constant inequities they saw all around them--from resources at their school to what happened in their neighborhoods and community. This was heard through quotes like Tommy’s when he said, “I think we just don't have as much stuff to do or as much nice stuff because of the crime rate around here. All the shootings and stuff, who wants to put money into a place like that?” What was most interesting about Tommy’s comments was that the “place” he referred to was his home and neighborhood. Tommy could not pinpoint why he felt that way but he had gained that insight and perspective from somewhere. Unfortunately, for the majority of the youths that were a part of this study, most of them also had this idea that nobody really cared about their school or neighborhoods.

The high achieving middle school youths at EVC School #1 understood their outcomes within the context of their environments. The youth participants never once expressed a feeling of entitlement or pity for themselves. In fact, over half of the youth participants were immigrants from other countries and were very grateful for their situations in EVC. Nonetheless, they were conscious about not having the same access to resources and opportunities that wealthier districts in neighboring cities had. The EVC School #1 youths knew they were expected to do everything that youths from wealthier neighborhoods were doing - but with significantly less. In the interviews the youths expressed not being able to control factors like: who their teachers were, if they even had consistent teachers throughout the year, where they lived, or what resources their schools had. Yet, they all expressed feelings of pride and saw the amazing potential in their families, their school, and their peers. For all but one youth participant, they all felt that their school was a high achieving school. All of the youth participants knew that, in terms of passing
tests, their school was not receiving any awards or recognition. Yet, that is not what came to mind when they expressed EVC School #1 was a high achieving school.

In conclusion, every single youth participant viewed their school as high achieving for multiple different reasons. The youths’ measures and standards for what constitutes being a high achieving school deviated from how the state and district measure and determine which schools are high achieving. Through this study the youths provided an alternate perspective that reveals the abilities, potential, and overall intelligence of youth that attend a low-income and underperforming traditional public school. This alternative perspective shows that their measures of achievement, based on their own conceptualizations, reach far beyond what any standardized test or letter grade can communicate or quantify.

**Theoretical Implications**

By using an A-DA and CRT framework to understand what achievement meant to the youths of EVC School #1, expanded and non-Eurocentric definitions of achievement emerged that challenge dominant discourses. When utilized correctly, both the A-DA and CRT frameworks allow for marginalized and oppressed groups of people to regain control of the narratives that are often placed upon them (Harper, 2010; Stovall, 2005; Yosso, 2005). By adhering to the fundamental principles of these two frameworks, the youths at EVC School #1 were provided a space to redefine and reimagine what achievement meant in their homes, school, and neighborhood. Frameworks like A-DA and CRT were designed to place historically marginalized peoples in positions of power so that their experiences and knowledge can be revealed to the world and accurate realities can be understood. By providing the youths at EVC School #1 the ability to explain what matters most for their daily survival—and not just their grades or test scores—these non-traditional ideas of achievement can be better understood.
A-DA and CRT guided this study by ensuring the youths’ voices were acknowledged and given power and credibility (Yosso, 2005). With the youths anchoring this study, they were able to reveal an innate understanding of being in a school system that was never designed to meet their needs. Their keen sense of awareness, not just in their school but in society in general, revealed levels of intelligence and ability that their grades and standardized tests are not always able to recognize. For example, the youths knew they did not receive the same levels of resources and opportunities as other wealthier school districts, they knew that outside world looked at their school and neighborhood and assumed they were not intelligent, they knew that it was hard to find teachers that would want to work at their school, and they knew that what they were being asked to overcome was not fair. Yet, the research community and state departments of education continue to use Eurocentric measures of achievement that fail to use holistic measures of ability and intelligence with youths like those that attend EVC School #1.

The combined framework for this study focused on centering race, committing to social justice, challenging dominant ideologies, and highlighting excellence (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Harper, 2010, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2005; Yosso, 2005). These tenets allowed for data to be gathered that shifts understandings of how young Black and Latinx youths excel every day in schools across the country. When White-Eurocentric measures are continuously upheld as the bar that defines what high achievement means, we miss the opportunities to identify the excellence that all youths hold—especially for Black and Latinx youths from low-income communities. The implications from this study help show that excellence exists within every young person—no matter their circumstances or environment. Throughout this entire study, A-DA and CRT provided the platform for the EVC School #1 youths to provide concrete examples of how their school and peers was high achieving despite what they outside world may believe.
Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study reveal key perspectives, experiences, recommendations and practices that propel the Youth of Color from one under-resourced low-income neighborhood public school to high levels of achievement. It is important to emphasize that the findings from this study represent the experiences of the youths from one school and neighborhood and should not be generalized to other schools in the EVC district, state, or country. However, the voices and experiences of the youths at EVC School #1 likely align with many other similarly marginalized and under resourced Communities of Color throughout their district. Therefore, the findings from this study can provide educators, administrators, and policy makers with information and perspectives to assess - and redesign - policies and standards that are meant to measure, label, and identify high achieving youth and schools. Based on the findings and expertise of the study’s participants, educational stakeholders should carefully consider the following four recommendations.

Practical Implication I: Spaces and Climate

Based on the findings from this study, there are a few realistic resources and programmatic efforts that could be implemented and/or provided to help support the achievement of the youth at EVC School #1. This first recommendation is framed with an understanding that throughout the entire study, the youths displayed acts of independence and self-reliance. When different youths needed help and adults could not provide assistance, they were always quick to assist one another in whatever ways they could. There were many times when the youths were able to figure out what needed to be done--or how to complete something--without the assistance of an adult to lead them.
However, what became difficult for many of the youths was that they were often in classrooms that did not provide them a space to focus on their work. That is to say, even when the youths where valiantly trying to focus on their assignments, it regularly become impossible to focus. This reality is most closely related to school and classroom climate. The youths did not have regular access to a classroom that lacked firm structure, expectations for learning, respect for one other’s space, and high levels of trust and care; all signs of a poor school climate (Freiberg, 1998; Harris & Lowery, 2002; Haynes, 1998).

If the youths had a space, either before school, during lunch, or after school, to complete their homework and assignments--according to them--they would have more success at turning in daily assignments, which was an issue for nearly 90% of the youths. Having a structured space to work on school-related tasks was a need that was expressed by both the youths and the adults. Ideally, the entire school building would provide spaces like these so the youths would constantly be in spaces that have climates associated with and conducive to high levels of learning, focus, and engagement (Marshall, 2006). However, at minimum, there needs to be opportunities and access for youths to be in those spaces regardless of the overall school’s climate as a whole. This is a simple idea that should not need additional personnel or funding to implement. However, nobody in the building offered a structured study hall opportunity for the youth to have that space to focus on work.

**Practical Implication II: Mentors**

Another recommendation based on the findings and themes throughout the data focus on the assets that already exist in the community. Few youths at EVC School #1 have young adult mentors or high school teens to look up to and learn from. Aside from very strong women, either a mother or grandmother for all nine youth participant, there was not someone to help push and
guide them through the journeys of school and life. A constant theme that both the youths and adults expressed was that the youths at EVC School #1 did not have friends and/or mentors outside of their school and homes that can serve as role models and informants about how to navigate school and community resources.

With multiple high schools existing in the same neighborhood as EVC School #1, it would be mutually beneficial to connect high school youths that are doing amazing things in their schools and community, with the youths at EVC School #1. This is an idea that would require logistical details but should not need a significant amount of funding or additional personnel. Outside of both the youths and adults at EVC School #1 desiring mentorship programs, there is research that supports the positive benefits that can come from mentorship (Harper, 2010; Howard & Assoc., 2017; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng & DuBois, 2008; Lakind, Atkins & Eddy, 2015). More importantly, there is evidence that associates mentorship programs with positive academic outcomes for both the mentors and mentees - dual outcomes that could be extremely positive for the entire district.

**Practical Implication III: Courses and Extracurricular Opportunities**

At a more systematic level, there was a consistent desire to have more engaging course choices and after-school opportunities. The youths at EVC School #1 often expressed how they were exhausted of the same four courses (i.e., math, language arts, social studies and science) and the same three electives (i.e., gym, music, art) for the first 13-14 years of their lives. The youths often expressed a genuine desire to learn and grow but had little opportunity to learn about themselves and find what they were passionate about. Roughly 85% of the day was spent in the four main content courses that they had been exposed to--every day--from kindergarten to the eighth grade. The youths did not have opportunities to study a second language class (e.g.,
Spanish or French), a specialized art class (e.g., pottery, painting, computer design), a structured physical education class (e.g., weight lifting, cross-training, cardio, beginning basketball, etc.) or anything of the sort. Research on curricular and extracurricular exploration for youths has been linked to positive academic outcomes, improved attendance rates and increased educational aspirations (Fredericks and Eccles, 2006; Kamii, 1991; Kohn, 1993).

Furthermore, the youths at EVC School #1 do not have structured after-school opportunities outside of one basketball team and a robotics club. The message heard from the youths was that they have nothing to be excited about at school, they have nothing they get to feel passionate about, and they have nothing to help them get to know their peers outside of the classroom. This recommendation would be a costly implementation that requires personnel, funding, and facilities. However, when educational leaders and policymakers are looking to create equitable school systems, it is critical to provide the most oppressed and marginalized youths and communities with the resources and opportunities they deserve and need.

**Practical Implication IV: Counseling and Psychological Services**

The fourth recommendation also comes at the systemic level. Both youths and adults expressed the need for youths at EVC School #1 to have more access to counseling and psychological services. When many of the youths were providing ideas about what could help many of their classmates be higher achievers, access to counselors or other adults that could be available to talk to about different issues, was a consistent response. Similarly, adults in the building felt that there were too many issues that the youths were going through and they could not provide the time and services necessary. This was a message reiterated by teachers and other adult support staff. This is not only an observed theory that was made by the youths and adults at EVC School #1. Research shows that childhood trauma is associated with higher rates of
depression and psychiatric disorders that directly impact their ability to retain information, focus, and learn (Lewis, Simons, Nguyen, Murakami, Reid, Silva & March, 2010; Grossman, Neckerman, Koepsell, Liu, Asher, Beland, 1997; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Again, this is a recommendation that would require funding and additional personnel but is a recommendation that is necessary. In his interview, when I asked Treyjan if he had any recommendations on what could help his classmates the most, he replied:

... a therapist because some kids are going through some problems or like going through some things at home or either like have some issues like anger issues or they talk too much or they give too much attitude, I think if there could be like with a therapist just to ask about like “why do you feel this way?”, “How come you are always in pain?”, “How come you have anger?”, “How come you're mad at him how come you’re mad at her?”, “How come you're always yelling?”, “How come you're always upset?” or stuff like that. That's what I think we really need. A therapist.

Even when some youths did not directly use the term “counselor” or “therapist”, all of them referred to needing more adults in the building that could be available for talking issues out when they were going through things. EVC School #1 has a full-time counselor and therapist available however in a school with nearly 400 students from grades Pre-K to eight, two people to address the emotional and psychological needs for the entire school is not enough.

Future Research

The findings in this study contribute to the literature that highlight the strengths, talents, and excellence existent in marginalized Communities of Color. This study builds on the limited research that explores the high achieving characteristics and outcomes of middle school Youth of Color that live in challenging environments. This study added to the body of literature that looks
to accentuate the empowering characteristics and outcomes these youths show rather than continue discussions that focus on the systemic and continuous inequities that hold marginalized youths back throughout the country (Carter, 2008; Harper, 2010, 2012; Hernandez, 2017; Howard & Assoc., 2017). Building upon this study and the current research, future studies should look to include larger sample sizes from regions across the country. While both Harper’s (2012) and Howard’s (2017) were large-scale studies that took place in large urban cities, these types of narratives need to be told from across the country and from every type of community. By continuing to investigate these types of similar studies in diverse communities, the data could help reveal how diverse groups of people across the country may require very different supports and interventions to address the inequities and challenges that have been placed upon them.

Future studies should also look to conduct comparative statistical analyses to understand how much value standardized test scores and letter grades reflect a youth’s future potential of achievement in education and career. Put differently, if scoring average or below on standardized achievement exams has minimal statistical indication of future ability and potential, then there should be less importance placed upon these sorts of measures in the U.S. education system - as some studies have already begun to show (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). However, as some opposing lines of research have begun exploring data that shows some correlations between standardized tests and future college and career readiness (Roderick, Nagaoka & Coca, 2009), than future research could also begin to investigate how that data could be best used (i.e., as a indicator of potential vs. indicator of ability vs. indicator for creating more effective instruction). Research has already shown the disparity in college going rates between White students and Black and Latinx students (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011), so it critical that we figure out the true value of standardized testing and the implications of using them as a barrier versus a snapshot for
teaching and learning purposes. However, what must also be taken into account are the historical context and circumstances that Black and Latinx youths in low-income environments are being asked to overcome. The playing field of education has never been equal and using standardization for college entry or measurements of achievement will only prolong the inequities in the American education system.

Lastly, future research should continue to assess the value of extending the amount of minutes that youths are exposed to four main content courses (i.e., Math, Science, English-Language Arts, Social Studies/History). In high need schools and districts, which are disproportionately made up of Youth of Color from low-income backgrounds, a common intervention has been to add more minutes of math, science, social studies, and reading (Jez & Wassmer, 2015). This intervention has been commonplace across the country and has resulted in school systems taking away elective courses and recreational time so that youths can receive more exposure to the subjects most often tested for on standardized exams (Jez & Wassmer, 2015; Lavy, 2010). This intervention strategy is based on research of youths being exposed to additional engaged minutes and not just sitting in classes for extended amounts of time (Brown & Saks, 1986; Cotton & Savard, 1981). Because of these types of interventions, youths at EVC School #1 have become largely unengaged and disinterested in their education. This is likely causing a decline in their learning rather than an improvement.

In conclusion, future research has to continue to center the data collection on the youths. This study reveals that middle school aged youths provide valuable input, insight, and recommendations on what they need and where their school is failing them. The in-depth research on how to turn around underperforming schools in marginalized Communities of Color cannot only happen at the high school or adult level. The youths in this study, between the ages
of 12 and 15, provided profound, in-depth, realistic, and honest perspectives and recommendations that could drastically improve their school’s ability to meet their needs.

Lessons Learned

Over the past four years I have had the amazing opportunity to work with hundreds of inspirational young people between four different EVC schools. Having access to some of EVC’s schools has completely shifted my thoughts of education. In my previous experiences as a classroom teacher and school leader, I had seen many challenging situations and I thought I had a firm idea of what goes on in America’s schools. However, it was not until working within the schools of EVC that I truly saw and understood what modern day segregation, discrimination, and inequitable schooling looked like.

Before moving to the Northeast in 2014, I had never witnessed or experienced such intense segregation. Whether it was during my childhood in rural Washington State with a large first-generation Mexican-American migrant population, or when I was teaching in both urban and rural low-income Phoenix (AZ) communities, never had I experienced school settings and dynamics like EVC. Prior to EVC, I had never stepped into a school where 100% of the students were Black and/or Latinx and qualified for the federal free lunch program--an economic indicator of low-socioeconomic status. In Connecticut, this intense level of segregation along lines of race, class, and ethnicity seem to be the norm rather than the exception. Even though I had understood inequities and racism throughout my childhood and teaching experiences on the west coast, it was eye-opening to see how blatant and normalized these racially-charged patterns were. I will never forget one of the first times of driving home from an EVC school visit and taking a wrong turn. I had taken that wrong turn for no more than five-minutes when a stark realization had occurred. In those brief five minutes or misdirection, I had gone from low-income
housing projects, dilapidated grocery and corner stores, and liquor stores at nearly every corner to a picturesque neighborhood with lush green lawns, million-dollar homes, and luxury cars in the driveways. In those five minutes, along the same street, I had crossed some sort of physical barrier that was created many years ago to ensure certain people lived on certain sides of that same road. A tear rolled down my cheek in that moment and anger and frustration grew inside of me. What I saw and witnessed that day gave me the perspective and strength--within one block and two completely different sides of the street--to persevere through my doctoral program in ways that would empower and give strength to the amazing people born on the side of the street that have never had the resources, opportunities, or support systems to maximize their potential.

I like to believe that equitable education will become a reality. In fact, I have to believe that. I have to believe that average and poor Black and Brown kids like myself, coming from families with little to no educational attainment, can still have access to the resources and support systems that will help them reach their full potential. I have to believe that at some point in the future, stories like mine will become the norm and not the exception. I have to hang on to that. Too many people--from the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s and César Chávez’s of the world to my very own parents--have sacrificed so much for people like me to ever give up. It is my belief in the amazing people I have worked with and are continuously defined as underachieving, along with amazing heroes before me that have opened the doors for new generations to carry on the fight for social justice and equity, that I am able to continue on with the research and work that I do. In my experiences, there are more losses than victories in this fight. However, I will always have that belief to pick me up every time I get knocked down.

As nonsensical as it sounds, the poor schooling that I have witnessed throughout my years of education, including this dissertation study, actually gives me hope. The poor teaching,
the poor school systems, the lack of support and understanding for youths, it all gives me hope. It is a reminder that we, as adults and educational stakeholders, are failing our highest-need youths. Rather than perpetually asking what is wrong with young People of Color or what can they do differently and/or better, we need to start looking inward and ask ourselves what is wrong with the approaches and methods we are taking to provide an equitable education. We need to ask ourselves if we are truly doing what is best for groups of young people that--along with their families--have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised from a school system that was never designed for them to succeed in.

When I see a teacher hand out crossword puzzles for the 3rd time in a week as a “rigorous and engaging” learning activity, I am reminded that WE are failing our youths. When I see a student step out of the classroom to give themselves space calm down from a frustrating moment, and the teacher locks the door to make sure that the student does not come back in, I am reminded that WE are failing our youths. And, when I see an extremely and consistently disengaged young person actually try to do an assignment for the first time, understandably needing a good deal of guidance and help, and the teacher refuses to help because that young person was not paying attention the previous three days of class, I am reminded that WE are failing our youths.

As a person who will be able to provide my future children an excess amount of privilege in terms of my own level and understanding of education and possession of economic resources, I can honestly say I expect my children to be above average in any sort of modern day academic measurement. I will be coming from a position of privilege that can provide my future children with whatever tools they need to navigate much of the biased educational system. Then I think about the parents who also love their children more than anything on this earth but have no
education, no means to provide extra enrichment opportunities, and have to work multiple
minimum wage jobs to provide for the family-- how can those parents and their amazing children
successfully navigate that same biased educational system? The system is biased against them
and in a position that is designed to maintain the status quo.

So, what do I think we do? I do not have that answer, nor does anyone quite yet.
Although I do know it is entirely unfair to expect that young People of Color from poor
communities be held to an inequitable definition of achievement, and expected to compete with
the majority White, privileged middle and upper classes of America. This does not mean that
young People of Color from poor communities, like the Black and Latinx youths from EVC
School #1, are not entirely capable of achieving along standards of every metric. In fact, one
point I hope has resonated with readers of my dissertation is that young Black and Latinx youths
from the “underachieving” EVC School #1 are some of the most gifted and talented youths in the
state. However, we measure them in ways that--many times--completely negate their genius,
excellence, and potential.

Until we create a truly equitable educational playing field, we cannot continue to measure
achievement along a Eurocentric-inspired idea of education and learning. I am determined to
both interrogate the existing definition and measures of achievement and also co-create platforms
where young people, like those I’ve gotten to know at EVC School #1, can combat and
reimagine Eurocentric and inequitable conceptualizations of “achievement.” Educational leaders
like myself must continue to push for systems that measure multiple intelligences and
understandings of achievement. Until then, as a nation, we will continue to ignore and place
limits on some of the most talented, inspirational, and excelling youths that our country has to
offer
REFERENCES


America must do to give every child an even chance. New York, NY: Oxford


Central Regional Educational Laboratory. Retrieved May 8, 2018, from
www.ncrel.org/gap/clark/intro.htm


Clark, R. (2003). In-school and out-of-school factors that build student achievement. North


attributions during clinical interviews. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 10(1), 77-83.

http://ctedreform.org/cts


in youth: The healthy kids resilience assessment. In seventh annual meeting of the Society for
Prevention Research, New Orleans, LA.


Qualitative Sociology, 13(1), 3-21.


education (pp. xi-xii). New York, NY: Routledge.


personality and social psychology, 54(1), 5.

Emerson, R. M., R. I. Fretz, and L. I. Shaw. 1995. Writing ethnographic fieldnotes. Chicago:

Law Review, 36(3), 523-559

Park, CA: Sage

http://hpsschools.org/rawson/index.php/pbis

promise-zone

analysis. Educational psychology review, 13(1), 1-22.


Do social and behavioral characteristics targeted by preventive interventions predict standardized
test scores and grades?. Journal of School Health, 75(9), 342-349.

teachers/diverse classrooms: A guide to building inclusive schools, promoting high expectations,
and eliminating racism. Sterling, VA: Stylus.


Milner IV, H. R. (2010). Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms. Harvard Education Press. 8 Story Street First Floor, Cambridge, MA 02138.


Ravitch, D. (2013). Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools
Regional Educational Laboratory.


University Press.


### State Achievement Categories and Selection for Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exceeds – above average achiever</th>
<th>Meets/Approaches – average achiever</th>
<th>Does Not Meet – high need achiever</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth in this category have scored “exceeds” in one subject and a minimum of “Meets” on all other subject tests</td>
<td>Youth in this category have scored “Meets” or “Approaches” on all subject tests. While these are two categories, the difference in scores within these two categories are often minimal</td>
<td>Youth in this category have scores “Does Not Meet” in half or more of their subject tests.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Appendix B**

*Data Analysis Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase One</th>
<th>Phase Two</th>
<th>Phase Three</th>
<th>Phase Four</th>
<th>Phase Five</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Create a database/file to keep all field notes.</td>
<td>1. Perform observations</td>
<td>1. Perform youth participant interview #1</td>
<td>1. Perform all adult interviews (between 6-8 separate interviews based on the number of youth participants)</td>
<td>1. Complete coding process using youth participant interviews to create major themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Create separate folders for a) interview transcriptions, b) observation field notes c) School documents (artifacts) and student data d) codes, themes, findings, and summaries</td>
<td>2. Take field notes during observations</td>
<td>2. Perform youth participant interview #2</td>
<td>2. Complete transcription process for all adult interviews</td>
<td>2. With major themes created, code all other data in relation to the major themes identified through the youth participant interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Digitally record and transcribe field notes</td>
<td>3. Perform youth participant interview #3</td>
<td>3. Begin analysis (coding) between participant interviews, adult interviews, and observation data</td>
<td>3. Summarize what the data is inferring in regards to all interviews, documents, and observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Save observation and field note data to dedicated folder throughout the data collection period</td>
<td>4. Complete transcription process of youth participant interviews</td>
<td>4. Save data to dedicated folders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Begin analysis (first cycle coding) between participant interviews and observation data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Save data to dedicated folders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol with EVC School #1 Youth Participant about their operational understandings of achievement and how it impacts their lives

Interview protocol - Youth Participants

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol with Rawson School Youth Participants about their operational understandings of achievement and how it impacts their lives

Interview One - Domain One: Participant’s life history and experiences

Lead-off Question: I would just like to know more about who you are, so could you please tell me about your childhood…

a) Where were you born?
b) Who helped raise you?
c) What are some of your favorite childhood memories?
   i. Why is that one of your favorite memories?
d) Who were some of your first childhood friends?
e) What age did you first start learning how to read and write?
f) Who was the first person to read a book to you?
g) Who were some people that you looked up to while you were growing up?
h) What was school like when you first started going to school?
i) Did you like school more or less when you were younger?
   i. Why did you like school more or less?
j) Who was your favorite childhood teacher?
   i. Why were they so special to you?
k) What were some of your childhood hobbies (i.e., sports, music, arts, singing, etc.)
   i. Who introduced you to those hobbies?
l) What kind of student were you when you were younger (i.e., K-5th grade)?
   i. Why do you think you were that kind of student when you were younger?

Topic Domain Two – Interview Two: Participant’s current experiences in and out of the school setting (e.g., describe how you do in school)

Lead-off Question: Tell me a little bit about who you currently are as a young person in Hartford and at Rawson…

a) What neighborhood do you currently live in?
b) Who all do you live with right now?
   c) Who supports you in your home or family (just overall in life)?
      i. Why do you think those people support you?
      ii.) Who do you think supports you the most?
         iii) Does that person support you the most in your education too?
            a) Why or why not do you think that is?
   iv) Who supports you the most in your education or cares about how well you do in school the most?
      a) why do you think that is?
      d) Who do you hang out with the most while you are at school?
         i. Why do you feel you are so close to that person?
c) Who do you hang out with the most outside of school?
   i. Why do you feel you are so close to that person?
f) What do you think of when you hear the term “high achieving”?
g) Who do you think the highest achieving student in school is?
   i) What makes that person so high achieving?
   ii) In your own words, what does it mean to be high achieving?
iii) Do you consider yourself high achieving?
   a) Why or why not?
   g) What are some things that help you do better in school?
   h) What are some things that, in your opinion, could help you do better in school?
   i) Is your school high achieving?
      i. Based on your response, why or why not?
      ii) What could make your school high achieving, or higher achieving (if you believe it is already achieving)
   j) How do your guardians view you as a high achieving young person?
      i. If you think that do not, why not?
   k) Do you think your teachers view you as a high achieving young person?
      i. Why or why not?
   l) What are some factors outside of school that help you do better in school?
      i) Does this thing (whatever it may be) help you do better outside of school too (i.e., in relationships with family and friends)?
   m) Now to help gain a better understanding of who you are, I would like to talk with two caring adults that are a part of your life. Could you recommend an adult at school that you know cares about you or that is an adult that you know you can trust?
      i) tell me more about that person.....
   n) Now, who is a caring adult outside of the school that is an important part of your life?
      i) tell me more about that person...
   o) Would it be alright if I contacted those two adults to interview them about you and all your talents?
      i) if yes, how would you like me to contact them?
      ii) if no to either one, is there someone else that you wouldn’t mind me contacting to do an interview about you with?
      iii) If still no, would you mind if I contacted your guardian to interview them about you?
      iv) If still no, that is okay ,I do not have to reach out to any other adults.

Domain Three – Interview Three: How the participants make meaning of their current life situations (e.g., Why do you think some students do better on state exams than others?)
Lead-off Question: Based on your responses and perspectives from the last interview (interview two), what is unique about you as a young person at Rawson?
   a) Why do you feel that you are achieving as you are in your school?
   b) What are some gifts and talents that you have, that other young people at Rawson might not have?
   c) What are some resources or supports that you have, that other young people at Rawson might not have?
   d) In the last interview we talked about if thought Rawson was a high achieving or low achieving school, has your opinion changed at all?
      i) If so, how? If not, why?
   e) What do you think would best support your peers to become in a higher achieving young person?
      i) Why do you think that would help?
         a) If you think there is nothing that could help, why do you think that?
      f) Do you think your state test scores accurately represent how smart, intelligent, and capable of doing well in school and in life you are?
         i) Why do you think that?
         ii) What would be a better way to measure how smart, intelligent, and capable you are?
   g) What are some factors in your life that you think may be holding you back from becoming high(er) achieving?
      i) Why do you think those things are holding you back?
h) What are some factors in your life that you think may be propelling to be the high achieving young person that you are?
   i) Why do you think those things are such strong factors in your ability to be high achieving?
   ii) What are the challenges to being high achieving in school?
   iii) What are some challenges of being high achieving in Hartford specifically?

J) Do you think all schools are equal? Does your school have everything that every other school in the state or country has?
   i) Explain your response….  

**Conclusion:**
Thank you for your responses - that concludes our interview. Is there anything else you would like to mention or talk about? If not, thank you for participating. The information you provided will be extremely useful in my research. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions, comments, or concerns pertaining to this interview. I will provide you a copy of the transcribed interview for you to review. Thank you again for your participation. Have a great day.
Appendix D

Interview Protocol – Adult Participants

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol with School Personnel and family/community member about their Perceptions and Understandings on how Achievement impacts the Youth of Rawson School

Domain One: Describe the relationship history between you and the participant
Lead-off Question: To begin, I just want to get a better sense of how and why you think the student might have chosen you as one of the people that they trust and believes knows them best within the school…

Possible Follow-up questions:
1. How long have you known the participant?
2. What is your relationship like with the participant’s parents/guardians (if not a parent)?
3. How did you first meet the participant?
4. What were your first impressions of the participant?
5. What is a memory that stands out the most between you and the participant?

Domain Two: What is your knowledge of the participant’s abilities in school/learning
Lead-off Question: Tell me about how the student does academically and why you think they are able to achieve at the levels that they are…

Possible Follow-up questions:
1. Where do you think the biggest areas of growth are for the participant?
   i) Why do you think this?
2. When you think of the term high achieving, what does that look when referring to this participant?
   i) Does high achieving look different for other youth in Rawson School?
   ii) Why do you feel that is?
3. How do you feel you best support the student? aid this participant in their achievement levels?
   i) Can you talk more about why you focus your energy on that kind of support?
   ii) How is it working?
4. Does this student achieve in areas outside of school (e.g., art, music, sports, etc.)?
   i) If so, tell me more about how you believe the participant is achieving in these areas outside of school…
   ii) If so, do you believe that these outside-of-school areas of achievement are just as valuable to the participant’s well-being as their school-related achievement levels?
5. What do you believe could help the participant in their levels of achievement within in school?
   i) Why do you feel that these suggestions would work for this student?
   ii) Why or why not would these suggestions be helpful to the majority of the youth at Rawson School?

Domain Three: Understanding of the participant’s overall disposition (i.e., attitude, confidence, motivation, etc.)
Lead-off Question: Based on your observations and relationship with the participant, tell me a little bit about the participant’s overall attitude in life….

Possible Follow-up questions:
1. How does the student show their motivation? Individuals?
   i) Why do you think yes or no?
2. Where do you think the participant gets these mindsets?
   i) Why do you feel that this is where the participant gets those mindsets?
3. Do you see the participant as a highly motivated student?
   i) Why or why not?
4. Do you see the participant as highly motivated to achieve in things outside of school (e.g., art, music, sports, etc.)?
   i) Why or why not?
5. What do you think could help build up the participant’s overall confidence and motivation in themselves?

**Conclusion:**
That you for your responses - that concludes our interview. Is there anything else you would like to mention or talk about? If not, thank you for participating. The information you provided me will be extremely useful in my research. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions, comments, or concerns pertaining to this interview. I will provide you a copy of the transcribed interview for your records and for you to review. Thank you again for your participation. Have a great day.
Good Morning EVC School #1 Faculty and Staff,

My name is Michael Corral and I’m currently a doctoral student at the University of Connecticut in the Department of Educational Leadership. I am conducting a research study that focuses on the perceptions of achievement and how students are able to attain certain levels of achievement. To investigate this, I will be focusing on a set of students between the current grades of 7 & 8. The purpose of the study is to try and understand how and why some students are performing at higher levels than other students, even when access to resources and support systems are not always equivalent.

To complete this study, I am hoping to focus on a set of six or nine students (2/2/2 or 3/3/3), with an equal amount of boys and girls, that fall into the different levels of achievement (as defined by state standardized test scores). For the sake of this study, the three achievement category/levels are 1) above-average level achievers, 2) average-level achievers, and 3) high-need level achievers.

I am hoping that some of you would be willing to respond to me, at this email address, with students that you think would make a good participant for this study. I would greatly appreciate it if you would respond with the recommendations for any 7th and 8th grade potential participants, and then also tell me where you think the fall on the achievement spectrum. For example, if I was to recommend Johnny Smith and Jane Doe, I could reply as such:

1. Johnny Smith, 7th grader, above-average level achiever
2. Jane Doe, 7th grader, average achiever

You do not need to know the students actual achievement levels. The purpose of these recommendations is just to get an idea of students that you all think would be a good participant for this study – since you all need these youth the most – and then I can verify other descriptive factors (like achievement levels) based on the recommendations and verifications from administrators.

Thank you for taking the time to read this request. You all do great work every day and this school would not be what it is without you. Please feel free to respond with any questions or concerns at any time.

Best,
Michael D. Corral
University of Connecticut
Doctoral Candidate – Learning, Leadership, and Education Policy
Appendix F
Class recruitment script

This conversation will take place in coordination with the school administrator and a classroom teacher of the student population. The Student investigator will present this information in the same class, over the period of one day, so that every student hears the presentation.

Student Investigator = SI  
Administrator = AD  
Potential student Participant = SP

SI: Hi, students. How has your day been going so far (let students talk a little bit to get comfortable)?

SI: So, I have been in and out of the school for the past couple of years now and I am going to be doing a project with the help of some of you. I am looking to understand what achievement means to you. I want to know what it makes you think of, what it looks like to you, how you see yourself doing it, all sorts of stuff related to that.

SI: Basically, I just want to gain a better understanding on what you think or feel about achievement. Do you know what I mean by achievement? (Explain/have brief conversation about what achievement can mean and look like).

SI: If you decide that you want to be a part of my study, ill be in the classrooms as I normally am but will be paying more attention to how you interact with your peers and teachers. I wont bother you at all; I’ll just be observing how you and a few other students that are in the study are engaging in the classrooms, hallways, at lunch, and during specials.

SI: I’ll also do a series of three interviews with you, if you decide to be in the study. In each of those interviews, you’ll basically just be talking about yourself. Stuff like who you are, childhood memories, who important people in your life are, what you think of school, what you think about your future. Nothing invasive and you’d never have to answer anything you don’t want to.

SI: So, what do you think? What are you thinking about with all of this? (Have an open conversation about thoughts, concerns, etc.).

SI: Okay, now I am going to hand everyone a parental permission form to have signed if you want to be a part of the study. Only 6-9 of you will be able to take part in the study so if more than nine students bring this back, you may not end up being in the study. The details of everything I am doing are in this packet. Read it over with your parents and if you would like to be considered, make sure you bring this back to the principal as soon as possible.

SI: Thanks for chatting with me (if student does not want to give answer right then, I will ask that they get back to me or Miss AD by the end of the week).
Appendix G
Youths intro to study script

Introduction to Youths - Script
This conversation will take place in coordination with the school administrator, in the administrator’s office (or another quiet place away from other students), with the administrator present.

Student Investigator = SI
Administrator = AD
Potential student Participant = SP

SI: Hi, SP. How has your day been going so far (let SP talk a little bit to get comfortable)?

SI: So, a few days ago Miss AD sent home a letter for your parents. Did they talk to you about it at all (engage SP in a brief overview either way).

SI: Since they signed it and you brought it back, I am able to see how interested you would be in taking part in my study.

SI: Basically, I just want to gain a better understanding on what you think or feel about achievement. Do you know what I mean by achievement? (Explain/have brief conversation about what achievement can mean and look like).

SI: If you decide that you want to be a part of my study, ill basically be in the classrooms as I normally am but will be paying more attention to how you interact with your peers and teachers. I wont bother you at all, I’ll just be observing how you and a few other students that are in the study are engaging in the classrooms, hallways, at lunch, and during specials.

SI: I’ll also do a series of three interviews with you, if you decide to be in the study. In each of those interviews, you’ll basically just be talking about yourself. Stuff like who you are, childhood memories, who important people in your life are, what you think of school, what you think about your future. Nothing invasive and you’d never have to answer anything you don’t want to.

SI: So, what do you think? What are you thinking about with all of this? (Have an open conversation about thoughts, concerns, etc.).

SI: Would you be willing to be a part of the study? I wont be able to pay you or give you anything but at the end, who knows, you might be interested in finding out what I see and find.

SI: Also, if you need time to think about it, no big deal. And even if you do decide to be a part of the study, and then later you realize you don’t want to be in it anymore, all you have to do is tell me or Miss AD or any of your teachers. It’s not a problem at all and you wont be in trouble or anything. I also cannot use or write anything about you that you do not want me to. I’ll always check with you to make sure I am understanding you correctly or am seeing things correctly before I write anything.

SI: Thanks for chatting with me (if student does not want to give answer right then, I will ask that they get back to me or Miss AD by the end of the week).
Appendix H
Adult conformed consent

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Jennifer McGarry

**Student Investigator:** Michael D. Corral

**Study Title:** Conceptualizations and impacts of achievement: A case study analysis of an urban northeastern school

**Introduction**

You are being invited to participate in a research study because a student at Rawson has identified you as a trusting and caring adult. This study is designed to assess the ideas of what achievement means to students at Rawson and what can support them to achieve at a higher level in and outside of the school building. We are interested in determining what can be used or provided to support Rawson students’ achievement in and outside of the school context and your insight may help strengthen or identify some of these supports.

**Why is this study being done?**

Wanting to provide every student at Rawson School with the resources and supports needed to be successful in school, part of understanding what could work is to allow the youth an opportunity to provide input and perspectives about what they need and want to get out of their school experience at Rawson School. Part of understanding the students that participate in this study is to consider the insight, perspective, and knowledge of trusting and caring adults in the students’ lives. To do this, a trusting and caring adult – both in the school and outside of the school – will be interviewed one time with a firm forty-five minute time limit. If you choose to take part in this study, you will work with the student investigator to coordinate a date and time to meet (at your convenience), so that you can be interviewed with a focus of the student that has identified you to take part in this study.

**What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to be a part of this study, you will be asked to take part in one individual interview lasting no more than forty-five minutes. The interview will be coordinated with you to be done at a time and place that works best for you and the student investigator, Michael D. Corral. During the interview you will be asked about the student’s early childhood, how you view them
currently in school and the community, and then conclude with questions about how and why you think the students have become the person that they are today. Again, all interviews will take place during school hours (unless a written and signed note from you or another parent/guardian allows them to meet before or after school) and will be scheduled under the guidance of the Rawson School administration and teachers. Between the interview with yourself, school personnel, Rawson students, observations, and artifacts that the students may create or produce to help show who they are, a large amount of data will be gathered to help understand the challenges that the youth at Rawson are facing and how some of them are overcoming those challenges.

**What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?**

There are very few potential risks for the participants who are a part of the study. One potential risk to any of the participants would be in the form of privacy during the data review or publishing of the study. To minimize this confidentiality threat, any name or label that can be tied to a specific person will be given a pseudonym. And with such a limited amount of participants, all measures will be taken to ensure no comments or quotes can be associated with a specific person. Furthermore, there may be some inconvenience for all interviewees when time is taken to complete the interviews. All sessions, interviews and member checking (i.e., the focus group), will take a maximum of 45-minutes but should not interfere with instructional time.

Additionally, some parent/guardians may be worried if their child does not select them as the caring and trusting adult to be interviewed. If/when a parent is not identified as the trusting or caring adult, they would likely not know, so it should not be an issue. However, if a parent is disturbed about not being selected as the trusting and caring adult, the student investigator will be able to explain that there are multiple people that the children see as trusting and caring and that, for whatever reason, they asked for the student investigator to contact this other person. However, if a parent were to get upset about this, a conversation would be had with the student participant to discuss if their parent could be the trusting and caring adult – OR – if they would just like to be dropped from the study completely to not complicate things further.

It is also possible that some of the interview questions - to both the student and adult participants - cause a certain level of anxiety/stress. To avoid this, all participants will be constantly reminded that they do not have to answer any of the questions that are asked and they can also stop the interview whenever they feel like it. The student investigator will be sure to remind all participants about these facts so that they feel comfortable and confident about being interviewed. However, all of the questions are designed to be age appropriate and do not specifically ask participants to reveal things that they may not feel comfortable revealing.

**What are the benefits of the study?**

The Rawson student that has selected you to be a part of this study may not directly benefit from this research. However, we hope your participation in the study my help to inform the leadership of Rawson how to create a better learning environment and support system for all students.
Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

There are no costs to you for participation in this study. Additionally, the Rawson students will not be paid to participate in this study.

How will my personal information be protected?

The UConn Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Research Compliance Services may inspect study records as part of its auditing program, but these reviews will only focus on the researchers and not on you or your child’s responses or involvement. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your data. The researchers will keep all study records (including any codes to your data) locked in a secure location. Research records will be labeled with a code. The code will be derived from a 001 number that reflects how many people have enrolled in the study. A master key that links names and codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location. The master key and audiotapes will be destroyed after 3 years. All electronic files (e.g., database, spreadsheet, etc.) containing identifiable information will be password protected. Any computer hosting such files will also have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. Only the members of the research staff will have access to the passwords. Data that will be shared with others will be coded as described above to help protect your identity. At the conclusion of this study, the researchers may publish their findings. Information will be presented in summary format and you will not be identified in any publications or presentations.

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality. If, during the course of this research study, a UConn employee suspects that a minor (under the age of 18) has been abused, neglected, or placed at imminent risk of serious harm, it will be reported directly to the Department of Children and Families (DCF) or a law enforcement agency.

Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

During any part of the study, you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. The researchers will remind you before and during the interview session that you not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer.

Whom do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this study or if you have a
research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, Jennifer McGarry at 860-486-5139, or the student investigator, Michael D. Corral, at 509-969-2395. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 860-486-8802.

**Documentation of Consent:**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

____________________   _____________________   ______
Participant Signature:  Print Name:            Date:

____________________   _____________________   ______
Signature of Person     Print Name:            Date:

Obtaining Consent

Adult Participant Contact Information

(ONLY NEED TO RETURN IF YOU ARE WILLING TO PARTICIPATE)

Please fill out the following information so that the student investigator can begin
coordinating a time and day to meet for the interview.

1. Name:_________________________________________________

2. Relationship to student that nominated you (e.g., teacher, relative, coach, pastor, parent, etc.)
____________________________________________________________________________

3. Phone:_______________________________________________

4. Email:______________________________________________________________________

5. Preferred method of contact (circle one):
   PHONE        EMAIL

6. Is it okay to text you at the phone number listed above (circle one):
   YES        NO

7. Best time of day to contact you (circle one):
   Morning       Afternoon       Evening

8. If it is easiest for you to communicate via text, feel free to text (Michael Corral) me at 509-969-2395 or Michael.corral@uconn.edu.
Appendix I

Approved IRB