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Being Myself in School: A Phenomenological Investigation of Historically Underrepresented High Ability Middle School Students

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BEING MYSELF IN SCHOOL: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF
HISTORICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED HIGH ABILITY MIDDLE SCHOOL
STUDENTS

A Dissertation

Presented to the

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by Melanie J. Lichtenstein

March 2019

BEING MYSELF IN SCHOOL: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF
HISTORICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED HIGH ABILITY MIDDLE SCHOOL
STUDENTS

By

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my former students from Alice Birney Middle School and Northwoods Middle School in North Charleston, South Carolina. Your stories matter, your experiences empower, and you continue to defy systems that refuse to see your greatness. (inspired by Adichie, 2009). Your achievements and accomplishments inspire me on a daily basis.

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ABSTRACT

Chimamanda Adichie (2009), Nigerian novelist, warns the “danger of a single story” is that it becomes the only story. Current scholarly research often features the stories of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students through deficit-lens while focusing on underrepresentation, underachievement, and undernomination. This deficit experience unfortunately becomes the “single story” for many high-ability and high-potential culturally diverse children in school. This phenomenological study aimed on centering the personal stories of middle school high-ability young adolescents who are members of historically underrepresented populations to answer the question: What is it like to be high-ability and a member of an underrepresented population in middle school? Using an assets-based lens, heuristic phenomenology, and arts-based inquiry; this study explores the lived experiences of historically underrepresented and high-ability middle school students (UHA). Four major thematic structures emerged from the descriptions of their experiences: (a) context, (b) curricular, (c) developmental, and (d) relationships. These thematic structures were used to create an emergent model of the intersectional experience of UHA middle school students to address contextual, curricular, developmental, and relational issues for young adolescents in school. The implications of this study are applicable to families, educators, policy actors, and researchers who are invested in creating culturally sustaining policies and pedagogical practices for high-ability historically underrepresented middle grades students.

Keywords: student voice, high-ability, gifted, underrepresented, phenomenology, middle school, arts-based inquiry

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to answer the question: What is it like to be a high-ability middle school student from an historically underrepresented group? This study explored the lived experiences of high-ability students who were also members of historically underrepresented populations about their time in middle school. *High-ability* suggests that the individual has skills and potential beyond their average peers; and makes them “deviant by definition...in terms of ability and motivation” (Coleman, 2012, p. 371). *Underrepresentation* indicates that they are not included in the advanced or gifted coursework opportunities or represented in the mainstream perception of gifted education, and historically includes African American, Latinx¹, and individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Coleman (2012) poses the question “Can I be myself in school?” as a pathway to consider a student’s perspective on their lived experience in school as well as the impact that context plays on an individual’s self-perception and identity (p. 396). For this study, this question was used as a launching point for students to share their experiences.

Statement of Problem

Issues of access and equity in gifted and talented education (GATE) have been an ongoing and contested subject in the field of gifted education (Ambrose, VanTassel-

¹ *Latinx* is the gender-neutral alternative to Latino, Latina and even Latin@ (see Salinas & Lozano, 2017).

Baska, Coleman, & Cross, 2010; Dai & Chen, 2013; Dai, Swanson, & Cheng, 2011; Lo & Porath, 2017; McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012; Plucker & Callahan, 2014; Ziegler & Raul, 2000). Specifically, the discussion regarding opportunities in GATE for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students has been at the forefront of this conversation (Ford, 2014; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Michael-Chadwell, 2011; Peters & Engerrand, 2016; Sapon-Shevin, 2003; Siegle et al., 2016). African American (Ford, 2014; Ford & Whiting, 2010), Latinx (Castellano, 2011), Native American (DeVries & Shires-Golon, 2011), English language learners (ELLs; Brulles, Castellano, & Laing, 2011), and low-income students (VanTassel-Baska, 2010) have been historically underrepresented in gifted education. As applied to this study, *underrepresentation* refers to the “discrepancy between the number of students in a school district and their number in gifted education” (Ford, 2013, p. 37). There is a substantial gap in research focusing on the qualitative experiences of gifted students in general (Coleman, Micko, & Cross, 2015). For the comparatively small number of high-ability and CLED students who are formally identified as gifted, their voices are not present in the extant literature related to this topic. As a result, their lived experiences are not considered in the policy and planning processes that take place when designing and implementing educational services. Cook-Sather (2002) points out that “there is something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve” (p. 3).

GATE, to a large extent, is racially (White and specific populations of Asian American students) and economically homogeneous (Ford, 2014; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Grissom & Redding, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil

Rights, 2016). According to U. S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights Civil Rights Data Collection (2016), African American and Latinx students represent 42% of students enrolled in schools that offer GATE programs; yet, this group represents only 28% of the students enrolled in GATE. Discriminatory patterns and problems in the gifted identification procedures, equity issues, curricular engagement, and resources within schools are a few of the reasons for this imbalance (Borland, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Ford, 2014; Peters & Engerrand, 2016; Sapon-Shevin, 2003). In this study, I intended to learn about high-ability early adolescent students' lived experiences in school while considering the impact of underrepresentation and the intersectional elements of identity on their experience (D. J. Davis, Brunn-Bevel, & Olive, 2015).²

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of underrepresented middle school aged children who are high-ability. Coleman et al. (2015) have reported that research concerning the lived experiences of children identified as gifted is scant with no indication of changing. This study contributes to the research by describing high-ability students' lived experiences, but also by sharing the stories and experiences of students who have been historically underrepresented and underserved in GATE and advanced coursework. Students are key stakeholders in education who are often overlooked when considering programming reform (Cook-Sather, 2014; Mertens, 2009). The voices of underrepresented and underserved students are often not included due to systemic disenfranchisement of racially, ethnically, and socio-economically

²For the purposes of this study, I have decided to use the phrase *high-ability* as an inclusive term to refer to the participants, instead of *gifted*, which connotes a systemic identification process that often excludes certain populations (Mazzoli Smith, 2014).

disadvantaged groups (Cook-Sather, 2014; Ford, 2014; Mertens, 2009; Silva & Rubin, 2003). Further, scholars often resort to generalizable truths instead of including individuals' lived experience of being high-ability (Mazzoli Smith, 2014). Cook-Sather (2014) has asserted that engaging young people into sharing their lived experiences is one way to understand their challenges. Similarly, Worrell (2014) suggested that more research on cultural identities and academic achievement should be conducted. This is particularly relevant for efforts to address equity in gifted or advanced education. The insights of marginalized students may positively impact education reform and change in practices that have been deemed inequitable (Cook-Sather, 2014). These students' unique perspectives may inform choices to address school-based equity issues such as access to advanced and gifted programming.

Research Questions

The overarching question for this study was: What is it like to be high-ability and a member of an historically underrepresented group in middle school? I engaged in this conversation by posing to the participants, "Can you be yourself in school?" (Coleman, 2012). Specifically, the following sub-question was addressed using a phenomenological method of research.

- How do underrepresented high-ability (UHA) middle school students experience, describe school?

Conceptual Framework

Examination of the lived experiences of high-ability and underrepresented middle school students in school includes specific concepts that the literature suggests students may mention when asked, *Can you be yourself in school?* The foundational concept is the

idea of *being myself in school*. There is a lack of scholarly research addressing the specific language of *being myself*, prior to gathering data I identified specific concepts that I presumed would contribute to the notion of *being myself* (see Figure 1).

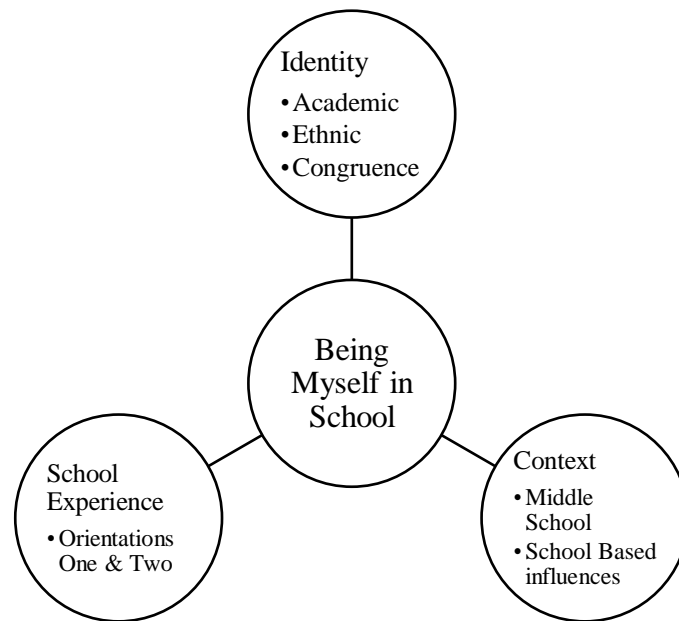


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of “Being Myself in School” including context, identity, and school experiences to understand the lived experiences of underrepresented high-ability students in middle school.

Being myself in school consists of three contributing concepts: school experience (*being*), identity (*myself*), and context (*in school*). Coleman (2012) suggested understanding the lived experience of UHA in school means understanding the context as well as what is a lived experience. Of the many reasons to study students’ lived experience Thiessen (2007) provided, two apply directly to this conceptual model. First, *Orientation One*, studying the lived experiences of UHA students provides for a unique opportunity to discover and describe students’ thoughts and feelings in the classroom and in school (Thiessen, 2007). The second purpose, *Orientation Two*, is the opportunity to

explore how the identities of students are influenced by classroom and school experiences (Thiessen, 2007). This second rationale lends itself to considering the multiple identities of the students and how their development is impacted by what happens in school. A substantial amount of literature examining CLED students' lived experiences in school is focused on themes of challenges or difficulty in school, such as: difficulty with success, cultural conflicts, and systemic problems that impair students' efforts to achieve (Thiessen, 2007). Studies on identity development across CLED groups explain that context is an important factor in what is considered the ideal situation for development (Kitano, 2012). It is for this reason that I added an understanding of the identities of the students to my proposed conceptual framework.

Often individuals from historically underrepresented groups are viewed as a part of a cultural monolith (Robinson, Vega, Moore, Mayes, & Robinson, 2014). Unfortunately reducing an individual's experience down to a single identity—and one that is often viewed from a deficit perspective—contributes to the underrepresentation of CLED high-ability students (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008; Robinson et al., 2014). Yosso (2006) points out that that discrimination in schools is revealed through deficit ideology as school reform is focused on changing the students instead of addressing the systemic problems that leads to underrepresentation. *Deficit Ideology*, also referred to as *deficit thinking model*, *deficit perspective*, and *cultural deficit model*, is the belief system that blames the cultural or social status of an individual for school failure (Valencia, 2010). There is a limited amount of *assets-based research* regarding CLED and high-ability students in gifted education (Hébert, 2018; Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2004; Reis & Hébert, 2007; Williams & Portman, 2014). *Assets-based*

or *strengths-based research* is grounded in positive psychology where students' experiences are considered through what gifts and talents they may bring to the school context.

Context is essential to consider because the personal changes that occur during early adolescent development are vast; the setting in which these changes occur, socially and environmentally, is intertwined with students' lived experiences (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Environmental factors that contribute to a student's lived experience in school include the school and classroom settings and interactions with peers and the adults in the context (Brigandi, Weiner, Siegle, Gubbins, & Little, 2018). This conceptual model provided a framework to consider the factors that may contribute to UHA students' lived experience in middle school that eventually became an emergent theoretical framework for the UHA experience in school.

Qualitative Approach: Phenomenology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the first-person lived experiences of middle school student members of underrepresented groups who are considered high ability. Considering the "lived experiences" of UHA middle school students imparted itself to a phenomenological qualitative approach (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). The interview in phenomenological research is the primary approach to gathering data (Bevan, 2014). This study intends on gathering data through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the participants. I will describe the interview approach more in chapter 3.

Examining students' lived experiences allowed for the students' voices to be heard. The phenomenological approach was selected to center the students' voices and experiences in the study. Other traditional qualitative research methods would have called

for additional perspectives and information into the study to examine lived experiences, phenomenology permitted for the data to be focused specifically on student voice and perspective. My previous professional experience as a champion and advocate for UHA students in school served as the impetus for the goal of centering student voice. Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted that phenomenology is best used for research that aims to understand a group of people's common or shared experience of phenomena.

Coleman et al. (2015) asserted that when researchers investigate the phenomenon of giftedness, it is often from the perspective of the parent or adults who describe their perspectives of a student's experience. The research tradition of phenomenology allowed for the student's own experiences as UHA students to be highlighted and contribute to the overall understanding of "being gifted or high-ability" (Coleman et al., 2015, p. 360). Coleman et al. (2015) have called for more scholarship in GATE research to focus on specific educational contexts and consider how the identification of giftedness impacts a student's identity and understanding of his or her positionality in the school context. This allowed the participants' own experiences and perceptions be the focus while adhering to the phenomenological approach. I analyzed the data using Moustakas's (1994) suggested approach called Heuristic Phenomenology, while reflecting on my own understanding of the lived experience of UHA students prior and after the interviews by maintaining a reflexive journal.

Arts-based Inquiry

To act as an icebreaker and potentially to provide additional data about the lived experience of UHA students, I used an arts-based inquiry approach (ABI; Leavy, 2015). ABI provides another way for participants to share their perceptions of their experiences

in school through a creative outlet. During the interview process, I provided the participants with an outline of a human body where the students could draw, write, illustrate how they perceived themselves in school and how they think others perceived them (Neal-Jackson, 2018). The resulting participant created art was used to inform the semi-structured interview and provide non-verbal based method of sharing what their experience was in middle school.

Definitions and Assumptions

I believe that an individual's experience cannot be separated from their multiple identities, contexts, or history surrounding that experience. This study follows a phenomenological approach to enlighten an understanding of an underserved and underrepresented group and aims to inform a better understanding of the phenomenon of being a UHA middle school student. Learning about UHA lived experiences in schools could contribute to ongoing efforts to address access and equity in schools by providing an additional stakeholder voice.

Definition of Terms

The following is a list of terms and phrases that will be used throughout this proposal:

Camp. A pseudonym assigned to the STEM gifted and high-ability summer camp in which the participants will be recruited from.

Culturally, linguistically and economically diverse (CLED). I use the term culturally, linguistically and economically diverse (CLED) as an inclusive model that encompasses, but is not limited to: racial, ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic, ability, and other identities of underrepresented populations outside of GATE programming.

Gifted and talented. “Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.” [Title IX, Part A, Definition 22. (2002)].

Underrepresented High-Ability (UHA). This term is a general categorical identification label for the participants who fit in multiple underrepresented categories including, but not limited to: ethnically diverse, qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch, linguistic diversity, gender identity, and academic ability level as determined by the state identification policies.

Lived experience. The essence of the collective lived experiences of UHA students in gifted or high-ability programming in middle school.

Student voice. “A student’s voice is not a reflection of the world as much as it is a constitutive force that both mediates and shapes reality within historically constructed practices and relationships shaped by the rule of capital” (McLaren, 2014, p. 180).

Underrepresented. It is defined as the “discrepancy between the number of students in a school district and their number in gifted education” (Ford, 2013, p. 37). Statistically it has been aligned with diverse identities such as: racial, ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic, and ability.

Overview of the Chapters

The present study aimed to provide UHA students an opportunity to share their lived experiences in middle school through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. This study attempted to provide an opportunity for students who have been historically

marginalized or perceived through a deficit lens to contribute to the discussion of being high-ability in North American middle schools. Their voices were unique because: as early adolescents, their perspectives have not been featured in the scholarly literature; as members of historically underrepresented groups, their voices have not been featured in research as much as their White and affluent counterparts; and high-ability students, their distinctive voices have not been the primary focus of scholarly research about GATE. This study intended to see if there are commonalities between UHA students' descriptions of their school experiences, determine how UHA students describe their experiences, and how the school context may impact their development and educational experiences.

The following four chapters for this study include: **Chapter 2**, a review of literature to inform the study and an overview of the current the research; **Chapter 3**, a review of the methodological approach and data analysis of the study; **Chapter 4**, the findings of the study; and **Chapter 5**, a discussion of and implications of the findings. Chapter 2 includes the extant literature that contributes to the conceptual framework of *Being myself in School*. In Chapter 3, I explain the theoretical foundations of the study, who were the participants, how the data were gathered, and how it was analyzed. Chapter 4 includes the individual textural descriptions for each participant, explanation of the thematic structures, and introduces the emergent theoretical framework. In Chapter 5, I discuss the implications of the study, and apply an intersectional lens to the emergent theoretical framework.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses the variables that contribute to the experience of historically underrepresented high-ability (UHA) middle school students in school through a review of the literature that relates to underserved and underrepresented populations. To better understand the experience of UHA middle school students, the variables that contribute to this phenomenon must be explained. Specifically, this literature review considers current research that explores what high-ability middle school-aged students might identify as influences in their school experiences. Using the question that Coleman (2012) poses, “Can I be myself in school?” as an entry point to the data gathering process, allows the literature review to be concentrated on which variables might contribute to students’ descriptions of being themselves in the specific context of school, without making too many presumptions (p. 381). The concept of *being myself* frames this literature review.

Using the question “Can I be myself in school?” to examine UHA middle school students’ lived experience in school, is a developmentally suitable start for the students to describe their experiences (Coleman, 2012, p. 381). It would be inappropriate to presume to know the experiences of UHA middle school students. Exploring the lived experiences of students through a phenomenological method was my choice to answer the research question of: What is it like to be high-ability as well as a member of an historically

underrepresented population in middle school? One of the challenges of a phenomenological approach is to not be too prescriptive about what the participants will say. Phenomenology calls for researchers to reserve any preconceived ideas about the phenomena being examined through a process Husserl (1913/2014) called “epoché” (p. 336; See Attachment A). The researcher brackets his or her beliefs and previous experiences with the phenomena and focuses on the exploration of the described experiences. Hamill and Sinclair (2010) suggested that the literature review be delayed until after data collection and analysis, so that the researcher does not structure questions based on extant literature and themes. Unfortunately, this is contrary to traditional research practice, but it is important to point out the theory-practice disconnect for future research (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). For this literature review, the emphasis will be on what I presumed were the elements that may have influenced a student’s lived experience of *being themselves* in school. These elements form the conceptual model called *Being Myself in School* for this present study. This literature review will focus on the variables related to (1) lived experience; (2) identity; (3) GATE and underrepresentation; (4) context; and (5) assets-based research..

Lived Experience

Lived experiences are shaped by systemic, contextual, relational, and individual influences. Students’ biographies are influenced by multiple levels of factors that have been often overlooked or not addressed within the scholarship (Giorgi, 2009). In a literature review of studies that focused on student experience from the 1950s-to-2000s, Thiessen (2007) identified common patterns, themes, and practices that have helped and hindered the scholarly work in student lived experience. The studies that Thiessen

considered did not all fall under a phenomenological methodology. For the purpose of this literature review, I have included literature that focus on the student experiences and perspectives, rather than on the specific methodology used. The reasoning for this is that, as Coleman et al. (2015) pointed out, there is a gap in the literature that phenomenology as a method to explore student's lived experiences. Additionally, I will explore literature that focus on assets-based considerations of the lived experiences of UHA students.

Thiessen (2007) described three orientations in research related to the lived experience of students:

- Orientation One: How students participate in and make sense of life in classrooms and schools;
- Orientation Two: Who students are and how they develop in classrooms and schools; and
- Orientation Three: How students are actively involved in shaping their own learning opportunities and in the improvement of what happens in classrooms and schools. (p. 8)

Thiessen suggested that a majority of scholarly understandings about student experience are derived from inferred conclusions by adults describing what the students are doing as opposed to what they are thinking, feeling, or believing. Coleman et al. (2015) supported this observation, pointing out that research related to students' lived experiences is limited because the "accounts of the experience of being gifted are not the lived experiences because parents or adults describe a child's experience from data gathered anecdotally or in response to questions" (p. 359). Mazzoli Smith (2014) pointed out that although most psychological research about high-ability students has been focused on the

concept of the individual, the same school of thought has spent little time on the actual lived experiences, merely focusing on generalizable truths. Coleman et al. (2015) stressed that to examine a lived experience, the individual's voice needs to be present.

The lived experience that was examined within this study is the early adolescent student's perception of having high abilities as well being a member of an underrepresented population while in middle school. Kozol (2005) pointed out that student narratives are often more reliable in sharing what actually happens in schools, describing them as "pure witnesses" to the schools (p. 12). The student experience is the starting point for any effort for change. Research about students' awareness of educational equity issues is scant, but when provided the opportunity to examine or explore issues of inequity, students are more than capable of "problematizing it, and thinking about their responsibility in addressing it" (Storz, 2008, p. 250). To describe what children are thinking, feeling, and believing, the researcher would have to communicate directly with the child instead of drawing conclusions through observation. Coleman et al. (2015) focused their review on studies that were specifically about the lived experiences of gifted students and not adult perceptions and interpretations applied to children. Coleman et al. (2015) organized their findings under: (a) The essence of being gifted; (b) Students' identities; and (c) Gifted students in a school setting. This present review will conceptualize *lived experience* by using Thiessen's (2007) Orientations One and Two and the themes that Coleman et al. (2005) identified regarding high-ability students.

Orientation One

Studies that explore students' lived experiences under Orientation One focus on the students' understanding and interpretation of their experiences in classrooms and schools (Thiessen, 2007). The theme of *gifted students in a school setting* as identified in the Coleman et al. (2015) review falls under Orientation One. The research question of this present study is directly connected to Thiessen's Orientation One: *How do underrepresented high-ability (UHA) middle school students experience and describe school?*

Coleman (2012) asserts that high-ability children have "mixed feelings" about their experiences in school (p. 379). Unfortunately, the current model of American schools is not designed to accommodate the high-ability child. High-ability children have characteristics, interests, and learning preferences that often come into conflict with the context in which they are placed (Samardzija & Peterson, 2015). McHatton, Shaunessy-Dedrick, Farmer, Ray, and Bessette (2014) specifically examined students' perspectives of program delivery models when middle school-aged students described their learning environments in school. McHatton et al. (2014) conducted their study with 132 middle school-aged students in a southeastern suburban middle school. Using ABI, they prompted the students to draw a picture of what a "camera would see" when their teacher was teaching in the classroom (p. 41). They found that generally the students in the GATE classes had positive perceptions of their learning environments by showing that the learning environment was simultaneously relevant, engaging, and nurturing (McHatton et al., 2014). The students in the GATE classes illustrated learning environments that were learner-centered and supportive of multiple learning preferences

(McHatton et al., 2014). This was contrary to the general education and special education classes where the classroom environments were focused on behavior and teacher-centered. Schunk and Pajares (2009) asserted that the school environment has the potential for supporting a high sense of efficacy for students or can undermine it if there is a lack of support.

Depending on the program delivery model, high-ability students' lived experiences varied in terms of how challenging school seemed to them (Gentry, Rizza, & Owen, 2002). Gentry et al. (2002) conducted a correlational and causal comparative "survey of 155 students, grades 3-8, from 23 schools in seven states" (p. 147). Students identified as gifted were oversampled because of the purposeful inclusion of two gifted magnet school in the elementary and middle level (Gentry et al., 2002). Magnet schools are public schools that enroll students from across school district residential zoning areas, and typically have a curricular or thematic focus (Jacobs & Eckert, 2017). Students in magnet programs found their learning experiences to be "often challenging," while high-ability students in other settings found the work only "sometimes challenging" (Gentry et al., 2002, p. 152). This was reiterated in the findings of Coleman et al. (2015), who concluded that some high-ability students find themselves in schools that are unprepared for the academic needs of the advanced student. In a literature review of studies concerning gifted students' lived experiences in school settings, Coleman et al. (2015) described similar experiences involving waiting class, the absence of a challenge, academic defiance, and bullying.

School-based factors. Just as Coleman (2012) described American schooling as not being designed for the high-ability child, there is also evidence that it is not designed

for the culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) student (Sapon-Shevin, 1994, 2003). When researchers have considered the unique experiences of UHA students, the focus of the research is often on issues of underachievement, undermotivation, and underrepresentation (e.g., J. K. Allen, 2017; Ford, 2013; Ford et al., 2008; Hines, Anderson, & Grantham, 2017). These are deficit-based perspectives, lacking consideration for the assets of the UHA middle school student. This deficit-based research has led to assumptions about CLED students dropping out and persistently underachieving in school (Carter Andrews, 2012). Although not all CLED students disengage, they still encounter school-based factors that impact their lived experience (Henfield et al., 2008). Under Orientation One, Vega et al. (2012) drew their data from a larger study and identified *tracking, discipline gap, teacher expectations, school belonging, and resegregation* as school and classroom-based factors that contribute to historically underrepresented students' lived experiences. J. K. Allen (2017) conducted interviews of elementary school teachers to determine the role teacher perception played on underrepresentation of CLED students. J. K. Allen (2017) found that expectations regarding language barriers, overreliance on psychometric tests, and a lack of professional development influenced CLED student's experiences in school. These are the same school-based issues that have been identified as contributors to underrepresentation of CLED students in GATE education (J. K. Allen, 2017; Carter Andrews, 2012; Henfield et al., 2008).

Tracking. Academic ability and behavioral tracking have repeatedly been found to segregate students in school racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically. Using IQ tests and early achievement tests, schools repeatedly assign labels and class placement

that could dictate the academic trajectory of a student (Hines, Anderson, & Grantham, 2017; Tyson, 2011). As a result, students and educators begin associating ability and behavior with the different tracks students find themselves on (Tyson, 2013). As a result, advanced courses are perceived as “White courses,” and “regular courses” are associated with CLED students (Vega et al., 2012). Tyson (2011) asserts that assumptions are then made about the approach to academic achievement based on cultural diversity. O’Connor (2006) pointed out that educational research has persistently equated academic achievement and course segregation as being associated with deficit-based perceptions of CLED students. Tyson (2013) encourages educators to reexamine the impact of early assessments in school and consider how those decisions might have impacted a student’s educational experience. Early adolescents increasingly become aware of the absence of students of color in advanced and challenging coursework. This has a direct impact on a student’s perception of academic and identity congruence (Vega et al., 2012). One way tracking hurts is that CLED students become more aware of this discrepancy and may internalize their exclusion from GATE as a sign that they are not actually capable enough to be included (Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2008). Nasir et al. (2008) found in their 2-year study of African American students’ experiences in urban high schools that school context places a significant role in their racial and academic identities. Students were found to view ethnic and academic identities as being context specific and fluid depending where and who they were with (Nasir et al., 2008). All hope is not lost; when students of color are included in the advanced courses, this challenged the perceptions (Mickleson & Velasco, 2006). Mickleson and Velasco (2006) found that when CLED

students were enrolled in GATE from an earlier age, *being smart* became a significant part of their academic identity and their experiences in school.

Discipline gap. Racial disparities also exist in the overrepresentation of CLED students who are subject to exclusionary and punitive discipline practices (Vega et al., 2012). Exclusionary discipline is when students are placed outside of the learning environment for punishment, such as: detention, in-school and out of school suspension, and expulsion. This is a factor that impacts UHA students' experiences in school, because as CLED students they are more likely to be subject to inequitable discipline practices. Longitudinal research has documented correlations with exclusionary discipline and a number of negative outcomes, including academic attainment and school disengagement in African American students (Losen, 2014; Shollenberger, 2015). In a longitudinal study of racial disparities in school discipline records, African American students received the harshest consequences in school discipline when compared to their White counterparts (Shollenberger, 2015). Losen (2014) pointed out that the use of exclusionary discipline is applied to CLED students statistically more than any other subgroups. CLED students who are subjected to more incidents of exclusionary discipline practices are statistically more likely to fall behind in grades, attendance record, and academic pathways to secondary school (Losen, 2014).

Teacher expectations. Teacher and student interactions have direct influence on students' academic outcomes. Wiggan (2008) affirmed that teacher actions and decisions have the most significant impact on student academic achievement. In a mixed method study of high-ability African American students' lived experiences, Wiggan (2008) found that students listed "teacher practices" and "engaging activities" as being a primary

contributor to their academic success (p. 327). Deficit-based thinking impacts teacher's expectations of their students. Specific systemic models, such as academic tracking and the discipline gap, have contributed to the expectation that conflates achievement with cultural identity. Specifically, deficit thinking has been associated with CLED groups, and has created barriers that impede success in the educational system. Deficit-based language that educators have used include "inferior," "disadvantaged," and "deprived," and are examples of how thinking influences expectations (Ford et al., 2008, p. 292). Teacher expectations have a direct connection to participation or access to advanced coursework. Grissom and Redding (2016) found that CLED students taught by non-CLED teachers were less likely to be nominated for GATE or for access to advanced math and reading courses. Teachers are often the single gatekeeper for students to access challenging and advanced coursework (Ford, 2013). States often rely on teachers as references for students' eligibility in GATE. Whether a teacher refers a child to be evaluated or considered for challenging or advanced coursework is dependent solely on that teacher's expectations (Ford, 2013).

School belonging. School belonging plays an important role in student achievement. Osborne and Walker (2006) found that a lack of school belonging was a strong predictor of academic disengagement. In a longitudinal study of rising ninth-grade aged students, Osborne and Walker (2006) measured students' identification with academics, withdraw from school, and academic outcomes. They found that students that identified with academics demonstrated higher grade point averages and less absenteeism (Osborne & Walker, 2006). However, when Osborne and Walker examined predictors of early withdrawal for high school, those CLED students who identified as academic did

drop-out more. Osborne and Walker concluded that CLED students have a more challenging time balancing stigma, academic success, and community connection when considering attrition issues.

Some researchers have suggested that students who experience ongoing mistreatment in the form of low-expectations, excessive exclusionary discipline, and academic tracking had negative associations with school (Vega et al., 2012). Wiggan (2008) found that secondary students were more likely to feel a sense of school belonging with engaging and caring teachers, opportunities for extracurricular activities, and financial incentive in the form of college scholarships. For students in the middle grades, some scholars have suggested that the concept of school belonging is significant to future academic paths (e.g., Gottfried, Gottfried, & Guerin, 2006; Kern & Friedman, 2008; Mickleson & Velasco, 2006). As students move through middle school, they have demonstrated a slow decline in their sense of school belonging (Anderman, 2003). Anderman (2003) found that challenging coursework, caring teachers, and purposeful learning tasks influenced students' sense of belonging in the middle-grades.

De facto segregation. As a result of *de facto* segregation, schools in the United States have been stratified based on class and race (Q. Allen, 2015). *De facto* segregation refers to racial segregation based on social factors, such as housing and neighborhoods. This results in underfunded schools and programs, which limits student opportunities for future academic achievement (Hamilton et al., 2018). Segregation promotes division, inequality, and the absence of opportunity (Orfield, 2013). Teachers at segregated schools remain mostly White, female, and middle class and, in some cases, are underprepared to work with diverse students' needs (Howard, 2010). Additionally, uncontrolled school

choice has contributed to more factors of inequity because families who are privileged are more likely to take advantage of academic alternatives (Orfield, 2013).

Socio-cultural factors. The researchers who have considered CLED students' lived experiences in school often include school-based factors as well as the socio-cultural factors that are addressed under Orientation Two (Thiessen, 2007). Vega et al. (2012) identified *poverty*, *peer influences*, and *familial influences* as socio-cultural factors that impact students' lived experiences in school and fall under Orientation One.

Poverty. Students from low-income households are included in the group of historically underrepresented students. Recent data show that an average of 51% of students in America's public schools come from low-income backgrounds (Suits, 2015). CLED students are concentrated within communities of poverty, and there is a link between poverty and communities in urban areas (Milner, Murray, Farinde, & Delale-O'Connor, 2015). School socio-economic status (SES) impacts the factors that contribute to a student's lived experience (Hamilton et al., 2018). Hamilton et al. (2018) identified specific impacts that school poverty may have on UHA students' lived experience; these include: *teacher expectations*, *peer influences*, and *limited educational opportunities*. These educational opportunities include programming like GATE and access to resources. Hamilton et al. pointed out that, depending on a school's SES based on free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) percentages, less funding may be allocated for GATE programming. In order to consider the lived experiences of UHA students, the SES of the schools must be recognized as a variable that influences how a student experiences school.

Peer influences. Vega et al. (2012) and Hamilton et al. (2018) both considered peer influences as a factor of students' lived experience in school. Peer influences have been found to be both positive and negative. Students often seek academic support from their peers and improve academically (Altermatt, Pomerantz, Ruble, Frey, & Greulich, 2002). Shim, Rubenstein, and Drapeau (2016) asserted that students seek peer support academically because of several reasons: (1) teacher-student ratio impacts the availability of one-on-one support in the middle grades, (2) peers may appear less judgmental, and (3) peer linguistic development may appear more accessible. For the high-ability student, atypical development is common, and impacts peer relationships and learning experiences (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, McCormick, & Rogers, 2012). Kitsantas, Bland, and Chirinos (2017) found that middle school-aged high-ability students understood the value of being grouped with like-ability peers through positive experiences of being challenged.

Vega et al. (2012) asserted that students of color might have negative experiences with peers that impact their academic performance. Some scholars have suggested that when a student of color excels academically, they encounter negative peer interactions by being accused of "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). *Acting White* suggests that a student of color will sacrifice his or her ethnic and racial identity to achieve academically. However, other scholars have encouraged researchers to turn away from this phrasing because of the perpetuation of the idea that being academically successful is only affiliated with "Whiteness." Vega et al. (2012) have challenged the impact of this accusation. Bergin and Cooks (2002), in a study of high-ability students of color, found only 10 out of the 38 students studied had been accused of *acting White*, and none of these students were compelled to disassociate with school or their ability. Urrieta (2005)

asserted that the concept of *acting White* ignores student agency and overlooks how the phrase is actually a criticism of *Whiteness* instead of a disengagement of academic and ethnic identity.

Henfield et al. (2008) studied the challenges that African American students encounter when being involved in GATE programming. They also found that students experienced the phrase *acting White*; however, the term was introduced to the data through researcher questioning (Henfield et al., 2008). More importantly the participants in the Henfield et al. (2008) were concerned with being viewed and treated “normal” by their peers and educators (p. 439). I will explore how giftedness or high-ability impacted students’ identities further in Orientation Two.

Familial influences. That all high-ability students are intrinsically motivated to learn when entering school is an inaccurate assumption often made by educators (Gottfried, Cook, Gottfried, & Morris, 2005). Family attitudes towards school act as students’ first perception of school, learning, and academic achievement (Garn, Matthews, & Jolly, 2010). Thus, a student’s experience will be impacted by the expectations, previous experiences, and family perceptions of a schooling environment. Borland, Schnur, and Wright (2000) found that students who were academically successful had parents and families that valued education and achievement along with actions that supported the student’s journey throughout their academic career. It is possible that although parents are not physically present in the school building or classroom, their lessons and values systems from home might be guiding many of the students’ perceptions and experiences in school (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2018).

Orientation Two

Orientation Two encompasses studies that focus on the lived experience of students and how they relate to student identity, how identity influences students' experiences in school, and how schools impact the development of student identity (Thiessen, 2007). Coleman et al. (2015) identified the themes of *the essence of being gifted: being different* and *students' identities* as Orientation Two related focuses in gifted literature. Thiessen (2007) reported that a significant amount of research in lived experiences related to identity has focused on students who struggle or are not being served properly by schools. This is similar in gifted research, especially when considering the lived experiences related to high ability and identity. This present study's research questions that fall under Orientation Two are: *How do UHA middle school students describe their identities and how they are impacted by their experiences in school?* and *How are UHA middle school students' descriptions of their experiences in classrooms and school congruent or incongruent with their identities?*

The essence of being gifted: Being different. Coleman et al. (2015) pointed out that students who are high ability are aware of their differences even without specific labels or explanations. Henfield et al. (2008) described students' desire to be treated *normal*. This demonstrated the students' self-perception as being *abnormal*, or different from their peers. Henfield et al. (2008) also found that high-ability African American students did not want to "stand out" or be described as different from their peers (p. 439). The participants in the Henfield et al. study described being different as often being assigned additional responsibilities within the school context, such as school leadership.

Students' identities. The conflict of the teacher expectation of assuming a school leadership role because of a gifted label described in Henfield et al. (2008) can be included in the advantages and disadvantages that students identify as being considered gifted (Berlin, 2009; Coleman et al., 2015). Berlin (2009) found that students who were labeled gifted were assigned more work, pressured more, and impacted by teacher assumptions about their abilities. Cross, Coleman, and Terhaar-Yonkers (2014) examined the stigma of giftedness and its presence in the development of an adolescent identity and found that although students often felt stigmatized, they had a number of strategies to cope with situations in school. Cross et al. (2014) pointed out that although the stigma and the strategies exist, there is a gap in the research about how high-ability students apply the strategies.

In a study of middle school-aged students, Meadows and Neumann (2017) examined how the students defined giftedness their perspectives on their experiences in the classroom, how the GT classes differed from the non-GT classes, their perception of the GT label, and their feelings on their GT class and status. The authors found that students' perceptions of the label reflected the ongoing conflict within gifted research where the question is: How do define giftedness and gifted children? (Dai, 2010). Additionally, Meadows and Neumann (2017) concluded that without a specific definition of giftedness or high-ability, students will create their own definition based on their experiences and perceptions. In a survey of 365 gifted identified students at a summer program, Makel, Snyder, Thomas, Malone, and Putallaz (2015) found that the students viewed giftedness and intelligence as related, but still different. Having high abilities as well as being a member of an historically underrepresented population makes the lived

experience of these students unique. I will explore in depth the role identity development plays in the lives of students of color later in this chapter.

Congruence. Worrell (2014) calls for more research to be conducted examining identity and academic achievement. Specifically, “To what extent are students’ cultural identities and academic identities congruent?” (Worrell, 2014, p. 342). This question falls under Orientation Two because it allows the study to consider how experiences at school influence their academic and cultural identities and whether these are congruent.

Oyserman and Destin (2010) explicitly stated that students interpret experiences and contexts in ways they see as being identity-congruent, or *this is for people like me*. Ford (2013) asserted that “the greater the incongruence between the culture of the home, the community, and the school, the more difficult and negative will be students’ educational experiences” (p. 17). If the students feel that they can *be themselves*, then the assumption can be made that their experiences are identity-congruent.

Identity

Operationalizing the concept of *being myself* is the aim of this section of the literature review. I consider *identity* an important part of the lived experience of UHA students in middle school. *Identity* or *identities* are the traits, characteristics, roles, and group memberships that contribute a person’s self-perception (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). Identities can be considered contextual and malleable, ever changing based on experiences and external influences. Identities make up *self-concept*. Self-concept is how one perceives oneself, their personality, and the individual’s concept of truth (Oyserman et al., 2012). Early adolescents (ages 9-13) start demonstrating emergent self-concept linked directly to social group affiliation and academic ability (Wigfield et al.,

2014). The conceptual frame work of *being myself at school* specifically focuses on how students define their self-concept within multiple school contexts. Oyserman et al. (2012) have explained that self-concept and identity influence what individuals do, how they interpret or understand what others are doing, and how they feel. Oyserman et al. (2012) additionally supported that, when considering issues of achievement and motivation, self-concept can be a potentially successful motivational tool to engage students into their choices and how that impact their academic career.

Ethnic and Racial Identity

Ethnic and racial identity (ERI) are key to this study because of the nature of the research question considering how students' identities are impacted by their lived experiences at school based on Orientation Two (Thiessen, 2007). The use of ERI as a metaconstruct instead of racial *or* ethnic identity is based on the Ethnic and Racial Identity in the 21st century Study Group where scholars deliberated over the use of either terms and how they are often used (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). According to Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2014), the terms racial and ethnic are used to describe specific labels and categories. For instance, racial identity is used when describing a single group, such as Black; and ethnic identity is used when the group being described is considered ethnic, such as Latinx. Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) assert that children's and adolescent's concepts of racial and ethnic identity develop at a similar rate. Worrell (2007) confirmed that ERI development has more significance for CLED students than for their White counterparts. Cross and Cross (2008) argue that adolescents do not separate in their lived experiences in racial, ethnic, or cultural components of their identities; it is appropriate to consider ethnic, racial, and cultural as a metaconstruct when describing the lived

experiences of students of color. Adolescents become increasingly aware of their identities along racial, gender and academic lines as they enter high school (Howard, 2003, p. 7).

Academic Identity

Academic identity as a construct is helpful to understand the experience of UHA students (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011, p. 447). Altschul, Osyerman, and Bybee (2006) found that over time as students' ERI increased, their academic achievement declined. One explanation for this is the lack of identity congruence between school and the student's ERI. For some CLED students, schools become a setting of resistance and alienation (Howard, 2003). Students who are subject to low expectations, less than challenging curriculum, and increased discipline are likely to develop a disconnect between self and academic identity (Howard, 2003). Howard (2003) reinforces the impact of positive family and teacher expectations, how students perceive themselves, and the opportunities afforded by the development of an academic identity. Academic achievement has also been harnessed as an act of defiance by students of color to challenge the accepted perception of their abilities (Q. Allen, 2015). African American males who have a positive academic identity view themselves as "academicians, as studious, as competent and capable, and as intelligent or talented in school settings" (Whiting, 2006, p. 224).

Gifted Education

Gifted education is part of the larger system of public education that serves advanced or high ability students. To earn a designation as *gifted*, a student needs to have high IQ scores (140 or higher) or high academic scores in two content areas (Worrell,

2009). However, the use of IQ scores has been brought into question due to issues of testing (Ford, 2013). According to Paul and Moon (2017) educational organizations often rely on one notion of giftedness to serve as an underpinning for all gifted services. This single conception of giftedness conflicts with the diverse and heterogeneous nature of gifted youngsters.

Giftedness is a social construct grounded in two definitions: conceptual and operational (Paul & Moon, 2017). Conceptual definitions of giftedness provide a theoretical foundation in which decisions for educational programming are based. Conceptual definitions allow for states or districts to define giftedness to understand the specific nature and needs of gifted students to provide appropriate programming. Operational definitions provide actionable steps to take to identify, educate, and support the gifted student (Paul & Moon, 2017). Schools often rely on an operational definition focused on academic giftedness to determine programming choices. An academically gifted student:

Demonstrates outstanding performance or evidence of potential for outstanding academic performance, when compared with other students of the same age, experience and opportunity...and a thirst to excel in one or more academic domains.... The academically gifted student is likely to benefit from special educational programs or resources, especially if they align with their unique profile of abilities and interests. (Pfeiffer, 2015, p. 3)

Gifted Adolescents

Young adolescents (ages 10-15) are able to think abstractly, are curious, may have a wide range of interests, and can develop an understanding of their abilities. Young

adolescents experience an enormous amount of change and development when entering the middle school-aged years. This time of fluidity brings into question whether a child maintains their gifted designation (Matthews, 2009). The asynchrony that comes along with adolescence causes additional challenges in supporting young high-ability students academically and emotionally (Jacobs & Eckert, 2017).

Underrepresentation

The consequence of underidentifying culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLEd) students as gifted and talented excludes them from the ability-tracking model that follows students throughout their K-12 experience. Gifted identification is the start of the process of “racialized tracking” (Tyson, 2013, pp. 174-175). This process is not supported by gifted scholarly work, yet it is still utilized widely within American schools (Hines et al., 2017; McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012; Plucker & Callahan, 2014). Schools systems continue to rely on a single cutoff score from an IQ test to identify gifted students (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012). Gifted scholars and academic leaders have called for a more comprehensive, multiple criteria process of identifying gifted students (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012). Reliance on single IQ test scores has been identified as a major contributor to the under-identification of CLEd students in GATE (Ford, 2013; Peters & Engerrand, 2016). The screening and referral process have also contributed to underrepresentation of CLEd students in GATE (Grissom & Redding, 2016). Under-identification and underrepresentation of CLEd students in GATE establishes a precedent that impacts students’ path throughout their school experience.

Middle school aged CLEd students not identified as gifted find themselves often left out of the courses that fulfill prerequisites for college preparatory high school course

work (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Tracking has long been identified as a practice that perpetuates division among CLED students and dominant culture White students (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Darling-Hammond (2013) has asserted that students and educators often associate advanced coursework with only White students. However, there is little information of how the CLED students perceive their school experiences as members of historically underrepresented groups.

Context

Coleman et al. (2015) asserted that an individual's lived experience cannot be separated from the context in which it occurs. Unfortunately, the contexts found in schools are often not conducive for the divergent student. The student's perspective of a school being congruent with their identity might impact a student's academic performance. The school context has a variety of factors, addressed earlier in this chapter that contribute to a student's lived experience.

School Context

Access to advanced coursework and the ongoing changing academic expectations of middle school students have impacted programming and curricular choices for middle-school aged students. Many of the expectations include access to high school level coursework, college preparatory classes, and college readiness activities. Tierney, Bailey, Constantine, Finkelstein, and Hurd (2009) have recommended that students need to be prepared before entering the ninth grade to take college-level courses. This includes access to prerequisites such as high-school credit math, science, and language courses in the middle grades, so that all coursework in high school can be targeted toward a postsecondary educational attainment goal. Access to these programs is often dependent

on the students' academic label in the school. Scholars report that having the gifted label often creates access to programming with original curricula, unique opportunities, and engagement (Berlin, 2009; Henfield et al., 2008; Shaunessy, McHatton, Hughes, Brice, & Ratliff, 2007). It is important to learn whether this is accurate in the schools that serve UHA students. Learning whether gifted programming is available for the UHA student, and whether it is something they perceive as creating opportunities and engaging is important as it will inform the field how to best serve the UHA student (Henfield, Woo, & Bang, 2017). If the students are being identified as gifted, it is still important to learn whether they are being best served and through what model or models. This understanding could contribute to policy and planning for UHA students in middle grades schools.

Assets-Based Research

Deficit-based thinking is attributed as one of the of the reasons that UHA students are not included in gifted and advanced coursework (Ford & Grantham, 2003). Ford and Grantham recommended that shifting the negative perceptions that educators may hold about CLED students in reference to intelligence, assessment practices, policy, teacher professional development, family-to-school relationships, and student perception of giftedness to an assets-based thinking will start to address underrepresentation. Ford and Grantham, however, did not recommend shifting researcher perception or approach of CLED or UHA students.

Zimmerman (2013) recommended to use the concept of *resiliency theory* as an assets-based or strengths-based conceptual theory to consider adolescent development. Reis et al. (2004) used resiliency theory to consider how successful adolescents achieve

in contexts that are labeled risk situations or adverse. Reis et al. (2004) cite Neihart (2001) who pointed out that gifted children have similar characteristics as resilient children. According to McMillian and Reed (1994) elements of resiliency include concepts such as intrinsic motivation and internal locus of control. Resilient students have established goals and a clear idea of their future-self (McMillian & Reed, 1994). Resilient students use their time for their interests and activities. McMillian and Reed also suggested that resilient students have a strong relationship with at least one caregiver, and the family involvement makes positive contribution to successful students. Kitano and Lewis (2005) suggested that intelligence and ability often plays a role in resilience for young people, but this has not been studied enough.

This present study aimed to feature students' experiences and highlight the assets or positive experiences that they may have in school. There is a limited amount of research in gifted education that features an assets-based lens. Some assets that high-ability students possess are also considered resiliency characteristics. Reis et al. (2004) sought to determine the factors that contributed to high achieving high school students' resilience while at an urban high school. In a comparative case study, Reis et al. observed, interviewed, and collected extant documentation for 35 high achieving students over a period of three years. Reis et al. found that the development of resilience was the result of personal, contextual, and social experiences that contributed to the students' success. Some of the participants who were considered underachievers in the Reis et al. study had many unrecognized talents and potentialities and would often perform poorly in school; whereas the academic achievers were rewarded for their grades and test scores.

Q. Allen's (2015) study of Black male achievers aimed to provide an assets-based lens when considering Black males in education. Q. Allen pointed out that the current scholarship on Black male achievement downplays or does not mention the role of agency in Black male achievement. Q. Allen interviewed four academically successful high-ability Black males within a larger ethnographic study about educational experiences of Black male high school students. Q. Allen found that "despite the pervasive and prevailing deficit notions of Black male academic identity, these students succeeded in spite of such dominant discourse" (p. 224). Hébert (2018) conducted a phenomenological study investigating the experiences of 10 first-generation low-income college students and the psychological and social factors that contributed to their success. Hébert's (2018) findings reiterated the research in resiliency in UHA students, that multiple "protective" factors contributed to a student's success: internal locus of control, advanced cognitive ability, strong-work ethic, self-confidence, supportive teachers, established support systems, high caregiver expectations, faith-based engagement, and extra-curricular activities (p. 106).

D. J. Carter (2008) conducted a year-long grounded theory investigation of nine high-ability Black students attending a predominantly white high school using the lens of critical race theory. D. J. Carter pointed out that a conceptual gap existed between race and achievement ideology and critical race theory. D. J. Carter suggested that critical race theory may provide a new concept of considering high-ability Black students' experiences in education. After interviewing and observing her participants for a year, D. J. Carter suggested that a new framework, Critical Race Achievement Ideology (CRAI), may be used to consider the experience of underrepresented students who use

achievement to challenge the perception that academic gifts and talents are possessions exclusive to whiteness. D. J. Carter concluded the following components that contribute to CRAI theory:

1. Students believe in themselves and feel that individual effort and self-accountability lead to school success.
2. Students view achievement as a human character trait that can define membership in their racial group.
3. Students possess a critical consciousness about racism and the challenges it presents to their present and future opportunities as well as those of other members of their racial group.
4. Students possess a pragmatic attitude about the utility of schooling for their future as members of a subdominant racial group.
5. Students value multicultural competence as a skill for success.
6. Students develop adaptive strategies for overcoming racism in the school context that allow them to maintain high academic achievement and a strong racial/ethnic self-concept. (D. J. Carter, 2008, pp. 491-492)

D. J. Carter's model could contribute to a greater understanding of the emergent identities of young adolescents who are high-ability as well as members of historically underrepresented students. Especially when looking for factors and concepts that middle-school-aged students have or that will need to develop for continued achievement into high school.

Nicolas et al. (2008) created a conceptual framework for understanding the strengths of Black youths as a tool to understand the assets that Black youths bring to

school. This model reiterated the call for a strengths-based model to consider how students successfully achieve in contexts that historically are places of oppression and low-expectations (Nicolas et al., 2008). Nicolas et al. (2008) pointed out that in spite of barriers within educational and community contexts, Black students continued to thrive. “The nature of the school environment plays a major role either in contributing to or in contesting society’s view of Black youths as underachieving” (Nicolas et al., 2008, p. 267). The strengths-based model for Black youths can contribute to the research on UHA students experiences within school contexts.

Conclusion

No one should feel that they must choose between the different categorical identities they carry with them (e.g., ethnicity, ability, gender, first-generation, linguistic ability); yet, research that is focused on the students who carry multiple identities is often focused on a single category. Schools are settings where adolescents spend a majority of their time, but we do not know whether school is a place where students actually feel they can move seamlessly in their various identities, or practice multiple ways of presenting themselves to their peers and teachers. Being a student of color, having a linguistic diversity, or being from poverty does not preclude intelligence. Yet research parses out student experiences in categories or deficit-paradigms. Scholars need to consider the whole experience, where the identities associated with power oppress the identities that are not, and how systems reinforce this conflict.

This study will bring the student voice to the forefront by considering the conceptual framework of *Being myself in school*. Based on my previous experiences as a teacher of UHA students, this literature review considered the potential concepts that may

contribute to a CLED middle school student's lived experience. The following chapter will describe how I intend on gathering the data, analyze it in a strict descriptive phenomenological method, and answer the research question of "What is it like to be UHA student in middle school"?

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

Recall that this study is an exploration into the lived experience of historically under-represented, high-ability (UHA) middle school children. Below describe I the philosophical traditions, research paradigm, guiding research question, and methods, including participants, research design, data collection and analysis processes, researcher role, and limitations and delimitations.

Philosophical Traditions

Phenomenology emerged out of the philosophical traditions of Germany through mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), considered the founder of phenomenology. He characterized phenomenology as a descriptive philosophy of experiences (Van Manen, 2014). Descriptions of experiences without interpretation, analysis, or theory differentiates phenomenological methodology from other research approaches. Van Manen (2014) explained that in “Husserlian phenomenological inquiry, experience is the thing, and ‘how’ the things of experience appear to consciousness is the focus” (p. 91). Giorgi (2009) explained that Husserlian phenomenology is concerned with how the “given”—object, relationships, or a “complex state of affairs”—are experienced and perceived in the consciousness (pp. 4–5). As illustrated in Van Manen’s (2014) text *Phenomenology of Practice*, there are many different approaches to phenomenology. For this study, my initial proposal was to follow a descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi, 2009). This empirical approach to phenomenology allowed for the research to

focus specifically on the participants' experiences to unearth an essence of being in middle school (Moustakas, 1994). Giorgi's approach focused on a specific context or situation where the experience happened, and since my study was more about looking for the essence across multiple contexts it was not necessarily the best fit. Moustakas's heuristic research allowed for more flexibility regarding context and examples.

Heuristic Phenomenology

Heuristic phenomenological research allowed for additional ways to portray the experience, whereas descriptive phenomenology relied only on the descriptions by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). This permitted my use of additional techniques, such as poetry and artwork, to portray the experience, and it aligned with the use of arts-based inquiry during the interview process (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Moustakas (1994) also asserted that whereas descriptive phenomenology used data to "construct structures of the experience, heuristic research aims toward composite depictions that remain close to the individual stories" (p. 18). I will describe later in this chapter how this specific delineation proved to be valuable during the analysis process. Finally, heuristic research aims to feature the participants' individual experiences using their own words and depictions. Giorgi's (2009) analysis called for a transforming the statements into psychologically based expressions without using the jargon of psychological science. This process of transformation contradicted the study's dedication to centering student voice as the focus of the study. As a result, this study followed a modified heuristic approach to phenomenology based on Moustakas (1990, 1994).

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm reveals the philosophy and the interpretative frameworks the researcher uses for the research process. I am a critical education researcher. My belief system lies in creating change and addressing access and equity issues for minoritized, marginalized, and otherwise oppressed populations (see Appendix A). Phenomenology calls for the researcher to reserve any preconceived understandings or beliefs about the phenomena being studied. My approach to critical theory was demonstrated in the aim for centering marginalized and underrepresented student voice in the research. However, to maintain a purer phenomenological approach, I reserved my critical lens until the discussion of my findings and the implications they had on stakeholders. I maintained a research log to address the times when my critical voice or perspective entered the process in an attempt to keep the lens separate from the data. For example, when analyzing the data when one of the participant's experiences reminded me of an example from my time as an educator in the classroom, I made note of it in my research log. In the following section, I address the worldview that I have as a researcher, and how it steered the selection of the specific methods and approaches to answer the central question of this study: What is it like to be UHA in middle school?

Ontology

Since the research paradigm driving this study is of a critical nature, then my *ontology*, or my understanding of reality, was that human nature exists in a persistent battle for power. Critical ontology suggests that privilege and oppression are often based on categories such as race, socioeconomic class, gender, cognitive and physical abilities, and sexual orientation. This ontology was appropriate for this study's purpose of

investigating the experiences of students who were members of underrepresented or historically oppressed groups. Coleman et al. (2015) discussed how the lived experiences of high ability students are absent from the scholarly discussion. The aim of this inquiry aligned with the critical paradigm to “discover truth as it relates to social power struggles” (Lincoln, Lyndham, & Guba, 2018, p. 119). In this case, it is the students’ truths as they experience underrepresentation and high ability in school.

Axiology

Axiology describes the role my values may have in the research (Creswell, 2013). To identify extant literature that would inform the research process, I called upon the existing literature in gifted and talented education (GATE) research to consider the elements of being high-ability and underrepresented. Additionally, I utilized research from scholarship on urban and ethnic studies. I was able to find literature addressing the intersection of ethnicity and ability. Much of the work in urban and ethnic studies are very critical of GATE. This is primarily because of the persistent problem of students of color being underrepresented in programs that appear to provide opportunities for a few and exclude many. It was important for me to identify literature that not only included the research about GATE but also literature that was critical of GATE. It is imperative that multiple perspectives are present when considering how experiences of marginalized groups are presented in scholarly work.

Epistemology

I believed that the experiences that UHA students have in middle school were directly connected to the structures that exist within their learning environment.

Epistemology of critical research refers to how the researcher investigates structures that

contribute to issues of oppression and access (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln et al., 2018). Simply put, epistemology is the process researchers use to pursue an understanding of reality. A critical paradigm means that understanding of reality and lived experiences is subjective and unique to the individual. The purpose of research with this epistemological lens was to shine light on the existing experiences of UHA middle school students (Lincoln et al., 2018).

Methodology

The critical paradigm is traditionally dialogic, meaning the participants' perceptions are shared through interviews, narratives, or written accounts (Lincoln et al., 2018). For this study, the method selected was to investigate the lived experiences of UHA students through heuristic phenomenology (Moustakas, 1990, 1994). In the following sections, I will describe the research design that included specific methodological approaches based on Moustakas's (1990, 1994) understanding of phenomenology. Phenomenology is a method that investigates lived experiences or phenomena that exist in our consciousness—before we have consciously thought or theorized about the experience. Van Manen (2014) asserted that phenomenology is a method that is “descriptive and interpretive, linguistic and hermeneutic” (p. 26). Hermeneutic means to interpret the “texts” of life along with the lived experiences of a phenomenon through deliberate and purposeful interpretive practices to gain understanding of a lived experience (Van Manen, 1990, p. 8). According to Van Manen (1990), phenomenological research is not introspective (while it is happening), but

retrospective (after the lived experience happens). The participants in this study described their experiences in middle school through a reflective lens, after it happened.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of UHA middle school students. As stated in Chapter 1, the overarching question for this study was *What is it like to be high-ability and a member of an historically underrepresented group in middle school?* To answer this question the following sub-question was addressed using a phenomenological approach.

- How do underrepresented high-ability (UHA) middle school students experience, and describe school?

I investigated 16 UHA students' lived experiences in school to extract the essence of what it is like to be a member of an underrepresented group as well as high-ability. I used heuristic research methodology based on Moustakas's (1994) interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology.

Methodology Rationale

I selected phenomenology over other qualitative methods because I wanted to center the research on silenced voices and perceptions in the existing literature of UHA students. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend using qualitative research when a problem exists and needs to be explored, a literary style is appropriate for reporting the data, empowerment of the participants may be a potential outcome, the problem is complex, the issue is contextually based, there is not an exacting quantitative approach to address the issue, a theory may emerge to address the issue, and recommendations may provide future opportunities for quantitative measures. The choice of phenomenology

was appropriate because I wanted to understand the universal essence of the experience of being UHA and learn if there were unifying elements of the UHA participants. Phenomenology also allowed for the student's description of experiences to stand alone without interpretation or explanation. This approach proved a challenge for me as a researcher, because of my previous experience as a teacher of UHA students. Giorgi (2009) suggests that the phenomenological practice of bracketing is not to ignore or forget about prior knowledge, but to reserve that knowledge during the identification process of units of meaning. Moustakas's (1994) heuristic approach called for the researcher to have previous experience with the phenomenon, and to have a significant meaning to the researcher. In this case, the experience was my role as a classroom teacher of UHA students in middle school, and it was significant because I saw the gap of student experiences in research when trying to support the students within my context.

Research Design

For the following section, I describe the participants, data sources and collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness. I will describe my interview protocol and provide a detailed description of how to apply the Bevan (2014) model of data analysis based on Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method.

Participants

The participants for this study were all high-ability and a member of an underrepresented group based on their ethnic identity or socioeconomic status. The participants were all 13 or 14 years old. All were enrolled in middle school or had just completed their final year and were in the process of transitioning to high school. The original 16 participants who made up the sample for this study were recruited from a

larger group of students who attended a summer camp located at a prestigious predominantly White institution of higher education in the mid-Atlantic states. The “camp” is a summer camp started in 2012, with the intent to provide a no-cost college summer camp experience for middle-school-aged children from within a 75-mile radius of the college’s campus. In order to participate in the camp, students had to meet certain criteria. The exact acceptance criteria to the camp were as follows:

- Household income level less than \$45,000 for an average family of four (current national metric used to determine free or reduced-price lunch status);
- Any standardized test results within the 90th percentile (gifted students typically score within the 97th percentile and above, so within the 90th percentile could mean that the student missed the cut off score by a small amount); and
- If there are no standardized test results, teachers can provide recommendations asserting the student’s ability for high achievement. (M. Kim, personal communication, October 24, 2016)

This method of sampling aligns with a typical case as defined by Patton (2015). A typical case is a sampling strategy where the researcher selects several participants who have experienced a certain phenomenon or what is typical to the research focus (Patton, 2015). The participants are typical cases of students who are considered underrepresented and high ability because of the admissions criteria for the camp. The household income criteria influence the racial diversity of the participants because socioeconomic inequality is linked with ethnicity, language variation, and socioeconomic status (P. L. Carter & Welner, 2013).

Recruitment. To recruit the participants, I attended the opening ceremony for the camp where the families were welcomed by the organization hosting the camp and provided with orientation information about what to expect in the following two weeks while at camp. I set up a table to greet the families alongside the camp welcome table where forms were signed and collected. I introduced myself to the families as they entered the building and explained informally what the study was about. The camp organizers allowed me to address the entire audience of families and potential participants, in which I explained who I was, what I hoped to learn, and informed them about the opportunity to qualify for a gift card from Amazon. I naively brought only a small number of forms for the interested families, because when the time came to introduce myself to entire camp, I was out of forms. I invited interested parents to meet me at my table after my presentation, where I got their name, their child's name, and an email address. As a result, I was able to get nearly 60 volunteers (see Appendix B: Parental Consent Form; Appendix C: Student Assent Form).

Selection. From the list of volunteers, I reduced the participant selection by collaborating with camp staff and looked for specific qualities to make up my sample. I attempted for an equal representation of males and females, then focused on participants that represented a typical case of a historically underrepresented student (ethnicity, linguistic diversity, and socioeconomic status), and then grade level. I was able to narrow the participants down to 16 students, ten females and six males, nine rising eighth graders and seven rising ninth graders. I decided to limit the selection of students to eighth and ninth grade students because of the length of time they had in middle school, hoping that

their longer time would provide additional information about the experience (see Table 1).

Four of the original 16 participants were interviewed, but their data were not included in the study because their responses did not provide a clear understanding of their experiences in school. These four participants' interviews went through the first and second round of analysis (see Figure 3). Even though they participated in the same interview protocol, their responses did not provide an understanding of what their time in school was like, nor did it apply to the research question or information that this study aimed to collect.

Table 1

Final Participants

Pseudonym	Grade	Age	Race/ethnicity
Females			
<i>Melea</i>	8th	13	Black
<i>Jasmine</i>	8th	13	Black/Asian
<i>Zeely</i>	8th	13	Hispanic
<i>Rose</i>	8th	13	Black
<i>Vivi</i>	8th	13	Hispanic
<i>Melissa</i>	9th	14	Two or more races
<i>Sarah</i>	9th	14	White
Males			
<i>Junior</i>	8th	13	Hispanic
<i>Johnny</i>	8th	13	Black
<i>Robert</i>	9th	14	Black
<i>Ben</i>	9th	14	Black
<i>Thomas</i>	9th	14	Black

I sent emails to the parents or caregivers on the final list with a formal invitation to participate, an explanation of the purpose of the study, the camper's role as participant, the data collection methods, and the participants' rights as set forth by the institution's

Education Institutional Review Board (EDIRC) to protect them and their families (see Appendix B: Parental Consent Form; Appendix C: Student Assent Form). In order to obtain permission over email due to the abbreviated time frame between volunteering and interviewing, I sent the parents or caregivers a paragraph that they needed to copy and paste in their responding email with their name, the child's name, and the date:

My name is [insert your name] and my child [insert your child's name] is attending camp at College now, [insert date]. I give Melanie Lichtenstein permission to interview [insert your child's name] about the lived experiences of high-ability children in middle school during [his/her] time at camp.

Upon receipt of that email I scheduled the participant's interview. At the conclusion of camp, when the families came to get their children, I collected the in-person signed documents from the families.

I had arranged with the camp director that I would be conducting interviews during times that would not disrupt the regular camp schedule. Those times were during the campers' free-time before dinner, and after dinner during their enrichment activities. If for any reason the camper did not want to participate or wanted to talk at a different time, the schedule was designed to be flexible. Over a period of two weeks, I was able to conduct two interviews a day ranging from 30 to 90 minutes long. The ultimate length of the interview was determined by the participant and how they responded to questions. Each participant was given a "thank you gift" with small pieces of candy, little manipulative toys, pens or pencils, and a gift card for \$10 to Target. Additionally, their name was entered in a raffle to be drawn on the last day for an Amazon gift card to be used with their Kindle Tablets the camp provided for them.

Data Sources

To understand the essence of the experience of being a UHA middle schooler, I conducted in-depth interviews with 16 participants (see Appendix D: Interview Protocol). The participants were asked to describe their experiences in school “retrospectively” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 95). Van Manen (2014) described phenomenological reflection as “recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through” (p. 95). Patton (2015) asserted that the only way to understand a phenomenon as another person experienced it is through in-depth interviews and observations. However, if observations were included as data, the description of the experience would no longer be based on the single individual; researcher observations could contribute bias and unintentionally alter participants’ stories (Husserl, 1983; Van Manen, 2014). Instead, I used a method based on “lived-experience description” where the participants were able to share their experience with the phenomenon through a creative outlet of writing, art, or other modes of expression (Van Manen, 1990).

Giorgi (2009) stated that the interview is the best way to get an understanding of the phenomenon. Moustakas (1990) asserted that interviews in heuristic research should be in a dialogue form to allow thoughts, feelings, and ideas are shared in a natural way. The most natural way is the “conversational interview” which relies on questions in a dialogue format where the researcher is revealing as much information as the participant (Moustakas, 1990, p. 47). Giorgi (2009) echoed this belief by stating that a more structured interview takes away from the “certain spontaneous quality” a semi-structured or unstructured interview can generate (p. 122). For this study, I conducted a modified conversational interview using Arts-Based Inquiry (ABI) as a conversation ice breaker,

and asked follow-up questions for the participant to expand and describe specific experiences based on the original ABI. This is a reverse of the steps Moustakas suggests, when using participant-created works to supplement the description of the experiential stories.

Giorgi (2009) also stressed the importance of rapport between the researcher and participants. I was able to build rapport with the participants by being physically present during the times I was not interviewing, informally engaging in conversations with the campers, and introducing myself to the participants a few days before their interviews so they would not be surprised when I spoke to them. The camp was accommodating to my presence in the different spaces they occupied, and directly contributed to making the participants comfortable with me. I had previous experience working with the camp in a number of different capacities, so I was familiar with the staff and procedures that already existed.

Interview protocol. The phenomenological interview serves as the primary method of gathering experiential stories, anecdotes, and narratives to gain an understanding for the specific experience (Van Manen, 2014). Moustakas (1994) described the phenomenological interview in this way:

The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions. Although the primary researcher may in advance develop a series of questions aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person's experience of the phenomenon, these are varied, altered, or not used at all when the co-researcher shares the full story of his or her experience of the bracketed question. (p. 114)

The interviews were open-ended with guiding questions used to clarify and gain a more in-depth understanding of the lived experience (see Appendix D).

I deliberately did not include a space for the students to identify their ethnicity on their interview forms, with the intent to see if any of the participants mention their ethnicity within the context of the school day, without external introduction of the topic. Although some participants did bring it up, not all did. This meant that when completing the descriptions of the final participants, I realized that not all participants had included this in their interviews, and the information I had was from an external third party (the camp counselors). I obtained access to the final participants camp application forms to obtain their self-reported description of their ethnicity, and as a result had access to documents that included their report cards. This was a data source that I had not planned for, and in hindsight, I should have included a space for the participants to identify their ethnicity on their own forms or included access to the application forms in the original research plan. Instead of ignoring what I had found, it became clear that there was some responder bias with the self-reported grades versus the grades that were on their mid-year report cards. I included the information because I believed it was important to be transparent with all of the information that contributed to my understanding of the participants' experiences.

ABI procedures. Using ABI as an icebreaker was inspired by my previous experience as a theater artist and arts outreach instructor. I sought a method to engage the conversation with the participants without having direct questions where the participants would be concerned with giving me the right answer. So I chose to use the concept of “how you would describe/view yourself in school” to begin the conversation (Appendix

D). Asking the participants to describe themselves in school establishes the context, and centers the conversation around how they view themselves as opposed to asking a question like, “what is it like in school for you?” Using ABI gave the participant a less direct, but still impactful way to learn about the participants’ experiences as well as providing an openness of how they answer the questions. If my line of questioning was more direct, or explicit, I may not have gotten as rich descriptions because the participants would be trying to give me the *right* answer.

Data Generation Procedures

Giorgi (2009) addressed the issue of gathering descriptions of lived experiences and stated that the interview is the best way to get an understanding of the phenomenon. The goal of a phenomenological interview is to get as rich and thick of a description so that the participant’s experience is clear and clearly articulates their perspective of the experience.

All of the participants were able to see my initial presentation at the opening ceremony for the camp. Each interview was conducted in either an empty available room in the dormitory that the camp was using for the duration of the camp or in an empty classroom in one of the academic buildings that were being used for the enrichment classes. With help from the camp staff, I would introduce myself to the participant, and invited them to speak with me. One participant, Melissa, found that our interview time overlapped with her time to go swimming, so we rescheduled it. After inviting the participant to the interview space, I reminded them of who I was, why I wanted to talk to them, that I would be audio recording the interview, and asked again if they were comfortable talking to me. Fortunately, all participants agreed, and we would begin the

interview. I had them read the “Student assent form” (Appendix C) and answered any questions they may have had. They would then complete a questionnaire providing their legal name, preference for pseudonym, birthdate, name of school they attended for middle school, and if they were going to high school, the name of that school (see Appendix E, Demographic questionnaire).

After completing the paperwork and addressing any questions, I would explain to each participant a variation of the following:

All right. So, um, one thing I want to make sure that is clear is that I want you to be honest. ... Um, and so I want you ... Don't try and give me an answer that you think I want. Don't give me the teacher answer. You know what I'm talking about? Give me the one that, like, that's the real deal. The reason why I asked you to pick a pseudonym is that so no one knows what you're saying. So, you can tell me the good, the bad, the ugly of your experiences. Hopefully it's all good, but if not, we should hear about the bad and the ugly, definitely. Okay? (MJL, July 16, 2018)

Each participant understood what I meant by “teacher answer” (Melea, July 16, 2018). I was referencing the tendency for interviewees to demonstrate responder bias for socially desirable answer where the participants attempt to give the answer they think the interviewer wants (Fan et al., 2006; Krumpal, 2013).

After completing the paperwork, we began the ABI and interview process. I will describe the steps below:

1. Give the participant the ABI Worksheet (Appendix F).

2. Ask participant if they had ever seen anything like this? Explain the purpose of the worksheet:

So on this page there are two sides. How I see or describe myself at school. And then, how others see or describe me at school. And we're gonna start on this side... Like how, how, how would you describe yourself to me? (Thomas, July 26, 2018)

3. I provided markers, colored pencils, and after the first four days of interview, stickers.
4. Participants would write a word, apply a sticker, start coloring and I would ask if they would describe what they just did:

Thomas: Okay. Uh, is this, like, coming in his head from somewhere? The guy coverin' his ears on there? I'm just...

MJL: Okay, So what did you just put there?

Thomas: I put down a emoji coverin' his ears. Like coverin' in his head... Because, I, uh, ... I don't, I don't like ... When I'm at school ... Uh, you know, I talk to my friends, but when it's like, ... When I'm working, like, on a project or something, I usually, like, you know, exclude myself from all, like, contact. Away from everybody else. (Thomas, July 26, 2018; See Appendix G: Thomas ABI)

5. From that point I would ask the participants to describe a time when they were most *focused*, or a term they used to describe the ABI choice. For some participants they used specific word, colors, and stickers. The participant would then describe a specific incident or memory where they were the *most* of that characteristic.
6. This process would continue for each identifying characteristic, I would ask clarification question for the participant to explain the experience so that I could get a rich description.

Phenomenological semi-structured interview. Bevan (2014) applied the phenomenological concepts of: description, natural attitude, lifeworld, modes of appearing, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation to inform the interview structure (p. 138). For purposes of clarity I will explain the phenomenological definitions and uses of the less familiar terms. Husserl's notion of the "natural attitude" describes how each of us is involved in the consciousness of the world (as cited in Bevan, 2014, p. 136). The concept of "lifeworld" includes all the experiences, objects, contexts, and events in the conscious interaction with the world (Bevan, 2014, p. 136). Giorgi (2009) asserts that the objective of the phenomenological interview is to describe the participant's experience in their own lifeworld description, and not through a theoretical analysis. I will address how I utilized the concepts of phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation in the data analysis section of this chapter.

Using these concepts, Bevan (2014) created three domains that make up the phenomenological interview: contextualization, apprehending the phenomenon, and clarifying the phenomenon. Bevan's (2014) model provides specific phenomenological concepts to guide the interview process. Bevan outline the structure of phenomenological interviewing in a helpful outline (Figure 2).

Phenomenological Attitude	Researcher Approach	Interview Structure	Method	Example Question
Phenomenological Reduction (Epoché)	Acceptance of Natural Attitude of Participants	Contextualization (Eliciting the Lifeworld in Natural Attitude)	Descriptive/Narrative Context Questions	<i>How you see yourself? How others see you?</i>
	Reflexive Critical Dialog With Self	Apprehending the Phenomenon (Modes of Appearing in Natural Attitude)	Descriptive and Structural Questions of Modes of Appearing	<i>“Describe a time when you most felt like [identity/characteristic]?”</i>
	Active Listing	Clarifying the Phenomenon (Meaning Through Imaginative Variation)	Imaginative Variation: Varying of Structure of Questions	<i>“Is there a place you are most comfortable/person you are most comfortable with while at school?”</i>

Figure 2. A structure of phenomenological interviewing. Adapted from “A Method of Phenomenological Interviewing,” by M. T. Bevan, 2014, *Advancing Qualitative Methods*, 24, p. 139.

Contextualization. The first domain, contextualization, addresses the “natural attitude and life-world” concepts of descriptive phenomenological method (Bevan, 2014, p. 138). Husserl (1983) affirmed that experiences of the lifeworld are grounded in context. The context must be considered when examining an individual’s experience. The contextualization domain allows for the participant to describe the experience in narrative form. Contextualization questions allow for a presentation of the phenomenon to be examined, situated within a context that informs the understanding and meaning of the experience (Bevan, 2014). For this study, the contextualization question was a part of the open-ended and semistructured interview. Throughout the interview I would remind the participants that they are describing themselves “in school.” Interviews were open-ended and provided space for the participants to describe their own experience and semi-structured by having specific starting points in the Bevan (2014) model. The first question asked each participant:

Interview Q1: “Describe yourself in school,” or, “If I were to describe you in school, what would I need to say?”

This first question varied from the first interview to the last. Although most participants understood what I meant by “describe yourself in school” the question morphed to being “if I were to describe you, what would I need to say,” or “Tell me what to say to describe you.” The difference was significant because in general the participants’ responses became richer and detailed as the two weeks of interviews progressed. Another result from this line of questioning was that their descriptions of experiences in school were non-linear, and did not follow the timeline of a typical school day. Bevan suggested that this method requires flexibility on part of the interviewer. The responses from the participants gave me a narrative that I analyzed then converted into individual textural descriptions following Moustakas’s (1994) method to gain a clearer understanding of the experience.

Arts-based inquiry. The use of arts-based inquiry (ABI) as an approach to gathering data provided an icebreaker to start the conversation. It is important to note that purpose of the art was not intended to get a realistic depiction of the participants’ experience. Instead, it followed an approach supported by Cox’s (2005) research with young children and art.

When the purpose of drawing is no longer tied to the assumed intention to depict the world, as it is ‘neutrally’ seen, a new perspective is opened up. We can look at children’s drawing, not so much in terms of categorizing the artifacts, which are produced, but in terms of looking at the activities that produce them and at the

children who are engaging in those activities. It shifts the focus towards what is going on when children draw. (Cox, 2005, p. 118)

For this study the use of the art was to provide the participants an opportunity to think and represent how they would describe themselves at school and how others would describe them at school. Some participants used only words: Melea (Appendix H), Junior (Appendix I), Melissa (Appendix J), and Robert (Appendix K). The use of words alone provided me a term to use when asking the follow up question of, “tell me a time when you felt most [term]?” From that point, the participants would share their experiences and I would ask clarification or follow-up questions. Rose used the ABI to color as a task to focus on when discussing sensitive topics. I provided stickers along with the colored pencils and markers for the participants to use, and the response was drastic. The participants used a group of emoji stickers to symbolize their moods or behaviors in school (Appendix L). Thomas (Appendix H) used drawing, coloring, and stickers to represent important aspects of his school experience. Freeman and Mathison (2009) suggest that the use of ABI can be an opportunity for “sense making and representation” beyond language-based data (p. 113). The use of ABI for this study was used in an integrated way to gather data of the larger question of what the experience of middle school is like for UHA students (Leavy, 2015). For the purpose of this study, the art was not put through an ABI analysis. This will be reserved for future research as it did not necessarily contribute to the narrative of what it was like to be UHA and in middle school.

Interview Q2-Step One: (see Appendix F: Body Handout). Participants were be provided a piece of paper with an outline of a human body with a line drawn

down the center. On one side will be the heading “How others (at school) see/describe me,” and on the other side will be the heading “How I see/describe myself at school”

Step Two: The participants were directed to fill out each side answering the appropriate heading; they were encouraged to use words, visual representations, quotes, symbols, names, places, and so on.

Instead of waiting for the participants to complete their ABI, I asked if they were comfortable with me asking questions throughout the process. Some ABI artifacts were sparse compared to others, and that was an indication that the interview transitioned to a conversational style and contributed to the richness of the data.

Apprehending the phenomenon. The second domain, apprehending the phenomenon, addresses the “modes of appearing and natural attitude” of phenomenological interviewing (Bevan, 2014). I used the words or images to ask the participants to describe times at school when they felt the most [term].

Interview Q3: Using the ABI drawing, I asked the participant to expand on his or her experiences, and the conversation would either return to the ABI for the next term or experience or we would talk more about the experiences they shared initially. For instance, if the participant put the word *musical* in the “how you see/describe yourself” section I asked a question like, “Describe a time when you knew you were musical” (Vivi, July 18, 2019; Appendix M). One participant wrote the word *Gamer* in the section under “how you see/describe yourself” section. The follow up questions, “Describe a time when you felt you were able to

really show your ‘gamer’ side of who you are in school” (Ben, July 25, 2018; Appendix N).

The second question of *Interview Q3* included the concept of asking a participant if they, “can be [themselves] at school” as illustrated by Coleman (2012, p. 381). Coleman (2012) suggested that this direction of questioning may elicit responses that reveal not only the participant’s comfort level at school, but also how the school or those in the school interact with the participant. Providing the participants with the opportunity to consider, “Can I be myself in school?” or “how I view myself,” revealed how the participant perceived himself or herself within the context, and how comfortable he or she was that context (Coleman, 2012, p. 381). This line of questioning *apprehends the phenomena* that Bevan (2014) suggested, including the contextual information of the previous line of questioning, along with participants’ self-perceptions, and how those perceptions fit within the school setting. After the interview covered the elements the participants shared on the ABI, I asked the participants if school was a place they felt they could be themselves, and all participants but one responded affirmatively. However, asking that question at the end of the interview became more of a conclusion to the interview session. These prompts also created the potential for participants to reveal more information about the relationships, organizational structures, and experiences related to being high-ability at their school (Núñez, 2014).

Clarifying the phenomenon. The final domain, clarifying the phenomenon, I asked a concluding question modeled after a recommended guide based on Moustakas (1994): Have you shared everything I should know about your experience in middle school? Some participants used this question as an opportunity to summarize their experience, for

instance: Jasmine spoke of the challenges of puberty in middle school (July 20, 2018), and Thomas gave recommendations for how middle school students should interact and listen to their teachers (July 26, 2018).

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data followed a modified version of Moustakas's (1990) heuristic phenomenological method integrating elements from Giorgi (2009).

I describe each step below (see Figure 3).

First Round

The first round of data analysis included verbatim transcription, coding for “meaning units,” and coding for “significant statements” (Moustakas, 1994). I will describe each step and explain how the data was parsed out to more manageable sections.

Read for sense of the whole. After each interview, I sent the audio recording to an online voice recognition service. This was because I wanted the material in text format as soon as possible. I would then go through the text and edit it as a part of reading for the sense of the whole. Unfortunately, the voice recognition service was not accustomed

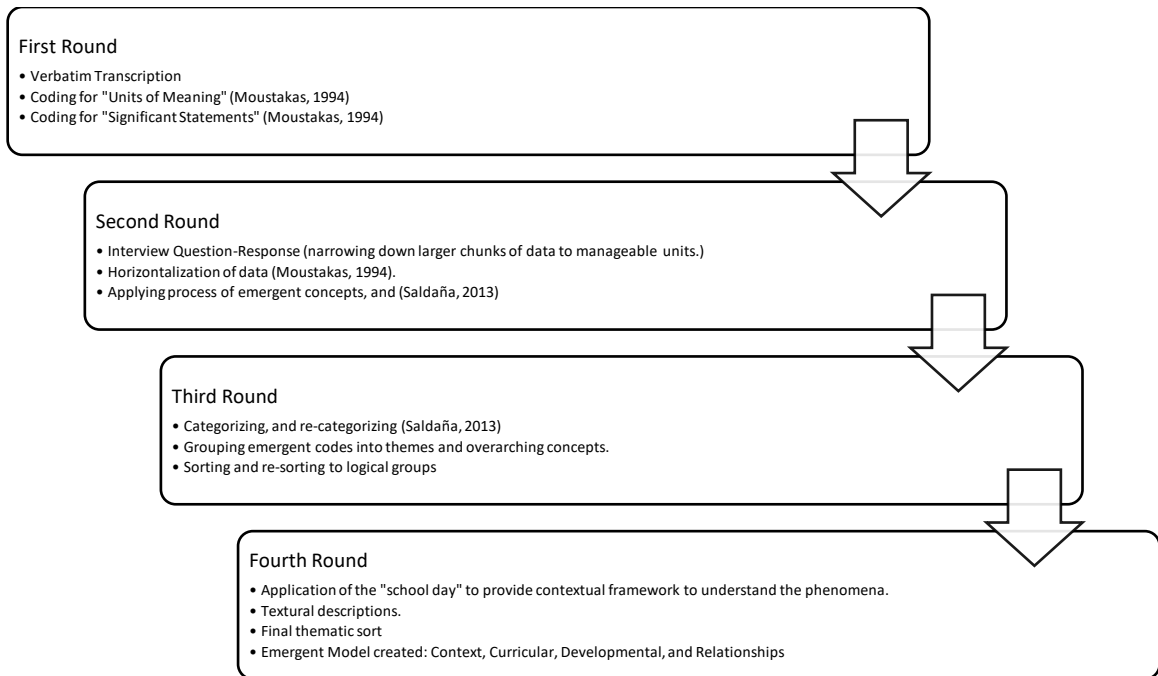


Figure 3. Data analysis process including first, second, third, and fourth round of analysis.

to African American Vernacular or the phonology of the young adolescent voice, so the audio was sent to a service that would transcribe verbatim. This still required a careful review of the text once transcribed. This step called for me to read the data through a naïve lens, where I gain a sense of the whole experience (Giorgi, 2009). Throughout the initial transcription process of the interview my focus was on if the language was accurate to what the participants actually said. Giorgi (2009) suggested not trying to clarify or critique the description, this happened naturally as I was merely focused on issues of accuracy and not regarding the specific content of the text. I formatted and uploaded the ABI artifacts to the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) MAXQDA18. Throughout the initial readings I maintained bracketing to avoid any initial presumptions. I recorded my impressions, thoughts, and ideas in the MAXQDA18 logbook (VERBI GmbH, 2019).

Determination of meaning units. This step required me to break apart the whole participant’s descriptions to find the “meaning of the experience” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 129). For this step, I read the interview transcripts and identify moments when the meaning shifts or there is a change in the narrative of the participants’ experience. I searched for meaning units that connect to the participant’s school-based experiences. Giorgi (2009) recommended the researcher return to the beginning of the data and reread it, assuming an attitude considering the phenomena being studied. For this study, it was considering the experience of being high-ability and a member of an underrepresented group. For each significant change in meaning I marked or indicated the change. After this process, each unit was divided into multiple series of “meaning units” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 130). I did not interpret the units, but I did make note in my logbook of potential themes that emerged in the meaning units (Figure 4).

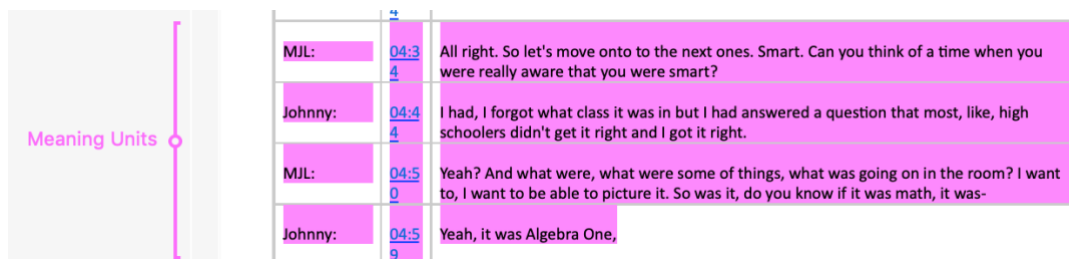


Figure 4. Meaning unit using MAXQDA18.

Significant statements. After the meaning units, I coded statements that I considered significant, unique, or I perceived as an important experience to share. The aim was to make the data and narrative more manageable; Giorgi (2009) asserted that it is possible that different researchers could identify different meaning units. Moustakas (1994) recommended testing the expressions if they contain a moment of the experience

that is necessary and sufficient to understand. I will share an example of what I called “significant statements” after identifying meaning units (Figure 5). In this example I labeled it a “significant statement” because Rose was sharing an incident where her peers were surprised that she had received straight As, and she pointed out that she believed they thought this because most of the straight A students at her school were White, and she is Black.

Melanie:	16:4 5	(laughter) How would you describe like, when, from, you know, like if you're like "I'm being very determined and I'm working very hard because I want to get this 'A'" as opposed to a 'B.' What-
Rose:	16:5 7	You feel proud.
Melanie:	16:5 9	Yeah.
Rose:	17:0 0	Because you always thought that you couldn't do it. You always thought, like, there were certain people that can do it. And you proved them wrong. And it just feels great!
Melanie:	17:1 5	Could you tell me a little bit more about that? Um, was there a time that you were like I- were you ... tell me more about when you couldn't do it. When you thought you couldn't do it. When you always thought you couldn't do it. You said that.
Rose:	17:3 0	Um, when I was skating, I always thought I couldn't skate. Or I always thought I couldn't whistle; that could be one. I just learned how to whistle recently. And then I just kept doing it over and over again. Just waiting to get it. And now I can whistle.
Melanie:	17:4 9	Well, let's talk about with like, academics. And you said there's some people that can, that always get A's.

Figure 5. Significant Statement using MAXQDA18

Second Round

The second round of analysis reduced the data to smaller chunks of data to manageable units based on the specific questions I asked the participant and their responses. This step aligns with horizontalization of data because each utterance is given an equal value as I look to “disclose its nature and essence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95).

After identifying the responses and questions, I began applying the emergent concepts I had been making note of during the initial readings (Saldaña, 2013).

Horizontalization of meaning units. I returned to the transcripts and applied the codes “interview question” and “response.” This reduced the data to smaller units to prepare application of concepts and themes, and to check that all utterances were given the same value as the meaning units and significant statements (Figure 6). This process prepared the data to be coded into emergent themes, codes, and concepts that were revealed in the initial reading of the transcripts.

Ben:	And I knew two people that was in there.
MJL:	Oh, okay. Um, did it bother you, you weren't in honors?
Ben:	Kind of, but I kinda said, I had a deal with it. It's like-
MJL:	Mm-hmm (affirmative). How did you deal with it?
Ben:	Just kept working.

Figure 6. Horizontalization of meaning units, application of "interview question" and "response"

Applying emergent concepts. In order to sustain bracketing of my preconceived ideas, I maintained a logbook on MAXQDA18 and a notebook where I would jot down concepts and potential themes that were emerging from the first rounds of analysis. Initial emergent codes found in the interview transcripts are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Initial Emergent Codes

Code	Sub-codes
Academic Achievement	
Relationships	Peer Teacher Other Adult
Parental Influence	
Engagement	Academic Extracurricular
Context	
Help seeking	
Popularity	
Identity Construction	
Opportunities	Self-efficacy Self-sufficient Competence
Teacher quality	
Classroom context	Climate
Appearance	

The application of the initial coding involved returning to the transcripts and using the application of the “smart coding” tool on MAXQDA18. This process allowed me to pull all of the coded items labeled “meaning units,” “significant statements,” “interview question,” and “response” and code them with the above terms (Figure 7).

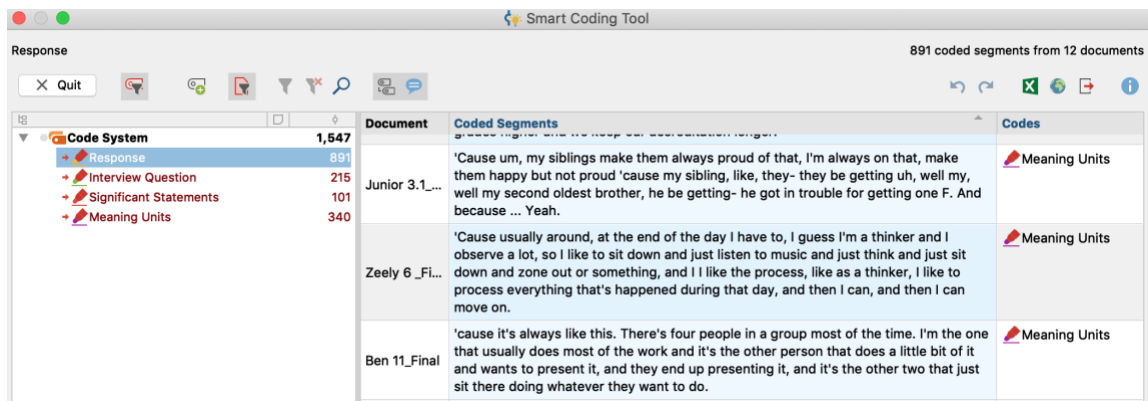


Figure 7. Smart Coding Tool from MAXQDA18

Using this tool, I could select an utterance and create a descriptive code that applied to what the participant said (Saldaña, 2013). This allowed me to look at the utterances only under a specific code, see who said it, and if it overlapped with other codes. For this step, I had to return to each “response,” “interview question,” “significant statement,” and “meaning unit” grouping and either use the emergent codes or new code if it did not fit within that group. This process went on until every response, interview question, significant statement, and meaning unit had a more specific code about the participants’ experiences in school. The result was nearly 90 codes that would eventually be grouped and merged with similar codes.

Third Round

The third round of analysis included categorizing, and recategorizing; grouping codes into concepts and themes; and sorting and re-sorting into logical groups. MAXQDA18 included a process that allowed for moving of codes to and from larger themes (Figure 8). Additional codes emerged using this process. The initial themes were based on the study’s initial conceptual model including: identity, context, and education (Figure 1).

Creative Coding

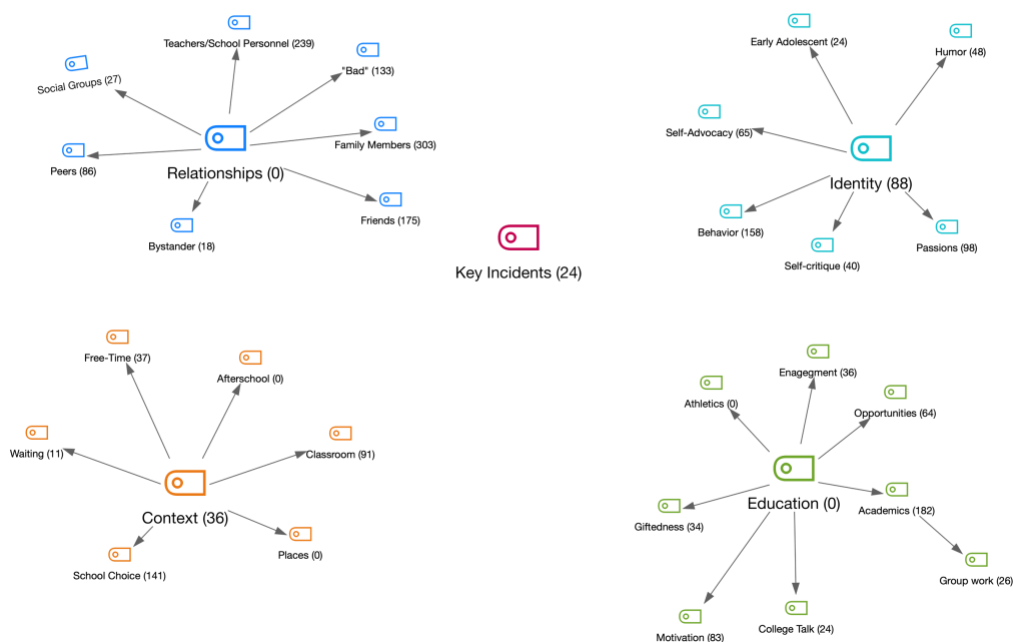


Figure 8. MAXMaps *initial sort*

I added “relationships” to the initial concepts model because it was apparent that a common theme across the participants experiences was the role other people played in their experience in school. Multiple rounds of coding and sorting allowed me to identify more general and abstract concepts that would eventually become themes. MAXQDA18 allowed for simultaneous coding to happen within the data. Multiple applications of different codes contributed to more generalized concepts that eventually contribute to the final emergent theoretical model. For instance, the initial code of “identity” was combined with “behavior” and “passions/interests” because when the participants were asked to describe themselves in school, they would often use terms that described their interests and behavior to describe who they were. I illustrate how codes came to be themes and eventually theory through a model suggested by Saldaña (2013; Figure 9).

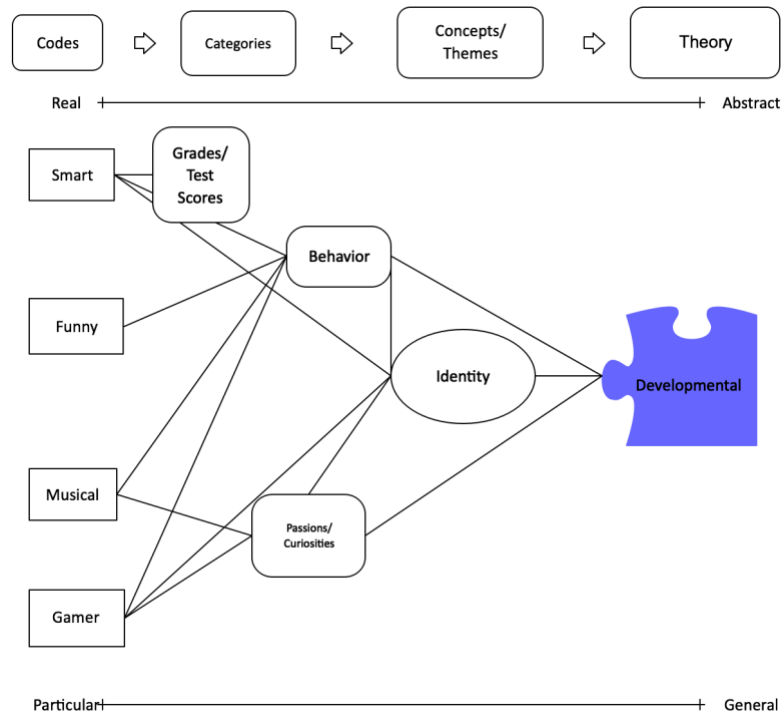


Figure 9. Code-to- theory process. Adapted from “A streamlined codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry,” by J. Saldaña, 2013, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, p. 17.

This process continued until the emergent theory came about, including the overarching themes: of context, curricular, developmental, and relationships

Fourth Round

The fourth round of analysis included a theoretical application of the “school day” to provide contextual framework to understand the phenomena (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). This was a process that illustrated returning to the original research question of “what is it like to be UHA in middle school?” Although it illustrated that even though the participants’ narratives were nonlinear, they inevitably shared parts of their experience in the context of the school day. This round did not provide any additional information to the study and was ultimately disregarded.

Individual textural descriptions. Although the school day as a framework was eventually set aside, it did provide additional information to compose the individual textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). This step required synthesis of the *constituents* of the experience into narrative form (Broomé, 2011). Constituents are the commonalities, or examples of essence of the experience. Constituents are context specific and are part of the whole structure of the experience. The constituents were identified by finding the common meanings across the participants' descriptions. Each category was descriptive of the UHA experience: Context, Curricular, Developmental, and Relationships. The individual textural descriptions are presented in chapter four as a part of the findings. Giorgi (2009) asserted that through description, the researcher will verbally paint a picture that encompasses the multilevel categories including relationships, context, and experiences that make up the phenomenon. The textural descriptions used direct utterances and quotes from the participants to center their voice as a part of the narratives. This is the generalization of the experience through seeking the *eidós* or essence of the experience of the phenomena.

Accuracy and Trustworthiness

In addition to maintaining a research journal and logbook throughout the study, I conducted the following strategies to address issues of accuracy and trustworthiness. During the interviews, I conducted member checking in real time by verbally confirming what I heard and summarizing what each participant said to me. At the conclusion of the study, participants' parents and guardians were sent summaries of the findings. To maintain the participants' confidence, I withheld any specific identifying events or factors that would reveal their children's actual words.

The method of phenomenology limits the ability to validate the results, so it is important that this study provides the following as recommended by Danaher and Briod (2005):

1. *Vividness*, describing the feeling of genuineness: The individual textural descriptions uses the participants words and expressions to convey their experiences in middle school.
2. *Accuracy*, making writing believable, enabling readers to ‘see’ what the experience is like: The use of the participants’ expressions, descriptions, and illustrations contribute to the accuracy of the study.
3. *Richness*, the depth of description: the descriptions were reliant on the information each participant shared with me. The aim was to provide a rich understanding of the experience. (p. 225)

In addition to following the above expectations, I conducted peer debriefing with a colleague who had the same identification as the participants: Black, female, and gifted. We would discuss the experiences that the participants and she would reflect on the accuracy or similarity to her experiences as being UHA.

Ethical Considerations

Research with human participants requires a strict adherence to processes and procedures set forth by the institution. I obtained institutional review board (IRB) approval of the research methods and processes through the EDIRC process. This is especially significant because of the vulnerable population of minors who I worked with. I maintained the ethical standards that guided the principles of human subject research. The parents or caregivers had consent forms that explained the nature, purpose, and

requirements of the research. All the participants were on a volunteer basis, with the option to withdraw at any time. The participants' identities were confidential and only available to me; each has his or her own self-selected pseudonym only known to the primary researcher. Upon completion of the study, the participants will receive a summary of the findings.

Conclusion

In the following chapter I will provide the individual textural descriptions, composed through a phenomenological process to bring the essence of the UHA experience in middle school to light. I will explain the thematic structures that emerged through the four stages of analysis. I will provide an introduction to the emergent theoretical model that has been come from the findings of what it is like to be UHA and in middle school.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This study followed a phenomenological method to answer the question: What is it like to be a member of a historically underrepresented group as well as high-ability in middle school? The purpose of this study was to provide a platform for middle school students who are high-ability as well as members of historically underrepresented populations to share their experiences in school. There is a need for qualitative studies that feature student voices because the student voices can contribute to educational change (Cook-Sather, 2002). The lack of student voices as participants in empirical literature on educational change counters its purpose of being *for* students. For this study, I wanted to learn what it was like to be in middle school, be high-ability, and be a member of historically underrepresented groups and still achieve (Nieto, 1994).

The phenomenological interview is the primary way of gathering antidotal, narrative, and descriptions of experiences that the participants describe (Van Manen, 2014). The interview reveals how the participants experienced the lifeworld they are describing without interpretation, but reflection. I used Arts-based Inquiry (ABI) as a launching point for semi-structured interviews and maintained a conversational process of interviewing to glean each participant's story.

When asking an American adult to describe their middle school experience, the response is often visceral. The description includes smells, sounds, embarrassments,

funny, and sometimes painful memories. When asking early adolescents about their experience in middle school it is different. Different because they may lack the developmental understanding of the whole experience, but their descriptions are no less impactful. In the following chapter, I include individual textual descriptions of each participant's experiences, thematic analysis of those experiences, description of the thematic structures, and an introduction to the theory that arose from these structures.

Data Collection

Gathering data in phenomenology is limited to finding information that best illustrates the participant's experience. For this study I limited the data to the ABI process to jumpstart the conversation, and the phenomenological interview. The interviews were conducted over two weeks during a summer residential camp at a prestigious predominantly White institution of higher education in the mid-Atlantic states. Each interview was in either a dormitory room during the participant's free time or in an empty classroom in an academic building. The following section will briefly explain how ABI was used to jump-start the interview, and how the conversation continued to gain an understanding of the participants' experience.

Arts-based Inquiry

To begin the conversation about their lived experiences in school, I used an ABI method as a jump-start (Appendix D). I asked the students to embellish the body document and to fill out the sides using words, drawings, and stickers to answer the questions: How I see/describe myself at school? and How others see/describe me at school? Some participants were more comfortable with words than drawing. For eight days I conducted interviews during the participants' free-time or enrichment class. On the

fourth day, I added stickers that had images, emoji, and symbols for the participants to use. The participants were very responsive to the stickers, and the difference is clear in the ABI pieces of art (Appendices G-R).

When the participants would put a word, sticker, or drawing on the body document, I would follow up with a question like, “Do you remember a time when you were most aware of feeling this way?” An example of how this happened is when one participant wrote the word “smart” on her ABI, I responded with the question, “Was there a time in school where you really remember that you felt smart?” (Melissa, July 24, 2018). The participant would then describe a specific incident or memory of a time when she felt smart.

Interviews

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by an external transcription company. During each interview I would start the conversation off by asking the participant to indicate on the ABI how they would describe themselves in school, and I would follow up with questions that followed the format of, “Tell me about a time when you most felt [term or image used on ABI]?” The participants would expand on those identifying terms by describing experiences and incidents that led to them knowing they were how the indicated term or characteristic. When the participants used stickers or images, the question followed the same format. The interviews followed a conversational structure, but always returning the questioning to the ABI for the next term or image to gain an understanding of the participants school experiences. For some participants, the ABI would be limited to a few words because the conversation would be rich in information; some participants used the stickers to symbolize their experiences

and then explained their choices (Literat, 2013). For one participant, Thomas, he used drawing, stickers, and words to illustrate his experience, his approach was unique because his coloring choices were mostly symbolic or metaphorical, and will provide rich information for future research. I interviewed a total of 16 participants and included 12 for this study. I eliminated four because their responses did not give me an understanding of their experiences in middle school that would answer the research question. They will be used in future manuscripts.

Individual Textural Descriptions

Textural descriptions are a part of the analysis process to identify the essence of the experience of being UHA in middle school. Moustakas (1994) recommends the researcher write descriptions of each participant's experience using their own words. The following section consists of descriptions of each participant's experience in middle school from their own words. This process allows a clear understanding of what each participant shared with me about their experiences in middle school and being UHA. Writing the individual textural descriptions allows for a full description of the participants' experience without including the repetitive constituents or units of meaning of the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). The individual textural descriptions reveal the commonalities and themes found across the different experiences. Although this is a step in the analysis process, it also reveals the findings of the experience and demonstrates the process of identifying the essence of the experience.

After the individual textural descriptions, I describe my process for identifying the themes by composing a composite description of the entire study through an emergent theoretical model. The following section includes 12 individual textural descriptions (one

for each participant) and direct statements that best illustrate their experiences of being high-ability, members of underrepresented populations, and in middle school (see Appendices H-S for participants' ABI artifacts). To remind the reader, participant demographics are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Grade	Age	Ethnicity	School type	Community	School % FRPL
Female						
<i>Melea</i>	8	13	Black	Public charter	Urban	84.6
<i>Jasmine</i>	8	13	Black/Asian	Public charter	Urban	84.6
<i>Zeely</i>	8	13	Hispanic	Partial magnet	Urban	85.8
<i>Rose</i>	8	13	Black	Partial magnet	Urban	59.6
<i>Vivi</i>	8	13	Hispanic	Partial magnet	Urban	59.6
<i>Melissa</i>	9	14	Multi-Racial	Neighborhood	Urban	51.5
<i>Sarah</i>	9	14	White	Neighborhood	Suburban	23.6
Male						
<i>Junior</i>	8	13	Hispanic	Neighborhood	Urban	59.6
<i>Johnny</i>	8	13	Black	Neighborhood	Urban	58.8
<i>Robert</i>	9	14	Black	Neighborhood	Urban	71.2
<i>Ben</i>	9	14	Black	Neighborhood	Urban	99.8
<i>Thomas</i>	9	14	Black	Neighborhood	Suburban	62.1

Note. FRPL = Free or Reduced-Price Lunch eligible

Twelve Individual Textural Descriptions

Melea. Melea was a 13-year-old, rising eighth grader. She attended a year-round charter school intended for students of color, and students coming from disadvantaged communities. Melea described herself as an avid reader, and a trustworthy person whom her peers could rely on as an empathetic ear to turn to (Appendix H). She found that she did not have time in her regular academic day to read, so she found time to read when she

finished her work early, or at home. “Like, I love doing school work, but I prefer read, I prefer to read over anything for the most part” (Melea, July 16, 2018). She got frustrated when her regular teachers were out and required the coverage of a substitute. She wished she was more organized, and her disorganization had impacted her academic achievement through missing assignments or leaving items to the last minute. Her gifted classes were designated as talented and gifted (TAG) classes, and she had friends who were in both TAG and regular classes.

Melea had relationships with two teachers that she considered to be more than the regular teacher-student dynamic. Her enrichment teacher included her class to pick out names for her baby. Melea felt like she was able to get to know this teacher on a very personal level and was upset when the teacher did not reveal the pregnancy until the second trimester. This teacher also included her students on the news of her engagement to be married. The second teacher, whom she considered a surrogate grandmother, was her English teacher. This teacher provided passes for the students to be excused from their summer session keyboarding classes when they completed their work to allow them to come to her classroom to spend time until dismissal. The relationships with these teachers were very important to Melea:

It's like, it's like having another student that's like your best friend. But they're a grown up. So, like, you tell them everything. So, my Enrichment teacher, we would have hallway conversations. So, it'd be like, like if we wanted to talk about something, we just go in the hallway and talk about it. (Melea, July 16, 2018)

Melea was considering leaving the charter school after middle school to be in a setting with more diversity (her school was majority Black) and high academic standards.

She was a student at the year-round charter since elementary school but felt like their expectations had declined over the years. Her school was affiliated with a neighborhood high school that was often on “lock-downs” (Melea, July 16, 2018).

So, it's like not always the safest area...because their environment that they're around, they bring it into the school sometimes and causes problems in their school. And their kids already don't like our kids 'cause they say that we're stuck up because we're a public private school. So, it's like, we have higher standards than them, and like, we're [focused] in academics than they are. Like, they have extra-curricular activities for their school. Our school, not very many. So, they say that we're stuck up and we think we're better than them because we keep our grades higher and we keep our accreditation longer. (Melea, July 16, 2018)

The expectation of the school was that the grades and scores would be maintained at a specific level, and Melea did not understand why that perception of being stuck up existed, since the students at her school came from the exact same neighborhoods as the students at the neighborhood high school. She believed the perception was based on a commitment that academic achievement comes before a passion for athletics. “They're more focused on like, ‘oh yeah, play that football, play that football, different football games.’ And we're like, 'Gotta get my work done so I can continue *to* [emphasis added] play football” (Melea, July 16, 2018). Her decision to leave the charter school was based on her mother’s wanting Melea to have an equal balance of extracurricular and academics, “because they know that in college, that colleges look for well-rounded students, and not just all academics, all work and no play” (Melea, July 16, 2018).

Rose. Rose was a 13-year-old, rising eighth grader. She was very passionate about succeeding in her academics, and sometimes got frustrated when she was in class with peers who were not as passionate.

Kids are at school, they feel like, they can just do whatever they want, like, if you get in trouble, you're basically a popular kid. It doesn't matter to me like, people come to school to get popular, and all that, I care about my education like, I don't care what you do. (Rose, July 17, 2018)

Rose attended a partial magnet school for middle school students with an interest in future careers in medical, healthcare, and engineering fields. The honors classes were accelerated so she was able to take academic classes for high school credit. She enjoyed surprising her peers when she excelled but pointed out how maddening it was to not be considered an “A” student based on the color of her skin. When Rose got all As on her report card she was very proud to “prove them wrong” (Rose, July 17, 2018). The “them” she referred to were her peers who did not believe she could accomplish it. She felt her Black friends did not think she could get all As because they had not seen many Black students excel academically. She pointed out that three other Black students in her honors class got straight As as well. However, there were students in the honors classes that did not believe her either.

The issue of race became more of a problem when Rose started middle school (see Appendix O). She recalled a time when she was told, “Oh, you can't hang out with her because she's White” (Rose, July 17, 2018). This was contrary to Rose's belief system; she felt that people should be judged on “their personality” (Rose, July 17, 2018). Even when she got straight As, her peers did not believe her and accused her of lying.

Rose declared that she worked to not let those comments bother her, because her education was very important to her.

The classes at her school were divided by “single block” and “double block” (Rose, July 17, 2018). Single block classes met every day, and double block met for a longer time, but only every other day. Rose had one class where the students were mixed ability. As a sixth-grade student she was in single block math and had one enrichment class with the non-honors students; she referred to those students as “bad kids” during our conversation (Rose, July 17, 2018). She believed that the students in the honors classes were more focused on their achievement and would complete their school work and listen to the teacher.

So, I only have like, a-one class where, like, only like, bad kids are in. Not to like separate the bad kids and the good kids. It's like, the kid that are annoying can never know when to stop when the teacher tells them. (Rose, July 17, 2018)

Rose was suspended once for interfering with her peers and expressing her frustration with their behavior. Ultimately, she was disrespectful to the teacher and was punished as a result. This impacted her greatly, and she still had a visceral response to thinking about the experience. Since that incident, Rose was very deliberate in avoiding conflict in the classroom, and when she finished her assignments she read.

Rose would prefer to be at a school where a student's ethnicity was not an issue. She felt that at her school people were judged based on who they affiliated with, their ethnicity, and their academic ability.

Junior. Junior was a 13-year-old rising eighth grader and identified as Hispanic. He was multilingual and enjoyed helping his mother through interpreting because it

meant they would have time to spend together. “It's a little difficult because when I have to like repeat the things, and then it's sometimes like some big words and then I don't really know how to pronounce it in Spanish, them big words” (Junior, July 17, 2018). Junior was quiet, and often he was assigned to sit in the back of the classroom with the more rambunctious students (see Appendix I). This interfered with his learning, and he struggled with focusing in class when he was surrounded by the noisier classmates. When he broke his glasses, though, his math teacher moved him to the front of the room so he could see, and the positive impact on his academic performance was significant. He did so well that he was being moved to the advanced math classes. Changing his seat in science also impacted his performance, so he was moving to advanced science the next year as well. Junior wanted to go into medicine. He would be the first in his family to graduate high school, so he had a lot at stake when it came to excelling in school. He was very focused on his academics and did not participate in any after school or extracurricular activities unless it was for improving academics. Junior surrounded himself with a diverse mix of friends. They were able to socialize at lunch, and he and his friends helped each other by taking their friends' lunch trays up after eating.

He did get the impression that others at the school may have thought he was weird. Junior's quietness was very noticeable to his peers, that when he answered a question or responded to a teacher his peers were often stunned silent. He said his peers called him weird because he was often the one silently observing or sitting away from the crowd. However, Junior purposefully separated himself from the group in class because he did not want to risk getting in trouble. He never got in trouble, so the one time a teacher took him out of class for a conversation, his peers were excited to hear about

what he was “in trouble for” (Junior, July 17, 2018). The popular students at Junior’s school were the ones who “have, like the most stuff. Like, more friends, more jokes, more everything basically” (Junior, July 17, 2018). He was not concerned about popularity because he was aware that middle school is a short time, and he would only be there for a “little while” (Junior, July 17, 2018).

Vivi. Vivi was a 13-year-old rising eighth grader. Vivi was a musician; she played the viola and most of her friends and socialization revolved around the school orchestra (see Appendix M). She was also learning the piano and the guitar. Vivi was very shy and had anxiety when meeting new people. She said she overthought things, and she sometimes wished she were more outgoing. She was able to make friends on the first day of school her seventh-grade year by offering assistance in Algebra. However, she was not comfortable asking the teacher for assistance because she did not want to “look bad” or give the impression she was not paying attention (Vivi, July 18, 2018). She provided a specific example of when the teacher made her feel bad about not knowing the answer:

So, it was one time and I'm so embarrassed about it. That's why I remember it so fresh. I wasn't there when they did the slopes because I went to like a family thing. So, I came back, they [had] slopes for two days already. This is like the third day... And then I was like, wait, do you guys understand? And they like tried explaining it to me, but then I still didn't get it because I didn't have notes still get and I like to use my notes instead of everyone else's. So, then I asked the teacher and then he's just like a, yeah, rise over run and I'm just like, ‘don't know what that means. I just came here until it was just like, oh, okay.’ [he calls her up to the board to do the assignment in front of the class] I'm just like, I, I'm just sitting

there and I'm just like, 'I don't know.' And then he's like, 'you should've asked peers and stuff,' but I just don't want to ask them and then to just give me the answer because sometimes they'll do that. They'll be like, I'll be like, how do you do number four? And then just like, oh, it's so like for four fifths. (Vivi, July 18, 2018)

Her teacher made her feel bad for not knowing how to do slopes, but she had been absent for a couple of days and was not in the classroom to learn the content.

Vivi identified as Hispanic and had often experienced microaggressions from her peers asking about her ethnicity and linguistic diversity. They asked her, "Are you Hispanic? So, what are you?" (Vivi, July 18, 2018). She believed the other Hispanic students either did not speak English or were bad, and that she was the only one in the honors classes. Her classmates asked her about where she was from, whether she spoke Spanish, and what her ethnicity was. Additionally, she was often bullied about her appearance. Vivi suffered from cystic acne and experienced significant bullying from her peers at lunch time. She was called names like "disgusting" and "Rudolph" by one particular peer. The same student came up to Vivi the next day and continued asking about her appearance. At one point, Vivi was refusing to go to school because of the maltreatment from her peers. This led to her asking her father for a medical intervention. She eventually got braces and clear skin because her father was supportive of her concerns. Vivi's peers had called her "emo," which is short for emotional, because she was quiet and did not sit with a grin on her face all the time (Vivi, July 18, 2018). They accused her of being "sad" and interpreted her quietness as depression. "I'm just not a smiley person," she said (Vivi, July 18, 2018).

Vivi spent a lot of her free time in the orchestra room. Her orchestra teacher was very supportive of her talent and had encouraged her to take leadership roles in the school orchestra.

She's like the teacher most comfortable with because I spend a lot of time with her since I do extra orchestra stuff. So, all the time I'm always going into her classroom after school we're not have to wait for someone or something and she just lets me go. (Vivi, July 18, 2018)

Vivi confided in her orchestra teacher and felt comfortable talking about personal topics. When the issue of Vivi moving came up, her orchestra teacher went out of her way to communicate with her father about trying to get her to stay at the school. Having a teacher have that much of an interest in her staying made Vivi feel appreciated at school.

Jasmine. Jasmine was a 13-year-old scholar athlete. Jasmine identified as Black and Asian. She attended a year-round charter school and was in the process of deciding if she would continue onto the high school program or attend her neighborhood high school. Jasmine participated in five different athletic extracurriculars: basketball, track, volleyball, tennis, and dance. She often had multiple practices each night and had been up working on school work until 2:00 am. When Jasmine's mother found her up this late, she suggested they drop one or more of the extracurriculars. She was considering running for student council president. She felt that there were some issues and opportunities on which she could influence her peers and the school administration as the student council president. These issues ranged from having school dances, to providing incentives for positive behavior, to making adjustments to uniform policies. Jasmine made it clear that school came first, before any extracurriculars. Her mother was able to monitor her grades

through a parent access website, and Jasmine pointed out that, “my mom doesn't play that. She would drop a sport for me before I fail a class, because I don't get enough sleep or don't do my homework” (Jasmine, July 20, 2018).

Jasmine’s friends were all athletes, but she thought they may have better grades because they were not doing multiple sports at the same time. Her mother compared her to her friends often, especially when her grades were slipping. Jasmine was frustrated by her peers who did not take school as seriously as she did. She had gotten in trouble for trying to get her peers to quiet down and stop disturbing class.

It's mostly the boys though. The boys are so disruptive and it's like, sometimes it's just so annoying. Like, the teacher, they'll try to tell them be quiet and if they're one of the teachers who'll be like, "Boys, quiet down" and they don't quiet down because the boys, they de –, teachers like, like ... not, if a teacher's not yelling at them, they're not gonna do anything. If teacher just tells them, "Oh, quiet down", they gon' keep on yelling, horseplay and stuff like that. And if nobody else decides to tell them to be quiet, I'm a be the one to be like, "Y'all need to sit down, and y'all need to pay attention because there's a test", 'cause ... 'cause you decided to do a pop quiz tomorrow. Y'all all will be lookin' stupid.... The thing is they bother my education, so they need to shut up. And I'll be the one to tell 'em to shut up, and she'll ... she'll be like, "No. You don't need to be the one to shut up and tell them shut up because there's a teacher there." But then I'll be like, "The teacher's not doing anything." (Jasmine, July 20, 2018)

Jasmine admitted that she was talkative, but when a teacher reprimanded her, she got quiet. When Jasmine's academic performance did fall below her expectations, she became disappointed in herself because she knew she was capable of more.

Zeely. Zeely was a 13-year-old rising eighth grader. She was a self-proclaimed polyglot, and she could be seen every morning on the school morning news show greeting her school in different linguistic greetings. The morning show opportunity came about because her TV production teacher selected her to be the director of the morning show. Zeely had also had other academic and extracurricular opportunities because an administrator or teacher wanted to reward her positive behavior.

'Cause a lot of teachers will tell me ... well, a lot of teachers or a lot ... my principal, like I remember we were graduating, and she gave me an award for the best um ... the best student or like the person who always followed the rules.

(Zeely, July 20, 2018)

At her school each incoming sixth-grade cohort of students was assigned an administrator and counselor team that remained with that group until they graduated middle school.

Zeely preferred this model:

Yeah, I like it because even as you go from like sixth to eighth grade a lot happens in that period of time. So, staying with that counselor you feel most comfortable talking to, I think is better as you're growing up. Because you'll be able to talk to them no matter what. (Zeely, July 20, 2018)

Zeely was often recognized as a model student or as an example for her peers of "what it is to be a good student" (Zeely, July 20, 2018). She and a group of peers from her science

class were able to participate in an academic science competition because the teacher selected them specifically for their behavior and academic performance.

Zeely was known for her curly hair and caused quite an uproar when she decided to cut it (see Appendix P). However, she was not concerned about her peers' perceptions of her, and proudly identified herself and her friends as "weird" (Zeely, July 20, 2018). Zeely enjoyed her time at lunch because she could socialize with her friends. She made a point of sitting with any new student during lunchtime to make sure that person felt welcome. Zeely was very active in school groups and extracurricular activities. At the end of the day, she used the rare time she had alone on the school bus or at home to listen to music and decompress.

When providing permission to participate in this study, Zeely's mother informed me that their family had a tragic accident in which one of Zeely's brothers had died (personal communication, July 16, 2018). She asked me to determine how Zeely was able to maintain a commitment to academic excellence in spite of the tragedy. Although this question did not come up during the interview, Zeely did describe a time in school when she sprained her ankle and did not ask to go home or go to the nurse. She referenced something her mother told her about dealing with bad days:

But she told me um... She had told me that even though you're in pain, you gotta keep going. 'Cause you know you're gonna come home at the end of the day and you're going to feel better. (Zeely, July 20, 2018)

Zeely also referenced lessons she had learned at home from her mother when issues came up regarding interacting with negative peers, that she needed to consider the challenges that everyone dealt with at home before passing judgement. Zeely also

described her mother as a “terminator” to illustrate how she was “always doing things, all of the time. Like you would never see her just sitting down...just sitting down and relaxin’” (Zeely, July 20, 2019). When not participating in peer tutoring, community outreach, Student Council Association, and National Honors Society, in addition to her other commitments, Zeely could be found running cross-country afterschool in the neighborhood surrounding her school.

Johnny. Johnny was a 13-year-old rising eighth grader and identified as Black. He was a scholar-athlete who considered himself “smart, funny, cool, [and] athletic” (see Appendix Q). He had been playing football since he was 3 years old. When asked how he would decide on his high school and college choices, he asserted that he would pick based on academics, “90% academics, and 10 athletic.” Johnny considered himself popular because he had a large social circle and was known throughout the school because of his football success (Johnny, July 23, 2018). Johnny described support in school “people on your back making sure you’re doing things you’re suppose to do because they want to see you make it out” (Johnny, July 23, 2018). He had a family member who worked in the school administration and was very aware that his conduct would quickly be reported back to his mother. He made careful decisions about choosing his friends, “Like if, I have to pick people that have the same, um, standards as me. Like good grades, sports, go to college and stuff” (Johnny, July 23, 2018). Johnny considered himself a leader, and had demonstrated these skills on the football field, in the classroom, in group work, and when his friends were behaving poorly. He was the oldest of two sisters and three brothers, which influenced his behavior as a leader in school.

Johnny's mother had established clear expectations when it came to school conduct and academic achievement. When Johnny was falling behind on his work, she restricted participation in one of his athletic commitments to bring up his grades and maintain them. Any grade below a "B" was considered unacceptable and any behavior that was inappropriate would be reported to his mother. His mother once learned that he had been misbehaving in class with a friend.

And then once my mom had found out, she was like, "You either going to be friends with him and keep getting in trouble, or you going to stop being friends with him and do what you're supposed to do." So, I had to go in school and tell him the next day that, um, "Maybe it's not so good for us to be friends because I need to focus in class. (Johnny, July 23, 2018)

As a result, he and his friend decided to limit their friendship to outside of class. To maintain good grades, Johnny chose to sit close to the teacher and away from his friends in the classroom. He worked to be on "task" and "focused" in class. Johnny admired his mother greatly because she was able to "finish high school with honors... finished college with her honors" while being a young mother (Johnny, July 23, 2018). He felt that not many are able to accomplish that, and as a result he worked hard to maintain good grades. Johnny's mother made an extra effort to make sure he was a participant in this study by highlighting his name on the sign-up sheet. According to Johnny, she signed him up for many opportunities including participation in this study.

Melissa. Melissa was a 14-year-old rising ninth grader. She was in the honors classes and high school credit classes. She did not have honors for science because it was

not an option at her school, but she found her teacher to be good. However, she thought her peers were too disruptive, which would frustrate her.

We did a lot of online stuff and like we took quizzes and stuff and like we couldn't, I couldn't focus because I am one of those people, I need some quiet to take a test and like they just want to be loud. [The teacher] was yelling at them but they just kept talking back. (Melissa, July 24, 2018).

As a result, she did not get the grade she wanted on the quiz. An additional challenge for Melissa was that she was a twin, and her peers constantly compared her to her brother. "But I mean it's okay because my brother's dumb and I'm smart and then like he's popular [right]? So, we're like polar opposites" (Melissa, July 24, 2018). Melissa's brother was not admitted into the gifted and talented program, so they did not have the same classes or opportunities. Melissa's mother encouraged her and her brother to aim for A's and B's, but her brother struggled. Even though she and her brother did not get along, she believed he was capable of doing well academically, but that he was more focused on the social aspects of school than good grades.

Socially, Melissa was picked on and called a "snitch," meaning tattletale, by her peers (Melissa, July 24, 2018). She surrounded herself with friends who did not get in trouble but felt conflicted when she saw a "popular person...picking on a less, like emo person, you can't really step up for them because like then everyone will come from you afterward." If she or someone stood up to a popular person they would pick on their insecurities. In spite of these social challenges, Melissa excelled at her extracurricular activities. She played catcher for the high school softball team and had many friends who were already in high school. Melissa played the viola and was a member of the National

Honors Society and President of her class in Student Council. Melissa intended to go to medical school after college. She considered herself inquisitive and could be found asking clarification questions of her teachers. Melissa was looking forward to high school and taking classes to advance her toward her goal of going to a competitive college.

Ben. Ben was a 14-year-old ninth-grade gamer and identified as Black (see Appendix N). Ben considered himself quiet and thought his peers would not know a lot about him because he did not share. He was not a fan of sports, but he had a large number of other interests and found himself going on the internet to learn about new concepts and theories, as well as new skills. Using technology such as online applications and social media, Ben taught himself: how to play the piano, science theories, Japanese, German, Morse code, game theory, and a number of other skills. He had a passion for learning new things and was introduced to classics like the works of William Shakespeare in his gifted class, called Special Program for Academic and Creative Excellence (SPACE). Ben felt he was best at STEM classes and wanted to be an engineer. He was able to nurture this passion through watching theory videos on YouTube. When Ben was introduced to a new concept or topic, he would go directly to YouTube to learn about it. He had been introduced to many new ideas and concepts through his gaming passion.

Ben found that he preferred being in class with other gifted or high-ability children. He learned this because of a mistake when transferring to his middle school. His gifted teacher “didn't write the recommendation he said he was gonna write” (Ben, July 25, 2018). He was in SPACE in elementary school, but when he entered sixth grade he was placed in the non-honors classes. He only knew two other students in those classes. One of his friends in sixth grade was moved immediately to the honors classes, but Ben

stayed put. He did not understand why he was in there, especially since he had all As and was already in the gifted classes in elementary school. He thought to himself, “I shouldn’t be here” (Ben, July 25, 2018). Ben said he did not think his mother complained to the school when his classmate’s mother did. He did not feel comfortable going to the school counselor, “because he was always yelling” (Ben, July 25, 2018). He found the work in those classes very easy and used the extra time to explore other interests.

He was able to see his friends from SPACE in the middle school Spanish language classes, but his other academics were with students who were not identified as gifted. This had a significant impact on his perspective of the two different groups. As a quiet and shy student, Ben found the non-honors classes loud and would miss being in a classroom where he felt the students were more focused on work. “Honors is harder, but it’s not like hard to the point where it’s like not fun. I love, I love school” (Ben, July 25, 2018). He explained that the bad students were the ones who were yelling all of the time, not listening to the teachers, using their phones, and cutting class. Ben found the disciplinary practices of his school ineffective, “And when they suspend them, I don’t, to me, I don’t like suspension. Because all its gonna do is give them another reason when they come back, they’ll do something again” (Ben, July 25, 2018). Ben pointed out that, “being in a class with all the good kids is like the best thing...’Cause it’s quiet” (Ben, July 25, 2018). At the time of the interview, Ben had been accepted to start at a competitive magnet high school and was looking forward to the quietness and learning new languages.

Sarah. Sarah was a 14-year-old rising ninth grader. She was very artistic and had multiple teachers ask to keep her various projects to use as exemplar models. She really

showed her artistic talent in her art class when she was able to design a chair, and in her honors English class where she designed a magazine by hand (see Appendix R). Sarah found refuge in a few of her teachers' classrooms during lunch or other times when the school campus is noisy or overwhelming. One year she would spend time in her science teacher's classroom and assist the teacher with grading quizzes and other classroom tasks. Her science teacher was also her field hockey coach, so she had an extracurricular relationship with her. Her Geometry teacher kept his class open and available at lunch for a semi-structured study hall where students could come, eat, and work quietly or get extra tutoring in their math work. At Sarah's school there was only one Geometry class, and they filled it with as many bodies as possible. They did not offer honors or gifted in any other subjects besides math and English. She always got good grades in middle school and would finish her work quickly. While waiting for her peers to finish work, Sarah would read, draw quietly, or work on homework for other classes. Sarah would get frustrated when she was not permitted to work ahead in her classwork when she had already mastered the content. "Um, it frustrated me because, like, I didn't like how she wouldn't let me do my own work when that's what you're supposed to be doing" (Sarah, July 26, 2018). She had one history teacher who would not let her move ahead and insisted on doing all the classwork together as a whole class.

She was just like, "You need to stop working ahead because we're doing this as a class", even though that's what we did all the time, and then we had to do it later. And then the next day, she was like, "Why is this all wrong?" to the other people because all they did was copy her work, so then they didn't know anything. (Sarah, July 26, 2018)

Sarah could see how her classmates were not learning the content, but just copying down the answers, and that the teacher was not instructing the content. The other history class allowed for independent practice, and she knew her peers in there were at least four days ahead of her own class. Ultimately, her history class scored low on the state standardized test, and although Sarah got one of the highest grades, many of her classmates had to retake it. She was moving on to high school to take all honors classes and hoped to take more advanced art classes.

Robert. Robert was a 14-year-old rising ninth grader. Robert's first year of middle school was in an online homeschool program. He excelled at the work but found it lonely and quiet. When Robert returned to his neighborhood middle school, he found the social aspects somewhat distracting, and did not perform as well academically as he normally had in the past. He would occasionally get in trouble for talking too much in class or breaking rules in the lunch room. "I would, sometimes I would have to eat in the dean's office cause I was just cut up a lot or running in the lunch room" (Robert, July 26, 2018). He realized that his grades were slipping, but it was too late in the year to do any make-up work. His teachers had a policy that when there were missing assignments or poor grades the student could not wait until the end of the year to fix it; they had to address it at the time of the assignment. After his seventh-grade year, he made an effort to change his behavior at school. Many of his teachers noticed and pointed out that he was "flying under the radar" compared to the previous years. He worked very hard to be focused in class and complete his assignments. This included changing his seat to the front of class and trying not to be as social in the classroom. His peers and teachers considered him a leader and he was very focused on his future as a marine scientist. He

had even considered returning to the homeschool path if it meant he could graduate high school early. Robert knew he had to get his grades up to go to a competitive college and planned on doing so in high school.

Thomas. Thomas was a 14-year-old rising ninth grader. Thomas identified as Black, and in his arts-based response to how he would describe himself, he drew two characters from the film *Black Panther* (Feige & Coogler, 2018) as a part of his identity (see Appendix G). He was popular among his peers and excelled academically. Thomas was not just dedicated to getting good grades, he also wanted to make sure he understood the content in classes he valued. His science teacher would encourage him to always aim to do better if his grade was not an A.

And the reason why I liked her is 'cause she motivated me a lot because she would tell me, like, every day, like, “[Thomas] you need to do better.” But, I would have, like, a B, or, like, a A, and she was, like, “so you need to do a little bit better.” (Thomas, July 26, 2018)

This encouragement prompted Thomas to ask for copies of the tests or quizzes he may have done poorly on to practice and make sure he mastered the content. His teacher recognized his commitment to excellence by raising his grade, but that did not matter to him.

Thomas changed schools between his seventh- and eighth-grade year. For the last few weeks of his seventh-grade year, Thomas’s mother would drive him from their new town back to his school in the urban city to make the transition less challenging. This meant his mother was driving hours out of the way, and he would often be late to class or stay late at school. Thomas had a pair of best friends, and during their eighth-grade year,

they kept in touch by texting and playing video games that allowed for networking. They were in the gifted classes together. Thomas and his friends would often call each other during the academic year to study.

And we'll be, like, uh, you help me with this page, I'll help you with that page.

And then, you know, we will, like, share ... Well not even share answers, but we will, like, help each other with the answers....So it would be like, how did you get so and so question?... And they'd be, like, yeah, read pages so and so and so, and then you'll get the answer. And then phone me back when you think it's right, or something like that. So, we kept, uh, a real tight bond between, like, us doin' the work. (Thomas, July 26, 2018)

He and his friends also engaged in an on-going conversation about what books they were reading. Thomas turned to reading when he lost access to his game system and decided to pick up a book. When the game was returned, he continued reading. He and his mother acquired a local library card and they would check out books together. Thomas's mother talked with him about her experiences in school, and she had high standards for him and his teachers because she was a teacher herself. Thomas was very close with his family, especially his sister, who was only two years ahead of him in school.

Thomas described himself as hard working and focused, one of "the cool nerdy kids" (Thomas, July 26, 2018). He pointed out that he was popular with his peers because they missed him when he was absent from school for a day and felt the need to fill him in on all the gossip. Thomas would occasionally get his work for class and with his two best friends go to the library to be more productive and less distracted. He and his friends were able to finish the work faster working in the library than in the classroom. Thomas

had a sense of humor, and it had occasionally gotten him in trouble with his teachers. One time he shared a joke with his friends that had a racial epithet in it, and a teacher overheard him. He was sent to the principal's office and his punishment was to call home. Another time, Thomas figured out a way to overcome technology assignments that were too long to finish; he managed to find a website that allowed him to copy and paste the completed work. He would go back and adjust the copy and pasted sections to make it look like he had typed it with common errors. Thomas was trying to "lighten the mood" in his technology class, the teacher contacted his mother and said, "If [Thomas] had home training, then he wouldn't [be] like this at school" (Thomas, July 26, 018). His mother was upset and wanted to go to the school to meet the teacher, but Thomas convinced her not to. However, his grandmother took issue with the comment and Thomas describes the incident like this:

And then, had my mom to go to school. She was like, "Nah, it's okay. Wait." And then, I was in school. And, like, I was in the middle of copying and pasting. And then my aunt, my mom, no, my grandma had came in. And my aunt had walked in, but my aunt kinda young. She was, like, and she was, like, real young at the time, so she had walked in. And she had that [inaudible] face. And I was like, "Aw, man." And then, the next thing you know, all you see coming behind her, looking around that corner. I was like, "Oh, Jesus," "[Thomas], is that your grandma?" "Sh!" "Huh?" She was like, "Where the teacher at?" And she was like, "You gotta go in the office to take him out of the class." And she was like, "I'm not taking him nowhere. I'm talking to you." And then they talked in the hallway, but it was really loud...And then, I got into extra trouble because she walked in

on the copy and pasting, I accidentally copied the URL with it, and then she clicked the link. (Thomas, July 26, 2018)

Thomas's grade was impacted by being caught cheating on his technology homework, but because his grandmother come to the school to express her concern about the comment, he was able to withdraw from the class without repercussion. Additionally, the teacher lessened the amount of assignments for the remaining year, and the class became more manageable according to Thomas's friends (Thomas, July 26, 2018). His grandmother became known as "Superwoman" by Thomas's peers (Thomas, July 26, 2018). Thomas continued excelling in school and will enjoy joining his older sister in high school the coming year.

Thematic Analysis

Having just presented the individual textural descriptions of what middle school is like for the participants in this study, the next step is to weave together the common elements to explain how the participants experienced being in middle school as a group (Moustakas, 1994). The analysis process of the data described further in Chapter 3 allowed for me to create nearly 90 codes (Figure 10).

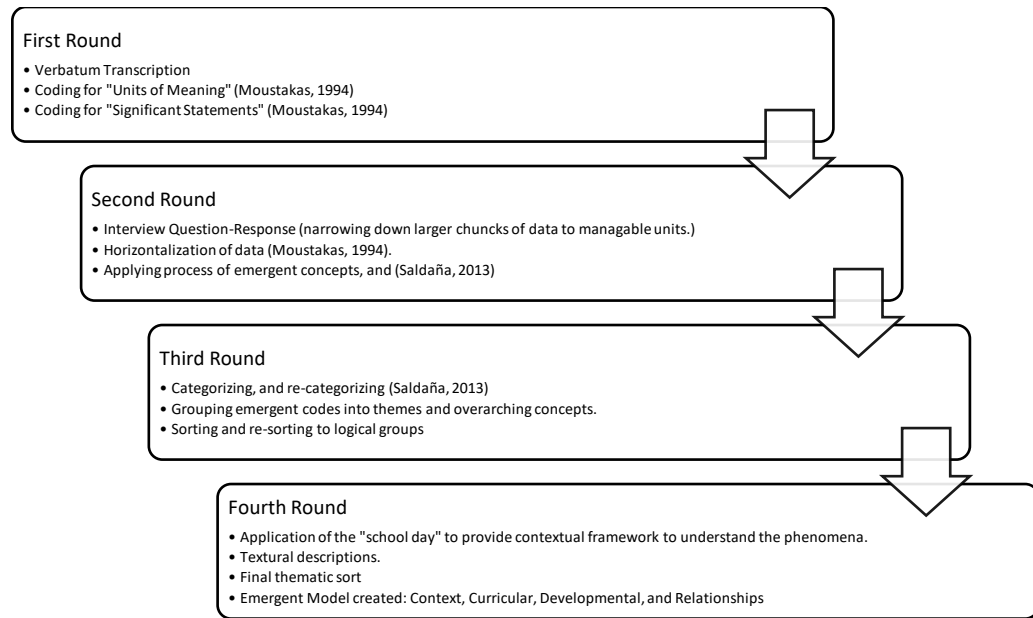


Figure 10. Coding sequence for data analysis.

Through further sorting of the codes, I organized these 90 codes into more abstract categories, then concepts and themes, and finally a theory (Saldaña, 2013). I narrowed the codes to four major themes that have three sub-concepts. The individual textural descriptions allowed me to further understand the experience of the whole group. To illustrate this, I will identify the concepts and themes that contributed to the theory.

The participants in this study shared their individual experiences of being in middle school through semi-structured interviews that used arts-based inquiry to begin the conversation. For most of the participants, when asked how they would describe themselves in school, they began with certain character traits or behaviors that they exhibit. Common words were *nice*, *kind*, *smart*, *intelligent*, and *focused*. Some participants included more descriptive words, whereas others focused on illustrating who they were in school. When the participants would indicate a word or characteristic, I would ask them a question like, “Describe a time you remember feeling most

kind/smart/funny.” The participants would then share with me a story about how they felt most like that characteristic. From that point, we would either move on to another characteristic or illustration, or I would probe further for additional information about the experience they shared.

MJL: Can you think of a time that you were, like, really aware of how focused you were?

Robert: Because, like, it's like a lot of times that it's still, like, the bell will ring, and I won't notice it even if everybody gets out of class and goes [inaudible]

MJL: Um, so do you get in kind of like a zone?

Robert: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

MJL: What ... Does it happen in one class more than another?

Robert: No.

MJL: Just all of them?

MJL: Um, has anyone ever said anything about your focus like that?

MJL: Teachers? No?

MJL: Okay.

MJL: What's the next word? (Robert, July 26, 2018)

In this example the participant used the word *focused*, and I asked him to share an example where he was aware of this behavior; he did, but he did not expand further. We moved on to the next word. For some participants the conversation was more involved:

MJL: Alright, I'm here. This one might be, was there a time in school where you really remember that you felt smart?

Melissa: Yeah, I'm in my Algebra class. Well, okay. In my civics class I got the highest score in my class and it was a pass advance and then Algebra. I was like, when she handed out the worksheets there was about like 60 questions and like we have like about 55 minutes in each class and everyone only gets to question 30, but I'd be done with all 60 problems that about like 40 minutes.

MJL: Wow. That's fast. Um, and like it. All right. So yeah. So, so you, so you taking tests and stuff, did any, had anyone like your peers or your teachers say anything to you about being smart?

Melissa: Yeah, like in my civics class, like I seem dumb because like I asked a lot of stupid questions but like I still got the highest and like my teacher's like, "see just because she has like weird questions but she's still got the highest score in the class," and like this, my teacher's like yeah, "I put you even in honors Geometry next year because I think you can really succeed in that class." So feel smart.

MJL: What about the, the, did your teacher say she asks a lot of questions are stupid questions or...

Melissa: Well she was like, she was mean kind of like she was bipolar to me because like one, like, like she'll show us like, and I'm saying like a lot but she'll show. It's like this video all the time and I'm like, "is that Tom Cruise?" Like everyone just like mimic me and stuff. So like I could say I kinda got bullied but like they would say it's joking but like half the time it was really funny. But...

MJL: So they would mock you when you would ask questions?

Melissa: ...and then my teacher would just like, sometimes they don't understand the question fully and like they're asking the 10 amendments and I said we have to name all of them. And she was like looked at me, kind of like, are you dumb like this? And she was like, "it's the Bill of Rights" and like that voice and I don't know, I just felt kind of bad. (Melissa, July 24, 2018)

In this example I responded to her writing the word "smart" on her ABI. She shared about her experience of excelling in an assignment and on the state exam, defining her understanding of smart by a score or grade. I asked her about her teachers calling her smart, and in spite of the teasing and sometimes bullying by her civics teacher, she still felt smart because of the grades and scores she was getting.

I coded the items using descriptive coding or emergent coding (Saldaña, 2013). After multiple coding cycles I grouped the codes into themes and concepts (see Figure 10). The individual textural descriptions allowed for me to see the larger thematic structures of the entire experience. After composing the individual textural descriptions, I returned to the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) and

completed a final sort of the themes that contribute to the final emergent model: Context, Curricular, Developmental, and Relationships.

Context

The research question was focused on understanding underrepresented and high-ability early adolescents' experience in middle school. As a result, the specific settings of their experiences were an important influencer to frame their responses. Eccles and Roeser (2011) assert that since a large majority of students' experiences happen within the school setting, various aspects of the context may influence what the experience is like. All but one of the participants attended a school that was designated a Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, meaning "schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards" (Title I, 2018). The financial resources at their schools and district-wide policies impacted their experiences, and the opportunities that they have access to describe the experience within the context.

Context can refer to the physical location of the school and the neighborhoods that surround it. Participants pointed out the location of their school impacted their day-to-day experience. Melea described how the neighborhood where her school is situated has a history of violence that often necessitates putting the school on "lock-down" to secure the school (Melea, July 16, 2018). Zeely also shared how the area where her school is located has a negative reputation, but through the opportunity of her running club, she was able to learn more about the neighborhood around her school. Melissa described one of the neighborhoods that feeds into her school as being problematic, "It's like this really bad neighborhood and like all the shootings you see on the news is usually

by [the neighborhood] and like people smoke like a lot of weed and stuff” (Melissa, July 24, 2018). Ben even equated someone’s behavior because of the neighborhood they were coming from. Since context was a significant factor for all students, what I have determined in the experiences of UHA students’ contexts is three additional aspects: opportunity, obstacles, and resources.

Opportunities. Opportunities are the various experiences that the participants had access to that contributed to their experience of middle school. Opportunities included in-school and afterschool activities that were unique to their schools. For instance, Zeely and Melissa had television news shows that they were able to participate in at their respective schools. “[The teacher will] teach us how to do it in class, but then when it's morning show time, he [would] let us try to run it ourselves” (Zeely, July 20, 2018). Melissa’s morning announcements became a meme where her closing remarks were used to joke about the school itself. Some students, Ben and Zeely, shared that they were picked to participate in events because of their behavior or academic achievement. Ben was selected to be the student who introduced the mayor to the entire school because his teacher pointed out that “I could see that you're like a very good student in class. You pay attention the whole time” (Ben, July 25, 2018). Zeely was rewarded as well for her behavior by receiving an award from the school leadership.

Additional factors that contributed to opportunities based on context, were the actual access to coursework or course sequence that the participants were able to enroll in. It is common for middle schools to offer high school credit courses that put the students in an accelerated position upon entering high school. Some students had the option to take Algebra I and Geometry, both that provide opportunities for high school

credit. Sarah shared that there was only a single teacher certified to teach Geometry at her school. Rose was going to be taking Geometry her eighth grade year, and Melissa and Ben will be taking it as freshman in high school. Thomas completed Geometry and two years of Spanish in middle school, which will put him on an advanced trajectory for dual-credit or Advanced Placement courses in mathematics and world languages. However, when he moved to a different district, his access to certain high school credit classes changed. Thomas's success in advanced or above grade level courses was encouraged by his mother, "And then my mom said if you try hard enough, we could probably get out of high school early. Like you know, like 11th grade" (Thomas, July 26, 2018). Robert also pointed out the benefit of taking advanced coursework or working at an accelerated pace through homeschooling, "Homeschool is easier and faster, I could graduate faster" (Robert, July 26, 2018). Junior will be taking Algebra one in 8th grade, primarily because he was able to excel by changing his seat in the classroom.

Obstacles. Obstacles refer to contextual barriers that impact the participant's experiences. These are present due to no fault of the students and are often outside of the control of the school-based leadership. Some students shared obstacles that impacted their experiences and sometimes their grades. Johnny spoke about the first time he had a failing grade as a result of a teacher leaving:

Our teacher had left, our regular teacher had left. Like we was on the split list³ for like a whole month... Yeah, so we really weren't learning nothing and when we

³ "Split list" refers to a practice in schools when there is an absent teacher, and there are no substitutes; the administration will divide up a class and assign the smaller groups of students to different classes that meet at the same time.

had that new teacher she had came and quizzed us and I had got like a 70 on it.”
(Johnny, July 23, 2018)

Melea also had challenges with substitute teachers:

I think it would be like, it's most of the time we have substitutes. ‘Cuz they're like, we try to explain to them what our teacher does and they're like, "Well, I'm not your teacher." It's like, okay but the teacher left you papers on what you're supposed to do and trust us to know what we're supposed to do. So, we try to explain it to you. You're supposed to listen to us because it's our regular. It's not your regular. (Melea, July16, 2018)

Other participants also described obstacles that were the result of district- or school-wide policies. This often happened in classes where the students were mixed ability or were not the group the participants were used to having class with. Rose and Jasmine described times when they did not get along with the students from the non-honors classes. Ben shared the experience of his recommendation for being in the honors classes as a sixth grader never was sent to his middle school, so he spent his first year in regular academics, and only saw his high-ability peers in his Spanish class and his gifted and talented class.

Resources. Resources are what was available at the school to ensure that the students were successful in their middle school. As Title I schools, the schools received additional funding for curricular and additional supports that served school-wide but focused specifically on students who were underperforming or were at risk of failing. The participants in this study were never underperforming or at risk of failing, but their access to Title I services was most likely limited to a district-wide free lunch plan. Additionally, resources could include extra-curricular opportunities the students have access to. Five of

the participants were student athletes and were able to participate in afterschool sports. For Johnny, participation in the school football team contributed to his popularity and made school personnel more aware of him in the school building. Melissa was a catcher for the high school softball team, and as a junior varsity player she was required to provide her own gear. Zeely participated in afterschool activities every Tuesday and Thursday, and every year her cross-country running program provided new sneakers and clothing for the team.

Curricular

Findings under the curricular theme apply to learning opportunities, classroom tasks, and school-sponsored extra-curricular elements. Curricular elements are often dependent on district-wide policies. For instance, Sarah was only served as a gifted student in her math and English content areas, whereas Ben had a GATE enrichment class along with honors-level academics. Curricular practices are dependent on the teacher and the teacher qualifications. For Thomas, he admired his science teacher and was motivated to perform well in her class. “I can relate because you know, she's an African American you know, and she was really smart” (Thomas, July 26, 2018). This same science teacher created challenging assignments that Thomas enjoyed.

She was like, she likes being a teacher because she likes seeing people uh you know, live up to her standards. Like. And then it was like, it got to a point where she wouldn't grade you, you would grade yourself on how you think you did. So, one day I did a project, and she was like um everybody else had like really long paragraphs, but I had like four paragraphs and we had to make our own plant that lives in, and it had to go off of what she gave us... So my plant was like a, I call it

a super cactus.... So, aw man it was so cool like being able to like—normally you'll, like, have somebody make a cactus. You know, but she like you know, went above and beyond like make a plant that lives up to the standards of you know, that area. (Thomas, July 26, 2018)

Thomas then drew on his ABI what the “super cactus” looked like and went on to describe how he built it and it worked (see Appendix G). He also explained that he gave himself a C as a grade for the project because he did not write as much about his cactus as his peers. His teacher assessed him differently, including his presentation and raised his grade to an A. Not all participants had examples of curricular choices that teachers made. Sarah pointed out her frustration in having a teacher that did not allow for independent practice of the work and prevented her from moving at an accelerated pace. She did describe a project in her English class that allowed for her to demonstrate her artistic talent.

One was this year, because we had to make magazines in English, and I made this like ... and we had to make it also, like a non-fiction book, and I did Hiroshima, the Atomic Bomb... And I like, I made mine, like, it was out of computer paper, and I hand wrote everything and drew pictures. And then I hole-punched it, and then I laminated it, and then it was like really all nice ... and I made an advertisement in it, and then on the back I like did a little, like, um, trademark. (Sarah, July 26, 2018)

Sarah and Thomas were the only participants that shared stories of academically challenging opportunities to demonstrate their gifts and talents in the academic content area that went beyond test scores and state standardized test. Ben shared curricular

choices that were specific to his gifted and talented class, such as introducing him to Shakespeare. “And I love Shakespeare stuff... And I like how ... I like the words he used, even though like that language is not used a lot anymore” (Ben, July 25, 2018).

Classroom. Decisions made in the classroom are reliant on educators who are well-qualified, certified, and prepared for the schools in which they teach (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Many of the participants shared examples of teachers they thought were good at their jobs. Sarah shared that her Geometry teacher would tutor anyone that came to his classroom during lunch. Thomas described his favorite teacher as someone who had high expectations for her students and would provide learning opportunities that were challenging and appropriate for the honors-level class. Junior was able to excel academically because his teacher merely moved his seat to the front of the room after he broke his glasses. Jasmine described frustration with teachers not being able to manage the classroom and how that impacted her education:

The thing is they bother my education, so they need to shut up. And I'll be the one to tell 'em to shut up, and [mom will] be like, "No. You don't need to be the one to shut up and tell them shut up because there's a teacher there." But then I'll be like, "The teacher's not doing anything." (Jasmine, July 20, 2018)

She explained to her mother why she would get so frustrated, and often in trouble for telling her peers to “shut up” (Jasmine, July 20, 2018).

Other participants described a great difference between classes with gifted or high-ability students and students who were not identified as gifted. At Rose’s school they called the classes for honors “pre-med” and the non-honors classes “regular” (Rose, July 17, 2018). Ben was very aware of the difference when he was in the non-honors

academic classes as a sixth grader. Like many of the participants, Ben thrived working in quiet and more focused classroom environments: “Being in a class with all the good kids is like the best thing” (Ben, July 25, 2018). Rose and Melissa shared similar sentiments on the behavior of their peers. Many of the participants considered students who were quiet and appeared academically focused as *good*, and the *bad* students were disruptive, more outwardly social, and popular. Melissa differentiated the academic students from the more social students as “ghetto” and “non-ghetto” (Melissa, July 24, 2018). Melissa defined ghetto, “Okay. I’m trying to think of like a ghetto sentence. Like when they don’t use proper grammar. Okay. When they’re like always talking about people I don’t know. Like I think that’s ghetto when you’re talking behind people’s backs” (Melissa, July 24, 2018). Melissa also asserted that sometimes there were *ghetto* students in her honors classes, but not many. “Okay. So, the smart. So, the advanced classes, they’re quiet, they’re doing their work. I mean they’ll talk, everyone’s all but like they get their work done, they get high test scores, they listened to the teacher, they’re respectful” (Melissa, July 24, 2018).

Achievement. Most participants described themselves as smart, and when asked to expand on that label they referred to grades and standardized test scores. Melissa even compared herself to her twin brother, describing him as not smart because he did not have As and Bs. A few participants——Zeely, Vivi, and Melissa——discussed being aware of how they did on tests and quizzes as compared to their classmates. Vivi described an incident when she was disappointed in the score she received on a state standardized test:

Everybody was telling me like, you really, really like overthinking this because everybody else got really low score compared to what you got. They got like 420s

and stuff and like some of them just barely passed and then like I just said you should be happy about this score you got but I wasn't, still low but they were just comparing it to themselves. Right. So, it was a boy who got like the highest score in the class, not great. And he like put it on his forehead because he did the sticky note... he showed everyone like everybody just like, what'd you get? (Vivi, July 18, 2018)

Vivi and Zeely described their teachers posting test scores on the board for the whole class to see, and if a name was missing, it meant that they did not perform well. Zeely shared, “our teacher in Algebra, he would write down the, um, if we got a good grade on the test, he would write down the As, Bs, and the Cs on the board” (Zeely, July 20, 2018). Zeely pointed out that the practice of posting grades would upset students.

Yeah sometimes our names weren't up there and I kinda felt a little bad, but I think that's because I feel like sometimes during the school year, I feel like I put my expectations a little too high and not where I can reach. And that's, I thought I felt upset. But still I also wanna do good. (Zeely, July 20, 2018)

Many participants had grade expectations based on values established by their parents. Johnny focused on achieving because of the challenges his mother had as a young woman, and a commitment to not disappointing her. Junior intended on making sure he graduated high school because his mother had not the same opportunities when she was his age. Some participants wanted As and Bs; others wanted straight As. Rose described experiencing microaggressions from her peers when she got straight As. Vivi had gotten very disappointed in herself when she received a grade below an 80, “because I don't, I don't just like passing seventy-five is passing. I'm not good with a 75 and I'm just like, I

can do better than that” (Vivi, July 18, 2018). Most participants who described themselves as smart identified their grades and test scores as the measurement that established them as smart. Thomas, however, spoke of redoing assignments when he scored poorly in order to master the content, not just for the grade.

I will ask if I can get another test, and I'll study for it again... I was, like, uh, “Miss, I didn't do good on my quiz the other day. Can I get another one?” And she was like, yeah. But I took it home. I took it home... And then me and my mom, uh, studied together... because when I gave her back the paper, and I was, like, “Yeah Miss, I did pretty good.” She was, like, “Yeah, your mom sent me the, uh, the picture of what you got.” And she was like,” I, um, edited your grade.”

(Thomas, July 26, 2018)

Even though his first motivation was not to improve his grade, his teacher acknowledged his effort and averaged his grade after all.

Extra-curricular. Students who had interests beyond traditional academics would describe themselves by those interests. For instance, Vivi described herself as “musical” because everything she affiliated herself with had to do with her school orchestra (Vivi, July18, 2018). She was also learning two additional instruments besides the viola. Of 12 participants, three played the viola. Ben was also learning new instruments but doing it away from school. He would borrow his sister’s electronic keyboard and practice playing the piano through lessons on YouTube. Sarah was an artist but was only able to practice her art in art class or when her teachers would assign projects that allowed for creativity. As described earlier, five participants were athletes, and most of those experiences were away from school at an external program.

Some students developed extra interests at home as a way to spend time learning. Rose and Melea both read at school to avoid any potential negative interaction with their peers. Thomas picked up reading because he lost access to his game system. As a result, he and his friends formed an informal book group—“I think it was me and my friends, we all, we all read books. Like, we don't read the same book, but we like... we not a book club it's more like a book meeting” (Thomas, July 26, 2018). Ben would use the internet to explore his curiosities and play games. He had many non-school-based interests and took advantage of the internet to explore them. Two participants, Ben and Sarah, both considered themselves pun-smiths but did not find time during the school day to practice creating them.

Developmental

Early adolescence is a time of rapid growth and change. The participants in this study were either 13 or 14 during their interviews, but their development experiences varied between them. The concept of developmental includes behavior, passions and curiosities, and identity. The factors that contribute to participants' experiences in the context of school also impact their development as students. This includes the culture established within the school. Vivi, Jasmine, Rose, and Melissa described experiences when they were ridiculed about their physical appearances. Jasmine pointed out the challenges of puberty and how she believed middle school was a difficult time for girls.

Being a middle school girl ... is hard because ... Because ... middle school, I guess middle school is when you start your period. Whatever. But, it's like ... starting your period is tough. In middle school it's like around the time where it happens.... So, like ... you always worried about what somebody else will say....

So, you always gotta make sure you think about what other people say. And, like my mom said, my mom say, "You should not care about what other people say to you." But, at the same time, peoples' worries can affect somebody's ... thinking.

(Jasmine, July 20, 2018)

Vivi was explicitly bullied about acne and her appearance. She and Melissa were teased about their body types. Rose and Vivi, who actually attended the same school, both experienced solo-status and microaggressions regarding their ethnicity. The developmental aspect of the middle grades is a factor that underlies the entire experience of being UHA and an early adolescent.

Behavior. Most of the students listed behavioral characteristics when asked to describe themselves at school; examples include “trustworthy” (Melea), “kind” (Sarah, Junior), “quiet” (Junior, Robert, Sarah, Melissa), and “focused” (Johnny, Robert). Many identified their behaviors or the things they liked as part of who they were. A few considered themselves shy and described incidents that illustrated this. Ben pointed out how his shyness impacted his interaction with peers:

But, I—I don't stand up for myself a lot 'cause I'm shy. I'm a people's person, but I'm not at the same time. So like, if I could tell, I could tell if somebody's friendly. And when they are, I talk to 'em. But ... 'cause you shouldn't judge a book by a cover, but I, it's ... it depends because some people have like eyebrows, it's like they look real mean. (Ben, July 25, 2018)

Vivi discussed how her shyness was often interpreted as sadness and anxiety when she spoke up. When I asked Jasmine to describe herself, she used an emoji sticker of laughing and pointed out that if she was not laughing, then something must be wrong.

Jasmine also pointed out that she thought some of her peers may think she has an “attitude problem” because she got frustrated with other people’s behavior (Jasmine, July 20, 2018). Johnny used his leadership skills to help advise his friends to do better in school academically and behaviorally “You need to calm down, focus on your academics and sports cause if not, you might fail seventh grade” (Johnny, July 23, 2018).

Most of the participants equated behavior with achievement. They considered the students who behaved poorly or were disrespectful to the teachers to be bad students.

MJL: Was he in the honors classes?

Ben: Yeah. I don't know why.

MJL: Was he, did he do well in class?

Ben: He was smart, but he has a, he's like really bad. (Ben, July 25, 2018)

Jasmine: I feel like the kids that get in trouble a lot, those are the kids that are attention seekers to me, because they like, there's no reason why you should be getting in trouble in school. You're supposed to come to school to learn. (Jasmine, July 20, 2018)

Vivi: It means the kid doesn't try, like the kid who talks back to the teacher, they can do like slouches, the kid who is like, oh I don't want to do this anymore or doesn't come to rehearsals and like is really confused on music when the teacher gives us like practice with the parts of the practice, they don't do it. (Vivi, July 18, 2018)

Junior: Um. Like, if he [the teacher] puts me in a good group, I'll do work. But if he puts me in a bad group then I'll basically be the only one don't do the work, because they'll like, they'll be talking to each other and then to other groups and I'm the one that has to be doing all the work basically. (Junior, July 17, 2018)

They also expressed that they believed students who were high-ability followed the rules and did well academically. Thomas admitted to figuring out how to cheat in his keyboarding class by copying and pasting the assignments from the internet. Thomas knew that cheating was against the rules, but it did not change his definition of himself as a student. A few of the participants talked about “cutting up” and having fun in class but knowing when to be quiet after the teacher told them to (Robert, July 26, 2018). Robert

was one of the few students who shared experiences of being in detention or having to sit in a “quiet seat” for misbehaving at lunch. For the few shy and quiet students, they described watching their peers misbehave and making noise in class.

Passions and curiosities. When the students were not working on their academics, they were finding new and innovative ways to learn skills and concepts that were not a part of their regular curriculum. I chose the words *passions* and *curiosities* instead of interests because as high-ability students, their engagement in extra-curricular learning went beyond a mere passing interest. Ben especially was an example of this—his passion for games and gaming led him to learn about different languages, music, and vocabulary. Ben learned a number of soundtrack tunes to his games by ear and could play them on his borrowed keyboard piano. He transcribed the Morse code system, “just in case I need to use it” (Ben, July 25, 2018). He did not explore his interests when the teacher was talking or when he was doing school work, but when he had finished his work, was waiting, or had free time. As mentioned earlier, Ben used YouTube to watch videos on science theories, even theories that he did not believe in: “But some of ‘em just don't make sense to me. Like the earth is flat?” There were not science events or competitions at his school to serve as opportunities for him to demonstrate these passions. When Ben shared his enthusiasm for creating puns, he pointed out that there were no curricular opportunities to explore that either.

Melea described not being able to read as much as she would like because of her academic schedule. Thomas read with his friends and his mother but did not describe any times where reading in school was an opportunity. Zeely described practicing her passion

for languages on the school television morning show, but she did not describe any time during school that she was studying languages.

Identity. One of the initial research questions prior to gathering the data for this study was about participants' identities and whether their experiences at school were congruent with those identities. This question was not appropriate for this study, mainly because the participants were still in the early stages of developing their cultural and ethnic identities. A few students explicitly shared experiences regarding their ethnicity as a part of who they were. Thomas drew one half of his body on the ABI as the two main characters from *Black Panther*, and he shared talking about the importance of the film for representation of Black characters with his step-father. Rose colored her skin on the ABI brown to match how she looked. She also spoke about multiple incidents of being Black and achieving as a straight-A student. Vivi also had peers asking her questions about her ethnicity on a regular basis. She expressed she did not really think about it, and when I asked if there were other Hispanic students in her academic classes, she was surprised to realize that she was the only one. As the participants get older, their identities will change, and their experiences in school, positive or negative, will have a direct impact (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], 2010).

Relationships

AMLE (2010) asserts that for a student to have a successful time in school, positive human relationships are vital. Every participant in this study talked about relationships with peers, friends, and school personnel as elements of their lived experiences. Every participant referenced their mother as the family member with the most direct connection to their achievement and motivation. Several participants

described peers who were their friends and talked about how they chose their friends. The participants also referenced peers who were “popular” and “bad” (all 12 mentioned the terms popular and bad when referencing peers), but occasionally *popular* also meant *bad*. Most participants also referenced a teacher, administrator, counselor, coach, or other school personnel who had a daily impact on their school experience. Some students described an adult at school who served as an advocate or safe person to be with during the school day. Relationships are a major part of school experiences, especially if students are to feel valued and cared for (AMLE, 2010).

Peers. The participants had positive and negative experiences with peers. Rose and Jasmine shared getting frustrated with their peers when they would not listen to the teacher or when they were at whole-school events (Jasmine, July 20, 2018). Junior talked about the importance of helping his peers when they needed help, like when they dropped their belongings in the hall, or helping clean up after lunch. Melea, Rose, Sarah, and Zeely all talked about reaching out to peers who were new to their schools, especially during lunch or other whole-school events where being the *new kid* can be daunting (Craft, 2019).

Robert was the only participant who had experience with homeschooling, and one of the reasons he returned to traditional school was that he missed the face-to-face relationships. He also learned that those relationships could also be a distraction to the learning experience. Melissa also found her peers’ behavior distraction and used the term *ghetto* to describe them (Melissa, July 24, 2018). When choosing friends, most participants looked for peers with similar values in academic achievement, extra-curricular interests, and kindness. Peer relationships often have a direct connection to a

student's sense of belongingness at a school; both Vivi and Rose had experiences where they felt like outcasts or did not belong.

Family. When sharing their lived experiences, participants described their families as a major part of their school experiences. Academic achievement and grade expectations were established by their parents. Most participants knew what grades and scores their parents expected and were upset if they did not accomplish that.

I do my work no matter what. I'm gonna get my work done, because school is important to me. And school's gonna get me everywhere... like, my mom always tells me, cheering on somebody's sideline's not gonna get you in college.

(Jasmine, July 20, 2018)

Johnny excelled because he knew his mother overcame adversity and achieved more than most, so he aimed not to let her down. Johnny also had the family influence of relatives who were members of his school administration during the school day. Zeely and Junior also learned from their parents' overcoming adversity and referenced them as inspirations to their academic achievement. Vivi was able to call upon her father when she was being bullied at school; and Thomas's mother, grandmother, and aunt all got involved when a teacher insulted Thomas's upbringing.

School personnel. Just as Johnny thrived because of a family member's advocacy for him in school, many of the other participants also had champions in school personnel. Johnny felt valued when he made the winning touchdown for the school football team, "everybody was dabbin' me up and they were, 'Oh, yeah, good job.' Even the principal and the assistant principal and the security guards did" (Johnny, July 23, 2018). Junior had a teacher who recognized his potential, and a simple change of seating allowed for

him to thrive. Vivi organized her entire school experience around her orchestra class, and the teacher demonstrated a commitment and appreciation of having her as a student. Thomas and Sarah were both able to exercise their creativity when completing projects for academic classes. Thomas went above and beyond the expectation and built a working model of a motorized cactus for his science class. Sarah used her artistic skills to create a magazine for her English class because she did not like the aesthetics of the computer-generated version.

Participants were impacted by how school personnel interacted with their peers as well. School personnel that fostered relationships beyond the traditional classroom had a lasting impact on the students' sense of belonging and connectedness with the school. Ben was very aware of the change in behavior when one principal left and another joined the school administration team.

I saw her [current principal] every now and then, like when it comes to like special events and stuff. But compared to last year, like our principal. He was like, like he knew like the kids by name. Even the good kids 'cause usually the teachers, I meant um the staff, like the big people from the school don't even know the good kids' names 'cause they never do anything wrong. Which doesn't make sense, 'cause like that's the names you should know because that's the ones that are actually trying to make the school better. (Ben, July 25, 2018)

Ben's observance of school administrators knowing the *good kids' names* demonstrated his insightfulness of the role of school personnel relationships on the culture of the school. Melissa described how her teacher changed her behavior after results from a standardized test were reported, the teacher who was "never really nice to me, but then

like when I got the highest score I was all the sudden her favorite” (Melissa, July 24, 2018). The participants, overall, responded to positive sustained relationships with school personnel. They identified them as role models, counselors, supportive, and advocates for their academic well-being.

Summary

The above thematic structures reiterated what similar research on school-based factors that impact students’ experiences (Vega et al., 2012). In addition to there being a lack of student voice in research about school experience, there is a lack of consideration of how the different factors of context, curricular, developmental, and relationships intersect for the UHA middle school experience. High-ability culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students bring a rich background of resilience, ambition, dedication, and unique knowledge that focusing on a single identity such as giftedness alone contributes to an incomplete way of serving these students.

This study has demonstrated that the multiple levels of factors that contribute to a UHA individual’s daily experience in school can no longer be parsed out into separate categories such as context, curricular, developmental, and relationships alone (Núñez, 2014). I recommend that future educational approaches to utilize an intersectional lens of addressing context, curriculum, developmental, and relationships in the school setting to best support UHA students. Intersectionality has been applied to fields such as nursing, social work, and special education. To illustrate this concept based on the interviews and stories shared by the participants of this study I have created an emergent model of this study’s findings (see Figure 11; Appendix S)

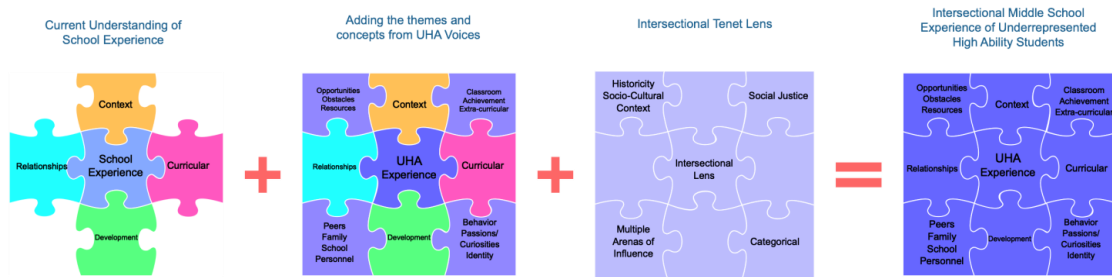


Figure 11. Intersectional middle school experience of underrepresented high-ability students

The *Intersectional Middle School Experiences of Underrepresented High-Ability Students* model uses a puzzle as a metaphor for how educational experiences are addressed in current research and application (see Figure 11). The first shape shows an incomplete puzzle representing how research may be conducted in school context, curricular choices, development, and relationships in isolation. The second shape is where the thematic sub-concepts are added. This step uses the interconnecting pieces of the puzzle to illustrate how each theme is connected to the next (see Appendix S for larger version). The third shape is the addition of the intersectional lens. The lens includes a modified version of the Núñez (2014) and Anthias (2012) multilevel intersectionality model:

- Context—Opportunities, Obstacles, and Resources— lends itself to the concepts of Historicity and Socio-Cultural Context which addresses the contextual elements attached to each school;
- Curricular— Classroom, Achievement, and Extra-Curricular— intersectionality has a social justice purpose, emancipatory and culturally sustaining pedagogy should be applied in the curricular aspects of the UHA experience;

- Developmental— Passions/curiosities, Identities, and Behavioral—
categorical concepts of intersectionality where the identity categories are understood as being socially constructed. They intersect, oppress, and overlap the developmental process of identity and interests:
- Relationships— Peers, Family, and School Personnel— Multiple areas of influence, as Núñez cited Anthias “these domains include (a) organizational (e.g., positions in structures of society such as work, family, and education), (b) representational (e.g., discursive processes), (c) intersubjective (e.g., relationships between individuals and members of groups), and (d) experiential (e.g., narrative sense making)” (2014; p. 88).

The UHA experience in school requires an intersectional approach to education where the students’ identities, values, prior knowledge, human connections, and passions are a part of the whole experience. In chapter 5, I will explain further how this study reiterates the need to approach education for UHA middle school students with an intersectional lens to ensure that they continue on a path to greatness through high school and beyond; and the implications for school and policy decision making, and suggestions for teacher training.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to learn about how students who are members of historically underrepresented groups and high-ability (UHA) describe and experience middle school. Using phenomenology as the research approach the study, I used semi-structured interviews and arts-based inquiry (ABI) to understand how 12 rising eighth and ninth graders experienced middle school. Through an analysis of their responses, I aimed to answer the overarching research question of “How do underrepresented high-ability (UHA) middle school students describe and experience middle school?”

The voice of middle school students is surprisingly absent from scholarly work on the school experience. To contribute to the scholarly research, this study utilized phenomenology as the method to center student-described experiences at school and to contribute an additional perspective on the phenomenon of being UHA in middle school. I followed a process recommended by Moustakas (1994), where I identified meaning units, clarified emergent concepts and ideas, clustered ideas into larger themes, composed textural descriptions of each participant’s experience, and finally identified the lived experience of UHA middle school students. In this chapter, I will expand on and discuss the findings, suggest the application of an intersectional lens, implications for stakeholders, limitations, and provide recommendations for future research.

Discussion

I will discuss the findings of the study within the general themes of context, curricular, developmental, and relationships. I will connect the themes to the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and provide specific examples from the participants. Because of the interconnected way the participants described their experiences, many of the themes overlap, and this is one of the reasons an intersectional lens may be appropriate when providing support for UHA students in school.

Context

This study considered the experiences of UHA students within the context of school. Many state-wide and district-wide policies impact in-school experiences. These policies may include school configuration, tracking, and availability of extra-curricular resources (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). The issues that the 12 participants discussed that were related to context were: school choice, configuration, segregation, and tracking.

Hamilton et al. (2018) pointed out that the relationship between a school's socio-economic status and academic achievement will influence student achievement. Hamilton et al. suggest that the reasons for this include lower expectations, peer conduct, and tedious curriculum. Although the participants did not explicitly mention poverty, they did describe the impact of teacher expectations, engaging coursework, and their peer's behavior on their school experience. If the SES of a school impacts the opportunity for achievement, then the participants' descriptions align with this finding, and it makes it especially extraordinary that they continue to achieve.

Junior, Melea, Melissa, and Zeely all referenced the negative aspects of the neighborhoods in which their schools existed. This reiterated the findings that Vega et al.

(2012) described when the high school aged participants discussed the issues of feeling safe in the school and the neighborhood. Zeely was able to explore the neighborhood of her school through the cross-country running club she participated in. This dispelled any negative perceptions she may have had about the neighborhood. Melea pointed out that the closest high school to her school was persistently on “lock down” due to issues of the neighborhood coming into the school. Junior expressed his mother’s decision to send him to one middle school over another because of information she had heard word of mouth about the safety of the schools. Melissa described the negative conduct and behavior of her school peers as a reflection of the neighborhood.

In spite of ability, acceleration and access to high school credit opportunities was limited depending on the context of the school. Most participants discussed access to challenging coursework in honors classes or high school credit courses. Specific access to advanced coursework was limited to math or English courses. Jacobs and Eckert (2017) suggest a number of curricular models that serve students within the academic contexts. Programs like International Baccalaureate, honors or advanced classes, subject-specific acceleration, and special schools are a few of the ways that high-ability students can be served with appropriate coursework, but access to these is limited based on contextual settings. Five of the participants were able to attend middle schools with special school models.

Challenges come with the special school model, especially when applied as a partial magnet or when honors classes are offered within the program. Tyson (2011) points out that when there are classes perceived as more advanced, the potential is to further divisions between student groups. Rose and Vivi attended a school with a partial

magnet model, and the courses for advanced or high-ability students were called “Pre-med.” The courses for the non-academically advanced classes did not have a specific name. In this case, even the name choice appeared to support additional division between high-ability and regular students. Vivi and Rose experienced solo-status at their magnet schools, making them vulnerable to potential identity and academic threat as a result of persistent microaggressions regarding their ethnicity (Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran, & Borman, 2014). Tyson (2011) reiterated that when access to advanced and gifted curriculum, it is important to consider the cultural representation within the classroom, Otherwise stereotypes and animosity may be fostered in the more challenging courses. Rose pointed this out when sharing her experiences of her peers not believing her straight A status, and Vivi was constantly being questioned about her ethnicity and linguistic ability.

Although the students did not reference “acting White” when discussing academic achievement and students of color, Melea mentioned that other schools perceived her school as “stuck-up” because of its focus on academics (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). It is possible that the concept of “stuck-up” could be similar to the “acting white” epithet. Rose theorized that her Black peers were not used to seeing other Black students achieve, which would align with the assertions that representation matters in advanced courses (Tyson, 2011). These experiences reiterate that although participants may have received some critiques from their peers, none felt compelled to disengage from their academic achievement (Urrieta, 2005).

Jacobs and Eckert (2017) stress that measures of quality for programs that support high-ability children in middle school should include plans for addressing issues of

stereotype threat and identity development. The findings in this study show that (a) students who are high-ability may not have access to appropriate challenging coursework, and (b) that some do not have or are not aware of any school-based support mitigating the impact of solo-status and stereotype threat on achievement.

Curricular

Schools that are identified as Title I are directed to focus on low-performing and failing risk students. This raises the question: “What about the high-ability students?” Vivi and Melissa described separate incidents where they did not understand or master concepts, and as a result they were perceived as less capable and ridiculed in front their peers by their teachers. Educators who work with students need to understand (a) what high-ability looks like in CLED students, (b) that there is not one type of giftedness, and (c) that myths of being high-ability persist (Cross, 2018). Asking questions or not immediately mastering a new topic is not an indication of ability.

Additionally, educators need to understand the difference between rigor and busywork (Hines et al., 2017). In those cases, many of the educators had not been properly trained in understanding what rigor looks like for high-ability students. The incident that Thomas described where the teacher assigned an overabundance of work, and he figured out a way to cheat, is an example of the high-ability student seeking a way to complete the assignment that he perceived as a waste of time. This resulted in his also using the *coping mechanism* of humor (Cross, 2018) to fill the time in class, which then led to his teacher’s making a comment to his mother that offended her. The teacher lacked cultural competence and an understanding of the importance of the parent’s role in the student’s academic achievement (J. L. Davis, 2010; Garn et al., 2010; Olszewski-

Kubilius, 2018). Hines et al. (2017) reiterate the need to provide additional training for culturally responsive pedagogy as a way to start to consider why underrepresentation continues. Hines et al. (2017) explicitly call for more equity-minded educators in the field of gifted education in Title I schools.

Most of the participants framed their understanding of being smart and a good student with grades and test scores. Many of the participants were already demonstrating a sense of ownership and autonomy for their education, but they would benefit from more curriculum that was designed with critical thinking skills and creativity in mind. Two participants, Sarah and Thomas, shared examples of curricular opportunities that they perceived as challenging and matching their abilities (Wiggin, 2008). Ben described unique learning opportunities he had in his GATE class. The other participants did not describe innovative learning opportunities, but were primarily focused on excelling in their extra-curricular activities and in their grades. Junior made a point of stating that he will participate in afterschool activities if they are for academic achievement, but not for anything else. He may consider non-academic extra-curricular opportunities in high school, though.

Teacher expectations positively impacted the participants in this study. Thomas specifically referenced being pushed by a teacher to achieve. I believe they also impacted the students not identified as high-ability. For example, many of the participants described peers who were “bad,” and equated bad with not smart. Participants considered the bad behavior more of an annoyance and distraction than being specifically targeted because of their ability as discussed by Mickleson and Velasco (2006). Robert shared that the distraction of his peers was significant enough to impact his academic performance.

Jasmine suggested that the attention-seeking behavior of her peers was due to a lack of attention elsewhere. Teachers of all students need opportunities to address these perceptions and constantly improve their pedagogical practice (J. K. Allen, 2017; Swanson, 2016). Moving teacher training and educational practice to an assets-based model grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy would be beneficial for school-wide change (Kennedy, Brinegar, Hurd, & Harrison, 2016).

Developmental

Participants shared stories of getting good grades and good test scores, and of the fallout if they dropped (e.g., punishment from parents, loss of access to technology). When I unintentionally gained access to a few of the participants' report cards, I found that even though they reported having As and Bs, a few of them had Cs and Ds. This could have been a reflection of response bias. However, it is important to know that although many of the participants wanted to go to a competitive or highly selective college after high school, it was unclear if they knew what was required to accomplish this.

Many participants were using their wait time and free time to explore and grow their own passions. Not a single participant mentioned boredom as a part of their experience in school, which is contrary to current assertions regarding early adolescents in school (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). They shared examples of autonomous learning that happened in school while waiting for their peers to complete their work, or after school at home. Access to the internet through their phone or electronic device allowed for students like Ben and Zeely to explore concepts and theories, and to learn new skills. In addition to independent learning, most participants used their wait time to read or do other quiet

tasks. Thomas, who did not enjoy waiting, had a teacher who would allow him and his friends to go to the library so they would not be disruptive to their peers who were still working. Melea also shared an example of a teacher who provided passes to go to another classroom to spend time while waiting. Thomas spoke of returning to the classroom when he was finished to get more assignments. Since most participants adhered to an externally established expectation of doing behaviors for the purpose of being rewarded, the students were still developing their autonomous behaviors.

Educators need to encourage UHA students' curiosity and developing academic identity. Melissa shared how a teacher had ridiculed her for asking questions the teacher perceived as "dumb" (Melissa, July 24, 2018). Jasmine and Rose were punished for interfering with their peers who were being disruptive class. They believed that their classmates did not have the same investment in education as they did, which made them angry and frustrated. Melissa called her peers "ghetto," using it as an adjective, which could be construed as using the term as a pejorative suggesting their socio-economic status or "imply a distinct form of inferiority that is connected to marginal group membership" (Richardson & Donley, 2018). Melissa struggled with interacting with peers who were not a part of her friend group. The use of this epithet could be a sign of a more significant perspective that would require further investigation.

Ben pointed out that his one of his school leaders never knew the names of high achievers at his school because the administrator's focus was always on those who misbehaved. This ties to the suggestion that Title I schools prioritize addressing failure as mandated by the Title I Program, and the success and well-being of the high-ability students is not on the administrators' radar (Hines et al., 2017). Robert even used the term

“radar” when he described how his administrator had noticed his name had not come up during his eighth-grade year, as he must have been “flying below the radar” (Robert, July 26, 2018). Most participants mentioned a specific grown-up at school who had a positive influence on their school experience: Vivi had her orchestra teacher; Thomas had his science teacher; Sarah had her field hockey coach; Junior had his mathematics instructor; Melea had her English teacher; and Zeely had the school resource officer all as champions. These participants flourished under the guidance of one or two school personnel.

The current model of advanced and gifted coursework in middle school is focused on the content areas of math and English. This can lead to the assumption that even though the students who are high-ability are being served through their coursework, the school may not need to have a specific teacher of the gifted to be an expert on the nature and needs of students with high abilities. Having an advocate for high-ability students could address the recommendation of having a plan or strategy to support the social and emotional needs of middle school students who are high-ability (Jacobs & Eckert, 2017). Although many of the participants connected their smartness or ability to grades or test scores, this does not accurately reflect the nature of giftedness or ability (Cross, 2018). Unfortunately, the service model of only serving high-ability students in math or English perpetuates this concept. What about the students who have gifts and talents that are in other domains? Additionally, if the priority of achievement is directed to math and English scores, there is limited opportunity for students who may not excel at math or English or who may be an English language learners (ELL) or with an exceptionality that interferes with math or English comprehension to move into the honors or advanced

courses (Hines et al., 2017). This may be another explanation for underrepresentation of twice-exceptional, ELL, or students with low-incident disabilities in gifted or advanced education (Lichtenstein & Lichtenstein, 2015). Junior, an ELL, was fortunate enough to have a teacher who was aware enough to move his seat so he could see, and the impact was that he was able to demonstrate his potential to achieve in math.

Relationships

The interviews for this study were designed to center UHA students' voices in their descriptions of school. For each participant, though, family members were a significant presence in their school experience. The participants' motivation, personal standards, and values were directly connected to a specific person in their life away from school. When students encountered challenges or adversity, they called upon lessons and experiences from their family members to guide them to handle the problem. Vivi's father supported her in addressing the issues she was being bullied for. Johnny used his own mother's personal challenges as rationale to maintain his level of achievement. Rose, Melea, and Jasmine each spoke of their mother's expectations and the consequences for not reaching these. Thomas spoke highly of his sister, who was only a year ahead of him, and was looking forward to being in the same high school with her. Junior reminded himself that the experience of middle school was temporary, so the upsetting or challenging times would be over soon. Families are an essential part of the UHA school experience. Engaging parents and families in the school experience would only strengthen the experiences of the UHA student.

The relationships between educators and students has been demonstrated as a strong predictor for student success (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). The sense of belongingness

is especially influenced by the actions educators take to foster positive and supportive relationships with their students. Melea described multiple educators at her school that she assigned more intimate roles to, mother and grandmother. Vivi described how her orchestra teacher made her feel appreciated when she offered to try to convince her father to not move from their current community. Thomas even took an opportunity during the interview to speak directly to the recording device to recommend other middle school students to talk with their teachers and take their advice. He had benefited from a teacher sharing her experiences with solo-status during college as a model to continue to persevere academically.

Participants had diverse experiences with their peers, this reiterated the findings of Vega et al. (2012) and Hamilton et al. (2018). Rose and Jasmine described being frustrated with peers who did not have the same commitment to academic achievement. They believed that the more disruptive a student was, the less they cared about their academic achievement. Ben talked specifically about how his class environment would change when a disruptive student was subject to exclusionary discipline. Ben expressed how much he enjoyed being in class with other high-ability students, this duplicated the findings that Kitsantas et al. (2017) found about high ability students appreciated ability grouping. Additionally, Ben did not think suspension as a discipline tool worked because the misbehaving student would always return and do the same thing. Johnny talked about his role in advising a friend who was falling behind and getting in trouble. Shim et al. (2016) found that guidance from peers may be less judgmental when describing why

students seek peer support. Zeely and Junior described having a supportive, and diverse friend group.

Application of Intersectional Lens

The above findings reiterated the concept that the UHA middle school experience is one that is multifaceted and would benefit from approaching future research, curriculum development, pedagogy, and school change from an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality allows for a framework to consider educational experiences with a consideration of how race, gender, social class, and sexuality, as well as context, arenas of influence, and pedagogy can impact the learning opportunities of students. For the participants in this study, it was apparent that their experiences had multiple intersecting examples (Jones & Wijeyesinghe, 2011). To remind the reader, below is the emergent model from the study (see Figure 12; Appendix S).

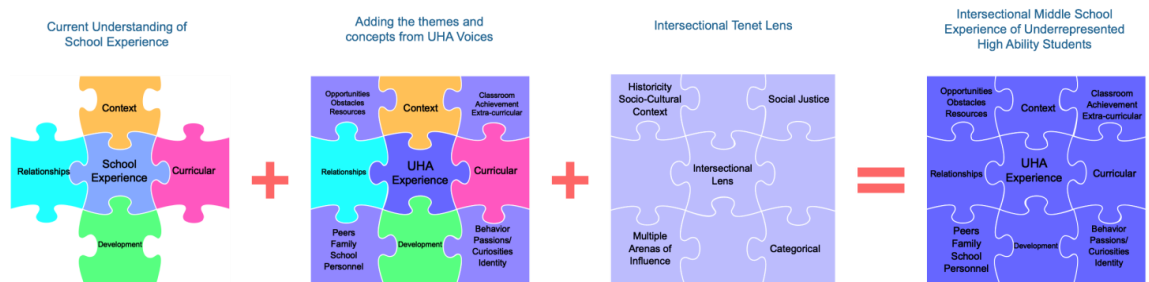


Figure 12. Intersectional middle school experience of underrepresented high-ability students

The first puzzle with missing pieces represents the current model of how research on and practice of educating UHA students are compartmentalized. Much of this may come from ease, access, and opportunity of scholarly interests of academics. However, the model misses specific elements that are vital to UHA students’ experience (the purple corner pieces added in the second puzzle). To connect these factors with context, curricular, developmental, and relationship research in education, I recommend adding a

lens of intersectionality (third puzzle image) to eventually equal a whole picture of what it is like to be UHA and in middle school.

Intersectionality as a methodological lens arose from Black feminist thought to address how categorical differences impact individual's experiences differently based on the multiple levels of identity (Crenshaw, 1991; Núñez, 2014). This model suggests using intersectionality as a lens to consider the complex categorical relationships and how they may frame or impact culturally diverse middle school students' lived experiences in school. To honor the UHA student's experience while considering the multiple levels of identity, the contextual and social influences, and the historical influences that may contribute to the lived experience (Anthias, 2012; McCall, 2005; Núñez, 2014).

Núñez (2014) drew upon Anthias (2012) to provide a model that moves beyond the categorical levels of identity that influence lived experiences, but considers the influence of context, time, and relationships on an educational experience. This model is appropriate as an lens for addressing the school experience of UHA students as an encompassing framework that does not focus on any single category but follows the axiology that lived experience is framed by multiple levels of categories, relationships, and structures.

Intersectionality in education allows researchers and educators to consider students' identities together, as opposed to a single identity that may have more power or overshadow the whole individual. For instance, having high-abilities is considered a privilege with power in school (access to more opportunities, resources, courses); but coming from poverty may be considered a categorical identity with weaker positioning within a hierarchal model of identities. This can also be considered a criticism of the lens

of intersectionality. Some categorical identities may be overlooked or not considered when applying an intersectionality. Additionally, this study aimed to consider the assets that the participants brought to their schooling experience, intersectionality often focuses on power dynamics which requires a consideration of deficits. I recommend that when considering categories, we should consider what assets come from disadvantaged positions. For instance, a small number of scholars have dedicated their research to considering the assets or strengths that students from contexts that are considered adversarial bring with them to achieve in school (Q. Allen, 2015; D. J. Carter, 2008; Hébert, 2018; Kitano & Lewis, 2005; Neihart, 2001; Reis et al., 2004; Williams & Portman, 2004).

Another way to consider assets and strengths can be through considering cultural capital. Yosso (2006) recommended the epistemology of considering People of Color to change within the context of inequality; specifically when considering what type of knowledge has power in a hierarchical society. Schools and educational systems have typically valued the epistemology of middle and upper-class White communities when considering academic achievement. Unfortunately, by doing this, the assets and strengths of communities that are outside of middle and upper-class White communities are considered less than or not valued. Based on the findings of this study, I recommend considering the assets, strengths, and capital that UHA students bring with them into the school context.

For the participants in this study, being high-ability often carried opportunities of power and privilege in their school contexts. Examples included access to special spaces in the school and participation in extra-curricular, awards, and learning opportunities.

However, because of issues of poverty, contextual resources, race, and gender, as well as the individual students' behaviors, there were incidents that overshadowed or eliminated the privilege that may come with being *smart*. The varied access to advanced and high school credit courses, presumption of conduct, and lack of educational advocacy resulted in incidents that unnecessarily interfered with some of the students' learning experiences. Anthias (2012) extended the original Collins (1990) and Crenshaw (1991) model that focused on social categories such as gender, race, and the conflict of privilege, by adding specific elements that contribute to experiences such as contextual and institutional structures. Núñez (2014) took the Anthias model and applied it to the experience of Hispanic and Latinx students in college. This *multilevel model of intersectionality* aligns with the experiences of UHA middle school students (see Figure 13).

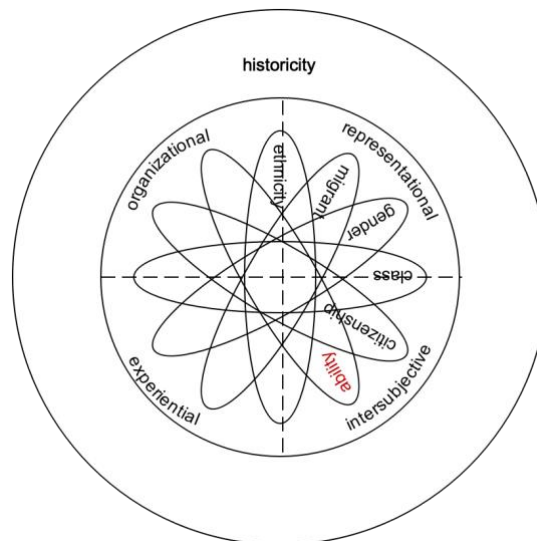


Figure 13. Multilevel model of intersectionality. Adapted from “Employing Multilevel Intersectionality in Educational Research: Latino Identities, Contexts, and College Access,” by A. Núñez, 2014, *Educational Researcher*, 43, p. 87.

In Núñez's (2014) model the categorical elements of identity are centered. I have added “ability” in red to illustrate the inclusion of one of the privileges of my participants. This center model aligns with the theme of *Developmental* from the UHA experience puzzle

model. The next level in the Núñez model is the multiple arenas of influence, which aligns with the theme of *Relationships* with the UHA experience puzzle model. Núñez's model finishes with historicity, describing the contexts and systems that may contribute to issues of equity. I applied this model and added *Curricular*, which includes the goal of grounding education and instruction in social justice with emancipatory purposes.

- Context (opportunities, obstacles, resources): This lends itself to the concepts of historicity and socio-cultural context which addresses the contextual elements attached to each school.
- Curricular (classroom, achievement, extra-curricular): Intersectionality has a social justice purpose; emancipatory and culturally sustaining pedagogy should be applied in the curricular aspects of the UHA experience.
- Developmental (passions/curiosities, identities, behavioral): Categorical concepts of intersectionality—where the identity categories are understood as being socially constructed—intersect, oppress, and overlap the developmental process of identity and interests.
- Relationships (peers, family, school personnel): Multiple areas of influence, including “(a) organizational (e.g., positions in structures of society such as work, family, and education), (b) representational (e.g., discursive processes), (c) intersubjective (e.g., relationships between individuals and members of groups), and (d) experiential (e.g., narrative sense making)” (Anthias, 2012, p. 12).

This model is evolving and can contribute to future approaches to research on UHA middle school experiences. I suggest we use this approach to address teacher training,

curricular design, policy analysis, and as a tool to consider how systems may prevent UHA middle school students from having the same opportunities as their more represented (i.e., wealthier, Whiter) peers in gifted education.

Limitations

The first limitation regarding this study was my role as researcher. To minimize this influence, I attempted to bracket my understanding of the experience of UHA students and my own experience as a teacher (see Appendix A). This knowledge has been nurtured and developed through my being a child of progressive educators, and in the various contexts and communities in which I have taught. My extensive experience in urban, suburban, and rural CLED communities has provided me with a catalogue of experiences that cannot be transferred to other researchers. This includes an ability to have rapport and ease with listening to early adolescents. Bracketing my experiences was necessary to account for the heavy influence of these experiences, but still proved challenging, especially when drawing conclusions about the described experiences (see Appendix A).

The access to specific participants was enabled by my academic connection to the institution hosting the children for the camp. The participants' families had already provided consent for research as a part of participating with the camp, and this made for ease of connecting with the families and getting permission to communicate with the students. Conducting research through the system of school districts is often complicated and challenging to navigate due to the school systems' intent to protect the students and families that they serve. With that said, it is was unique position and opportunity to have

access to a large population that all fit the identifying criteria to be considered typical cases.

As a qualitative study, using interviews as the primary source of data limited the number of participants in my sample. I had a volunteer pool of nearly 60 potential participants. The methodology of phenomenology recommends for 12-16 participant pool, so I was able to be very deliberate with my selection process. The participants came from different contexts, but all were from the same 80-mile radius of the hosting college in the mid-Atlantic region. It is unclear how students from other areas may have described their experiences, since context was such a major influence on the participants' experience. Generalizing their experiences for all UHA middle school students would be inaccurate. Additionally, even though the participants were not my students, there was always a potential of responder bias where the participant gave me information they thought I wanted to hear or a perceived power differential (Fan et al., 2006; Krumpal, 2013). The participants in this study were very forthcoming with their experiences and did not appear to share stories or experiences that were for any other purpose than sharing their stories.

Implications

In this section I will discuss the implications of what the above findings for the following stakeholders: parents and families, educators, policy makers, and researchers.

Parents and Families

The participants of this study described their parents and families as a part of their school experience. Even if the parents and families were not an active part of the school day, their expectations and values were instilled in the participants and how they

performed in school. The middle grades are a drastic time of change, and depending on how families address the successes as well as the turmoil students experience will determine how the young adolescents will engage in seeking out family during high school and beyond (AMLE, 2010). Vivi's father demonstrated empathy and compassion when Vivi was being bullied about her appearance. Instead of dismissing the experience as "tough times" he was willing to pursue ways to make her middle school experience a little bit easier. Johnny's mother shared stories of the challenges that she had as a teen, and Johnny took them as cautionary tales to inform his behavior and decision making. Conversely, Ben's mother did not intervene when he was placed in the less challenging non-honors class. Ben would have benefited from an advocate at the school level who understood the academic needs of a high-ability student. Since Ben was a good student, it may be assumed that his mother did not interfere because he was excelling and was well behaved.

Unfortunately, there is a deficit-based false narrative about parents of students in Title I schools (Cooper, 2009). I feel the information in this study is important for parents and families to know how to best support their student, especially during a time when adolescents start to turn to their peers first for support and answered questions. Parents and families are a significant part of the stakeholder group dedicated to supporting early adolescent development and transition (AMLE, 2010). This is especially relevant if parents and families are concerned about the academic achievement of their middle school students. To have an impactful interdisciplinary team for students, parents and families are vital for improving academic achievement and success (AMLE, 2010). Based on what the participants shared, the parents and families instilled strong models of

resiliency and goal orientation and maintained their high expectations throughout all aspects of their student's life.

Educators

Since this study was centered in the context of middle school, the implications for educators are abundant. First, educators and school personnel need on-going and accurate training in culturally sustaining pedagogy. Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) is a model that extends the approaches established by Ladson-Billings's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, to include the practice of supporting and valuing the "multiethnic and multilingual present and future" (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Paris (2012) explained that CSP seeks to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. I recommend this approach because it provides space for the students' own identities, experiences, and arenas of influence to be a part of the school experience. The participants benefited greatly from educators and school personnel who nurtured relationships beyond the traditional teacher-student model. Some participants shared examples of educators who shared specific experiences that could inform the students about strategies to navigate their educational journey as a UHA students.

CSP defines the direct purpose of education as a practice to sustain the linguistic and cultural diversity of a democratic society. The current demographic changes and political climate necessitates an explicit model to assert that we are teaching a pluralistic population of young people with different backgrounds, experiences, and capabilities. This specific approach would fit within the model I am suggesting, especially when considering the contextual, curricular, developmental, and relationship influences of the

model. Intersectional approaches call for the purpose of teaching and learning to be grounded in social justice, and using CSP will accomplish this. Teacher training programs should address the process of instilling family and parental partnerships as a significant part of the school experience. Student achievement has been found to improve when families and parents were involved properly (Cooper, 2009; J. L. Davis, 2010; Garn et al., 2010; Lawson, 2003; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2018).

Educators need a greater understanding of differentiation. If school systems continue to allow financial constraints to dictate their curricular and policy choices, it is important that educators are best prepared to work in this situation. Participants shared how they navigated waiting for their peers to finish their school work, but a few found the wait time an opportunity to entertain their peers. UHA students need opportunities to demonstrate their learning beyond the grade and score model and have opportunities to expand their interests and skills beyond the grade level standards. Grade- and score-driven educational approaches follow the banking model that Paolo Freire (1993) used to illustrate how an education system can be emancipatory or oppressive. Most of the participants in this study spoke about liking school and liking learning, so three questions are raised:

1. How long can grades maintain a passion for learning?
2. Should educational approaches consider and practice pedagogy that acknowledges high-ability children may have already mastered the foundational concepts often assessed by standardized tests?
3. How can these children be further challenged in their learning in settings where they are already achieving beyond their peers?

Although developmentally the participants in this study were at the early stages of their identity development, it is important to maintain their achievement orientation regarding their academic trajectory. Certain systemic models have already been found to alienate and further disenfranchise students of color from achievement through low expectations and a lack of representation in the context, content, curriculum, and in school leadership. Valuing and engaging the student's intersectional identities as a part of their learning process will be one way to accomplish this.

Policymakers

Policymakers need to consider whether and how opportunities are being distributed equitably across districts and learning communities. This consideration could address the contextual issues of obstacles and resources that the participants shared. External examination of school policies that serve CLED communities need to be conducted to determine whether UHA students are getting the same access as their more affluent and white peers more commonly identified as gifted. As I mentioned earlier, high-ability students appear to be forgotten within schools identified as Title I. I recommend considering how students at all levels can benefit from federally mandated supports.

In other nations, such as Australia, student voice and student experiences are a part of the assessment of and improvement of schools (e.g., Cook-Sather, 2006, 2014; McLaren, 2014; Scanlon, 2012; Theissen, 2007). This is not currently a common practice in the United States. Cook-Sather (2006) asserts that to understand what is and is not working in schools, educators must listen and talk to the students who are in the classrooms. The participants in this study were able to communicate what they perceived

as successful teaching. They were also able to share what was not working in the school. Policymakers and educational leaders need to include the perspectives of these important and insightful stakeholders.

Implications for Future Research

This study aimed to understand the experience of UHA middle school students in school using a phenomenological research approach. The 12 participants shared their stories and experiences as an opportunity for a peek into the experience. One potential next step in this current study is to conduct a longitudinal follow-up with the participants to learn about their experiences in high school, and potentially beyond. Additional methodological options for future research include conducting specific case studies within the context of the middle school with the same question of trying to learn about the student's experiences in school while being UHA. Using the case study model would allow further inquiry into the specific context of a middle school, and potentially bring the voices of the educators that serve UHA students.

The use of ABI and specific questioning approach to gather data for this study needs additional exploration. I was able to learn about the participants' lived experiences in school without directly asking them. The interview process was through an identity-centered process, where the participants introduced the topics and concepts. In previous studies, researchers had introduced terms like "acting white" or "boredom" to their student participants through questions, and the data reflected the students' responses using these terms (Henfield et al., 2008). None of the participants in this study used the terms "acting white" or "boredom" to describe their experiences in school. This is especially significant since many studies claim that students in the middle grades who are

high-ability suffer from boredom (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). This approach needs to be further explored, especially when considering how gathering research whether qualitative or quantitative are often reflections of the specific word choice or terms the researcher introduces to the inquiry.

My role as an advocate for UHA students would lend itself to conducting participatory research with students regarding their experiences in school and opportunities for facilitating development of critical consciousness that D. J. Carter (2008) calls for in Critical Race Achievement Ideology (CRAI) theory. D. J. Carter's CRAI model focused on the experiences of high-achieving Black high school students. The findings in this study lend to the consideration: How can this model be applied within the middle school context with appropriate developmental adjustments? Can this model be applied using an intersectional lens to allow for other historically underrepresented or oppressed groups within the school context? The student voice, perspective, and experience need to be more of a presence in scholarly educational research. Students' experiences and perceptions of their school experience could potentially contribute to address much of what school reform are attempting to accomplish. Conducting school reform and change without consulting the individuals who are directly impacted by the changes is ignoring the stakeholder role students have.

I recommend dedicating more research reflecting an assets-based approach when considering the experience of UHA students. Kitano and Lewis (2005) asserted that there needs to be more studies dedicated to the connection between intelligence and ability with resilience for adolescents. Resilience is a characteristic found in youth that are often in challenging or oppressive contexts. Resilience needs further examination within

communities considered disadvantaged. Angela Duckworth's (2016) concept of grit has been celebrated when encouraging academic achievement. However, it has also been criticized for lacking the consideration of how systemic oppression and racism impacts students coping skills. Grit ignores the resiliency that oppressed students already bring with them to the school context (Ris, 2015). This is an opportunity for scholars to consider the *actual* strengths and assets that students from adverse situations or contexts have already developed before entering the school building. Educational scholars need to consider how schooling can embrace the strengths and assets students already bring when they enter the school context.

Criticism of the term *gifted* and the perpetuation of education as property has dominated scholarly discussions on issues of representation. Much of this comes from continuous use of models, assessments, and resources that no longer reflect the changes in communities. Research in gifted education that considers the experience of UHA students often focuses on underrepresentation, undernomination, and underachievement. It is time that scholars start focusing on the assets that UHA students bring to school. Scholarship in UHA students has focused on under-representation, -nomination, and achievement for decades with little change. Focusing research on successful assets-based models of UHA student representation and achievement might bring this population into the light instead of being under a fog of deficit-based research.

Conclusion

This study gave participants an opportunity to share their experiences in school. The UHA students in this study were active participants in their education and had a commitment to excellence that is not often attributed to young adolescents. The

participants in this study aimed to go to competitive colleges and become professionals in a number of fields. Unfortunately, these goals and achievements were not the focus of how CLED students are represented in public media. Viral videos and pictures of CLED students getting accepted to competitive colleges are increasingly becoming more present on social media. I look forward to the day that these videos are not presented as the exceptions, but are so common, that they are no longer necessary. The experiences of my participants should illustrate that there are great accomplishments in places that are often perceived as “less than.” I am encouraged by the future these participants were working towards. As educational leaders, we need to work to make it easier and more common to see CLED children being represented as the leaders, scientists, explorers, and change agents of the future. The deficit narrative of CLED students is no longer relevant; it is time for scholarly work and educational settings to represent the greatness that is actually happening.

EPILOGUE

The purpose for the epilogue is that it provides me an opportunity to share my perspective and bring forward my understanding of the findings of this study in relation to my previous role as a teacher and advocate of the gifted, high-ability, high-potential, and historically underrepresented students in a Title I middle school. Moustakas's (1994) approach to phenomenology calls for the topic being researched to be important to the researcher. In this study's case, I worked for seven years as a teacher of the gifted at a Title I middle school where underrepresentation was an issue. Prior to teaching in a traditional classroom, I had worked for eight years as an education outreach artist for professional theater companies in and around Philadelphia and Ohio. I mention this because throughout the research process, I found myself reflecting on specific students and incidents where I had seen or experienced something similar. This made the bracketing process challenging.

When I started teaching at my first Title I middle school in South Carolina, I experienced multiple incidents where my colleagues did not believe there were high-ability children at the school. This was reiterated in the participants' shared experiences. One participant pointed out that he believed that school leaders dedicated their attention to the students who are misbehaving or not achieving instead of the "good kids." A few of the participants described being valued based on their academic achievement and their positive behavior. I believe in schools where the focus of leadership is on poor performance and failure, students who excel may not get the positive reinforcement they

need to feel like a part of the school community. I was fortunate enough to be in a setting that rewarded achievement and growth—in order to celebrate those who grew, not only the already well-performing high-ability students. This shift of focus to being goal-oriented was on the path to changing the culture of the school. Students would say things like, “it’s almost like it is cool to be smart” (personal communication, Spring 2011). Deficit-based practices and perceptions are pervasive and will impact the educational experiences of all students.

Learning opportunities and experiences for UHA students are largely dependent on contextual, curricular, developmental, and relationships within the school setting. This includes how resources are distributed by decisionmakers, if teachers are practicing culturally sustaining pedagogy, and how the setting of the school is designed to support the developmental and social-emotional needs of middle school students. Students come to school with an established set of achievement expectations, and I believe they must be taught the strategies for success to maintain a college and career trajectory (Alsubaie, 2015).

The participants of this study had an unyielding commitment to excellence and ownership of their future-selves. The participants in this study wanted to do well, they enjoyed school, and they needed to be in contexts that supported this. Supporting this commitment includes training teachers to have assets-based lenses to see their students. This also means engaging and including parents and families as a part of the interdisciplinary team that works supporting students to reach their potential. The participants in this study reiterated the scholarly research pointing out the importance of

parents and families in the lives and development of CLED students (J. L. Davis, 2010; Hébert, 2018; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2018).

Hébert (2018) asserted that UHA students benefited from educators recognizing the talents and potential in their students, and this includes recognizing the complex identities that students bring with them to the school. This is where an intersectional understanding of how students exist is an important lens to have as an educator. Students are not only their ability, or their ethnicity, or their academic performance; but they are the family they come from, the community in which they are raised, and the history that surrounds their development. This study affirmed my commitment to being a champion for UHA students. We must shift our views to seeing the greatness that already exists in our students that come from challenging or adversarial contexts; this includes our pedagogical, scholarly, and political approaches to education for historically underserved and underrepresented communities and populations.

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Appendix A

Researcher's Epoché

The lack of uniformity of the *epoché* in phenomenological research means that there are a variety of ways to approach the bracketing process. Tufford and Newman (2010) assert that Giorgi supports limiting bracketing to the analysis phase. Giorgi advocates a natural and engaging interview process take priority over reserving preconceptions. I will use a narrative approach to describe my experiences, values, and presumptions about the phenomenon being studied (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Here are some general assertions that I believe, and I need to be aware of in that they may influence the data gathering and analysis process:

- Access to gifted and talented opportunities and resources is hindered by implicit and explicit biases against culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLEDE) students.
- Racist and classist policies are foundational for how public schools have designed and carried out approaches and systems of education.
- Because of current trends and teacher training programs, middle schools are typically led by middle class white women, who may not have had enough experience or training to work with diverse and underserved communities.
- This lack of experience impacts how CLEDE students experience school, especially regarding policy and procedures that limit or provides access to equitable learning opportunities.
- Gifted, high-ability, and high-potential characteristics present themselves differently for different people based on their identities, the context, and the

opportunities afforded to them; and depends on who is defining the gifts, abilities, and potentials.

- Many youngsters do not get access to educational opportunities because of matters of convenience and cost as decided by school districts, and not based on serving the actual student or what is in the best interest for a community.
- There are educational leaders who would prefer to maintain a model that perpetuates white supremacy by limiting opportunities and experiences for CLED students based on arbitrary reasons.
- Education and the concept of giftedness can be considered property, just as “whiteness is property” (Harris, 1993; Mansfield, 2015).

Guiding question for this *epoché*: *How does the experience of being gifted or high-ability, being a member of a historically underrepresented group, and being a young adolescent in middle school present itself in my consciousness?* (Van Manen, 2014).

I was in second grade when I was tested for gifted and talented program in my home state. I remember riding to the school on a Saturday where the testing was happening, sitting in a room with other students, and taking a test – that in my mind’s eye – as black and white puzzles. I recognized the puzzles, and found the whole experience *fun*, if taking a test can be fun. That is my first memory, but of that memory there are some clues to how my experience entering gifted education was drastically different than of the young adolescents I will be interviewing.

At the time, entrance into gifted education was optional, only available to families that could take their children to special testing sites or afford a private tester. So, my

reflective self is keenly aware of the privilege that I was afforded merely to be identified as *gifted*. I presume that many, if not all of my participants will have had a drastically different experience being identified or possibly not being identified as gifted. Both of my brothers had to take the test twice, once in a room with other students, and the second time alone with a private school psychologist. They had not been as familiar with the puzzles and pattern recognition questions that I had. The reason was, my mother would study with me for her School Psychologist certification, and practice giving psychometric tests that involved manipulating blocks and identifying patterns. This is another testament to the drastically different journey into gifted education that I had versus what my participants will have. The question occurs to me: was it my privilege that got me into a gifted label or was it my own ability?

I decided to study the experiences in middle school, for multiple reasons: (1) I was a middle school teacher for over ten years, (2) there is a gap in the literature including the voices of young adolescents and their lived experiences, and (3) I had a positive experience in middle school (which is unusual for many during that tumultuous time of change). I am not a member of a historically underrepresented group in gifted education or advanced coursework. I did have the privilege to go to a magnet school with high-ability children from all over my school district for elementary and middle school. The school district made an effort of have the school be a *true* microcosm of the communities it served. This meant that I went to school with students who were ethnically, socio-economically, and culturally different than myself. We were similar cognitively, as it was a school for high ability students, so all the students were considered gifted or high-potential. I had experiences having sleepovers at homes on

military bases, public housing, and on the beach; and my peers would be a constant presence in my home.

Being a religious minority, I experienced anti-Semitism and multiple examples of microaggressions from peers, strangers, and educators. In school, I remember multiple teachers that had issue with my faith, and this became especially apparent during the time when I was training for my Bat Mitzvah. Certain teachers were not accommodating in the middle school, and some were explicitly hateful. And even though I had the privilege to hide my minority status, I was keenly aware of the unfair treatment that I endured at the hands of my teachers. This knowledge was transferable when I saw my African American peers endure racist and hateful language from the adults at school.

I was brought up in a fairly progressive household compared to my neighbors. My parents were transplants from the North East, and we were Jewish. With these two characteristics, progressive and Jewish, my parents made very deliberate choices in raising us with an awareness of issues of justice and equity in the world and our community. They raised us to value academics, and they were very purposeful in fostering our gifts and talents. With all of this said, I clearly remember having concerns about the representation of my African American friends and my friends from the less affluent and historically Black communities in the pull-out gifted class. It seemed odd that for a school where everyone was considered high-ability, that only a handful of children went to the special gifted and talented class. I distinctly remember being aware of this, and not understanding why it was the case.

In spite of this progressive knowledge, I enjoyed my middle school experience, and it was directly because I was in a school that catered to high-ability diverse students.

This model is unusual, and the original school no longer follows the same deliberate integration; but the experiences I had as a high-ability student in middle school have direct connections to why I chose this study, and my own understanding of being high-ability and CLED in middle school.

My personal experience with the phenomenon is that I was a teacher of high-ability students at a school identified as Title I, and the school had a significant problem with underrepresentation of CLED students in advanced courses and deficit-based thinking from the educators. For 7 years, I worked to identify and provide academic services to students who were historically overlooked and disregarded based on their cultural or socioeconomic identities. The participants in this study are members of historically underrepresented groups and have been identified as gifted or high-ability in middle school.

To ensure bracketing will occur throughout the study, I followed a modified version of the Hamill and Sinclair (2010) steps.

1. Write down what you know of the topic and what you think are the issues;
2. Keep a reflective journal to document your thoughts, feelings and perceptions throughout the research and examine your position on issues raised and emerging themes. Why are these themes emerging and who are they important to – me or the participants?;
3. Develop an audit trail to provide a framework for establishing trustworthiness of the study;

4. Use supervisor support and/or steering committee feedback to check that your interpretation of data can be 'seen', bearing in mind that others may not find the same themes or come to the same conclusions. Check that themes are grounded in raw data and that others can see what you see in the data.
5. Participant feedback – check your interpretation of the data rather than the accuracy of the transcript. Have you misinterpreted the participants' description and meaning? Is their use of language and description the same as yours? Is it influenced by personal values and culture? Do you really understand their position? Does anything seem odd, different or unexplained in the data? If so, seek understanding and meaning by going back to your participants.
6. Peer/supervisor review of interview schedule and transcripts – look for leading questions or questions that reflect your understanding of the phenomenon rather than being open to new understandings.
7. Check your literature review themes do not occur in your research findings without due evidence. (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010, pp. 20-21)

Appendix B

Parental Consent for Children Participation in Research

Title: Being myself in school: A phenomenological investigation of high-ability underrepresented middle school students lived experiences in school.

Principal Investigator: Melanie J. Lichtenstein, M.Ed.

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as the parent of a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to let your child participate in this research study. The person conducting the research will describe the study to you and answer all your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to give your permission for your child to take part in the study. If you decide to let your child be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your permission.

Purpose of the Study

If you agree, your child will be asked to participate in a research study about: What it is like to be high-ability as well as a member of an underrepresented population in middle school. The purpose of this study is to learn about high-ability students' lived experiences in school while being a member of a culturally diverse group.

What is my child going to be asked to do?

If you allow your child to participate in this study, they will be asked to answer questions in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. They will also be asked to complete a short drawing exercise to illustrate their point-of-view of what it is like to be them in school. This study will take a single interview from 30 to 90 minutes long and there will be 8 to 12 other people in this study.

Your child will be audio or video recorded to allow the researcher to return to the interview. The interview recordings will be accessible only by the single researcher, and will be kept in a password protected file.

What are the risks involved in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. The procedures used in this study may involve risks that are currently unforeseeable.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

Your child will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, there may be societal benefits such as informing the educational research community and the schools that serve your child the student's perspective of what it is *really* like in school.

Does my child have to participate?

No, your child's participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may decline to participate or to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect their relationship with William & Mary in anyway. You can agree to allow your child to be in the study now and change your mind later without any penalty.

What if my child does not want to participate?

In addition to your permission, your child must agree to participate in the study. If your child does not want to participate they will not be included in the study and there will be no penalty. If your child initially agrees to be in the study they can change their mind later without any penalty.

Will there be any incentives for participation?

Your child will receive a gift card as a "thank you" for participating in the study.

How will your child's privacy and confidentiality be protected if s/he participates in this research study?

Your child's privacy and the confidentiality of his/her data will be protected by having your child select a pseudonym that the researcher will be the only one with knowledge of. Your child's privacy and confidentiality will be accomplished by maintaining a single list of the pseudonyms, password protected data, and secured in a password protected file that the researcher has the only access to.

If it becomes necessary, the Institutional Review Board may need to review the study records. If this happens, information that can be linked to your child will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your child's research records will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order.

If you choose to participate in this study, your child will be audio and/or video recorded. Any audio and/or video recordings will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for five years and then erased.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact Melanie J. Lichtenstein at 843-323-0196 or send an email to mjlichtenstein@email.wm.edu for any questions or if you feel that you have been harmed. This study has been reviewed and approved by The William & Mary’s Institutional Review Board and the study number is [Insert study number].

Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?

[Insert WM compliance information]

Signature

You are making a decision about allowing your child to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you are 18 years or older and have read the information provided above and have decided to allow them to participate in the study. If you later decide that you wish to withdraw your permission for your child to participate in the study you may discontinue his or her participation at any time. You will be given a copy of this document.

NOTE: Include the following if recording is optional:

_____ My child MAY be audio and/or video recorded.

_____ My child MAY NOT be audio and/or video recorded.

Printed Name of Child

Printed Name of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian

Signature of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix C

Student Assent Form for Participation in Research

Student Informed Assent Agreement

WHAT DO I HOPE TO LEARN FROM YOU?

I want to learn what is it like to be high-ability, diverse, and in middle school.

WHAT WILL YOU DO AS PART OF MY STUDY?

- As part of this study, I would like you to tell me about your experiences in school. I will be interviewing you by yourself one time for about 30 to 90 minutes. During the interviews I will ask you to use art to show me details about your experiences in school.
- Finally, I will have you fill out a brief information form about your demographics. This will include your ethnicity, gender, age, hometown, and school. You will choose a pseudonym to have an extra level of privacy.

MORE INFORMATION:

- I will be audio recording the interviews to help me remember what you said.
- Your answers to my questions, your drawings, and your demographic answers will be kept private. Your name will not be used and anyone who reads the study will not know it is you who helped me by participating.
- It is your choice to be a part of my study. If you do not want to participate, it's OK. Please tell me so.
- During the interviews, you do not have to answer every question that I ask. Tell me if you would rather not answer a question.
- If you want to stop participating in the study, tell me. You will not get in trouble for stopping, and you can stop at any time. If you decide to stop, your audio recordings, drawing, and survey will be destroyed.

AGREEMENT:

I agree to participate in the research study described above.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

RQ: What is it like to be high-ability and a member of an historically underrepresented group in middle school?

[Interviewer: *You are here today because I want to know what is it like to be you in middle school. The information here is anonymous and no one will know what you said. First you will fill out a sheet with your demographics information, and choose a pseudonym. Appendix E, Demographic Questionnaire.]*

Bevan (2014) model of applying Descriptive Phenomenology to Interviews

Contextualization- Describe yourself at school.

[How you see yourself? How others see you?]

Interview Q1: Art-Based Inquiry (See Attachment D: Arts-Based Inquiry Protocol)

Step One: (See Appendix F: Body Handout). Participants will be provided a piece of paper with an outline of a human body with a line drawn down the center. On one side will be the heading “How others see/describe me at school:”, and on the other side will be the heading “How I see/describe myself at school:”

Step Two: The participants will be directed to fill out each side answering the appropriate heading, they are encouraged to use words, visual representations, quotes, symbols, names, places, and so on.

Apprehending the Phenomenon- Can describe a time or when you most felt like

[characteristic or identity element on ABI]?

Interview Q2: Expand on their responses in the image in *Interview Q1*. For instance, if the co-participant put the word *library* in the “How others see/describe me” section I will

ask a question like, “*Can you remember a time when you most felt like you were known for being in the library?*”

Clarifying the phenomenon:

Interview Q3: For this step I will ask the participant to describe a specific event or time in school that inspired their drawing. I will use probing prompts such as:

- *Could you describe what that looked like, or*
- *I want to feel like I was there, can you tell me more?,*
- *Are there places or people in school who you feel most comfortable with?*
- *Can you tell me about a time when you were most comfortable at being yourself with a person or at school?*

The art supplies will be available for use if the student wanted to illustrate or design their ideal school and during the drawing, I will continue the conversation using the spontaneous quality that Giorgi (2009) encouraged.

Phenomenological Attitude	Researcher Approach	Interview Structure	Method	Example Question
Phenomenological Reduction (Epoché)	Acceptance of Natural Attitude of Participants	Contextualization (Eliciting the Lifeworld in Natural Attitude)	Descriptive/Narrative Context Questions	<i>How you see yourself? How others see you?</i>
	Reflexive Critical Dialog With Self	Apprehending the Phenomenon (Modes of Appearing in Natural Attitude)	Descriptive and Structural Questions of Modes of Appearing	<i>“Describe a time when you most felt like [identity/characteristic]?”</i>
	Active Listing	Clarifying the Phenomenon (Meaning Through Imaginative Variation)	Imaginative Variation: Varying of Structure of Questions	<i>“Is there a place you are most comfortable/person you are most comfortable with while at school?”</i>

Figure 2. A structure of phenomenological interviewing. Adapted from “A Method of Phenomenological Interviewing,” by M.T. Bevan, 2014, *Advancing Qualitative Methods*, 24, p. 139.

Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire

First Name:

Middle Name:

Last Name:

Preferred Name:

Date of Birth

Pseudonym (To
remain anonymous):

Grade Level for 2018-
2019 School Year:

Hometown:

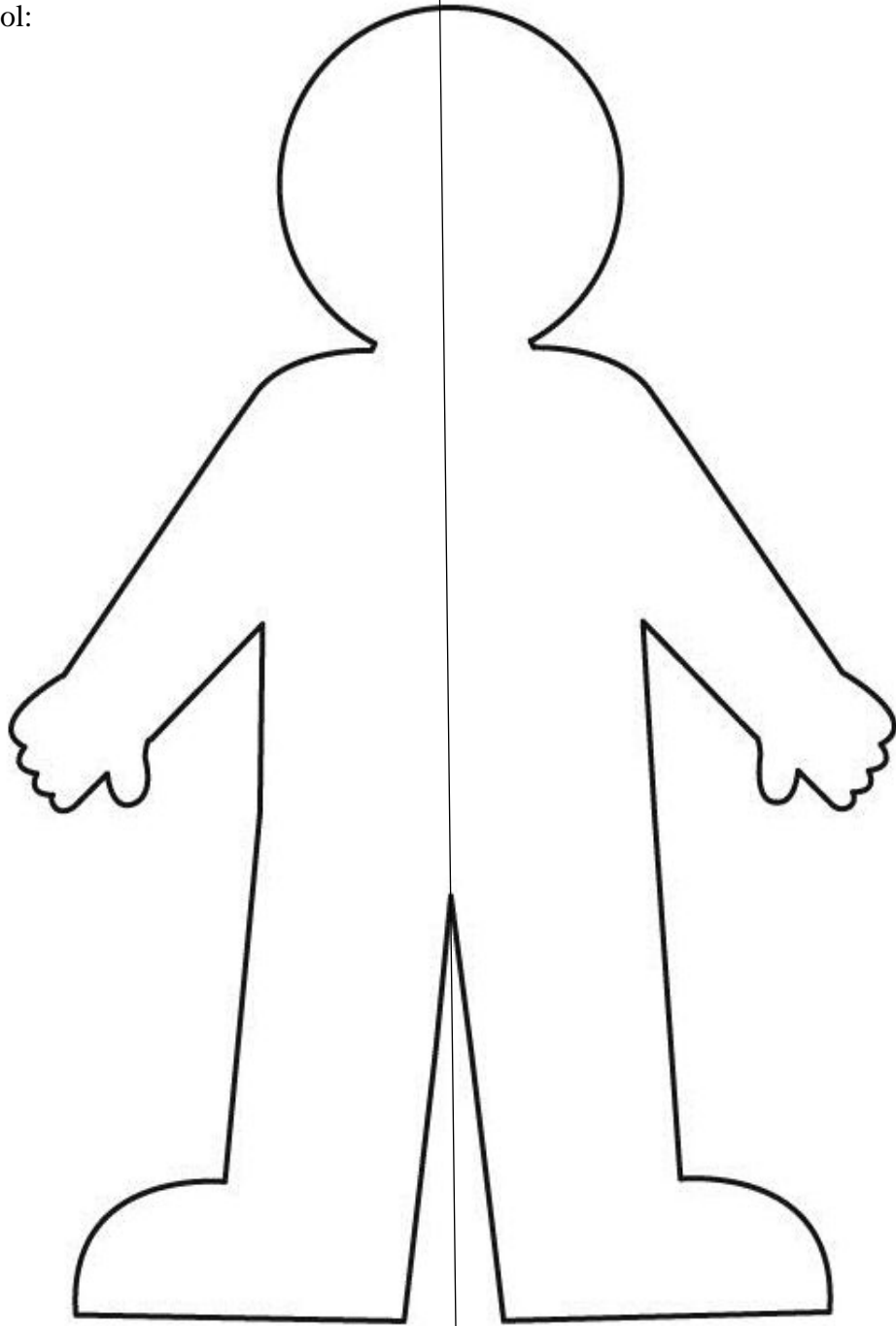
Name of School you
attended *last year*
(2017-2018 school
year):

Appendix F

ABI Worksheet

How others
see/describe me at
school:

How I see/describe
myself at school:



Appendix G

Thomas ABI

15

Thomas

How others see/describe me at school:

How I see/describe myself at school:



Appendix H

Melea ABI

1 Melea

How others see/describe me at school: How I see/describe myself at school:

Trustworthy
Non-judgemental

Bring me monster by Walter Dean Meyers

Appendix I

Junior

3

Junior

How others see/describe me
at school:

weird

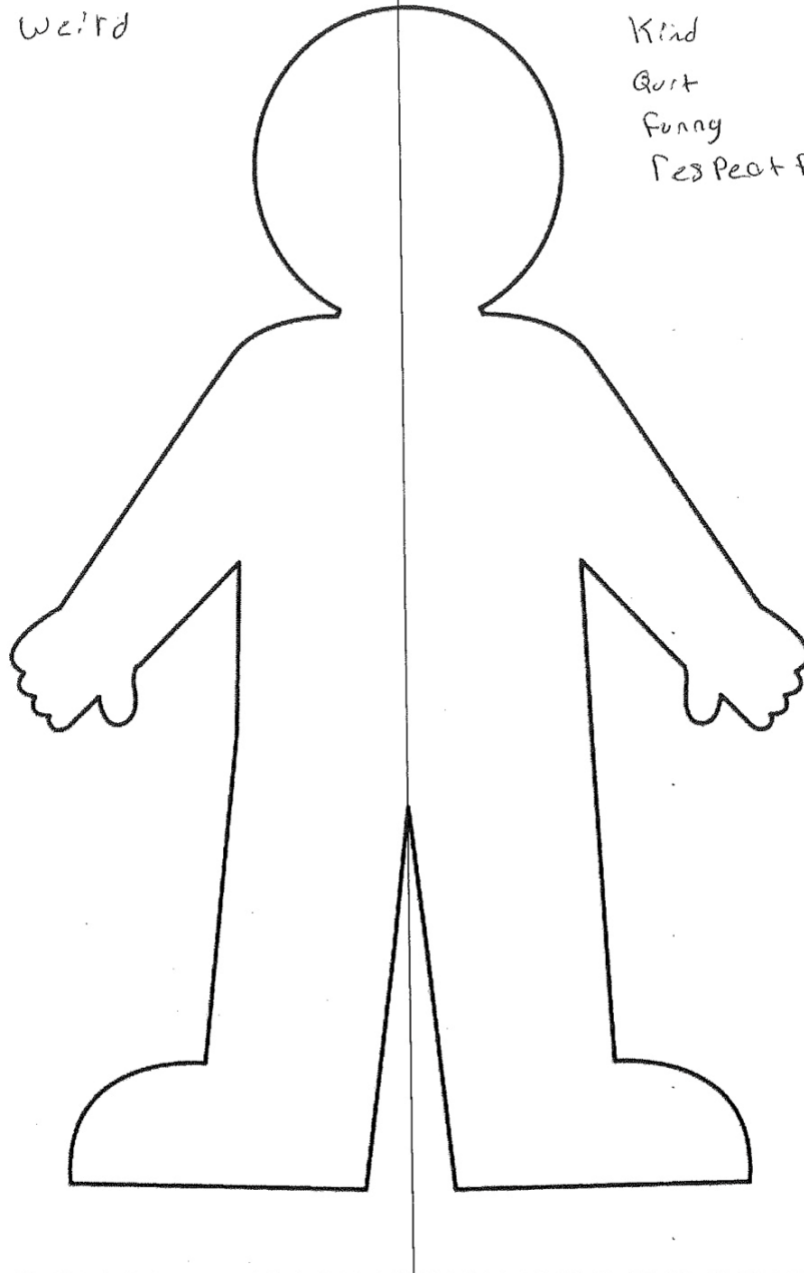
How I see/describe myself
at school:

Kind

Quiet

Funny

Respectful



Appendix J

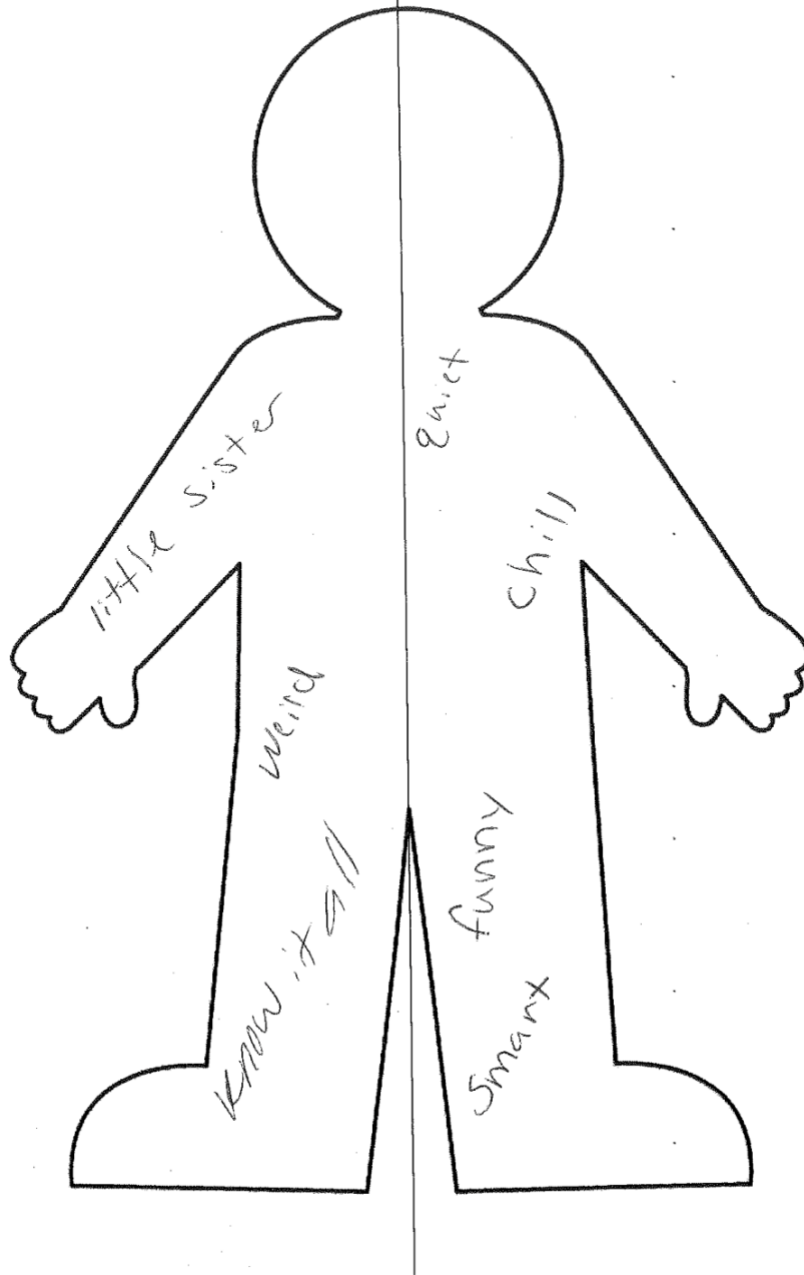
Melissa ABI

9

Melissa

How others see/describe me
at school:

How I see/describe myself
at school:



Appendix K

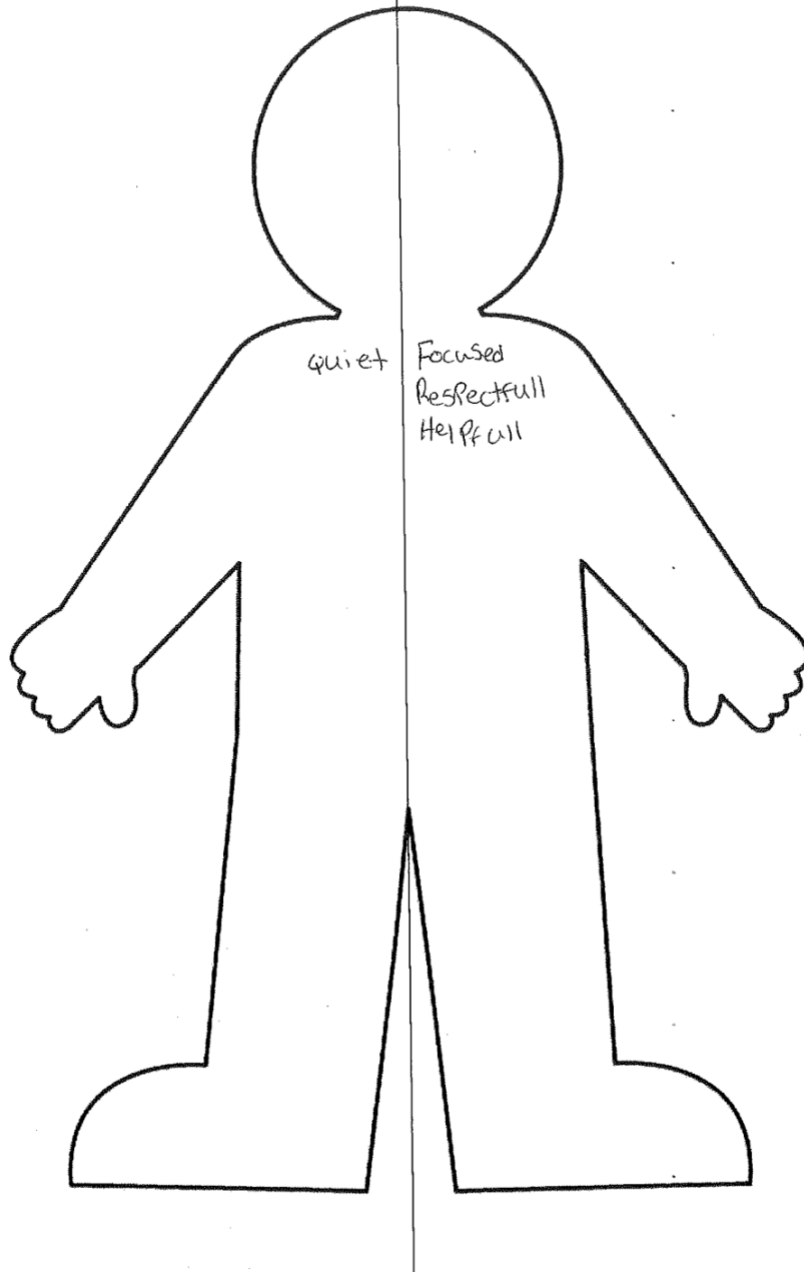
Robert ABI

13

Robert

How others see/describe me
at school:

How I see/describe myself
at school:



Appendix L

Jasmine ABI

7

Jasmine

How others see/describe me
at school:

How I see/describe myself
at school:



Appendix M

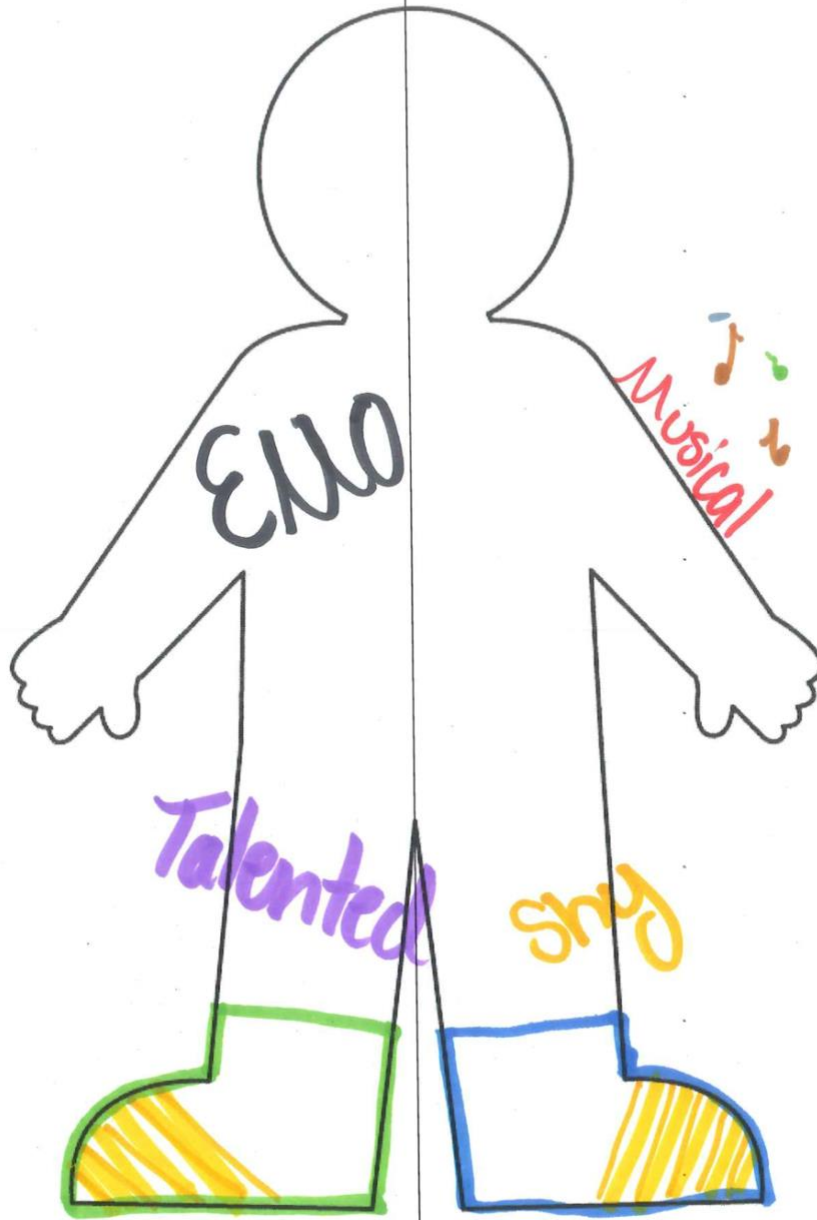
Vivi ABI

4

Vivi

How others see/describe me
at school:

How I see/describe myself
at school:



Appendix N

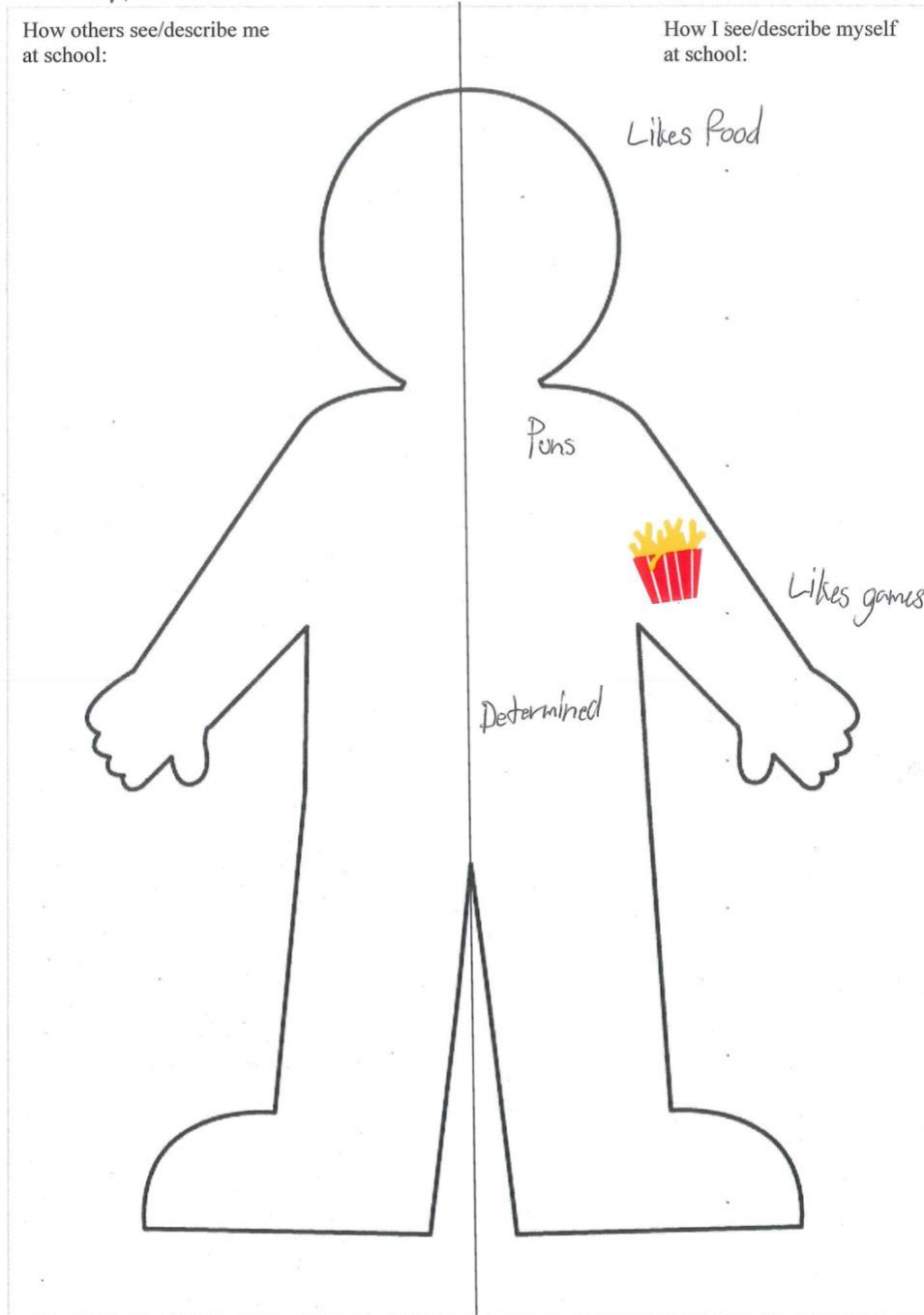
Ben ABI

11

Ben

How others see/describe me
at school:

How I see/describe myself
at school:



Appendix O

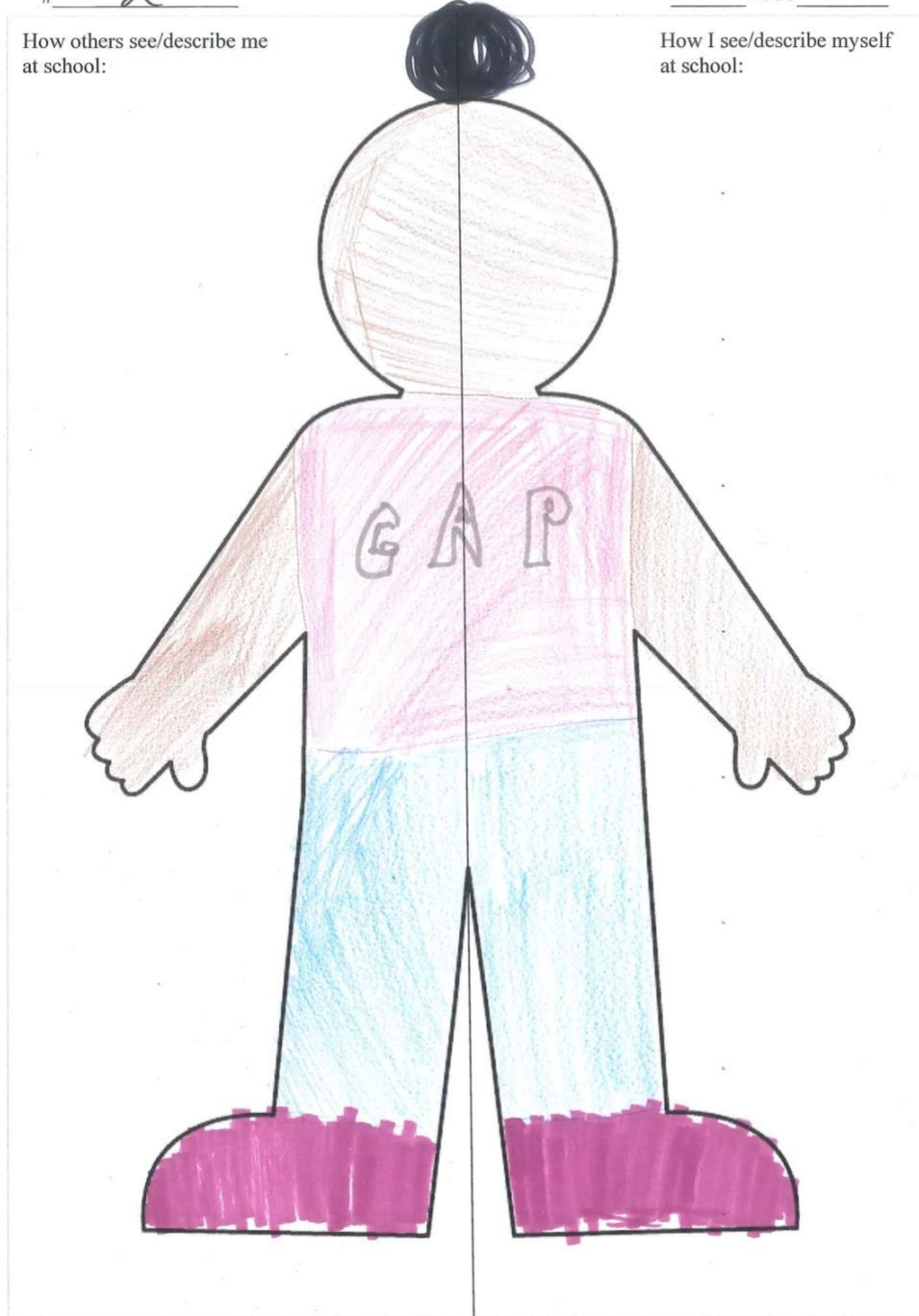
Rose ABI

2

Rose

How others see/describe me
at school:

How I see/describe myself
at school:



Appendix P

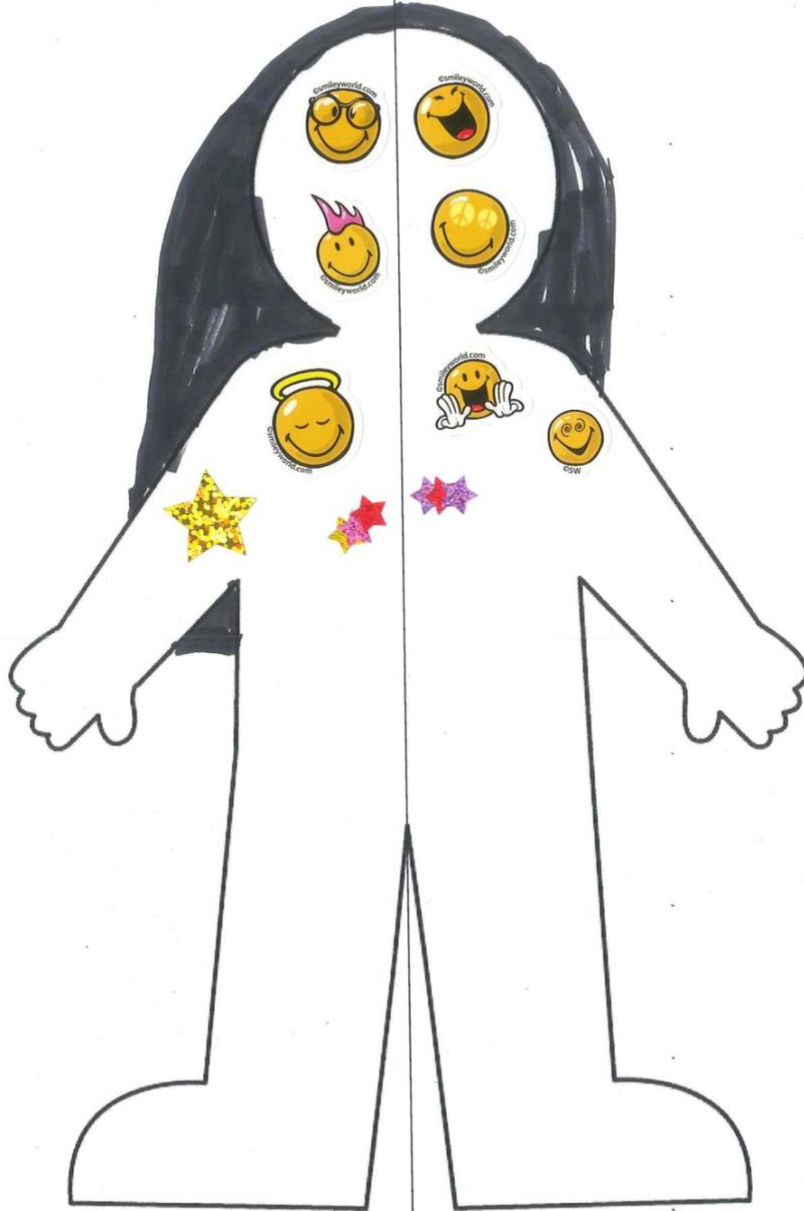
Zeely ABI

6

Zeely

How others see/describe me at school:

How I see/describe myself at school:



Appendix Q

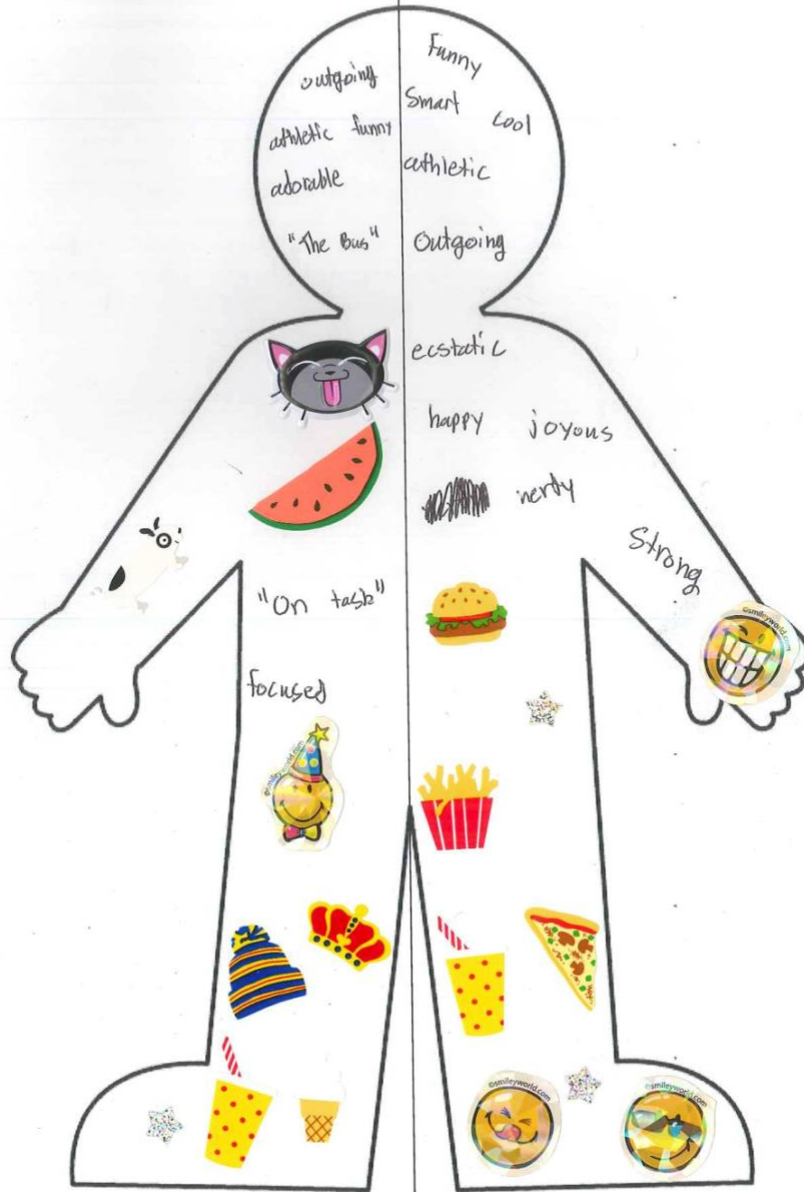
Johnny ABI

8

Johnny

How others see/describe me at school:

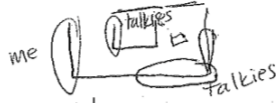
How I see/describe myself at school:



Appendix R

Sarah ABI

12



Sarah

How others see/describe me at school:

nice

quiet

funny

How I see/describe myself at school:

Creative



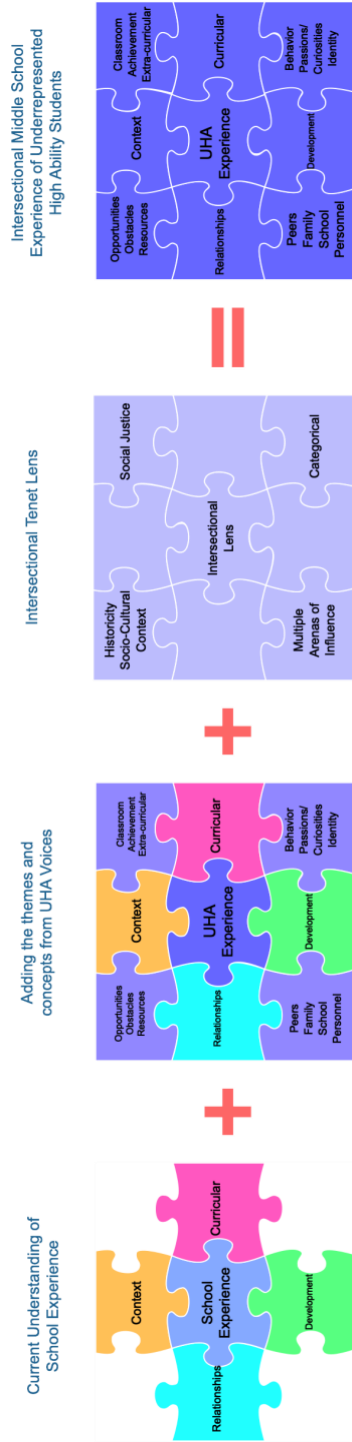
nice

intelligent



Appendix S

Intersectional Middle School Experience of Underrepresented High-Ability Students



Vita

Melanie J. Lichtenstein
b. September 10, 1976
Charleston, South Carolina

Doctor of Philosophy, Educational Policy, Planning, & Leadership, 2019 (College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia)

Master of Education, Teaching and Learning: Drama, Language Arts, Literature, & Reading, 2005 (The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio)

Bachelor of Arts, Drama, 1994 (Gambier, Ohio)

Melanie was a teacher of middle school high-ability students at Alice Birney Middle School and Northwoods Middle School in North Charleston, South Carolina, from 2006-2013; Awarded the Doctoral fellowship in diversity education for the Center for Student Diversity at the College of William & Mary; a fellow of the *11th Annual Hilliard-Sizemore Research Course on African Americans and Education* AERA 2018 Annual Conference New York City, New York; Guest lectured for the *College of Charleston, School of Education, Gifted and Talented Leadership institute* in 2013 and 2015; Presented at multiple annual conferences for Council of Exceptional Children, American Educational Research Association, National Association of Teachers of English, and International Literacy Association; Columnist for The Association for the Gifted Division, Council of Exceptional Children; Coordinated a curriculum writing team for the Ohio Department of Education, from 2004-2006; and Acted as education coordinator and instructor for arts-education outreach programs in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from 1998-2002.