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The Opportunity Gap in the Age of Accountability: Experiences of Students from One Urban District

Danielle Greene
College of William and Mary

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The Opportunity Gap in the Age of Accountability: Experiences of Students from One Urban District

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from The College of William and Mary

by

Danielle Greene

Accepted for ________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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The Opportunity Gap in the Age of Accountability: Experiences of Students from One Urban District

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Chapter 1: Problem Statement

I was born in Richmond, Virginia to a salesman for Philip Morris, Inc. and an elementary school teacher. I was fortunate to have two loving parents who dedicated themselves to helping my siblings and I reach our goals, and stressed the importance of an education. I strongly took after my mother, the educator, and developed an indescribable enthusiasm for the field of education. When she was promoted to the administrative position of Principal to an inner city elementary school, I often spent most of my days off from school at her school.\(^1\) Whether as a student or an assistant, any day I spent in a classroom was considered time well spent.

Working around my mother’s inner city school facilitated my very first interactions with educational inequalities, as my experience had been in suburban schools. My mother’s school provided educational services to mostly minorities of low socio-economic status, and therefore presented to me a world of strife I never knew existed. Working and volunteering in my mother’s school placed me in direct contact with, and fostered my deep interest in, educational disparities and the opportunity gap. I saw struggles that are experienced outside of the classroom, like personal identity, poverty, and familial discord, combined with problems within school, such as teacher effectiveness/perception, and classroom size can significantly hinder a child’s educational achievement. Throughout high school it crossed my mind many times the educational disparities in inner-city schools and how I could make a difference in education for schools with populations like my mother’s.

Despite having the awareness of those educational inequalities and volunteering at the schools, it was not until I became a part of the William and Mary community. The courses that

\(^1\) All names have been changed for the privacy of the participants, including: the schools, the school district, and participant names.
led me to developing my thesis are: African-American Vernacular English, The Idea of Race, ENGL 418, HIST 491C, and AFST 303. In CMST 250 I investigated causes of educational inequalities, examined research methods, and learned how to prepare and present an education project proposal. In the courses, HIST 491C and AFST 303, we explored the history of the opportunity gap between races, as well as the history of education for African Americans and their struggle for equality. Through ENGL 418 I investigated methods of data collection and analysis. Specifically, it was in Community Studies 250: African American Vernacular English that my interests in educational inequalities developed and I began my current research project. The course combined civic engagement and theoretical practice, which forced me from my comfort zone where I acknowledged that educational problems existed, but doing nothing to solve them.

Within my classes we often discussed how students accomplish what is expected of them, and how administrations attempt to discern the future success of students based on past performance. I noticed teachers often favored the more advanced students, and would often make statements that the advanced students would be successful in the future. Yet, I realized that if I asked the students who were deemed not as intelligent to complete similar tasks to those given to the favored students the non-favored students worked just as diligently. After that realization, the idea that opportunity gaps are created within the classroom because of the assumption that previously unsuccessful students are likely to continue to be unproductive was born. I want to explore possible answers to my questions surrounding educational inequalities and opportunities by interviewing students. By enlisting their help, I can hopefully correct the parts of the educational system that are not producing successful students, and continuously not acknowledge the impact that outside life factors have on academics. It is my belief that the objective of school
systems is to provide a solid educational foundation that will produce well-educated students who will eventually become productive citizens.

The combined class research and personal observations have led me to investigate the following questions: “How does students’ academic achievement in elementary school impact their educational opportunities in middle and high school?”; and “What factors contribute to the change in a student’s academic successes or failures?” In order to answer these questions, I employed a multiple case study and used ethnographic style interview techniques to examine the educational experiences and opportunities of students who were viewed to have little academic potential at the end of their elementary school careers. Data was collected using the through personal review of the literature and interviews. Ethnographic interviews work well to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of students perceived to have little academic potential, especially when studying historically marginalized minority populations, such as in past research on Asian-American students (Lee, 1996); therefore an ethnographic-influenced interviewing approach was taken. The study participants were identified from a population of students from the bottom 15% (test scores and GPAs) of an elementary school’s graduating class of 2006. A sample of five students (2 males and 3 females) was used to allow for a more in-depth look into the main research questions. Students were chosen from the bottom 15% because this is the group I strongly feel that research should be focused on servicing; students who are behind academically should not be left behind.

The information gathered from this research project is not only personally important, but also is relevant to the lives of other individuals. This investigation could prove beneficial by providing student perspectives and could benefit research on the opportunity gap and educational inequalities which is highly useful when developing educational policies. The United States’
Congress is currently debating the Elementary and Secondary Education Act’s (ESEA) responsibility for the opportunity gap, as recently amended by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Also, there has been a national focus on accountability reform measures, such as President Obama’s 2009 Race to the Top competition to offset the large education budget cuts made at state and federal levels.

Finding solutions for educational inequalities, starting with the elimination of prejudices against students who are classified as at-risk learners early on is steadily becoming my life’s passion. As a result of my experiences, I have come to the conclusion that educational inequalities are matters that need to be taken head on by people who truly care about the students and the system that educated them. I am and will remain one of those people.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review, Chapter 3 is an overview of my methodology, Chapter 4 is a presentation of the data collected, and Chapter 5 presents the implications of this study, and the conclusion.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

There are three major factors’ relationships with student academic achievement that are heavily investigated and debated in research: institutional, familial, and identity factors (Okpala, Okpala, and Smith, 2001). Institutional factors include issues from educational policy and a teacher’s personal education to building location and classroom size. Institutional factors’ include classroom size, teacher effectiveness/perception, and school based resources (Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine, 1996). Similarly, familial factors include socioeconomic status, extracurricular enrichment activities, or racial/cultural pressures. A major factor relating to familial influences include parental involvement (interest in their student’s education) and socioeconomic class (coupled with part-time jobs). Finally, identity factors research extends from racial/cultural, peer group pressures and self-esteem to personal and outside expectations (Pratt, 1992 and Hill, 2004). Identity factors’ research focuses on the following: self-esteem and self-identification/classification. Below, I will discuss these factors in detail.

Institutional Factors

Three of the most researched institutional issues related to student academic achievement are classroom size, teacher effectiveness and/or perception, and school-related resources (Okpala, Okpala, and Smith, 2001).

Classroom Size

There have been many institutional reform efforts made in schools to attempt to address inequalities in academic achievement (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, 2006). One of the most popularly cited institutional changes that is assumed to increase student achievement is small
class size. For many, the reduction of the number of children learning in the same space (ex. classroom) is a helpful step towards solving the problem of educational underachievement (Blatchford, 1994; Konstantopoulos, 2008; and Rotherham, 2011). For example, rampant protests developed after Idaho proposed balancing budget cuts by dismissing over 700 instructors and raising class sizes (Rotherham, 2011). The public’s general belief is that larger classroom sizes negatively affect academic achievement rates. However, reports from academic research remain inconsistent.

Researchers have not come to a consensus about the benefits and merits of classroom reduction. The discussion surrounding classroom size ranges from Slavin’s (1989) assertion that “…reducing class size will not itself make a substantial difference in student achievement,” (as cited in Blatchford and Mortimore, 1994, p. 411) to Glass, Cahen, Smith and Filby’s (1982) suggestion that “large reductions in school class size promise learning benefits of a magnitude commonly believed not within the power of education to achieve.” (p. 411) Advocates of smaller class size argue that a uniform decrease in the number of students per classroom allows for increased opportunities for more individual attention, increased quality of teaching, better curriculum coverage, better student and teacher morale, improved inter-student relations, better teacher control over students, and less time spent managing student behavior (Konstantopoulos and Sun, 2010).

One common thread that is present in the research is that students should not be placed in extremely large classrooms. Recognizing the impact that large classes have on the academic success of students many countries are creating class size standards. By 1995, multiple European countries including Norway, Germany, France, and Greece created national legislation that prevented classroom sizes from exceeding 30, and Scotland nationally imposed a classroom limit
of 33 pupils (Berliner & Judd, 1995). Likewise, J.J. Arias and Douglas Walker (2004) investigated the reasons behind why American universities boast about small professor-student ratios to insinuate prospective students can learn in smaller classroom environments. Arias and Walker found statistically significant evidence that small class size has a positive impact on student performance. Classroom size, especially in primary school where personal attention is vital, when pupil numbers exceed 40-50 can be problematic, but the question of how large a class size can be before it negatively affects academic achievement remains.

Studies like the Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) project attempted to answer the question of what size classroom students learn best in. In Tennessee, the four year (1985-1989) experimental program called STAR was implemented across 42 districts in 79 different elementary schools and affected over 11,000 students. Project STAR was an attempt to investigate type of classroom setting children were able to learn best in: “smaller classes (13-17 students), larger classes (22-26 students), or larger classes with a full-time classroom aide” (Konstantopoulous, 2008, pp. 276, 279). The results yielded by Project STAR produced strong praise for smaller size classrooms; the students placed in classrooms of 13-17 pupils had higher achievement levels. The program concluded with an additional year of observation (Long Benefits Study; “LBS”) where the students returned to regular sized classrooms for their 4th grade year in order to determine the long-term effects of the experiment. The LBS yielded the following results in the official STAR report:

Students who had been in smaller classes had higher achievement in all academic areas compared to students in regular or teacher-aide classes; pupils who had been in small classes were rated as expending more effort in the classroom, taking greater initiative
with regard to learning activities, and displaying less disruptive or inattentive behavior compared to their peers who had been in regular-size classes.

Project STAR’s results helped to provide statistical evidence for researchers and public figures who advocated for smaller classroom sizes.

Project STAR and other programs like it (Prime Time in Indiana) have received strong approval, but also profound critiques. The classroom sizes implemented in Project STAR had fewer students in them than what research acknowledges as small (20 or fewer) or large sized classrooms (30 or more) (Blatchford & Mortimore, 1994). Collectively researchers do not suggest that students should be placed in classrooms with 40+ students. However, it does state that it is neither financially affordable nor feasible to uniformly place students in classrooms with 20 or fewer pupils. Tomlinson (1990) asserted that “reducing class size to the point where student achievement would likely benefit… is prohibitively expensive” (p. 411). Likewise, with widespread budget cuts, administrations are keeping classroom sizes from average to large. Not only would new teachers have to be hired and their salaries paid, but classroom availability is a problem; a school cannot just add on classrooms to meet demand. Those problems combined with reports like C. Burstall’s (1992) that “the outcomes [the classroom reduction] research effort… have been conflicting, inconclusive, and disappointingly meager,” have led to inaction on the part of school systems (p. 411). It can be concluded that most schools are not willing to spend the necessary funds for a theory that may not produce the desired results.

Nevertheless, reducing class size is identified by the public and a number of researchers, such as Finn and Achilles (1990) as a mean that can “increase achievement for all students” (as cited in Konstantopoulos and Sun, 2010). Likewise, Blatchford and Mortimore (1994) assert that “the size of a class in school is one of the most important and basic ways that the school
environment effect children’s learning and behavior.” Also, Shapson (1980) believes that class size does not help or persuade teachers to alter the way their classrooms are conducted or their methods of instruction” (as cited in Blatchford and Mortimore, 1994, p. 425). The theory that classroom size matters because it alters the instructor’s ability to produce a higher quality education is a very common thread in the overall debate.

Teacher Effectiveness/Perception

How effective a teacher can be in helping his/her students learn is a highly researched institutional factor (Kupermintz, 2003). Teacher effectiveness can be altered by a teacher’s perception of his/her student’s intellect or behavior. The ability to identify the factors and environments that create successful teachers is imperative to educational reform.

There are teachers who are very efficient in promoting student acceleration of learning and some who are not. Spyros Konstantopoulos’ (2009) commented that, “one factor that most educational researchers believe affects student achievement is teachers,” highlighting how great the public concern surrounding teacher effectiveness. Teachers are blamed when students do poorly academically and praised when students achieve. Kupermintz (2003) discussed how educational reform legislation in recent years, like NCLB, has increased focus on methods that will hold school systems and teachers individually accountable for student learning.

Research on teacher effectiveness rarely illustrates what instructors should do to increase student academic achievement, because each teacher is different in his/her approach to, style of, and deliverance of instruction. However, research, like Wasicsko’s (2009), which focuses on what helps to promote and increase teacher effectiveness. For example, outside of understanding and acknowledging that categorizing people based on assumptions is natural and being hyper-
aware of how they are treating their students, Wasicsko (2009) outlined the following four basic qualities that effective teachers have: “the most effective teachers perceive themselves as effective,” “they believe that all students can learn,” “they have a broad frame of reference and see a larger purpose for what they do,” and “they look at the people element” (as cited in Hallam, 2009). The characteristics are very broad on how to become a better teacher, but do provide some general guidelines for instructors to measure themselves by.

It is very difficult to create a uniform protocol on how to be an effective teacher when various unknown factors thwart teacher’s best efforts (Konstantopoulous, 2009). According to Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) how teachers also must overpower influences from outside the community to be effective in the classroom as well:

In effect, teachers must compete for students’ attention with parents, siblings, boyfriends, girlfriends, bosses, coaches, salespeople, media figures, and a host of others who touch adolescents’ lives. (p. 15)

Despite outside community influences, teachers are held accountable for the successes and failures of the children in their classrooms. Even with all the external factors that play significant roles in children’s lives, a teacher cannot blame the lack of academic achievement of his/her students on outside community influences, because what the instructor does during school hours has an impact on learning.

The method of instruction or teaching style that teachers use is a key factor of teacher effectiveness, because it influences the overall classroom environment (Kupermintz, 2003). According to Gamoran and Nystrand’s (1992) research, the type of classroom discussions used can make the difference between an effective and an ineffective educator. Classroom discussion is the primary way that students and teachers are able to interact with one another, and one of the
most consistently used methods of instruction. Teachers who take their students’ ideas seriously and have classroom discussion that encourages critical thinking are more likely to promote student engagement (Gamoran and Nystrand, 1992). A classroom environment that promotes deep thinking with higher order questions that “take students into [a] novel, [and leads] them to see characters’ motivations from the inside” rather than simple “question-answer recitation” is highly successful in raising student academic achievement. (pp. 43, 55) Likewise, avoiding forced question-answer recitation exercises helps students to feel that their commentary is important to the classroom conversation and that they are an influential part of the “learning community” (42). Students become actively involved in the learning process when questions asked facilitate learning and making connections to real life situations.

However, when many teachers fail to create that learning environment, they instead create an expectations gap. Expectations gaps are created when a teacher attempts to create an effective classroom discussion, but instead of attempting to engage reluctant students to participate, instructors create discussion with the already engaged students. Questions begin to be directed only toward high-achieving students based on teacher assumptions made from past classroom interactions (Williams, 1976). Eventually, teachers and students fall into a pattern of student role assignments, where only a few students speak and are expected to speak. As a result, the assumed low-achieving students have to fight harder or respond more rapidly in order to participate in classroom discussion. Tyler and Boelter (2008) found that the cognitive and behavioral engagement of nearly 300 black middle school students could be predicted based on the individual student reports of their teacher’s expectations of them (as quoted in Quaglia, Fox, andCurso, 2010).
Teacher perceptions of students can negatively affect the academic achievement of students in school systems where students are “tracked” into different leveled classrooms based on ability. Oakes (2009) defined tracking as “the practice of grouping students into separate classes or courses based on their prior academic achievement”. Not only can students be placed in non-challenging classrooms as a result of student role assignments, but Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2006) found that higher achieving students are ordinarily placed with more qualified teachers (high levels of instructional experience and high teacher licensure scores). Schools that track students are institutions that are at risk of preventing academic success in students who are assumed to be low-achievers.

In 1968, Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobsen published the book, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupils’ Intellectual Development* and explained the effects of how academic achievement could be altered by the creation of student role assignments. Rosenthal and Jacobsen found that instructors who expect the best, despite past behavior, from all students are more likely to create classroom-wide increases in academic achievement, because:

To a greater extent, our expectations for another person’s behavior are accurate because we know his past behavior. But there is now good reason to believe that another factor increases our accuracy of interpersonal predictions or prophecies. Our prediction or prophecy may in itself be a factor in determining the behavior of other people. (p. 62)

That research had huge implications on current research regarding teacher effectiveness, and an expanded version of the book was published in 1992.

An instructor’s expectations and assumptions about a student’s intellectual ability is an influential factor for how much a student achieves academically. If a student performs according
to how a teacher perceives them or treat there it can have a positive or negative effect. It the
teacher perceives them to be smart than they will produce above average work. If the teacher
perceives them as not performing bad view the grade level expectations and not as much learning
After asserting that “people, more often than not, do what is expected of them,” Rosenthal and
Lenore (1968) produced various educational experiments to confirm the theory that student
academic achievement is reflective of their teacher’s expectations (pp. vii-viii). For example,
The Oak School experiment was a case where 20 percent of students from an elementary school
were randomly selected to be reported to their instructors as “showing unusual potential for
intellectual growth” (p. 54). Experiment results reported that eight months later the children
randomly reported to their teachers made more significant gains in their IQs than the students
who had not been reported to teachers. Rosenthal and Lenore call cases like that “the Pygmalion
effect.”

Despite a teacher’s best efforts, student selection inequality and the Pygmalion effect are
two traps teachers easily fall into but greatly alter teacher effectiveness. However, just as there
are teachers who desperately need to re-evaluate their instructional delivery styles, there are
instructors who do the best they can, but with limited resources.

Resources

Resource distribution between school districts and individual schools and its effect on
student achievement is a fiercely debated topic in both scholarly research and policy discussion
(Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine, 1996). Educational resources and educational opportunity
equalization are major policy concerns at both local and state levels (Okpala, Okpala, Smith,
2001). Resources are the financial and physical supplies available to a school or a school district.
Since the “U.S. educational system is, in principle, designed to provide equal access to school resources and to reduce inequality in achievement,” school research surrounding resource availability and a student’s ability to succeed based on which school they attend is pursued by all levels of educational politics (Konstantopoulos, 2009).

The inequalities between resource distributions are most commonly seen between urban and suburban schools. James E. Ryan, in his book, *Five Miles Away and a World Apart: One City, Two Schools, and the Story of Educational Opportunity in Modern America* (2005), describes the district discrepancies best:

“Most urban schools are schools of concentrated poverty, where the majority of students are poor, and sometimes the vast majority. These high-poverty schools remain the largest challenge in the field of education policy; they almost always perform worse than middle-income schools, and they usually perform a lot worse. The poor performance of these schools is not just a product of the students, as middle-income students also perform worse in high-poverty schools than they do in predominantly middle-income schools” (p. 13).

Also, data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2000) reported that the academic achievement levels of children attending “disadvantaged” urban schools were significantly and routinely lower than students who attended suburban affluent schools (Sirin, 2005). The previously described dichotomy between urban and suburban schools is directly linked to the way the United States desegregated public schools.

The U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision did not cause immediate and nationwide integration. The decision was met with widespread resistance for
multiple decades, especially in the South, as whites employed tactics to prevent their children from attending integrated schools. The most popular method of refusing integration was called “white flight.” “White flight” describes the mass exodus of affluent whites from city and urban public schools. Many cities saw the development of a “dual education[al]” system as a result of affluent whites placing their children in, and sometimes establishing, private schools in order to circumvent the national mandate. More commonly white parents moved from city districts and bought homes in the surrounding county suburbs, knowing that poorer blacks could not afford to move just to integrate. As a result, the city school districts began serving primarily black and poorer populations, while the suburban counties and private schools housed the fleeing affluent whites (Ryan, 2010).

“Nixon’s compromise was clear: poor and minority students would remain in the city and would not have access to suburban schools, but efforts would be made to improve education in city schools. In other words, save the cities, but spare the suburbs” (p. 5).

The failure to integrate inner city schools with affluent white suburban schools is largely what led to the significant resource availability differences between the districts. Inter-district resource disparities, stem from the combination of property tax rates, state assistance, and local property wealth. The amount of local funding raised for schools is a direct product of the tax rate and property wealth of an area (Ryan, 2010). White flight caused local property wealth decreases as affluent whites moved out and poorer blacks moved in. Afterwards, local funding naturally plummeted for urban schools. Urban schools face the general reluctance of state legislatures to provide the additional and needed resources. The families of poor minority students hold little political power and their state representatives rarely hold enough influence to force state legislatures to make urban schools a financial priority.
However, money was and is not the only problem. When white flight was not curbed, urban city schools and the urban areas surrounding the schools sunk into poverty. Students living in and attending schools in high-poverty areas face structural and institutional problems, because of the lack of economic resources made available to their schools. The reasons why will be explained in the second section, “Familial Factors.”

The lack of school resources is positively related to a lack of student achievement, however money is not the root of the problem. Poorly organized usage of money leads to no progress in the availability of resources and provides minimal benefit to the children who need it the most.

Familial Factors

Education does not only happen within school walls, but is influenced by familial involvement in the home. The quality of a child’s home life, specifically the role his/her parents play, is a major factor of academic achievement. How family members promote and supports their child’s education can shape his/her outlook on academia the importance of education to children will provide a basis for a child’s future views on academia and influence the level of academic success they achieve.

Parental Involvement

Parental influences can support or counteract an institution or a teacher’s best efforts. The home is where children gain their initial interest in education as well as the belief that learning is beneficial to their lives (Lamborn, Brown, Mounts, Steinberg, 1992). Parents who actively participate in and support their child’s educational endeavors help to create a genuine interest in education (Okpala, Okpala, and Smith, 2001). Lamborn et. al (1992) notes that administrators,
teachers, and other professionals find it hard to instill a culture of academic excellence when family life undermine what is happening in the classroom. If parents do not show interest in their student’s academic success by reviewing homework, grades, report cards, or questioning about school related activities then students tend to not perform well in school (Finn, 1998). Attention has been directed towards encouraging parents to become involved in their children’s education. 2001’s No Child Left Behind Act listed six areas of reform, including increased parental involvement (Patall, Cooper, Robinson, 2008). NCLB wants schools to develop a parent involvement policy which would include: inviting parents to annual meetings and encouraging them to partake in the planning, reviewing, and improvement of school programs. There is a present day push from mass media/public opinion, educators, parents, and policy makers for schools and families to share accountability for students’ education.

Parental involvement in education can vary, but takes many different shapes and styles: volunteering in the classroom, communicating with the school, participating in parent-teacher associations (PTA) and conferences, pushing a positive view of education and the student’s institution, and assisting in and supporting academic related activities at home (such as homework) (Lamborn, et. al, 2008). According to Hill and Taylor (2004), parental school involvement makes parents equipped to help their children with school-related activities, such as projects, homework, and other school content-related information. Parents are given better opportunities to meet other parents where they can share insight regarding school policies and practices, extracurricular activities, and how to handle difficult situations. In addition, parents and teachers are also able to create relationships where they share expectations about behavior, achievement, and how to best supplement lessons from class in the home.
The effect of parental involvement in homework on student academic achievement is a highly researched factor. According to Cooper (1989), encouragement of parental involvement is one of the most commonly practiced strategies by institutions to promote academic achievement (Patall, et. al, 2008). Students who regularly complete their homework demonstrate improved academic achievement (Patall, et. al, 2008). Parents can become involved with homework through a wide array of methods, like:

…providing space and materials for homework; interacting with the teacher about homework; providing general oversight or monitoring of completion; making rules about when, where, or how homework is done; responding to questions about homework and giving feedback; or actually providing direct homework instruction. (p. 1040).

All of the above methods are critical factors in student academic success.

Children often imitate their parents, and a parent who stresses the importance of homework and helps a child develop skills to complete it autonomously, encourages self-regulatory skills and important study habits (Cooper, Lindsay, and Nye, 2000). Balli (1998) suggests that student attitudes towards school and their ability to achieve are more positive when there is parental involvement in homework (as cited in Patall, 2008). Leone and Richards (1989) found that students are more likely to have a positive attitude about school, be more attentive in class, and see homework as more agreeable when their parents are involved, because they see that their parents are invested in their education as well (as cited in Patall, 2008). Balli (1998) reported that 95% of all students felt that they improved in school academically when their parents were involved with their homework. Similarly, Zimmerman (2000) reported that parental involvement in homework is vital to promoting long-term achievement through the development
of behavioral and cognitive habits, such as time management, the importance of attentiveness, goal-setting, and etc.

However, there are often barriers preventing parental involvement in homework for students raised in high poverty areas. In order to make ends meet, parents might be forced to work during hours immediately following the release of children from school or might work nights and need to sleep during the afternoons. Structural problems associated with low socio-economic statuses are active hindrances to parental involvement and engagement in their child’s learning process.

As with many factors related to academic achievement, parental involvement in homework completion cannot create educational success alone. Another highly researched component of parental influence on student achievement is parenting style. Lamborn et. al, (1992) divided parenting styles into three categories: authoritative (high levels of warmth and low levels of demandingness); authoritarian (low levels of warmth and high levels of demandingness); permissive (high levels of warmth and low levels of demandingness). Of the three classifications Lamborn, et. al (1992) found that students who are raised by authoritative parents out perform their peers who were raised by one of the other two parenting styles. Authoritative parents monitor their children’s activities by setting strict but reasonable limitations, allow their children to share in family decisions, and show affection through involvement and interest in their students’ lives. The combination of support, high expectations, and psychological autonomy yields students who spend more time on homework, are more engaged in school, have higher expectations and grades, and are less likely to engage in delinquency, substance abuse, and school misconduct. It could be suggested that a student who
has authoritative parents who are involved in school-related activities, and promote autonomous homework/study skills will be successful in the classroom.

Authoritative parenting is known as a white, middle class, suburban phenomenon and is deemed as an unfeasible alternative to parenting for minority or lower class families. Direct parental involvement in school, such as volunteering or observing classroom activities, is less common for African-American parents and other ethnic minorities. Lamborn et. al (1992) noted that minorities prefer to be involved in school related activities in the home, whereas Eccles and Harold (1996) described Euro-Americans as preferring to be more involved in the actual school setting (Hill and Taylor, 2004). The difference creates a cultural/class divide. Likewise, in research conducted in 1991, Epstein and Dauber found that teachers were more likely to evaluate African-American, other ethnic minorities, and low income families as less supportive of their students’ achievement, than Euro-American and higher income families (as cited in Hill and Taylor, 2004). The parental presence in the classroom and events, like PTA meetings, by Euro-Americans is beneficial to their children, who as a result escape substandard treatment in the classroom, because of positive stereotyping. Instead of describing the cultural/class divide of parental involvement as preference, research associates the division to a material trend: socioeconomic status.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status (SES) is increasingly becoming the most commonly researched factor in education, because of its possible effects on academic achievement (Bornstein and Bradley, 2003 as cited in Sirin 2005). The increase in research levels of socio-economic status is possibly because it is becoming viewed as one of the major divisors of American society, on par
with race. Parent occupation, income, and education level are all important factors of how involved a parent is in his/her child’s educational journey, as socioeconomic status can hinder or encourage school involvement (Sirin 2005). Hill and Taylor (2004) found that parents who achieved a higher socioeconomic status were more involved in school, whereas parents of a lower socioeconomic status battled through obstacles such as “nonflexible work schedules, lack of resources, transportation problems, and stress due to residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods (162).” While students from lower SES face more obstacles on their path to academic success, those problems are the result of structural issues out of the child’s control. Teachers with that understanding are better equipped to help students overcome academic difficulties stemming from lower SES.

Likewise, families with low SES generally have completed fewer years of education. Baker and Stevenson (1986) report that education level is positively correlated to how much a parent feels comfortable advocating for student placement in higher level classes (as cited in Hill and Taylor, 2004). SES is also related to the cultural divide between African-Americans and other ethnic minorities’ parent involvement as compared to Euro-American parents. Sirin (2005) reported that The National Commission on Children (1991) stated that, “minorities are more likely to live in low-income households or in single parent families; their parents are likely to have less education; and they often attend under-funded schools” (p. 420). Hence why teachers report noting the lack of a non-Euro-American parental presence in classrooms.
Identity and Self-Worth

Self-Esteem

Since the 1950s, both psychologists and educators have become interested in how self-esteem related to academic achievement, and have found it to be an important factor that shapes students’ educational experiences. Research surrounding the correlation between self-esteem and academia stemmed from the historic 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. The Supreme Court justices used self-esteem as a part of the resolution to integrate the United States’ public school systems. In the Brown v. Board of Education decision, racial segregation was assessed to “generate… a feeling of inferiority as to [blacks’] status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone” (Bankston and Zhou, 2002, p. 390).

Blascovich and Tomaka (1991) describe self-esteem as an individual’s sense of his or her value or worth, or the extent to which a person values, approves of, appreciates, prizes or likes him or herself. Rosenberg stated that when self-esteem is high, one has self-respect, and feels worthwhile, while acknowledging personal faults and short-comings. When self-esteem is low, one’s perceived weaknesses predominate, and one see oneself as a seriously deficient person who is inadequate and unworthy (Owens, 2002). He also notes that it is through social comparisons, [that] people judge and evaluate themselves in comparison to particular individuals, groups, or social categories (1979).

Not all research on the relationship between self-esteem and scholastic achievement reports a positive correlation. Bankston and Zhou (2002) discuss the disbelief regarding the connection between academic performance and self-esteem. Cowers and King (2001) attacks the entire process of studying self-esteem on the basis that self-esteem is immeasurable, and
discredits the research of earlier studies by suggesting that it is outdated. The authors asserted that there is a weak correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement and cite supporting research from the University of Iowa and the University of Nebraska (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2005). Similar results are discussed in *Failing but Feeling Fine*. Hendrie (1998) discussed the discrepancy African American students, specifically males, cause when the self-esteem and academic achievement correlation is discussed. African American males are found to have the highest level of self-esteem among surveyed students, but generally produce the lowest levels of scholastic achievement. Owens (2001) noted other researchers who do not believe that there is a positive correlation between self-esteem and academia (Portner 1998, Schroeder 1996).

However, the majority of research agrees that Owens and King’s 2001 conclusions are in the minority, as Reasoner (2005) asserted that there is a general consensus by researchers that a close relationship exists between self-esteem and academic success. For example, Mecca, Smelser, and Vasconcellos’ (1989) *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*, discussed self-esteem as an indicator of teenage substance abuse, social responsibility, and high school dropout rates. Owens’ stated, “the [current] underlying assumption is that youths with high self-esteem will behave in more socially acceptable ways than those with low self-esteem and also will in general have higher achievement in conventional pursuits….” Lockett identified academic success as one of the “conventional pursuits” that higher achievement should be seen in, if a student feels good about his or herself (Bankston and Zhou, 2002). Covington (1989) described the positive correlation more specifically: “as the level of self-esteem increases, so does the level of academic achievement scores, but as the level of self-esteem decreases, achievement declines” (72).
Examining why self-esteem affects student scholastic achievement is as equally important as knowing what the effect is. Students who routinely perform well with academics in class are more likely to receive positive feedback from authority figures than students who routinely perform poorly (Rosenberg et. al, 1989). Likewise, those who perform poorly in school are subject to feelings of worthlessness, are put at a higher risk for various psychological, social, and other adolescent problems, and generally have a more pessimistic world view (Owens 2001, Burns 1979, Taylor 1989, Owens 1993). Also, research showed that students with lower self-esteem are more likely to detach themselves from classroom involvement and/or participation. Low self-esteem causes students to suppress contributing their questions or thoughts during class, and many often choose to sit as close to the rear of the classroom (and farthest away from the instructor) as possible (Morrison and Thomas, 1975). Students who isolate themselves from the learning process or are not confident enough to fully engage themselves in the classroom setting clearly are not getting the full benefits of instruction.

Instead, Rosenberg (1979) hypothesized that students with low self-esteem begin to search for positive feedback from places other than school. The aforementioned hypothesis aligns with findings previously discussed in Mecca, Smelser, and Vasconcellos’ (1989) work. Both described how students with low self-esteem can be attracted to delinquency and begin to receive positive self-attributions “from becoming an accepted and successful delinquent” (Rosenberg and Vasconcellos, 1989). By enhancing their self-esteem in an area other than academia, students see fewer reasons why achieving good grades is necessary because their need for approval is already satisfied elsewhere. If delinquency does not attract poorly performing youth, students may instead begin to actively obtain bad grades by giving up, not studying, and/or performing carelessly in effort salvage their self-esteem. Receiving poor grades as a result
of not trying and inadequate preparation is less of a blow to self-esteem, than believing that one is incapable of completing the tasks at hand (Owens 1994). Delinquency is not always the result of low self-esteem, but is a possibility. Regardless, self-esteem can seriously affect academic achievement of students.

**Conclusion**

The institutional, familial, and identity factors identified in this literature review are not the only factors that impact students’ academic opportunities and experiences. Instead the literature review covers the six factors that researchers have most commonly used to answer the main research questions of this study. Self-esteem, socio-economic status, parental involvement, teacher effectiveness/perception, class size, and school-based resources are areas that guided the data collection and analysis of this study. The student answers to those questions provide understanding of how their personal experiences with the institutional, familial, and identity aspects of the education system has impacted their academic achievement. This review of the literature, and in particular the major factors identified as key to students’ academic success or failures, is used as a framework for collecting and analyzing data for this collective case study of high school students.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to understand what factors are generally considered to have the greatest impact on students from elementary school to high school, the previous collection and description of relevant literature was compiled. The previous review of relevant literature provides a framework for making sense of factors that impact student academic opportunities and achievement. The research from the literature review led to the following questions that frame this study: “How do students’ academic achievements in elementary school impact their educational opportunities in middle and high school?”; and “What factors contribute to the change in a student’s academic successes or failures?”.

Methods

In this section, there is a comprehensive description of the steps taken to complete the actual study. The protocol of beginning this investigation, the acquirement of participants, the interview structure, descriptions of the participants, how the data was collected and analyzed, and the limitations are all included.

In order to investigate the previous questions a collective case study with methods borrowed from the ethnographic methodological tradition was employed. Ethnographic interviewing methods were applied to the case study methodology, for the following reasons: 1) “A strong emphasis on exploring the nature of a particular social phenomenon, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them (An Introduction to Qualitative Research, p. 233);” There was no set hypothesis that framed this study. It is a study that is completely guided by the experiences of the students who are interviewed. To set a hypothesis would steer away from that goal. To attach a hypothesis would limit the scope of possible answers and prevent the students’
interviews from providing responses that were indicative their own personal experiences. 2) “A tendency to work primarily with “unstructured” data: that is, data that have not been coded at the point of data collection in terms of a closed set of analytic categories (233);” All data was qualitative and collected through one-on-one interviews to allow the students to provide responses that possibly highlighted topics that were not originally included in the literature review research. A survey or quantitative based method of collecting data would not provide the opportunity for the students to go into detail about their educational opportunities and academic achievements. Also, speech patterns, insinuations, and body language are all important aspects of communication and story-telling, so to collect “structured” data would hinder access to all of that. 3) “Investigation of a small number of cases, perhaps just one case, in detail (233);” The end goal of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the students’ personal experiences in education. In order to achieve that a small pool of students was used. Five case studies were investigated in total. Educational experiences, personal feelings, and academic opportunities were variables collected from this study looked at.

Also, minority students compose over 90% of the ethnic make-up of Fillmore Public Schools. Ethnography is often used when investigating historically marginalized minority populations. Howard and Scott (1981) describe ethnography as an especially appropriate methodology to use with historically marginalized minority populations, because it creates an environment where the group can be assessed without the danger of unfavorably comparing them against the majority population. According to Howard and Scott (1981), ethnography allows minorities to “be studied with proper attention to their own perceptions of social reality, that their purposes be understood and that their perceptions of behavior be described in terms of what they are rather than what they are not.” (p. 131)
Protocol and Participants

Adams Elementary School is located in the city of Fillmore, a southeastern mid-sized city. The elementary school is demographically similar to the Fillmore Public Schools system it belongs to. Over 75% of students are African-American, over 15% of students are Hispanic/Latino, roughly 5% of students are Caucasian, 2% are unreported, and over 75% of all students receive free or reduced lunch. Approximately, 25 high school students were drawn from a blind sample of the bottom 15% of Adams Elementary School’s 2006 graduating class (an urban, majority minority and lower socioeconomic attended city, public school). The students were calculated to be in the bottom 15% based on their state-wide standardized testing scores. For a more complete list of the different students determined to be the in bottom 15% of Adam’s Elementary School’s 2005-2006 graduating class see Appendix A. A sample of five students (2 male and 3 female) was used to allow for a more in-depth look into the study’s main questions.

Students were chosen from the bottom 15% because this is a group I feel that research should be focused on servicing, and a group that is often not provided the same educational opportunities as students at higher initial achievement levels. Minorities who come from lower socioeconomic and urban backgrounds are already considered statistically disadvantaged, and as such the lower achieving students should be studied in order that they do not remain disadvantaged. Students labeled as having mental, emotional, and/or behavioral disturbances were omitted from the selection process. Students with Individual Educational Plans (IEP) were not used in this study.

Prior to contacting the 25 students, a Human Subject Proposal was submitted to The College of William and Mary’s Protocol and Compliance Management services in May of 2011. The proposal was reviewed by the Educational Institutional Review Committee (ERIC) and
approved in June of 2011. Also, a Research and Evaluation proposal was submitted to the Fillmore Public School (FPS) system to gain permission to conduct research. Permission to contact the selected students was given from FPS in December 2011. After my thesis was approved by both The College of William and Mary and FPS, the Principal of Adams Elementary went through the records of the school’s 5th graders from 2006 and provided me with the names of 25 students who were determined to be in the bottom 15% of their class.

Afterwards, I visited the three FPS high schools the 25 selected students now attend, McKinley High School, Taft High School, and Cheney High School, to talk to each of the principals. While waiting for approval, I wrote parental consent forms, and letters of formals to participate in the research study (see Appendices D and E). On December 9th, 2011 I travelled to McKinley and Taft high schools to solicit permission from the respective Principals to work with the students within their schools. Upon arriving at the respective schools I found that eight of the original 25 selected students no longer attended Fillmore Public Schools and three of the selected students were not in school on the day that I went to distribute the interview information. Likewise, two of the selected students were enrolled in an alternative school. I left the three interview invitation letters and consent forms for the three absent students with their respective guidance counselors, and went to Clinton Teen Center (the alternative school) to distribute the last two.

Nine students returned their consent forms indicating their willingness to participate in the study. I followed up with the nine students and managed to schedule interviews with five of them (see Appendix C). Each interview was conducted with the guide of a Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (see Appendix F).

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2 All names have been changed for the privacy of the participants, including: the schools, the school district, and participant names.
Participant Descriptions

Veronica Evergreen

Veronica Evergreen was a 18 year old female of African-American descent. Veronica is one of five children, and lives with her aunt. Her grandmother attended community college, her mother attended college, and her father finished high school. She has attended four different schools within in Fillmore school district: Adams Elementary School, Van Buren Middle School, Monroe Middle School, and McKinley High School. Adams, Monroe, and McKinley are all her home schools. She attended Van Buren Middle School until the end of her 7th grade year because Van Buren offered better opportunities than her home school, Monroe. Veronica reported that her grades were poor when she was in elementary school, but now she makes mostly A’s and B’s on her report card. She will be graduating on time, and currently only goes to school for one class, Government.

When answering interview questions she would focus on a point just past my ear, occasionally making brief eye contact with me. While she never said that she was uncomfortable with any of the questions, she would shift in such a way and stare at the ground after certain questions that I knew not to push for further information. She rarely gave answers that were more than two sentences; detailed answers were very rare.

Harrison Daniels

Harrison Daniels is an 18 year old male of African-American descent. Harrison is one of six children, and has attended six different schools: Roosevelt Elementary School, Adams Elementary School, Monroe Middle School, SLP Alternative School, McKinley High School, and the Clinton Teen Center. He switched schools as a result of moving from his mother’s home
to his father’s and then back to his mother’s. Harrison was placed in SLP Alternative School, because of frequent fighting. He enrolled in the Clinton Teen Center in order to graduate on time. While his parents completed high school, neither pursued post-secondary education. Harrison admits to having very poor grades for the majority of his educational experience.

**Lily Michaels**

Lily Michaels is 17 year old African-American female. She’s the adopted daughter of an older couple, has one adoptive sister, and does not know how many other children her adoptive parents have. While Lily’s mother finished high school, her father did not. Lily has never moved and attended Adams Elementary School, Monroe Middle School, SLP Alternative School, and McKinley High. She was sent to SLP Alternative for her 8th grade year, because of behavioral issues, such as insubordination and fighting. Lily’s grades fluctuated throughout her time in Fillmore Public Schools.

She was very outgoing and very comfortable with the interview process. She seemed very self-assured, sometimes using humor to cover up how upset she felt when answering some of the questions.

**Jaslyn Daniels**

An 18 year old African-American female, Jaslyn Daniels is the eldest of six children. Three of her siblings live with her father, and she with two of her other siblings live with her mother. Both of her parents completed high school, but neither pursued post-secondary educations. She has attended seven different schools: Roosevelt Elementary School, Adams Elementary School, Monroe Middle School, Van Buren Middle School, McKinley High School,
Taft High School, and Clinton Teen Center. She switched schools as a result of moving with her family, and also because of frequent fighting. Jaslyn was expelled from McKinley High School for a year for fighting, and eventually enrolled in the Clinton Teen Center to complete her high school requirements. Jaslyn admits to having poor grades for the majority of her educational experience.

She had a very domineering personality and sat mostly with her arms across her chest, and when answering questions either maintained eye contact or picked at her nails.

**Gary Boston**

Gary Boston was a 17 year old African-American male. His father is currently incarcerated, and Gary knows very little about him. His mother completed high school, but did not pursue post-secondary education. Gary lives with his mother and his little brother. As such, Gary attended Adams Elementary School, Monroe Middle School, and McKinley High School. At the time of this study, Gary was enrolled in two Advanced Placement classes, and has had a strong academic career for the majority of his time in Fillmore Public Schools. He is the anomaly of the students interviewed. He had good grades until the 5th grade when his father was incarcerated, but returned to his strong academic record in the 6th.

He was very emotive in his expressions and was overzealous when it came to answering questions. Gary spoke for minutes at a time, and when he was particularly upset was very intent on telling how the system had wronged him.
Data Collection

Each student scheduled an individual interview, and at the request of FPS all of the interviews were held at Adams Elementary School (where the students graduated from). The Principal, John Clearfield, of Adams Elementary School was present at all interviews, as outlined in the guidelines mandated by Fillmore Public Schools. Prior to each interview, I reviewed the following important guidelines from the consent form with each student:

1. The ensuing thesis will be stored and available in the William and Mary Swem digital repository.

2. Final copies of the thesis will be provided to district administration as well as to interested participants upon conclusion.

3. Participation in this study lasts for a total of 1-2 hours. The interview will be an investigation of school structure, class organization, personal educational experiences, and opportunities provided.

4. I will audio record the interview. You may at any time ask to review the audio file and edit it, in order to delete any material you do not want on the audio file. You may also turn the recorder off at any time during the conversation. You may also choose to respond or not respond to any portion of the survey or interview.

5. At any time during the study, you may withdraw from the study and no more information will be collected from you.

6. You have been informed that your participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to answer particular questions on the survey or during the interview. You are free to withdraw your consent for participation in this study at any time.
Once the students stated that they fully understood the guidelines, I recorded the respective interviews. I had the students start by stating the pseudonym that they had created for themselves, followed by their age, and grade level.

The semi-structured interview protocol is located in Appendix C. Each interview began with general questions covering topics from how the student feels about their success/grades in school to what was a moment they were proud of academically. The general questions were asked in order to illustrate the student’s overall perspectives of school. Determining whether the student had a positive or negative impression of school is important to do early, because students with negative attitudes towards academics can be wrongly assumed to be students who are not achieving academically. Therefore, the general questions portion of the interview was covered first to give early insight about how the student has fared in school.

The next series of interview questions were designed based on the research literature. “Familial Involvement,” “Institutional Experiences,” and “Self-Esteem/Self-Motivation” were the remaining three interview sections and include questions that focused on important aspects of each of the segments of the literature review. The interview questions were all semi-structured and open-ended, i.e. “What role do your parents, siblings, and/or other family members usually play in your academic life?” The open-ended questions, likewise, provided openings for collecting data about potentially new factors that impacted their educational opportunities that were not investigated in the original literature review. Also, most of the interview questions were followed by the question “Why?” for further clarification if needed.

Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. At the conclusion of each interview the student was thanked for his/her contribution, told that they would be contacted in
the future, and if they had any questions to please feel free to call or email me. Each student was then transported back home. Many of the students would not have been able to participate in the study if transportation was not provided to them.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews recording were transcribed word for word. After the transcriptions were completed, I went through each interview and coded each line of text. Each line was coded for meaning (Corbin, 1990). Wherever a student mentioned something that could possibly be identified as an influential component of their educational experiences, then it was given an identifying code. The codes used for this study were: class size (CS), teacher effectiveness (TE), teacher perceptions and behavior (TPB), administrative effectiveness (AE), administration perception (AP), structure (S1), resource availability (RA), school environment (SE), socio-economic status (SES), support (S2), authority type (AT), familial make-up (FM), familial education level (FEL), parental involvement (PI), extracurricular (EX), negative perception (NP), positive perception (PP), academic history (AH), student opinion (SO), future plans (FP), culpability (C), student personal effort (SPE), social life (SL), personal love of school (PLS), and student personal behavior (SPB).

Reflective memos were created for each student interviewed and were organized by the coded sections so that key themes could be seen and compared across the five cases. Afterwards, student memos were assembled (a draft is listed in Appendix E), where the small summaries were combined with quotes that supported the key themes that emerged. Finally, the student memos were compared to one another to see if the key themes that emerged within the individual
student memos turned out to be major factors that influenced all of the individuals’ educational experiences.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study stem from the small number of students interviewed. The ethnographic aims and time constraints of this thesis prevented more students from being recruited and interviewed. Originally permission was requested for in-classroom observations of the students participating in the survey, the ability to talk with teachers about the students, and obtain grade data. Unfortunately, Fillmore Public Schools would not grant permission for those aspects of the study to be incorporated. As a result, this study was limited to solely the perspectives of the student participants from the interviews.

Generalizations of Fillmore Public Schools are avoided, because the experiences of five students cannot speak for the educational experiences of over 20,000 other students. Also, in class observations granted for this study by FPS. It would have provided valuable insight to have observed all of the students in their natural school environment.
Chapter 4: Results

Four major themes emerged from my analysis of the data collected from the interviews with the five participants that are presented as findings below. These themes relate to the most pertinent factors impacting the students’ educational experiences and opportunities, and their academic achievement. The themes identified are: 1) teacher effectiveness, the ability of an instructor to engage students in such a way that they enjoy learning or take it seriously, and understand why they are learning; 2) the involvement of the participants’ families and friends in their academic careers, and how that involvement shapes their success and attitudes about education; 3) the participants of the schools that they were assigned to and how the schools and school system is viewed overall; and 4) the educational opportunities provided to the students.

It should not be assumed that those four factors are the only things that affect every student’s academic achievement. However, they were influential enough for these participants that they emerged as possible answers to the central questions of the investigation.

Teacher Effectiveness

Each of the participants emphasized teacher effectiveness as important to their educational experiences during their interviews. In particular, the participants identified several key aspects that made teachers more or less effective for their learning: the teacher’s ability to engage students through their teaching style, the type of authority the teacher presented in the classroom, and the level of personal relationships developed by teachers with their students.
Engagement and Motivation

Extrinsic motivation was a key factor that influenced how well the participants were engaged in their classes. The participants described their motivation to be directly influenced by the teacher’s ability to engage and increase student participation within the classroom. According to the student descriptions, their level of engagement during lessons was directly related to the teaching style of the instructors. Harrison, who routinely skipped classes before enrolling in the Clinton Teen Center, reported that he often did not bother to attend classes where the teachers made the subject matter boring. Veronica discussed struggling with analogies in 11th grade English; eventually giving up on trying to learn them, because she thought they were pointless and her teacher had never made an effort to explain their relevancy. All of the students described learning environments where the teacher lectured directly from a set of notes, taught by frequently writing workbook problems on the board, or had minimal interaction with their students. In each situation the students either regularly chose to skip, were consistently tardy, gave up on trying to understand, or daydreamed during those classes. Instances where the instructors failed to actively engage their classroom resulted in the students not putting forth their best effort to learn.

Conversely, in the instances where students described teachers as putting forth the effort to pique the interest of the class, students reciprocated by actively participating in the learning process. Lily recounted a positive story about her current History teacher without even being prompted to share:

Interviewer: Why is History your favorite class?

Lily: Because, um, in that class. It’s like the teacher interacts more better with the students. We have more hands on type things, and she like actually works with us, instead
of just trying to tell us to do it on our own and such and such type things. Like that’s one of my favorite teachers, Mrs. Arthur.

Interviewer: And then, so it’s more hands on?

Lily: More than my other classes.

Interviewer: What types of things will she do?

Lily: She will give us, like just the last class, we were working on the WWII spies or whatever, and she gave us this decoding thing that we had to like decode out this thing, where as we were reading there was a word that you had to decode and like that was fun. We, you know, we actually read and learned a lot just by reading and decoding out the words. So it’s just like the interesting things that we do.

Similarly, Veronica recounted this positive interaction with a teacher.

Interviewer: Okay, um, so I know you said that you had a teacher who wrote you recommendations to get you a job, um, can you identify one teacher or a class that has had a major impact in your life?

Veronica: One of my history teachers.

Interviewer: How?

Veronica: Like, cause when I wasn’t like really.... like he sat me down, and he did like an interview thing so that he could see what he needed to do so that he could see what he needs to do to help me like learn more. So you can like actually know what you’re doing. So he sat you down and did like a documentary.

Interviewer: Oh wow, that’s pretty cool. So... how did this like come about?

Veronica: Because he used all the ideas that everyone had said and he used them in class.

Interviewer: So was this at the beginning of the year, the middle of the year....
Veronica: The middle.

Interviewer: Okay, so what kind of questions did he ask you?

Veronica: He just asked like, what did he need to do to make us like more focused, and enjoy it more.

Interviewer: And how did you feel about that?

Veronica: I really liked it. The fact that he actually took time to sit down and ask.

Interviewer: Mhmm, do you think that changed the way that he taught during the second half of the year?

Veronica: Yea, he like did hands on things and stuff. Like we went to like the James River and like did stuff... [laughs] it was nasty... Yeah, so even though I didn’t like History, I enjoyed his class. Yeah.

Veronica’s least favorite class was History, but she appreciated that the teacher had the students evaluate his performance and then made changes based on their suggestions. This suggests that students who are validated by their teachers are more likely to be engaged in the classroom, regardless of whether or not the actual subject material appeals to them. Teachers who work with students to create classroom environments where they feel like their opinions matter are teachers who are providing every opportunity possible for children to succeed.

**Personal Relationships with Teachers**

Veronica’s History teacher also exhibited another characteristic that the students mentioned as an aspect of what keeps them engaged and feeling positively about class: an attempt to create a positive personal relationship with his students. From Veronica’s description,
her History teacher expressed a professional interest in her academic and personal well-being. For example, Veronica explained what she saw as the characteristics of a good teacher:

Veronica: Someone like my... that History teacher, and my math teacher.

Interviewer: So someone who.... fill in the blank

Veronica: Like will help you out and to get to know what you actually need to get to do; someone who wants to get to know you, inside and outside of the classroom.

Veronica was not the only student to express this sentiment. Every student, when asked to describe what they envisioned as a perfect teacher, used the phrase, “someone who cares,” or something similar. Lily constantly referred to a past math teacher, Mrs. Woodrow, with whom she has maintained a close relationship. She named Mrs. Woodrow as one of the main reasons she has reached the level of success she has in school. Likewise, Gary spoke of a teacher who told Gary’s class that he did not want to teach them what to think, but how to think. Gary saw that as his teacher caring more about them learning information for the standardized test, and responded with “…he was that type of teacher that made you want to think more deeply, instead of like just remembering and stuff like that…” Based on what the students recounted, instructors who show that they deeply care about their students, and not just how well they score on standardized exams, are more likely to keep their classrooms attentive and ready to learn.

However, the students made a clear distinction between teachers who created close positive personal relationships with them and instructors who were friends with students, but unprofessional in their demeanor. Lily, Harrison, and Jaslyn described how they all lacked respect for teachers who were more focused on being their friends than doing their jobs. Jaslyn and Harrison reported that they frequently skipped classes of teachers who they felt were wasting their time, because the teacher was more focused on being cool than relaying the material.
Instead, the students interviewed preferred teachers who were strict over teachers who had no structure to their classroom or spent time “hanging out.”

Harrison: Man, when teachers just be laid back in class, or acting like they have somewhere better to be, then I skip. I mean it’s a waste of time to just sit there and do book work in the class. I can do that at home.

Interviewer: What do you mean by laid back teachers?

Harrison: Teachers that have no order, like... like they do stuff just like whenever. Those teachers don’t have control over the class anyhow. Everybody just be all over everywhere, doing whatever. I mean the teacher don’t care.

Interviewer: How do you know the teacher doesn’t care?

Harrison: Because... because *shrug* I guess, man, I guess... teachers that are real strict and have order to their classrooms want you to do good and care, because they won’t let you act any type of way. Like in Mrs. Grant’s math class at McKinley, she kept me in line and told me she wouldn’t let me interrupt her class. But she teaches, I could always count on her to teach... that’s why I ain’t skip her class. *laughs* And, I mean, I just like Math too.

Although, Harrison already liked Math, he equated his attendance to how much the teacher showed that she cared about his advancement in her class through providing a structured, no nonsense learning environment. The establishment of professional personal relationships between teachers and students show students that instructors care about them as individuals.
Teacher Expectations

In addition to classes that included student engagement and teachers who showed they cared about students, the participants also explained that they preferred classrooms with structure and high expectations, as well as teachers who took their jobs seriously. The instructors who identified the interests of students, and utilized those interests during instruction, created opportunities for their classrooms to learn. Each student associated how effective a teacher with the type of authority a teacher presented, as well as how well the instructor managed to control the classroom. The students’ description of what makes a teacher strict ranged from someone who “don’t play” and were “serious about their work” to teachers who would send security after students who they suspected were skipping, in order they be brought back to class. Even Jaslyn reported that she skipped classes at a lower rate when she had stricter teachers who appeared serious about teaching. Jaslyn said that she felt that when teachers were serious in the classroom, she became more serious about learning and completing her work as well. Harrison felt like teachers who were stricter cared more, because the instructors did not seem to waste his time in class nor would they allow him to waste the time of his classmates. Lily, who never skipped, but often showed up to classes whenever she felt like it, stated that she always came in on time to classes where felt like the teachers would not tolerate that type of behavior.

Lily: See the thing is, I ain’t gone lie, I do come in late to certain classes.
Interviewer: Why?
Lily: Because I just don’t like the class and I just don’t be feeling like going. I mean there are some classes where the teachers don’t play games and either you show up on time or you’re out of luck. I go to those classes on time... every time. But sometimes, when I know the teacher don’t do nothing, I will go to a certain teacher that would give me a
pass, and so I’ll go to that teacher and she’ll write me a pass and then I’ll go to class when I get ready.

Each of the students’ experiences showed that the teacher’s strict expectations that the students be present, on time, and actually learn the material positively shaped their behaviors.

Even in cases where students did not depend on the instructor’s authority level to moderate their behavior, the interviewed students asserted that they preferred teachers with good classroom management. Lily described the classroom environment to feel “like a zoo” whenever she attended a class where the instructor did not have firm control over the students. Gary felt like strict teachers prevented the classroom environment from getting out of hand: “Teachers who make sure their class knows that schoolwork is business don’t have no problem. The more like firm a teacher is the better the class act, and the better the kids can concentrate.” According to Gary, the stricter the teacher the fewer the number of student interruptions.

Interestingly enough, Gary and Veronica had a much more positive opinion of their teachers and had more accounts of teachers who helped them to be successful than did Lily, Harrison, and Jaslyn. Gary suggested that the discrepancy stemmed from his enrollment in advanced classes.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Gary: That I’ve had mostly good teachers?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Gary: Uh, I guess. I don’t really know. Maybe, I mean maybe because I’ve had advanced classes. So maybe the teachers that were teaching me, they had to teach. But, maybe because the standard is high for teachers for advanced classes. I don’t really know why I’ve had the good teachers that I’ve had, I’m just lucky that I have them.
Here Gary reflects both the perception that students in advanced classes had the opportunity to work with better teachers, but also reflects the fact that advanced classes often have higher expectations and standards for behavior and coursework as well. When these students perceived that they had a “good” teacher then their perception of the class changes as well as their own behavior and views of that class.

Involvement of Family and Friends

While teachers play an important role in the type of education students receive, familial educational support and involvement, as identified in the literature review, are highly influential aspects of what helps students to succeed. Four out of the five students reported that their parents currently had minimal to no involvement with their education. Gary, the anomaly of the set because of his high grades before his father was incarcerated, reported that even though his mother did not understand the majority of the material he was working on, she made him do his homework on the kitchen table so that she could be sure of him completing it. Gary was enrolled in Advanced Placement classes and was very confident in the work that he had produced thus far. Likewise, Veronica said her grades were mostly A’s and B’s, reported that her Aunt helped her with homework through middle school, and that her grandmother occasionally checked up on her grades. However, Veronica is only enrolled in one class her senior year, Government, compared to Gary’s nearly full senior schedule, including the two Advanced Placement courses he is taking. The difference between the two schedules could be partially based in parental influence and pressure.

Veronica reported having very little parental pressure placed on her and her education. She, like Lily, Jaslyn, and Harrison did not receive punishment for poor grades and/or behavior.
From the descriptions from the students, it appears that students who have parents who do not place emphasis on their educational success tend to not strive to reach their full potential. For example, Lily failed Gym/Health class, simply because she chose not to dress out for gym.

   Interviewer: Um, alright. What role do you parents, siblings, and/or other family members play in your academic life?
   Lily: None.
   Interviewer: None?
   Lily: Uh uh, cause they don’t... I mean, we don’t really talk about school at my house?

   ... Interviewer: Since you guys don’t talk about school, if you get a bad grade is there any punishment for it?
   Lily: I mean I’ll get fussed at *shrugs*. But I don’t get bad grades often, so that’s not something that happens a lot.

   Interviewer: Well, what happened with Algebra I last year?
   Lily: I got a F, and they was upset about it, because that was my first F ever... well other than Gym, and I had 2 F’s on my report card at the same time. It was upsetting for them, but it was upsetting for me too. I was just like *sighs* they gone have a attitude when I get home.

In a household where choosing to fail a course would be inexcusable, it is highly unlikely that Lily would have failed. However, Lily reported that her parents never talk about school at home, and she did not receive punishment for bringing home an ‘F’ on her report card.

   Even still Lily understood the importance of familial involvement in academics. She associated the lack of parental involvement within her school system to be one of the main reasons why her educational opportunities have been stunted.
Lily: I feel like the system is unfair in the city. They don’t do as much for the city kids and they do for the county kids. And I know it’s not just like the Board or whatever, it’s also the parents. Because most of the parents in the city, don’t interact with the school like the county kids’ parents do.

Interviewer: Do your parents interact with the school?

Lily: They can’t, because of health and stuff. But the other parents don’t either. In county schools, the parents come out to PTA meetings, they come up to the school, volunteer at the school, but city kids’ parents’ll be like “school is for you, not for me.” That’s how I feel like the parents of the city feel.

Interviewer: Do you feel like that has an impact on the overall system of Fillmore Public Schools?

Lily: Yeah, I feel like if the parents don’t care, and then the Board will probably act like why should we care?

Similar to Lily, Harrison expressed that because his mother or any of his friends’ parents did not really care about his success in school that he thought that “maybe, high school doesn’t really matter.” Familial involvement with and encouragement of academic achievement was shown to be highly influential in the lives of the interviewed students. Gary and Veronica, who had the highest levels of academic achievement, reported the highest levels of familial involvement. Likewise, the families who do not provide a source of punishment for or enforce rules regarding poor academic achievement tend to be those that yield low producing students.
Student Perceptions of the School and Institutional Resources

Each of the students viewed their school and their school system more negatively than positively. Similar to their perceptions of having “good” teachers in more advanced classes, they also viewed their schools to be of a lower tier of quality than other schools in the city. The students see their poor schools and feel as like others believe their schools to be indicators of their own worth and character.

Interviewer: How do you like going to Clinton Teen Center?
Harrison: I mean, it’s alright I guess [shrug]. It’s no better than going to McKinley. Most people think that because I went there I’m just as bad as everybody else. I just get tired of people judging me, you know? I’m just like whatever, since you think I’m so bad, I’m gonna just go ahead and be like you want me to be... bad [shrug].

Gary had the same defeated attitude as Harrison, as he talked about McKinley being on the news for stabbings and riots. Not a single student in this study had pride in their school. As Harrison’s statement implies, this lack of pride stemmed from outside opinions of their schools.

Interviewer: How do you think somebody could instill school spirit at your school?
Lily: I mean start a program, give us like... be more excited to go to the football games, the basketball games... even though our football team sucks, still support them. I mean if you go out there and encourage them then they would probably be wanting to do better. But when they wear the uniforms and they walk through the hall, people will yell stuff like, “y’all gone lose anyway” and I’m like wow, that doesn’t help. I mean it’s funny because this is your school, people are gonna think that you suck too. And people do think we suck.
The students, in part, do see their self-worth as an extension of their schools’, but it is clear that their schools are not viewed positively.

School spirit and behavioral problems are not the only source of discontent that students have about their schools. The amount and type of resources that the students perceive their schools as having plays into their beliefs about the worth of their high schools. As seen in Lily’s quotation from the previous section, she sees a difference between the educational opportunities presented by the city and those presented by the surrounding schools, specifically suburban schools. Lily was not alone in her sentiment. All of the students expressed that if they had the choice, they would not send their children to schools within Fillmore Public Schools. All but Veronica said they would send their children to the surrounding county schools, with Veronica saying she would only consider sending her children to private school because of the smaller classroom sizes. Aside from Veronica, Harrison and Jaslyn replied with aggressive “NO”’s to the question of whether or not they would send their children to Fillmore Public Schools. Jaslyn said she would not send her children to FPS because she felt like the teachers were inexperienced and that the resources available to the students were “hand-me-down stuff.”

Interviewer: Okay, would you put your children in Fillmore Public Schools?

Jaslyn: Uhhhhh. NOOO!

Interviewer: Why not?

Jaslyn: We stay getting hand-me-down stuff. I don’t want that for my kids. I would just prefer for them to go to a Polk [county] School or a Pierce [county] School.

Interviewer: Why there?
Jaslyn: Because, like Polk and Pierce they more... experienced and stuff, like they more... like the teachers more advanced than those in Fillmore. And, they never get the dingy dirty stuff we be getting.

Gary and Lily went into greater detail about their disdain for Fillmore Public Schools, because of their inability to compare to the local suburban schools. As noted in the literature review, self-esteem is positively correlated with the types of grades students produced, but the results of the interviews show that self-esteem could also be associated with a student’s perceptions of the quality of his or her school. Gary names his school, McKinley High, as one of the worst in the area, and he and Lily both talk about how their school has received a large amount of negative press recently. They both appeared to be ashamed of the way that their school is viewed, and believe it is because of the negative views that the outside world has of their schools that their schools have poor resources.

Harrison, Gary, and Lily also mentioned that they believed that the school system was building a new McKinley High School with the intention of re-districting the lines so that there would be more white students, and the extra “bad” kids would be sent to the neighboring Taft High School. Gary, specifically, started off by discussing how poorly kept McKinley High was before discussing his educational opportunity based concerns.

Interviewer: Do you not like the facility at all?
Gary: It’s … its kinda ugly. Kinda old, tiles pop up, very few bathrooms that are decent, I don’t know when the last time the floors have been mopped, because you can drop your book bag and it just collects so much dust. The shades are like a hundred years old and when you pull ‘em you have to tug em... like really tug em to bring ‘em down. I think there’s asbestos in the ceiling. My English teacher that teaches me now, she says that
maybe the asbestos causing her to, you know keep having cancer. She’s just been there for so long. Asbestos might be something that leads to cancer.

Interviewer: Do you think when students get the new school they’ll...

Gary: [interrupts] Act better?

Interviewer: Yea, or treat it better?

Gary: I hope so. To me at first I thought that. Like we did an essay and it said, “If we build a new McKinley, how do you think people are going to act?” I said, I think I’m gonna act better, because if you’re at a school that look nice, you’ll treat it better. If you have a school that looks like dirt, then you’re gonna be like well it’s dirt, you’re not gonna respect it. But that’s what I felt at first, but then I was like, then again if they get the new school, they might just wanta mess that up too *looks frustrated*. They might not care so but that it is why they are rezoning and trying to get more people from across the river to come... to come to McKinley. They want... well what I heard... they want the school to be more a... equally proportional. They want more white kids and Hispanic kids, and … some black kids. They don’t want just black. I think they think they’re going to get more money that way, you know, by sending some of the kids.... well like me, I think I’m actually closer to Taft, like it’s just down the street, but it might be the same distance. I think what they’re thinking is if you get rid of all the bad black kids, send them somewhere else, that everything is gonna be better... which might happen.

Unfortunately, the students seem to associate different behavioral and educational opportunity levels with the different schools in the area. Not only that, but Gary stated that the school system will only build a new school for a mixed population instead of an all black one. The students appear to feel not respected, poorly treated (because of the lack of equal resources and
educational opportunities provided across school systems), and perceive other people as viewing them negatively. This in turn appears to influence their own views of their schools and opportunities and can be used as an excuse not to perform well or to believe that it does not matter how they perform because of the context of the their schools and beliefs about the education system as a whole. This belief, at least in terms of the educational opportunities they have had in their K-12 experience, also leads to opportunities for post-secondary education, or the lack of opportunities in this case - as explored in the next section.

Actual Educational Opportunities Presented

All five of the students interviewed are on track to graduate on time, June 2012, a great accomplishment for all students across the nation. In Fillmore Public Schools, the on-time graduation rate is a major enough goal that the percentage of students graduating on-time is released to the press on a yearly basis. However, the five students are receiving diplomas even though they feel that they have not received without having the same educational opportunities presented to them as students in other high schools and school systems. This begins with the lack of engagement and challenging and relevant coursework in the classroom described above, which significantly decreases the level of education each student is receiving.

Despite the fact that the students are graduating and doing so on time, not a single one has concrete post-secondary plans. This serves as yet another example of the lack of educational opportunities that have been provided. Only Gary was placed on a pre-collegiate curriculum track by his guidance counselor, despite each student expressing a desire to go onto some sort of post-secondary education or to begin a career, as they explain below.
Gary: So, I just feel like I’m ready to get out and go to college, and meet new people. I’ve been around the same people pretty much since Adams. Some people I still have in most of my classes, so I’m like I just want to get away from that, and I just want to, you know, start really motivating myself and meeting new people. You know that’s what college is about.

... 
Jaslyn: I mean like I want to go to college and be a pediatrician. But I don’t know how I’m gonna do all that...

... 
Lily: ‘Cause I had went up to [my guidance counselor] and had told him that I wanted to go to college and like I needed to know the criteria for certain colleges and stuff like that.

... 
Harrison: Me, go to college? Ha, yeah that’d be real cool. I just don’t know how to get there or how to pay for it.

... 
Veronica: Yes, and because it’s like I want to take up health and science when I get to like college.

The students will be graduating from high school, but, according to them, without proper counseling and a sub-par education. Gary lamented that former McKinley High School graduates returned to speak with the current students about post-secondary education, but could not confirm that the education they received from McKinley High adequately prepared them for life after high school. As a result, Gary expressed the fear upon enrolling in college that he would not be able to keep up with the work.

Interviewer: How confident do you feel about the quality of your school work?
Gary: The quality of my school work? Uh, it’s easy. It’s challenging, but it’s not challenging to the point where you really have to think about it. I like it, it fits me. But as far as it challenging you, and getting you to really think. No. But, that’s what bothers me, when seniors came -- you know we had seniors come from past classes who were in college, and they talked to us about college. And we asked them, you know, if our school, McKinley, prepare you for college, and they said, they were kinda hesitant, and said no, not really. And that’s how we feel, like we’re not getting prepared for college. You don’t want to get there and have high school have been a breeze and college knock you off your feet. I mean there are some days that I don’t have homework, or it’s so easy that I do it all during class. But I mean when we get to college, we’re gonna have homework and it won’t always be easy, we’ll have to read billions of pages a night *laughs*. I’m hoping that I’m prepared for that, but I don’t know that I am because of the education that I’m receiving. I don’t think it prepares you really.

Fears like Gary’s are factors that prevent students from building the courage to enroll in higher education. Harrison outright expressed a similar fear, saying that he was not considering continuing his education, because he felt like he “wasn’t any good at it now, because [he was] not being taught enough” and that he “didn’t see how he’d be good at it later.” The educational opportunities the students are being presented are not only detrimental in their quality, but are also damaging to the self-confidence the students possess when considering post-secondary school options.

Lily’s description of her feelings about the educational opportunities she has been presented with as a student of Fillmore Public Schools sums up the experiences of the other four students:
Interviewer: Do you feel like you’re reaching your potential as a student?
Lily: Not really, ‘cause I feel like I’m not being challenged enough.

Interviewer: You don’t feel like you’re being challenged in school?
Lily: Yeah. I just feel like the stuff is too easy and it’s holding me back.

These students are aware of the quality of their educational opportunities, and see that they have not been challenged enough by opportunities that provided. Some of this stemmed from administrative problems and the ineffectiveness of their guidance counselors. Veronica is only enrolled in Government as a senior, and was given the options of taking Gym or Creative Writing to fill out her senior schedule by her guidance counselor. Her guidance counselor did not offer her a pre-collegiate track course load.

Also, Veronica and Gary attend the same school, but have two different counselors. Veronica’s guidance counselor did not even offer her the opportunities that were given to Gary, even though they both had been enrolled in advanced classes since middle school. Gary’s guidance counselor encouraged him to excel, but Veronica’s did not.

Jaslyn, unlike Harrison, feels as if she is now reaching her full potential as a student now that she’s enrolled in the Clinton Teen Center. She feels that she is doing better in school at Clinton than she did in regular school. While Jaslyn’s sentiment is positive, she and Harrison spend around 5 hours a day in front of a computer screen where all of their lessons are self-taught. Jaslyn also reported how she could easily pass “modules” for her required classes; the tests involved required no higher thinking and often instructors would mark that she had passed, when she had not.

Jaslyn: Mhmm, there’s a teacher, but she don’t teach.

Interviewer: So...
Jaslyn: She just sits in the classroom *breaks out in laughter*, she just sit in the classroom and just watches us work on the computer all day. She’ll like... oh my god... she get paid to do nothing, but um, she just, say if you do a test and you fail the test, she’ll go over it with you or if you, if you need... let me see... or some of them just take the flag off and put a star. Won’t even go over it with you, they’ll just say that you passed.

Interviewer: Wait, they’ll just say that you passed?

Jaslyn: Mhmm, when you didn’t.

Jaslyn and Harrison do not write papers, have classroom discussions, or do anything that would prepare them for any form of post-secondary life. Harrison said that he felt “like a zombie or a robot” in class at Clinton Teen Center. He and Jaslyn were provided the educational opportunity to attend Clinton Teen Center so that they might graduate on time, but at the cost of really educating them. It appears that the school system is merely focused on graduating their students on time and not on providing them with the best possible high school education.

While each of the students provided different stories and impressions about their educational experiences and opportunities, and were presented different opportunities throughout their academic careers, all were impacted by the four factors included above – factors that have parallels with students in many urban school systems who are not being provided with equitable opportunities in education despite No Child Left Behind and other reform movements.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

Based on my analysis of the participants’ experiences and perspectives of FPS, four major findings emerged: 1) teacher effectiveness is key, especially regarding the high expectations teachers hold for their students academically and attempts to develop professional but caring relationships with students; 2) the involvement of the participants’ families and friends in a student’s academic career is extremely important but can take many forms to promote success; 3) student motivation and beliefs about the quality of their education hinges in part on how they view the quality of their schools, teachers, and peers, and how they view their school within the larger school system and as compared to neighboring school systems; and 4) that there is a large gulf in educational opportunities between students who come from poorly funded school systems and from poorer communities, continuing a cycle of low educational attainment and limited economic opportunities.

For these participants, their level of academic achievement in elementary school did not necessarily impact the educational opportunities they were provided with in middle and high school, especially in terms of the types of classroom environments, the level of coursework, and the attitudes the students held about academia. Two of the students, Veronica and Gary, were able to excel academically and participate in advanced learning classes. However, all of the students were not provided the educational opportunities to prepare them for college or a career, despite the fact that all five are on track to graduate with a high school diploma. This is perhaps the greatest contribution from the study and highlights the continuing and even growing inequities in educational structures and institutions between wealthy and poor schools and communities.
My findings overall support much of the research in this arena. In particular, the research and results described in the book, *Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools* (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992), regarding the need to hold parents and teachers accountable for disengaged students, investigated questions that have still yet to be answered even twenty years later. This study also shows that earlier findings on teacher effectiveness and resulting student motivation and engagement, as it relates to academic achievement, is still very relevant in today’s classrooms. With the exception of Jaslyn’s statement that she did not want to learn, the interviews suggested that students rely on extrinsic motivations, influenced by their instructors and families, to keep them achieving academically.

Because of the relationship between the parent and teacher expectations and involvement and students own desire to achieve, the larger claim could be made that the extrinsic motivations (non-tangible) provided by teachers and family members are used to fuel students’ intrinsic motivations. This finding is in accordance with the idea that the home is the place where children learn how beneficial education is (Lamborn, Brown, Mounts, and Steinberg, 1992). Likewise, Konstantopoulos’ 2009 asserts that teachers are one of the biggest factors influencing student academic achievement. As indicated by Gary’s mother, even though she did not understand his homework she made him do his work. In return, his grades were good. Lily, Harrison, and Jaslyn had no punishment for poor grades, as a result they made poor grades, and had a more negative attitude toward school. When parents and teachers failed to extrinsically motivate the students by keeping them engaged in class, being involved in homework, etc. the student’s academic achievement reflected it. The students in the study do not personally feel the necessity to learn when the attitudes of teachers and their families express that it is not important. They are not as
likely to participate in educational opportunities offered, if any are, if they do not see them as relevant and important to their lives.

The role of familial involvement in education is often viewed as a major factor that can greatly affect the issue of disengaged students. Only one out of ten of the parents of the student interviewed attended college, and only one out of the ten parents was actively engaged in their child’s education. The results from the investigation supported the claim made by Baker and Stevenson (1986) that education level is positively correlated to how comfortable a parent feels with school-related issues. Parents might not feel comfortable helping their child with school work, because of their own lack of confidence with academia, and thereby place less emphasis on the importance of school. The lack of incentive to do well from home will follow a student into the classroom where they remain disengaged unless a teacher or administrator creates an environment to reverse that attitude.

The case of Gary supported Patall, Cooper, and Robinson’s 2008 research that suggested that the level of parental involvement does not matter, so long as it is present students are more likely to be positive about school and make more conscious efforts to succeed academically. Gary’s mother was very involved in his schoolwork, even though she was not actively going over his work and helping him to figure out answers. As a result, Gary’s academic achievement was much higher than the other students, even though all his mother did was make sure he completed his homework. This is a positive finding that can be used to encourage parents to work with their children, even if it means simply asking about homework or sitting at the table while they work.

The other students supported Lamborn, et. al’s 1992 research that parents have a role in teaching students how learning is beneficial to their lives. This especially significant because all
but two of the student’s parents were educated within the Fillmore Public School system, and are perhaps disengaged because of their own lack of educational opportunities available during their high school years. Children imitate their parents and parents who are uninvolved in academia because they received a poor education when they were younger are probably likely to raise children with similar attitudes. Only one out of the ten parents of students interviewed attending college. Also, parents play a key role in creating a genuine interest in education (Okpala, Okpala, and Smith, 2001). A school that provides students with minimal educational opportunities is only creating a cycle of producing an uneducated and unmotivated surrounding community.

One implication for the study is that students’ achievement level in 5th grade is not necessarily a good predictor of potential achievement. That schools still use past achievement as the main indicator of future achievement, through practices like tracking, is problematic. As such, aside from familial involvement, each of the student’s academic achievement provided both predictable and unpredictable results based on their 5th grade test scores. Gary and Veronica showed elements of unpredictability in their academic experiences. Gary, who has already been established as the anomaly of the group, went on to enroll in Advanced Placement classes and Veronica took enough advanced classes that she only needed one class to graduate by the start of her senior year.

Yet, even with all of the successes that Gary and Veronica achieved academically, they are still identical to Harrison, Jaslyn, and Lily in the fact that they have no immediate and clear plans after high school. They have no concrete plans to further their education or seek a trade for a career. Across the nation high schools that boast low dropout and high on-time graduation rates are usually considered to be the better schools to send children to. James Heckman and Paul LaFontaine describe the American high school graduation rate as “the barometer of American
society and the skill level of its future workforce” (2010). The assumption being that if schools can effectively get their students to graduate on time, then they must be providing each individual student with every educational opportunity for high academic achievement. In the case of students in this study, the preceding assumption is not necessarily true in today’s society. Although all five of the students interviewed will be graduating from their respective high schools on time, they were not consistently provided the quality of instruction and educational opportunities to achieve academically. The five students recounted experiences of ineffective and uninterested teachers, lapses of institutional support and resources, as well as low confidence partially created by the negative perceptions of the schools they were attending.

Aside from Gary, none of the students were placed on a pre-collegiate academic track and only Gary and Veronica were approached by administrators to discuss post-secondary educational options. The resulting economic significance of students that are graduating with inadequate educational opportunities is tremendous. In the present time it is not uncommon to hear people refer to Master degrees as the “new” Bachelor degrees. As society’s job market begins to lean closer to making that expression the truth, these students will fall into the ever-widening financial gap between the haves and have-nots. Their current path trajectory is not the cause of a lack of intelligence, but the result of the limited educational opportunities presented to them. This is a direct result of the inadequate counseling provided to the students.

Gary and Veronica were the only ones selected by the school to discuss college because of their past enrollment in advanced classes. Although, their grades in the 5th grade placed them on the trajectory for regular classes, they were provided the opportunity to move onto more advanced classes. Therefore, the educational opportunities of more challenging schoolwork,
higher level thinking, and smaller classroom sizes were not closed off to them. Their placement in the bottom 15% was not an indicator of the educational opportunities they were provided. This is a powerful lesson that should be included in conversations regarding the tracking of students into different levels of courses, which often now occurs as early as middle school. Unlike Gary and Veronica, Lily, Harrison, and Jaslyn, because of their sustained enrollment in regular classes, were not approached by administrators as having the potential to achieve post-secondary educations. For the most part their classes promoted non-engagement, and the level of commitment and excitement their teachers presented to their students supports aligns with the findings of Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor’s (2006).

The levels of educational opportunities provided to students in Fillmore Public Schools were also indicated by the type of resources that the school offered. The resource discrepancies (teachers, materials, buildings, school supplies, etc.) that the students perceived to exist between Fillmore Public Schools and surrounding county schools was a major issue for some of the students. Rosenberg’s (1972) definition of self-esteem as a function of social comparisons between the self and “other” is supported as Gary, Harrison, and Lily, in particular, discussed their negative views of their schools in comparison to others and how they believed people to look down upon them as a result. Reasoner’s (2005) findings that there is a correlation between self-esteem and academic success, combined with the findings of this investigation, suggests that students might not view themselves as capable of taking advantage of educational opportunities, because of the way they perceive themselves. Schools, as institutions, need to work on instilling pride in the student body, regardless of resource availability, so that when students are provided with educational opportunities they do not turn them down because of fear.
Conclusion

Despite being in the bottom 15% of their 5th grade graduating class, Harrison, Jaslyn, Gary, Veronica, and Lily are all on track to graduate from their respective high schools on time. Each student’s interview identified aspects of teacher effectiveness, familial involvement in their academic careers, and institutional provisions of resources as the three major factors that determine the educational opportunities provided to them and ultimately the level of their academic achievement.

However, questions have risen that require further research that is outside of the scope of the original questions that shaped this investigation. Once the students have graduated what type of real world road blocks will they run into as a result of having no form of post-secondary education? How will their high school degrees help them to navigate life in a society that has an ever increasing gap of money earning potential between degree levels. None of the students discussed vocational schools as a possible avenue for post-secondary education. What will they be able to achieve as they enter the work force as unskilled and minimally educated adults? What is Fillmore Public Schools doing to change this?

Another set of questions that emerged from this investigation relates to the parents of the students interviewed. Most of the students’ parents were originally from the Fillmore city area, and did not complete any form of post-secondary education. Since familial involvement in school work was found to be a major factor of student academic achievement, it would be interesting to find out if the parents’ personal experiences in school align with Baker and Stevenson’s (1986) claims. If the parents indeed had a poor experience with Fillmore Public Schools while they were enrolled, research could be done to support Baker and Stevenson. Do
the parents reflect on their own educational experiences and believe helping their children as hopeless?

This investigation, its resulting findings, and new questions that have emerged have given me much to consider for next year, as I start teaching in a school system with very similar characteristics to Fillmore Public Schools. It will be a challenge keeping high school students engaged in History lessons, providing a welcoming environment with engaged lessons that relate to real life situations, and encouraging parental involvement, but this study has given me a head start on preparing. What I have learned from these five students is that they want structure, someone who cares and a teacher who will provide them with educational opportunities and explain why learning them is important. I now know what five students believe will help them succeed and make them feel like they are receiving adequate educational opportunities; hopefully that knowledge will help me with my own classes next fall.
Appendix

A. Bottom 15% of Students and Their Corresponding Standardized Testing Scores.

B. Students Who Returned Their Consent Forms

C. Standardized Test Scores of Students who Participated in the Study

D. Invitation to Participate Form

E. Informed Consent Document: Research Subject Information and Consent Form

F. Semi-Structured Protocol Interview Questions

G. Conceptual Student Memo Outline
Appendix A.

Adams Elementary School
Students Who Performed in the Bottom 15% Percentile
Standardized Test Results 2005-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
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Review of Results:

Standardized Test Pass Rates/Cut Scores

**Fail/Does not meet (399)** a mean scaled score of 399 or lower means the student was below the score required to pass. **Pass/Proficient (400)** A scaled score of 400 or higher signifies that the average student passed the test. **Pass/Advanced (500)** A scaled score of 500 or greater is required for a designation of advanced proficiency. Each test is divided into smaller categories that show various areas tested within the test.
Appendix B.

Adams Elementary School
Students Who Performed in the Bottom 15% Percentile
Permission Slips

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Names</th>
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<th>Return Form for Interview</th>
<th>Participated in the Interview Process</th>
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<td>Ryan Winston</td>
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</table>

The following students (XX) were contacted twice but they decided not to participate in the interview.
## Students Interviewed
### Adams Elementary School
### Standardized Test Results 2005-2006

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gary Boston</td>
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</table>
Appendix D.

Invitation to Participate in a Study
College of William and Mary

Monday, October 17th, 2011

Dear ________________.

My name is Danielle Greene, and I am currently a senior at The College of William and Mary with a double major in English and History. I am also pursuing an honors project focused on education, a profession that I am passionate about and hope to join as a history teacher upon graduation. For my senior Honors Thesis, I am doing an investigation of the major factors in and out of school that influence a student’s academic success. Since I am from the (Fillmore) area, I am particularly interested in the experiences of students who attend (Fillmore) Public Schools, and am seeking your participation in my study.

Participation in this study would only require 1-2 hours of your time and your participation would remain completely confidential. Attached is a consent form that provides more details about participating in the project. This form must be returned to _______fill in the blank______ in order to participate in this study. The consent form outlines all of your rights as a participant and if there are any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you for your time and I hope to hear from you soon!

Sincerely,

Danielle Greene
dmgreene@email.wm.edu
(804) 516-5991
Appendix E.

**Informed Consent Document**  
**Research Subject Information and Consent Form**

**Study Title:** Tracking and the Opportunity Gap

**Name of Researcher Whom to Contact about this Study:**  
**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Jeremy Stoddard  
Email: jdstod@wm.edu

**Student Researcher:** Danielle Greene  
Email: dmgreene@email.wm.edu

**I. Purpose of this Research Study:**  
Your child is being asked to participate in a research study that explores his/her educational experiences since elementary school.

**II. What will be done:**  
Participation in this study will last for a total of 1-2 hours over the span of the semester: I will ask your child to fill out one online survey, and possibly participate in an interview investigating his/her experience regarding school structure, class organization, personal educational experiences, and opportunities provided.

The interview will be conducted only with your permission, and I will audio record the interview only with your permission as well. You may at any time ask to review the audio file and edit it, in order to delete any material you do not want on the audio file. Your child may also turn the recorder off at any time during the conversation. Your child may also choose to respond or not respond to any portion of the survey or interview.

At any time during the study, you may withdraw your child from the study and no more information will be collected from your child.

**III. Possible Benefits:**  
This study may benefit your institution as you consider issues regarding the educational opportunities and experiences of students in Fillmore Public Schools.

**IV. Possible Risks:**  
Your child’s participation in this study does not involve any serious risks, to his/her physical or mental health or to your experience in the school district. Your child’s participation and identity will be held strictly confidential. At any time during the study, you may withdraw your child from the study and no more information will be collected.

**V. Confidentiality of Records:**  
All information collected for this study will remain confidential. Completed surveys and interviews will remain on Danielle Greene’s password protected computer and/or locked in a
filing cabinet. In addition, surveys, written comments and responses, and interview files will not have personal names or affiliations on them and participants will be referred to by pseudonyms. Information from this study’s participants and individual school will never be identified by name (only by pseudonym), and any identifying information about the participants and their school will be changed to protect their confidentiality.

By signing this form and consenting to participate in this research study, you are indicating your agreement that all information collected from the participants may be used by current and future researchers in such a fashion that personal identities and the school they work/attend in will be protected. Such use will include sharing anonymous information with other researchers and teachers for checking the accuracy of study findings and for future approved research that has potential for improving human knowledge.

**VI. Voluntary Participation With Right of Refusal:**
You have been informed that your participation in this research study is voluntary. Your child is free to choose not to answer particular questions on the survey or during the interview. You are free to withdraw your consent for your child’s participation in this study at any time.

**VII. IRB Review and Impartial Third Party:**
The general nature of this study conducted by Danielle Greene has been explained to me. I understand that my child will be asked to fill out one online survey, and participate in an interview.

Participation in this study should take 1-2 hours over the span of the semester. I understand that responses will be confidential – identity and responses will be known to the investigator, but will not be divulged and neither names nor the name of my school or schools discussion will be associated with any results of this study. I know that participants may refuse to answer any question asked and that they may discontinue participation at any time. Potential risks resulting from my participation in this project have been described to me. You are able to notify Dr. Ward, chair of the EDIC at 757-221-2358 or EDIRC-L@wm.edu. I am aware that educators and administrators must be at least 18 years of age, and that student participants under the age of 18 must have a signed permission form from their parent/guardian. My signature below signifies my voluntary consent of participation in this project, and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

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Appendix F.

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Warm-Up

1. Introduction of myself and my interests
2. Description of the investigation
3. Reminder that nothing they say will ever be linked back to them, everything is confidential, and I will be the only one who ever hears their opinions
4. Pseudonyms

General Questions

1. Tell me something about how your typical school day operates and what classes are you taking?
   a. What level of classes have you been in?
   b. What are the classes you’ve been good in?
   c. What have you struggled in?
      i. Are you just memorizing in your classes or are you thinking deeply?
2. How do you feel about school in general?
   a. How do you feel it functions?
      i. Is it a nice place to be are other students disruptive?
   b. Have your feelings changed over time?
      i. If so, how?
      ii. Did you feel the same way about school in elementary or middle school?
3. Tell me about your experiences in school?
   a. What has been a moment that you have been really proud of?
   b. What has been the biggest challenge for you in school?
4. What is your favorite subject and/or least favorite subject?
   a. Why?
   b. What grade levels or subject have been the most difficult or challenging?
      i. Why?
5. What has been an experience with a teacher, a subject, or classroom that you think of as really positive?
6. How do you feel about your success/grades in school?
   a. What has helped you to achieve the level of success that you have?
   b. Do you feel like you are reaching your potential as a student?

Familial Involvement

1. What role do your parents, siblings, and/or other family members usually play in your academic life?
2. How do you spend your time outside of school?
   a. Homework, jobs, sports, etc.?
b. Do you do those things because you want to, or because you are told to?

3. In what way have your parents and/or guardians helped you to be successful in school?
   a. Give me an example of one way that your parents are helpful with your education?

Institutional Experiences

1. How well supported do you feel in class?
   a. Has that feeling of support changed over time?

2. Describe your classes.
   a. How big are they?
   b. Do you like that size?
   c. What type of classes are you taking?
   d. Are your friends in your classes?

3. Can you identify one teacher or class that has had a major impact on your life?
   a. If no, are there certain things that you’ve seen in some of your teachers?
   b. What would you envision as a perfect teacher?

4. Beyond teachers who do you work with academically?
   a. Counselors?

5. Do you have any choice in what classes you get to take?
   a. If so why did you pick the ones that you did?
   b. If not then what would you rather be taking?

Self-Motivation; Self-Esteem

1. Describe an average day.
   a. Who do you usually interact with?
   b. What is the highlight of your day?

2. How confident do you feel about the quality of your school work?

3. How confident do you feel taking standardized tests?
   a. Has this feeling of confidence changed over time?

4. Do you feel like you’re treated fairly in school?
   a. How so?
      i. Why do you feel this way?

5. Do you feel like you have a lot of friends?
   a. Do you feel like your friends are more or less academically success than you?
   b. Who do you like to hang around in school?

6. What are do your typical grades look like?
Appendix G.

Conceptual memos: Participant Name:

**Participant Profile:**

1) Description of the participant:

1A) Academic history: What has been the educational experience of this participant? What schools have they attended, are they going to graduate, what types of classes have they taken?

1B) Familial/social history: What types of supports have students received related to their academic experiences? Parents, sibling, boyfriend/girlfriend?

**Institutional Impacts on student academic achievement and opportunities:**

2) How do students’ academic achievements in elementary school impact their educational opportunities in middle and high school? Including institutional factors (e.g., tracking to particular schools/classes), resource factors or perceptions, impact of advising/counseling?

2A) What other factors impact the students’ academic opportunities (daily, long term, in and out of class)?

2B) What opportunities have they had to increase their academic achievement, what opportunities were not provided to help their academic success?

**School/Teacher/Family/Personal factors impact on students’ academic opportunities and achievement:**

3) What factors contribute to the change in a student’s academic successes or failures?

3A) what do they perceive as an academic success and what factors contributed?

3B) What do they perceive as an academic failures and what factors contributed?

4) Can the future successes of students be determined based on past academic achievements from elementary school? What is the answer for each one?
4A) Perception of self and academic abilities – academic or career potential and future?
References


Harris, Cooper (1989). Does Homework Improve Academic Achievement?: If so, how much?


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