

UNPACKING MIDDLE SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: HOW STUDENTS PERCEIVE
THE EFFECT OF HOME, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY INFLUENCES ON THEIR
ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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by
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the
dissertation entitled

UNPACKING MIDDLE SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: HOW STUDENTS PERCEIVE
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ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

This transcendental phenomenological study set out to determine the nature and extent of influence on student success, as perceived by selected rising seventh-grade students at a particular mid-West middle school (grades 6-8), through analysis of a student-centered narrative. In particular, this study sought to ascertain how and why certain students believe they were successful, and how students perceive home, school, and community people and places to be positive and negative influences on their success in and outside of school.

Analysis revealed that students see themselves (“self”), as well as individuals and places outside the home and school (“places and faces”), along with rewards and punishments (a “double-edged sword”), as combined influences on their success. Analysis of the student narrative also led to the development of an ecological footprint for the selected school, which revealed more influence from the macro-system than previously suggested by prior research. As such, it may be wise for schools, families, and community agencies, programs and individuals to develop mental health and coping strategies and programs to promote student success.

Keywords: ecological systems theory, student voice, student success, middle school

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Section One – Introduction to the Dissertation-in-Practice

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Background

To draw on an African proverb popularized by Hillary Clinton (1996), *it takes a village to raise a child*. In other words, schools, families, and communities need to work together to support youth so children receive personalized, accessible, and interconnected support from home, school, and community agencies and programs (Weiss, Woodrum, Lopez, & Kraemer, 1993). As such, educators need to consider the strengths and weaknesses students see in themselves, the school, their homes, and the community when considering how and why students are successful. This includes the influence of friends, teachers, mentors, and family members on student success at the middle school level (Bowen, Rose, Powers, & Glennie, 2008; Hatchman & Rolland, 2001). After all, if influences impacting middle school success can be better understood by analyzing successful students' perceptions regarding how and why they have been successful, other students may be better prepared for the rigors of high school.

Unfortunately, research concerning middle school success remains primarily focused on a deficit approach: Why and to what extent certain students are unsuccessful, and what barriers stand in the way of their success (see Akos, Rose, & Orthner, 2015; Balfanz, 2007, 2009; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Bellmore, 2011; Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo & Urban, 2011)? However, research on middle school achievement cannot focus only on underachieving or failing students. Schools need to help *all* students be successful, not just those who are perceived or noted to be struggling or underachieving (Beatty, 2013; Harper, 2015; Paige & Witty, 2010). As such, the reverse situation is worthy of investigation: What can be learned from an examination of certain students' perceptions regarding their own success? Who and what help children be successful in middle school? For example, is

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success in school influenced more by academic supports within the school setting, or do students achieve success due to a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors affecting their performance in the school setting (see Hayenga & Corpus, 2010; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012)?

One possible solution is to listen to what students have to say: learn from students' perspectives about their needs and how the school culture, climate, and overall learning environment can be improved. To this end, individual interviews were conducted with selected rising seventh-grade students who were identified as being academically successful in the site school according to pre-determined criteria related primarily to academics and attendance (see *Participants*, below). After all, how can student success improve if causes of difficulty and barriers to learning are not better identified? How can services and supports improve student success if the nature and extent of success and failure at middle school are not first understood? Thus, the goal of this study was to gain an insight into how students saw their success being affected by home, school, and community influences, and who better to interview than those experiencing middle school than the students themselves?

As a result, this study sought to identify student-centered positive influences (i.e. what successful students are doing, using, or saying) *and* student-centered negative influences (i.e. barriers, challenges, or lack of success), rather than focus on a deficit approach with the emphasis on student failure (Harper, 2015; McMillan & Reed, 1994). This approach therefore encouraged students to explore and define what success looked like in terms of their *own experiences* via a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A). Finally, examination of successful students' stories led not only to a better understanding of selected middle school students' needs, but also the creation of specific recommendations designed to improve the learning environment at the site school (see Section Four).

Student Voice: A Catalyst for Change

School may be the primary learning context for youth, but all students need to be supported in a caring, challenging, environment to promote success (Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001; Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012). In fact, there are many possible reasons why some students are successful in middle school while others are not (see Section Three). Listening to students' concerns and suggestions, as well as their perceptions regarding what it means to be successful in middle school, may therefore help educators to better understand the nature and extent of influence facing middle school students. However, such "educational transformation cannot take place without the inclusion of the voices of students, among others, in the dialogue" (Nieto, 1994, p. 396).

This study seeks to value the input of students' voices. After all, "students have important lessons to teach educators and we need to begin to listen to them more carefully" (Nieto, p. 420; see also Dorner, 2015). This includes listening to students' perceptions of what it means to be successful in middle school. However, we also need to consider student recommendations, and act on the positive and negative influences uncovered through analysis of student-centered narratives such as was undertaken in this study. Why are some students more successful than others, and what can we learn from selected students' perceptions regarding success in middle school (Hatchman & Rolland, 2001; Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010)? For example, do students see their success related to only academics, or is there intrinsic influence that impacts middle school success (Ani, 2013; Lee & Bong, 2015)? Do students see their success affected by family and other home influences (Agabrian, 2007)? Do students feel "connected" to their school, and how does connectedness contribute to success (Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, Iachini, & Ball, 2012; Niehaus et al., 2012)?

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Indeed, how central are the home, school, and community settings in a child's network of influence (Neal & Neal, 2013)?

Students can be transformative agents and “agents of their own learning” (Nieto, 1994, p. 421), yet are usually provided little opportunity to make an affective change or become effective school leaders (Hazel, 2016; Mitra, 2004; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Often students are restricted to activities such as Student Council, where the influence of their combined voice may be limited by the willingness of administration to listen (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Mitra, 2004; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Alternatively, a few students may serve as token representatives on advisory councils or parent-student associations with limited opportunity to voice concerns due to infrequent meetings or limited speaking time (Mitra, 2004). Therefore, this study provides a timely investigation centering on the importance of middle school students' voices. It also provided participating students with an opportunity to make a difference in their school in an attempt to improve learning for themselves and others (Hazel, 2016; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Indeed, many participants commented on their desire to be interviewed in order to make a difference, both during the study and again in the future in order for their voice to have an impact on their school and their school experiences. Finally, this study also reminds educators to value student voice as a transformational force at the middle school level, before students become disengaged from learning as commonly happens due to the increasingly rigorous and pressured environment that is middle school and high school (Mitra, 2004).

Accessing selected students' voices through a student-centered narrative focused on middle school success also recognizes the wisdom students' hold regarding reasons for their own success and failure (Hatchman & Rolland, 2001; Haycock, 2001). For example, while

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home life, violence, and so on are commonly listed as influences affecting middle school achievement (see Section Three), what hurts students the most is that schools seem to teach them less and offer less (Haycock, 2001). This lack of resources and opportunity can be especially problematic for students in under-resourced, under-staffed, over-crowded, violent schools that expect far too little from them and lack strong mentoring and counseling programs, or other supports (Carey, 2004; Harper, 2015; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Orfield, 2013). As a result, continuation of achievement concerns at the middle school level serves to remind educators to create environments which are caring yet challenging for *all* students (Niehaus et al., 2012; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Yeh, 2015). This is further reinforced by Ani (2013) who states even young students are aware of negative impacts on success, such that listening to students can be a powerful tool in improving student success (see also Hazel, 2016). Educators, school administrators, and district policy makers therefore need to understand better what is meant by student success. This includes valuing and recognizing students' perspectives in middle school to bring about effective school organizational, instructional, and interpersonal change.

Statement of The Problem

As stated previously, middle school success is a significant indicator of future success in high school (Balfanz, 2007, 2009; Balfanz et al., 2007; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). This is especially so as poor academic performance in the sixth through eighth grades in “math and English, low reading scores, absenteeism, and disengagement from school become very reliable predictors of whether they will later drop out of high school” (APA, 2012, n.p.). However, schools can neither control all the factors influencing students' academic engagement or success, nor act in isolation to do so (Durlak et al., 2010; Evans, 2005).

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Relevant Data Pertaining to Student Success

There is increasing pressure in schools, school districts, and on school personnel to address student achievement, especially as an achievement gap between White and Black, and White and Hispanic students continues to be reflected in national and district level standardized test data. For example, according to the nation's report card, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), there is a persistent achievement gap between the nation's White, Black and Hispanic students. While the latest report states Black and Hispanic students made larger gains than White students (36 and 25 points versus 12 points, respectively when compared to 2008 scores), there is almost no change in the degree of disparity between the three groups (NCES, 2013). In other words, NAEP data from 2008 to 2012 in reading and mathematics reveal little to no gain in the achievement gap, despite the achievement gap being a continuing area of research and educational interest.

District level data. Consideration of patron insight data from the site school and school district further reinforces the need to better understand and improve student success. For instance, in both 2014 and 2015 parents and guardians indicated, across the district and at the site school, that student achievement was perceived to be tied firstly, to a student's belief in his or her own academic ability, and secondly, to positive teacher-student relationships, while home environment and parent involvement came in third and fourth place, respectively (Patron Insight, 2014, 2016). However, while research supports many of these *adult perceptions* (see Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010; Hopson, Lee, & Tang, 2014; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Gordon & Cui, 2014; Jeynes, 2011; Lam & Ducreux, 2013; Prince, 2014; Martin, Anderson, Bobis, Vellar, & Way, 2011; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001; Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006),

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this study sought to examine *students' perspectives* to determine the nature and extent of influence on student success in middle school.

Indeed, this need to consider student perspectives was reinforced by survey data from 2014 and 2015 which indicated students in the participating district believe good teachers, a caring school, and respect from teachers were the top three positives in schools in 2014 (Patron Insight, 2014), while expectations, equal chance to succeed, and teacher knowledge were the top three positives in 2015 (Patron Insight, 2016). Thus, listening to rising seventh grade students about their experiences in sixth grade, therefore, provides valuable insight into the strengths and weaknesses of not only the site school, but potentially also for other middle schools in the district. After all, it is hoped increased awareness of the various influences students encounter at home, in school, and in the community will improve the learning environment at the site school, and possibly in the district as a whole.

School level data. Examination of The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) data for Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) testing between 2010-2015 (DESE, 2016a; 2016b) shows student achievement concerns at the site school which further support its selection as this study's setting. For example, while district reorganization meant there was no sixth grade MAP testing at the site school until 2013, when results for the site school are compared with district level testing results for 2014-2015, there is disparity between particular student groups (see Table 1a and Table 1b, below):

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Table 1a: Proficiency data on 6th Grade for Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) at the site school level

SITE SCHOOL DATA			
(Number of students/percentage of students who scored proficient or above)			
YEAR*	SELF-REPORTED RACIAL STATUS **	MATH	ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS
2014***	Black	20.4 (49)	12.2 (49)
	Hispanic	63.6 (11)	16.7 (12)
	White	57.8 (102)	49.5 (105)
2015***	Black	13 (46)	13 (46)
	Hispanic	- (0)	- (0)
	White	30.7 (137)	37.4 (139)

* The first sixth grade MAP tests were not completed at the site school until Spring 2013.

** No students identified as Hispanic in 2015 at the school for sixth grade.

*** Assessment results for English and Math are not comparable between 2014 and 2015 (DESE, 2015).

Table 1b: Proficiency data on 6th Grade for Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) at the district level

DISTRICT DATA			
(Number of students/percentage of students who scored proficient or above)			
YEAR*	SELF-REPORTED RACIAL STATUS	MATH	ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS
2014**	Black	23.3 (250)	14.5 (250)
	Hispanic	36.6 (82)	15.7 (83)
	White	48.3 (751)	38.8 (761)
2015**	Black	7.5 (255)	13 (255)
	Hispanic	22.5 (80)	11.3 (80)
	White	28.5 (785)	28.3 (793)

* The first sixth grade MAP tests were not completed at the site school until Spring 2013.

** Assessment results for English and Math are not comparable between 2014 and 2015 (DESE, 2015).

While the above MAP data are not comparable between 2014 and 2015 due to new testing formats (and the 2016 data from MAP testing are not yet available at the time of writing), there is evidence of academic concern at the site school. For example, Black students performed 35% lower on their Math assessment than White students in 2014 and over 40% lower than their White peers in 2015. Similarly, in English Language Arts, Black students performed almost 25% lower than White students in 2014 and almost 35% lower in 2015 (DESE, 2016c).

Review of the site school report card for 2015 also revealed concerns with attendance for African American and Hispanic students building-wide at the site school, with both groups averaging slightly less than 84% for 2015, despite the district goal being 90% or

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higher attendance for all students (DESE, 2016c). Finally, school site data also revealed the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch (FRL) to be at 39.4% (DESE, 2016c). Although it is likely school FRL percentage is higher due to the fact that eligible middle school families do not always apply for assistance (personal communication, District Superintendent, October 22, 2015), FRL percentage remains a useful measure of a school's general socio-economic range. It can also be indirectly associated with the extent of poverty in a school (Darling-Hammond, 2013) and potentially indicates the number of students who may have income-related concerns, including housing, transportation, clothing, food, medical, and other essential needs (National Education Association [NEA], 2011). Although such needs lie outside the immediate school environment, research has shown such "economic deprivation" (Reeves, 2003, p. 1) can impact student academic success and contribute to systemic inequalities and academic disparities (NEA, 2011; Reeves, 2003; Verstegen, 2015). As such, it should be noted that the interview protocol (see Appendix A) probed for levels and type of parental support, as surrogate measures of parental and family income (Zhu, Tse, Cheung, & Oyersman, 2014), in lieu of accessing privileged FRL data.

The Problem of Practice

The overarching problem of practice is *why* certain students in a selected middle school do or do not achieve greater academic success. However, this led to an examination of three related problems: (1) what is meant by *success and failure*; (2) how do home, school, and community factors *contribute* to students' academic success; and (3) to what *extent* do home, school, and community factors influence academic success?

Existing Gap in the Literature

There is a plethora of studies concerning specific middle school achievement and

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reasons for under-achievement, including studies of students with special education diagnoses, gifted and talented status, or athletic ability (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; Harris, Hines, Kelly, Williams, & Bagley, 2014; Land, Mixon, Butcher, & Harris, 2014). Likewise, research on middle school achievement is readily found in relation to parent, peer, and community influences and school outcomes (Durlak et al., 2010; Gordon & Cui, 2014; Jeynes, 2007, 2011; Lam & Ducreux, 2013), as well as school climate, structure, and curriculum (Berry, 2005; Carpenter, Ramirez, & Severn, 2006; Darensbourg & Blake, 2014; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Mickelson & Greene, 2006; Wentzel, 1998; Wiggan, 2007, 2014). However, this study sought to use a triad approach to examine student perceptions of influences on their own success. Thus, instead of considering home, school, and community influence in isolation, this study examined the type and extent of multiple, simultaneous areas of influence on sixth grade students' success as perceived by the students themselves.

While there have been studies on the influence of one or two of the suggested triad settings (see the literature review offered in Section Three), there have been few attempts to examine the combined influence of home, school, and community settings on student achievement, despite claims that all three settings are important sources of support during adolescence (Song, Bong, Lee, & Kim, 2014). For example, while the foundational work by Sanders and Epstein (1998) stands out due to the authors' six frameworks reinforcing the importance of strong home-school-community partnerships (also see Sheldon & Epstein, 2005), there seems to have been little research into the *combined effect* of all three settings on middle school student success (see Bowen et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2011; Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). Moreover, while there are have been

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studies on high school and elementary achievement (see for example, Agabrian, 2007; Allen, 2015; Hatchman & Rolland, 2001; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015), the use of semi-structured interviews to develop a better understanding of middle school student success has been limited (see for example, Bishop & Pflaum, 2005 with their qualitative study based on a combination of drawings and interviews; Lee & Bong, 2015 with their goal-based study of Korean middle school students; Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthony, Gonzales, & Jenson, 2014 with their qualitative study of after-school participation by elementary and middle-school aged youth). Finally, very few studies examining middle school success from a broad ecological standpoint have been located at the date of writing (see Farrell et al., 2007 with their focus group study of 7th and 8th grade students; Lewthwaite, McMillan, Renaud, 2011 with their study of indigenous students' perceptions of their learning in grades 5 through 8). Therefore, this study attempts to rectify this gap by examining student perception of influences from the triad of home, school, and community settings through application of an ecological systems theory framework.

It is too easy for educators to blame student failure on students and their families (Brion-Meisels, 2016). For example, Kunjufu (2002) argues the achievement gap between White-Black and/or White-Hispanic students on standardized test scores across the nation is caused by a combination of factors including low teacher expectations, mismatched teaching and learning styles, lack of time, tracking, and a culturally irrelevant curriculum. However, to blame ill-performing schools, insufficiently qualified teachers, inadequate curricula, large class sizes and so on, is to ignore a myriad of factors outside the school environment, including home and community influences, which also impact learning (Bowen, Bowen, & Richman, 2000; Rothstein, 2005). This is reinforced by research on how the opportunity gap,

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or access to resources and programs can lead to an achievement gap.

The opportunity gap is closely related to the achievement gap, especially as students advance through grades and have greater demands placed on their time and resources (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Defined to include financial limits a family might have, and other restrictions a student may experience due to demographic, family or non-educational reasons, the opportunity gap calls on educators to shift their attention from outcomes of student success to inputs on success (Welner & Carter, 2013). For example, an opportunity gap may prohibit students from participating in extra-curricular clubs and activities due to financial and transportation issues, despite the fact that research indicates promoting participation is linked to increases in achievement, especially as public schools can offer students structured activities at little or no cost (Bennett et al., 2012; Growe & Montgomery, 2003). The cause of deficit thus becomes more important than the result of such deficit if change in student achievement is to be made possible. Thus, shifting the focus in this study from an achievement gap to the barriers and supports for student success was a conscious attempt to learn from students' voices about how and why certain students have been successful. It also reflected the site principal's broad desire to examine an overview of what students perceived to be strengths and weaknesses in the school in terms of how and why students were successful. Therefore, this study presents a novel approach: Analyze a student-centered narrative to determine the influence from a triad of home, school, and community settings on the academic success of rising seventh grade students from students' own perspectives.

The gap in the literature is clearly related to the topic of this study and the following specific questions: How is middle school student success affected by the simultaneous or combined influence of home, school, and community settings? What can be learned about

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middle school success from successful students' perspectives concerning influences on student success? Likewise, considering the theoretical framework point of view, there is a similar gap, for very few studies have approached middle school success from an ecological perspective. Therefore, this study also sought to investigate how ecological systems theory (EST) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) can be applied to influences on student success.

Purpose of the Study

Middle school has been described as the launching pad for a successful secondary and post-secondary education, especially as the middle grades can be instrumental in closing achievement gaps later in high school (Balfanz, 2009; Murray & Zvoch, 2011; Zaff, 2014). However, as stated above, middle school remains under-served when it comes to investigations of combined influences from home, school, and community settings on student success. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to examine what selected rising seventh grade students, in a common school setting, understand about influences on their own learning. What will students' perceptions of their own successes and failures in school reveal about middle school students' beliefs concerning their own learning? How can listening to student stories help identify positive and negative influences that have hindered or helped success in sixth grade? Finally, how can analysis of students' stories lead to recommendations at the site school to improve middle school academic success and student support?

Using individual interviews as the data collection tool, students were first asked to conceptualize what success and failure meant in the academic setting and non-academic setting before discussing other influences in their lives and on their academics (see the interview protocol in Appendix A). However, the secondary purpose of this study was to

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unpack the student-centered narrative to determine the extent to which influences identified in the student-centered narrative, from a triad approach of home, school, and community influences in the specific school setting, affect participants' academic experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 2016). This analysis led to specific site and district level recommendations to improve student achievement and student support in the school and its community via analysis of two forms of data: 1) a student-centered narrative generated from the semi-structured interviews, and 2) a multi-step analysis applying elements of EST as the primary theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Research Questions

This study focused on what information can be revealed from a student-centered narrative concerning the influence of home, school, and community factors on student success at a selected middle school. Therefore, the research questions were:

- (1) How do middle school students define academic success and failure?
- (2) How have home, school, and community influences helped and/or hindered students' academic success in middle school?

The research questions guided data collection via semi-structured individual student interviews using a transcendental phenomenological research approach (Creswell, 2013). Indeed, use of commonness of both time and setting via a specific school site was deliberate to improve student success for a specific school and its community (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, the altruistic goal of this proposed study was to apply EST to determine the extent of influence the triad has had on student success at the site middle school according to rising seventh-grade students' perspectives. From this, recommendations for the site school and its community were developed to help all students do better academically, but especially to

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focus on improving sixth grade student success. After all, given that middle school can impact high school success later (Balfanz, 2009; Murray & Zvoch, 2011; Zaff, 2014), there was merit in creating a site-specific report based on student-identified positive and negative influences on sixth grade student success.

Theoretical Frameworks Informing the Study

This study was heavily influenced by a constructivist/pragmatist paradigm to seek a human perspective and understanding of why things occur, what happens, and how to deal with problems in a real world setting. When coupled with my background as a middle school history teacher, there was a strong epistemological desire to understand the causes and effects of the achievement gap in our schools and local community. Driven by a longing to unpack, unravel, and examine student achievement in a specific, local, middle school setting, I was initially influenced by Mertens' (2010) *transformative approach* to consider marginalized groups, social oppression, and inequality when planning this study. However, after preliminary reading and research about middle school achievement, I realized I did not want to focus on the achievement gap, as the academic disparity between White and Black students is commonly referred (Bower, 2013), but on middle school achievement per se.

As an educator and a school leader, I wanted to know if listening to successful students' stories and uncovering what barriers exist, according to students' own perspectives, could help to improve student success for all students, rather than focus on those students who were or are struggling. I ultimately wanted this study to be more about how and why some students are more successful than others than about why students failed. Therefore, while the literature review offered in Section Three informed this study concerning various historical issues within the home, school, and community settings that influence middle

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school student achievement, it also served to identify other possible theoretical frameworks on which to base the study. These included McKown's (2013) *social equity theory* (SET), Lerner et al.'s (2005; also see Hazel, 2016) *positive youth development theory* (PYD), and Ogbu and Simons' (1998) *cultural-ecological theory* (CET) regarding how culture and society influence student achievement.

In particular, SET was initially considered because it is closely linked to larger ecological perspectives including how social processes and contexts create and maintain racial-ethnic achievement gaps. Part of SET's lure is its claim that the achievement gap exists and persists due to the fact that a combination of direct and indirect influences, comments, and expectations can erode academic expectations and achievement in home, school, and community settings across all racial groups and grade levels (McKown, 2013). This is supported by research suggesting influences such as one's peers, socializing, after-school activities, and negative cueing or stereotyping experienced by middle school students in home, school, and community settings can be positive and negative influences in a student's life (Witherspoon & Hughes, 2014; Worrell, 2014; Véronneau & Dishion, 2011).

Similarly, CET also received some initial attention as a possible theoretical framework, for it highlights the role of community and family forces on student achievement (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). For instance, CET suggests educational policies, structures, pedagogy, and systems are significant areas of concern, especially for minority students, although this can change depending on a student's immigrant identity and group affiliation. Ogbu and Simons also argue such treatment is compounded by how students react to and perceive this treatment in and by school, and that mistreatment in school can lead to problems at individual, family, and community levels. Thus, CET supports the use of

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individual interviews as a data collection tool by valuing the role student voice can play in understanding various influences on student achievement, especially in terms of identifying educational, cultural, and ecological issues in schools such as institutional, situational, symbolic, and relational discrimination and negative stereotyping. Reinforcing the interconnectedness between home, school, and communities, CET also stresses the need for schools to become more culturally sensitive, to value and increase parent involvement, and to use positive peer and community role models to improve academic and behavior standards, thus further informing the use of a triad approach of home, school, and community influences on student success in middle school.

Isolating the theoretical framework of this study also led to consideration of general adolescent development. While the transition to adulthood is not always easy, a new view of young people has emerged to frame adolescence not as a period of “storm” (Arnett, 2006), but as a period of more positive and intense physical, emotional and academic change (Arnett, 2006; Halverson, 2010; Lerner et al., 2005; Romero, Master, Paunesku, Dweck, & Gross, 2014) and this awareness led to consideration of *positive youth development theory* (PYD) as a possible theoretical framework on which to base this study. PYD was a possibility as it promotes youth development through community supports and programs, and recognizes the input youth can make when they are recognized as critical contributors to their own success (Durlak et al., 2007; Hazel, 2016; Lerner et al., 2005). Furthermore, according to PYD, investment in youth provides opportunities via community settings, civic instruction, and service and volunteer opportunities designed to develop strong academic behaviors, attitudes, life skills, and adaptive strategies (Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, & Lewin-Bizan, 2009). Thus, shifting the focus of this study from a deficit perspective of achievement to include

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positive outcomes meant PYD helped inform this study during the initial stages of data collection (Halverson, 2010). However, on completion of the data collection stage, I determined PYD was no longer applicable for explaining participants' success due to the limited role community factors and agencies seem to play on student success according to the students' own perspectives (see Section Four). Rather, the inter-relationship of people and places was deemed to be more influential than community activities and settings, which then led to a more in depth investigation of *ecological systems theory* (EST) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), as the central framework for this study.

As a result, despite concerns raised by Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield and Karnik (2009), EST became the core theoretical framework for this study because it relates more closely to the use of a triad approach to explain influences from simultaneous settings. In particular, EST maintains that an individual is affected over time by a combination of everything in the surrounding environment (see also Section Three). Ultimately, EST was adopted for two main reasons: 1) the basic theory highlights layered spheres of influence on individuals and this was reinforced in study findings which indicated a triad of influence on student success (see Section Four; also see Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Neal & Neal, 2013; Tudge et al., 2009); and 2) the process-person-context-time (PPCT) stage of EST (developed in 1995; see Gabbard & Krebs, 2012) was similarly reflected by study findings that participants' environments, and especially the person or self, influence student success over a period of time (see Section Four).

In summary, the process of adopting theoretical frameworks began with a desire to determine influences on student success in terms of achievement and areas of influence (as shown in Figures 1a and 1b). The first step was therefore to use a triad approach to examine

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student success via home, school, and community influence, as determined by an analysis of students' own stories and experiences, rather than to use a deficit approach by focusing on the existence of an achievement gap. However, this step led to the rejection of both CET and the transformative approach as detailed in Figure 1a:



Figure 1a: Graphic of Possible Achievement Frameworks

Similarly, while SET and PYD were also considered as possible theoretical frameworks during the secondary stage of development, they too were rejected as being not central to the study. This led to EST being chosen as the better theoretical framework on which to base the study, as shown in Figure 1b:

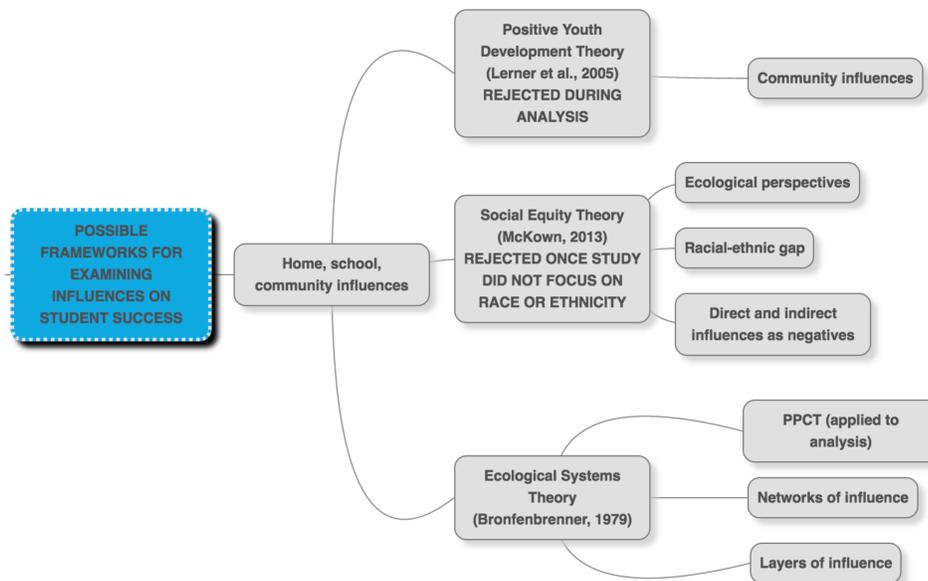


Figure 1b: Graphic of Possible Ecological and Developmental Frameworks

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Thus, in the end, examining students' perceptions regarding the influence of individuals and settings on their academic success during the analytical stage of this study served to further reinforce the selection of EST as the central framework for this study. This included elements of the basic theory related to layers of influence, and the more involved PPCT stage with its influence of time and place, although the lack of a longitudinal aspect limited the application of the chronos-dimension. EST was also chosen as the primary theoretical framework because it led to greater identify of how relationships between children and their peers, teachers, and parents, at different stages during their educational journey in sixth grade, serve as positive and negative influences on selected students' success (see also Agabrian, 2007; O'Toole, Hayes, & Mhathúna, 2014). EST is therefore applicable for determining the extent to which home, school, and community settings have had, or continue to have, an influence on student success, and led to the development of an ecological footprint for influences on the study participants in the common school setting (see Section Four; also Agabrian, 2007; Lee & Bong, 2015).

Design of the Study

This study examined how and to what extent the triad of home, school, and community settings influence student success via a distribution pattern revealed from a context-based analysis (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Tudge et al., 2009). Analysis focused on student perceptions and experiences to determine if there was more influence from one triad over another, and if there were more positive influences or more negative influences. Analysis also attempted to identify combined or simultaneous influence via multiple networks across different contexts or settings. The final analysis, therefore, attempted to examine how home, school, and community settings and individuals affect

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student success (Leonard, 2011; Sanders & Epstein, 1998). This analytical process thus transformed the study from being a discussion of influences on middle school achievement to one of how to improve and enrich student success by listening to students' voices.

Methodology

Extant research on middle school achievement and student success encompasses a range of emotional and social foci; yet this study delved into largely uncharted waters by exploring the influence of home, school, and community settings on student success from both positive and negative perspectives. This led to the use of a transcendental phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of rising seventh grade students who had been pre-identified as successful sixth grade students at the site school according to specific criteria, rather than via interpretations, experiences, or opinions of a researcher or observer (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, by examining students' successes and failures "as if for the first time" (Creswell, 2013, p. 80; and Moustakas, 1994, p. 34), it is hoped the "essence" of the phenomenon of middle school success (Merriam, 2009, p. 25), and the influences which precede it, will be better understood through the use of a common, experiential, academic setting (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002).

A transcendental phenomenological study consists of four phases: epoche, reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences to move from a state of awareness, to understanding, and finally knowledge about a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The *epoche* phase requires a researcher to refrain from judgment so everyday knowledge and perceptions are put to one side. This is a difficult but essential first step, for it requires the phenomenon (in this case, student success in the selected middle school) to be considered with a high degree of naivety without consideration of personal

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background or opinion. Therefore, during this phase, I reflected on my own experiences with and in middle schools in order to be aware of possible interference or bias before developing the interview protocol and to try to account for the impact of my personal and professional influences and experiences on the study (Merriam, 2009). This was also when I conducted a pilot interview with a middle school student (“Wendy”, a pseudonym) from a different school site to determine question order and effectiveness before the interview protocol was revised and used with the final student participants.

The pilot interview was beneficial for me. It reinforced the need to distance my own teaching experiences from the school-based experiences of the student interviewee by making me aware of when I make comments that were possibly leading or questions that were confusing. It also resulted in re-phrasing and re-ordering some questions to promote clarity and improve the likelihood of possible connections between sub-topics. The pilot interview also increased my awareness of student need during the interview, and especially of the need for me to be flexible or less-structured during the interview itself in order to accommodate deviations as topics were discussed. This was because the pilot interview became more conversational than I was expecting. As such, I became aware of changes I needed to make when interviewing to accommodate such diversions in the order and answer format. Lastly, review and transcription of the pilot interview highlighted how often I would acknowledge the student’s responses with positive comments such as, “That is a great example”, or with fillers and affirmative murmurs such as, “yes” or “mmm.” This awareness was invaluable for reminding me to stay more consciously neutral, yet supportive, during the later interview process. It also served to remind me to be sincere rather than automatic, such as when I responded to student comments, or when I needed to redirect

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students to questions if they lost the point of the question, or needed questions to be rephrased or repeated (see Roulston & Shelton, 2015).

The second phase of a transcendental phenomenological study, *reduction*, requires a researcher to consider information “as if for the first time” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80 and Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). During this phase, each experience is to be considered singularly and as part of the greater phenomenon through reflection of each piece of information. This phase therefore lends itself to analysis of a triad on sixth grade student success because home, school, and community influence could be considered separately and as combined influences on student success. During this phase, conducted during the transcription stage of the study, I therefore kept the triad approach in mind, reflecting on when and where each setting was evidenced as influences on particular students’ success.

This process of reflection led directly to the third phase which aims to “grasp the structural essence” of the phenomenon being examined (Moustakas, 1994, p. 35). During this *imaginative variation* phase, I re-read and reviewed transcripts in an attempt to identify the essence or core of the phenomenon by moving from facts to general meanings or possibilities as I began analyzing the student-centered narratives that were emerging from the transcription process. This phase also required me to consider contexts or themes that account for the phenomenon being studied, and the impact of broad structures such as time, space, and relationships with others as a way to categorize influences on student success. Finally, the fourth phase or *synthesis of meanings* allowed me to move towards a sense of understanding related to the essence of middle school success itself. Specifically, it was in this fourth stage that analysis endeavored to determine the extent of influence from the triad of home, school, and community on student success, leading to the creation of an ecological

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footprint for the site school. It also was when new central themes emerged from the narrative to reflect the combined influence of the triad settings.

A transcendental phenomenological study, therefore, is complicated, for it calls on researchers to keep an open mind as participants identify experiences related to the phenomenon being examined. It also required me to intentionally remove my perceptions and experiences about middle school students, middle school success, and middle school structures in order to recognize and interpret participants' experiences and meaning as stand alone pieces of information related to the phenomenon being studied. Setting aside one's own presuppositions, experiences, opinions and so on, is an essential part of the transcendental phenomenological method: to see the phenomenon for what it is, "just as it is, and to explicate what it is in its own terms" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41). In other words, I tried to be as removed from the experiences and opinions of rising seventh grade students' as possible, by attempting to ignore my own experiences with rising seventh grade students, as both a mother and a teacher, or at least to be cognizant of the potential influence my experiences could have. This meant focusing on the student-centered narratives as recollections and stories about student success and failure whilst consciously trying to ignore my own experiences. I, therefore, tried to consider students' experiences in isolation as I heard them for the first time to minimize the influence of my own story and to allow the students' stories to emerge.

However, while Moustakas (1994) warns that achieving a perfect state of isolation is not possible, he stresses the importance of being as removed from preconceived ideas, biases, and judgments as possible in order to develop an open state of mind ready to accept new information and ideas from the interview process. As such, it was especially important to

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achieve a degree of distance during the interviews, as I am a middle school teacher in the same district as the students. I did not want my experiences as a teacher to dictate the course of the discussions during the interviews, or compromise my analysis of the student-centered narrative afterwards. My concern was that my interpretation of participant influences and experiences at the site school may privilege my experiences based on the context in my own building rather than the realities of the site school. To help achieve this distance, student participants were not told I am a teacher in the district, but that I was a doctoral student investigating middle school student success (see Appendix B for the invitation, parent consent and student assent letters for the study). It also required a dedication of focus and attention to minimize distractions during the interviews, and later during analysis, to focus on the phenomenon of middle school student success.

Part of the process of accounting for my own perspectives and experiences thus necessitated that I serve more as a confidant during the interview process rather than centering my teacher identity. However, I did not want to be so distanced that I appeared non-caring or aloof. I therefore made a concerted effort to ensure students were in a safe, welcoming environment during the interview process by completing interviews in a private conference room where the interviews could be conducted without interruption. I also made a conscious attempt to establish rapport, by having a brief conversation with each participant about their day before the interview questions began. Regarding the interview environment, I also chose to sit next to each student, with the laptop off to the side for audio recording to create a more personal interview space, rather than situating myself in a potentially confrontational position across the table from them. Lastly, because I also wanted to encourage students to be honest and open in their recollections and comments, I reminded

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them often that no one else would hear their interview or read the transcripts and that they would have the opportunity to review the transcript prior to completion of the study.

The interviews took place during summer school in June and July, 2016 with student participants randomly selected from a list generated by the school principal according to specific selection criteria. Interviews were originally going to follow a three-interview model based on Dolbeare and Schuman (as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 17), however, conversations with rising seventh graders had different degrees and richness of detail in their story telling, resulting in interviews of varying length. As a result, instead of employing a multiple-interview model with an hour for each interview, the interviews lasted between 33-50 minutes and there was no need to conduct multiple interviews in order to complete the interview protocol (see Appendix A). Thus, prior to data collection, while the plan was to collect around 24 hours of interview data via 2-3 interviews per participant, data collection during summer school resulted in single interviews with participants and a total of around nine interview hours, which were then transcribed verbatim. There was also no need to arrange transportation, as interviews were held during the school day by agreement with the school principal.

The use of semi-structured interviews has not been widely used in middle school research to consider the effect and extent of combined influences on student success (see Lee & Bong, 2015; Forrest-Bank et al., 2014; Sanders & Epstein, 1998). However, semi-structured interviews allowed me to explore tangential traits and historical influences on middle school student achievement, as revealed by the extant literature. These included the potential influence of *home-based factors* including parental and extended family involvement (Dupere, Leventhal, Crosnoe, & Dion, 2010; Jeynes, 2011; Morton, 2014;

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Núñez et al., 2015; Stewart, 2008; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006) and the effect of parent involvement in school (Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007); *school-based factors* including school culture, high academic standards, and positive teacher-student relationships (Berry, 2005; Carpenter et al., 2006; Cohen, 2006; Darensbourg & Blake, 2014; Davenport & Anderson, 2002; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Johnson & Uline, 2005; Marzano, 2011; Mickelson & Greene, 2006; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013; Wentzel, 1998; Wiggan, 2007, 2014); and *community influence* via peer groups and participation in after school activities and clubs (Darensbourg & Blake, 2014; Drolet, Arcand, Ducharme, & Leblanc, 2013; Durlak et al., 2010; Gordon & Cui, 2014; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Lam & Ducreux, 2013; McCormick & Cappella, 2015; Jeynes, 2011; Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004).

To achieve this goal, the interview protocol investigated how students access resources, either during the school day or outside it, through various settings and the influence of individuals in the triad, as well as their own influence on their own success (see Appendix A). This included in-direct discussion of within-student traits, such as resiliency, hope, or motivation, and their influence on academic success (Feinstein, Driving-Hawk & Baartman, 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Kearney & Grazcyk, 2014; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). It also included investigation of intrinsic supports that impact achievement such as desire, self-worth, and self-motivation through conversations with students about their successes and failures (Emmanuel, Adom, Josephine, & Solomon, 2014; Fenzel, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Urdan, Solek & Schoenfleder, 2007). Traits such as self-control and self-praise have also been shown to impact success and academic achievement, especially in terms of goal attainment, college and career readiness, and attention to task (see

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Berry, 2005; Goldstein, Boxer, & Rudolph, 2015), so these were also explored during the interview process.

The interview protocol also included questions to examine direct and indirect familial influence such as homework assistance or encouragement, and communication with teachers (see Gordon & Cui, 2014; Goldstein et al., 2015; Núñez et al., 2015). School influences such as challenging curriculum or individualized teacher assistance (see Carpenter et al., 2006; Darensbourg & Blake, 2014; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Stevens, 2003); and neighborhood influences as location and type of housing (see Borman, Grigg, & Hanselman, 2016; Douglas, 2016; Orfield, 2013; Prince, 2014; Woolley et al., 2008), or participation in church groups, activities, and sports (see Berry, 2005; Dawes, Vest & Simpkins, 2014) were also investigated through the semi-structured interview process.

The interview protocol began with general topics of what is meant by success and failure, before moving to the influence of home, school, and community factors on middle school students' success (see Appendix A). This was a deliberate attempt to investigate both academic and non-academic meaning of success and failure so the study was not focused only on the school setting. As such, students were encouraged to talk about in-school and out-of-school experiences that may have hindered or helped them to be successful in sixth grade. This use of semi-structured interviews led to an investigation of many potential influences including family, friends, teachers, coaches, neighborhoods, sports teams, clubs, church, and youth groups, to determine the extent to which the triad has impacted each child's middle school level academic success or achievement. Finally, the interview process also examined how students perceive success to be influenced by goals and future planning (Durlak et al., 2010; Lee & Bong, 2015; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006).

The Analytical Process

A multiple step analysis plan further helped to achieve distance between my experiences as a middle school teacher and the details students provided through the interview process. This was necessary to avoid transference of authority or power due to my position as a middle school teacher in the district to the interview situation: I wanted to be seen simply as a researcher who knows something of middle school structure, rather than a teacher from a neighboring school in the same district. Therefore, the first step in the analytical process was to use open coding of the student narratives to identify information and discussion related to home, school, and community influences (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Open coding facilitated identification of broad concepts and themes from the student-centered narrative related to the triad approach of home, school and community settings, as shown below in Figure 2:

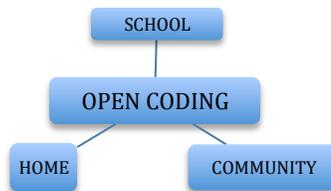


Figure 2: Open Coding Analysis

Thus, open coding helped to eliminate information not applicable to triad influence on student success (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Open coding was then followed by more precise analysis in the form of line-by-line coding to identify the “essence” of middle school success (Merriam, 2009, p. 25) via students’ perspectives and experiences (the third phase of the transcendental approach) as shown in Figure 3:

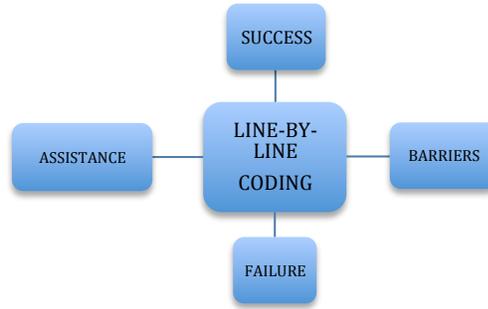


Figure 3: Line-by-line Coding Analysis

Thus, line-by-line coding served to pull meaning from the rich details, language, and stories about the phenomenon of influence on middle school achievement (Agabrian, 2007; Creswell, 2013). After all, the goal was to build a rich, detailed fabric of the settings, individuals, and experiences that help and/or hinder student success in sixth grade from students’ own words (Charmaz, 2010). Line-by-line analysis was also crucial in order to determine the extent or distribution of influence, using Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory (EST), and led to plotting of student comments, as well as emerging themes and trends, into a concentric circle format as shown in Figure 4:

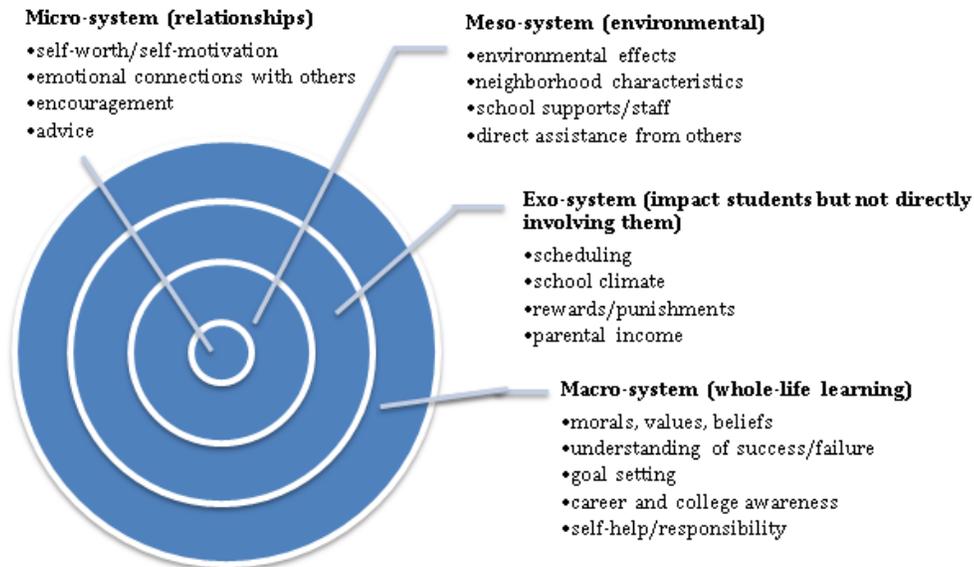


Figure 4: Distribution of Influences Modeled on Ecological Systems Theory

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Finally, the resultant student-centered narrative was analyzed to identify various macro- and meso- level influences on students (including family, school, religious, neighborhood, and peer relationships and experiences) to determine the extent of support and influence from each participant's immediate environment during his or her sixth grade year (Gabbard & Krebs, 2012; Rillero, 2016; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). This axial coding step (Merriam, 2009) was instrumental in bringing separate themes and concepts together under the triad headings to determine the extent of influence in the specific school setting using EST as the model and led to an ecological footprint for the school regarding the successes and struggles experienced by sixth grade students (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), as shown in Figure 5:

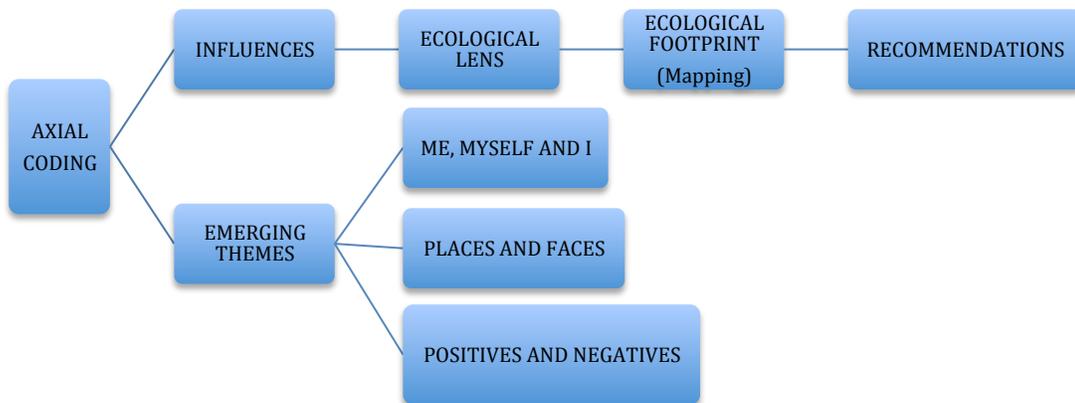


Figure 5: Axial Coding Analysis

Setting

Merriam (2009) speaks of the need to embrace a common experience or essence when exploring an ideal phenomenological base for investigating the shared emotional and cognitive experiences of a familiar, specific setting. Therefore, the selection of a common middle school setting presented an ideal environment for studying who, why, and how sixth grade student success is influenced by a triad approach according to students' perspectives. While study participants may not all have had the same teachers, nor been on the same grade

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level teams, nor in the same classrooms, nor have the same home or community experiences, the experience of being in the same middle school provided the common setting prescribed by both Merriam (2009) and Patton (2002) for phenomenological research.

The setting for this study was a traditional 6-8 middle school in a mid-sized city with a population of approximately 115,000, located in a mid-western state. However, the school was not my place of work, in order to remove potential ethical barriers or areas of conflict, as I am a middle school teacher in another school in the same district. Instead, the site was chosen primarily for convenience of location, to provide ease of access to maximize data collection in a short amount of time and to minimize travel for students and me. This was due to concerns including the number of interviews being conducted with participants; difficulty securing access to a suitable participant pool in a middle school building; and the number of participants potentially involved in the study. The site school was also chosen because it has very few English Language Learner (ELL) students (one of the protected status categories to be avoided according to IRB guidelines for research using children as a vulnerable population), and because DESE data for all the middle schools in the site district revealed achievement concerns worthy of investigation in the site school (see Table 1a and Table 1b).

Other potential populations and locations were considered, such as students attending the after-school Boys and Girls Club, but I was unable to secure approval from that site's coordinator. Furthermore, while church camps and sporting clubs were also suggested as alternative access points to recent sixth grade students, I feel such locales imply a degree of elitism between students who may have greater or lesser access to such organized sports (see also Bennett, Lutz, & Jayaram, 2012; Dawes et al., 2014), and thus may not have been ideal as a representative population from which to examine influences on sixth grade success.

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After all, per the maxim of Horace Mann (Growe & Montgomery, 2003), public school is the ‘great equalizer’: it provides a common setting, leading to common experiences for all students if expectations, resources, and opportunities are provided equally (Bennett et al., 2012; Gilbert et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Milner, 2010; VanSciver, 2006). As such, after experiencing initial difficulty gaining access to a sixth grade population, I approached the principal of the site school about conducting the study during summer school because of my desire to gain a better understanding of influences on middle school student success.

More information about the context of the site school as an organizational and educational setting is provided in Section Two, but suffice to say, the building principal provided preliminary permission to conduct the research and was intrigued about the aims of this study to investigate why certain students are successful in middle school. Research at the school site, however, was also contingent on district-level restrictions, which included having interview questions prepared in advance; having no identifying information or data for students in the final report; and not accessing any academic student records, although the guidance office used agreed upon selection criteria to identify a potential list of student participants. Finally, district approval was also contingent on IRB approval and successful completion of the dissertation proposal.

Participants

After some discussion with the building principal regarding random sampling versus purposeful sampling of students, and feedback from my committee members, the following criteria were identified as parameters for identifying possible participants:

- 1) *Academic success* was the main criterion used in selecting participants at the request of the school principal. Current sixth grade students with no failing

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grades, 90% or greater attendance, and no office referrals as of the end of the March grading period were identified in a list generated by the site school's guidance department to form the initial participant pool (n=123). However, it should be noted that it was not the intent of this study to suggest that students with such preclusions are not successful or cannot be successful, particularly in light of research that speaks to problematic disproportionalities related to office referrals for students of color (Gage, 2016; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; McIntosh, Mercer, Nesse, Strickland-Cohen, & Hoselton, 2016).

- 2) The *gender ratio* in the participant pool inadvertently mimicked the ratio of male to female students in the school's sixth grade population (49% male at the site school; 42% male for the final group of study participants). Gender was not a specific construct placed on participant selection, despite the final 5:7 ratio of males to females in the participant pool.
- 3) The *ethnic ratio* in the participant pool mimicked in part the sixth grade population (i.e. 26% of the sixth grade population was African American and 25% of the students interviewed in the study were African American. No Hispanic students were interviewed or randomly selected from the initial pool and none were identified via the summer school cross-check process. This is unfortunate, as it meant one group of students was eliminated by chance from the study, although it should be noted that the ratio of Hispanic to White or Hispanic to Black students was also not provided by the site school at the time. Notably, the school's Hispanic population was 5.6% of the total school population (DESE, 2016c). Furthermore, no students self-reported on the MAP for 2015 as Hispanic, so I

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have no way of knowing how this may have changed findings regarding student perception of sixth grade success. However, it should also be noted that race was not a pre-determinate of selection. In fact, I did not know a participant's race until we met for the interviews.

- 4) Students were excluded from the initial participant pool if they were ELL students, had an IEP or 504 plan, were wards of the state, and/or hearing or visually impaired according to IRB restrictions on using children as a vulnerable population. Notably, the implication that such students are not successful was not the intended purpose of this study. These restrictions were communicated by the IRB office in the early stage of planning this study. I acknowledge that such restrictions on participant selection removed such stories of success from the table and likewise would serve as inclusion, rather than exclusion, from future studies.

These selection criteria reinforce the focus of this study to be on middle school success, rather than on the existence of an achievement gap. While it could be argued there is selection bias by focusing only on students who were deemed successful according to the above criteria (Roulston & Shelton, 2015), these restrictions were set in agreement with not only members of my committee, but also by the school district's research office, the University's Office for IRB, and the site principal. Thus, final selection was deemed representative of *successful* sixth grade students at the site school (excluding Hispanic students, by chance, as explained above and protected status children, as discussed above).

Selection of possible students began when the guidance office generated an initial list according to the above criteria from the entire sixth grade population at the site school. An initial forty students were randomly selected from the initial pool of 123 eligible students by

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highlighting ten students per printed page of the original list. This was achieved by selecting the names of every fifth student in the original list. Invitations, along with consent and assent letters, were then mailed out in unidentified envelopes to the forty potential participants (see Appendices B and C). However, after only a few students responded to these initial invitations to participate, the school guidance office generated a second list of eligible students who were enrolled in the site school's summer school program.

These two lists were compared and twenty students common to both lists were randomly selected and invited to participate. However, at the end of two weeks, only four consent and assent forms had been returned to the school office. With the approval of the school principal, a third round of invitations was emailed out to parents of another twenty students whose names appeared on both lists. In response to this round, another eight students agreed to participate in the study, bringing the total to twelve students. A summary of participant characteristics follows:

Table 2: Summary of Participant Characteristics
(arranged alphabetically by student-chosen pseudonym)

Name/length of interview in minutes	Race	Family/home influences	School activities or influence	Community activities or influences
Benjamin (41 mins)	White	Lives with parents and younger sister Very involved extended family	Challenge Math Quiz Bowl Band Chess Club	Soccer league Golf lessons Volunteers
Ellie (43 mins)	White	Lives with mom (divorced) and an older sister and brother	Challenge Math Choir Band Cheer manager	Softball league Family friends Piano instruction Gymnastics club
Grace (35 mins)	White	Lives with mom (divorced) and younger brother	Challenge Math Reading Club Math Counts Band	Softball league
James (35 mins)	African American	Lives with mom (divorced) and younger brother	Orchestra	None
Jason (43 mins)	White	Lives with parents and an older brother	Challenge Math Band Choir	Piano instruction Soccer league

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Kate (36 mins)	White	Lives with parents No siblings	Challenge Math Band	Piano instruction Flute instruction
Liz (35 mins)	White	Lives with parents and three older siblings	Challenge Math Band Choir	None
Natalie (45 mins)	African American	Lives with parents and older brother	Challenge Math Choir	Basketball, soccer, and softball leagues Church choir
Opal (35 mins)	White	Lives with parents and younger brother Very involved extended family	Challenge Math Choir Intramurals	Piano instruction Church youth group
Owen (35 mins)	African American	Lives with parents and older sisters	Challenge Math Intramurals	Football and basketball leagues
Regina (45 mins)	White	Lives with mom (divorced) and older sister Very involved aunts	Challenge Math Band Choir Yearbook	Piano instruction Tennis lessons
Stephen (33 mins)	African American	Lives part time with mom, step-father and same age step-brother and part time with grandparents	Challenge Math Band	Baseball

Incentives for participation were also built into this study, with three retail gift card drawings for students who completed the interview process, in an attempt to improve student participation rates.

In arriving at the participant total of twelve, it should be noted that a small participant pool is supported by literature concerning other qualitative studies. For example, Creswell (2014) posits 3-15 participants is an ideal range for a phenomenological study, although Nieto's (1994) study included qualitative interviews with just ten high school students to investigate student perceptions regarding multiculturalism, racism, and academic success. Similarly, Ani (2013) provides a useful model of a qualitative study with just six participants from grades six through eight as an example of the effective use of student-centered narratives and one on one interviews, while Berry (2005) conducted a study with eight middle school males and reported explicitly on two participants in his research regarding student perception and mathematics success.

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Data Collection

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected academically successful middle school students, as outlined above. By asking students about their experiences, the goal was to investigate student perceptions of the extent to which the triad settings of home, school, and the community impact student success during sixth grade.

Merriam (2009) states welcoming, open-ended, introductory questions help participants feel comfortable and more specific questions should be suited to the purpose of the study. Therefore, interviews were conducted in a private, one-on-one setting to help students feel more comfortable, as stated above. After all, students fare better when they feel they are cared for, feel their opinions are respected, and feel trusted (NEA, 2011). Therefore, not only was establishing rapport in a private, semi-structured interview process critical, but doing so helped me to maintain a professional and ethical stance through the use of a respectful interview environment.

Interviews were conducted during the regular summer school day, with the approval of the summer school principal, and lasted between 33-50 minutes. Interviews were recorded on a laptop computer as an audio file only for later transcription, as documented in the parent consent and student assent forms, and students were allowed to create their own pseudonyms in order to protect their identities (Ani, 2013). Finally, participants were provided the opportunity to review the final coding of their personal narrative according to the triad approach, although none chose to do so (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Limitations and Assumptions

In accessing students' stories it is important to do no harm, especially as emotional details or sensitive information may emerge of what helps and hinders middle school

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students (Creswell, 2014; Horner & Minifie, 2011). Indeed, one of the difficulties of conducting qualitative research is learning information of a sensitive nature. Being informed of available supports prior to the study beginning, including the availability of school counselors and administrators, was a necessary precaution in case students were in need of emotional or other support due to information or detail discussed. Likewise, as a mandated reporter due to my employment as a teacher, I am required to inform the building administrator if any information revealed in the interview was particularly concerning. This also helped to avoid stereotyping, categorizing, or impeding of students or their families, as details emerged through the interview process and the analysis that followed (Merriam, 2009; Swick & Williams, 2006).

A major assumption that undergirds this study, however, is that students were telling the truth when discussing events and people during their interviews. There were no crosschecks with other individuals or locations raised in the interviews, so there was no way to confirm or deny details. Similarly, the act of interviewing students is both highly individualistic, due to the use of a semi-structured interview protocol, and subjective: one student's views about the learning environment may be vastly different from another (Buehler, Fletcher, Johnston, & Weymouth, 2015). Therefore, any future potential replication of this study would be best served by the use of follow-on interviews or surveys to corroborate details raised in student narratives and to use teacher and administrator data in combination with student perceptions to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the school environment. However, for this current study such extra lengths in data collection were not feasible due to time, setting, and resource restraints. Indeed, a future study of the same group of students with a longitudinal lens, perhaps until they graduate from high

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school, could allow for a more thorough application of the *chronos-dimension* that is part of ecological systems theory as mentioned above, and thus provide more data on student perceptions of success over an extended period of time.

Another limitation of this study lies with the size of the final participant group. Originally I had hoped to interview students across grades 6-8 to investigate triad influences on middle school student success. However, the study's scope was pared back to only sixth grade students, with a total of twelve participants due to time restraints associated with summer school participation. This focus on only rising seventh graders fit the purpose of the study, but in order to create a true ecological footprint for the entire school, applying such a study to students from all grades, and greater diversity would be a valuable future area of research. After all, if this study were to be replicated with more participants, it could lead to a wider narrative from which to examine the influence of home, school, and community factors. Ideally, this would include students from all spectrums of the school or district student population, including those with disabilities, and students of varied socio-economic, linguistic, and racial backgrounds, given that IRB exclusions in this study inadvertently restricted the type of student originally identified as possible participants.

Alternatively, if student responses were collected via a combination of surveys and interviews, although the narrative aspect may be compromised if students provide limited detail in their survey responses, more participants could be involved in a larger study using a mixed methods research design. However, it should be noted a mixed methods design was not used as a data collection method in this study due to access and time restrictions brought on by the use of summer school students as the participant group, for the use of both a survey and an interview would have required a significant change to the original study design and

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both district level and University level IRB approval.

A further limitation of this study was the fact that it was site-specific. However, I believe this study to be replicable across the site building and other middle schools in the district to examine triad influences in the entire school district at a future date. I believe a district-wide investigation of middle school students' perceptions of their own learning would be invaluable for supporting the district focus on achievement, enrichment, and opportunity (personal communication, District Publicity Officer, October 23, 2015) and could lead to increased student achievement, school improvement recommendations, and improved community based programming and partnerships.

Finally, given the corpus of literature concerning achievement and the achievement gap, limitations were imposed to establish boundaries when reviewing extant literature. This meant the literature review was first bounded *chronologically* from 1966 to 2016 by the seminal *Equality of Educational Opportunity/Coleman Report* (Coleman et al., 1966), significant for raising the issue of academic achievement as a national concern, up to current research published in 2016. Secondly, keyword searches included *achievement gap, middle schools, middle school achievement, achievement in middle school, middle school learning gap, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, bio-ecological systems theory, ecological systems theory, positive youth development, critical race theory, adolescent development theory, phenomenological research in middle schools, student-centered learning in middle school, underachievement in middle school, opportunity gap, resilience in middle school, neighborhood effects on middle school achievement, ecological influences in middle school* and *parental influence in middle school*. A second round of research was also conducted to explore student perspectives on success and what it means to be successful in middle school.

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This included keywords such as *equality in middle school*, *student perception in middle school*, *student voice in middle school*, *middle school student success*, *student voice* and *student perception of success*. Thirdly, search results included multi-grade level articles (including elementary and high school success), meta-analyses, and international research only when the subject, methods, or findings were pertinent to the topic of middle school success. Finally, research included *bibliographical searches* from other articles, as well as backward *citation searches*, and the use of Internet based tools such as Google scholar, ERIC, Pro-Quest, and SCIENCE DIRECT via the University of Missouri library.

Design Controls and Researcher Positionality

Using data from one's own school or school district could lead to a conflict of interest. To account for potential conflicts, I established protocols, as well as anonymized student names, district and building personnel, and the finalized data to protect participants' identities and key site and district data. Design controls included participants choosing their own pseudonyms and all identifying characteristics being anonymized or removed from transcripts. Likewise, no permanent or school records were accessed, including participants' grades, guidance, or administrative records, and the potential participant pool lists were generated by the site school's guidance office according to specific selection criteria with the full cooperation of the site school principal.

Furthermore, being a teacher in the same district as the site school meant I was required to choose a setting other than my own building in order to distance myself from participants and their success stories. However, being a resident of the same town and a teacher in the district means it was also important to exclude any students I knew personally so there was no conflict of interest. Thus, while I did not know the identity of participants

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prior to them being selected, I reviewed student names prior to sending out permission information to identify and minimize any potential conflict of interest or bias.

Similarly, with respect to researcher positionality, it was important to approach participants as an interviewer and not as a teacher who works in the same school district. To achieve this degree of distance and to encourage an honest and open dialogue, I needed to remove as much of my teacher persona as possible from the interview process so students saw me as just a person to talk to and not as a teacher within the district. This meant not discussing anything to do with my school, a cross-town rival of the site school, or mentioning anything in discussion with students that would give away the fact that I am a teacher. This was a little challenging at times, especially when students talked about in-school structures and routines such as the cafeteria, schedules, and specific classes such as RTI and Challenge Math. In such instances, wherein a non-teacher would not necessarily understand these details about middle school, I would disguise my knowledge by saying things like, “Yes, I have heard about Challenge Math from other students, it is ...”, or “I was told your cafeteria was... .” Comments such as these enabled me to stay involved in the discussion, but to detach my teacher self from my interviewer self. In fact, students did not know I was a teacher in the district and were simply told I was a doctoral student from the university. I do not think this influenced my study, for student rivalry between my school and the site school may have had the opposite effect if students had known where I work. Likewise, I think if students had known I was a teacher, they may have been reluctant to discuss concerns within their school or to make recommendations to improve the learning environment, school culture, or organization out of concern they could be in trouble with administration. In fact, to avoid this fear, I repeatedly reminded students that the study was going to be anonymized

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and the final transcripts and recommendations would have no identifying data. Students were also told they could review their transcript to check for accuracy and the like.

Finally, setting aside my experiences as a middle school teacher was an important step in maintaining distance when it came to not only the data collection stage, but also the analysis stage of this study. Being more aware of my preconceived ideas and prejudices about student success and home, school, and community involvement prior to analyzing the student narrative also helped me to maintain a level of objectivity when it came to determining the type and extent of triad influence on sixth grade student success (Moustakas, 1994). In particular, I strove to consider students' stories from the perspective of a child in sixth grade to ensure my analysis was based on *their* events and experiences and not through adult eyes. In so doing, I attempted to remain sensitive to students' age, interests and experiences, and their conversational skills, rather than keeping an adult perspective at the forefront of my mind and in my discussion.

For instance, some students were more articulate than others in their ability to answer questions, such as Benjamin, who had a lot more to say about many topics than Grace, who was more quiet and direct in her responses. Likewise, some students required redirects to stay on topic, such as James or Stephen, or needed questions repeated or broken down into shorter sections, such as with Kate and Regina, or the opportunity to stand and stretch, such as with Benjamin and Opal. Often students jumped around with their answers, necessitating flexibility in the order follow up questions were asked or topics were discussed. Thus, the use of the semi-structured protocol, with open ended questions inviting students to "tell me about" their experiences, encouraged students to be fluid in their own rhetoric instead of the interview taking on a stop-and-go structure. As a result, many students made connections for

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themselves about the type and extent of influence from home, school, and community settings on their own success. Ultimately, this flexibility and use of a semi-structured protocol allowed a richly detailed, student-centered, narrative to emerge, wherein student voices became the guide during the interviews instead of mine as the interviewer.

Definitions of Key Terms

Achievement

Before discussing how to improve student achievement it is important to realize what is and is not meant by this term. For instance, the achievement gap is often represented by student scores on standardized tests between groups of students (as shown in Table 1a and Table 1b, above). These groups are often based on racial identity, including Black and Hispanic, White and Black, and Black and Hispanic students (Anderson, Medrich, & Fowler, 2007; Bower, 2013; Evans, 2005). However, the achievement gap can include behavioral and/or discipline records between such groups (Gregory et. al., 2010; Griner & Stewart, 2013). Achievement, on the other hand, is more commonly measured by a combination of summative and formative measures including teacher-awarded grades, standardized tests scores, and subjective results such as peer-reviewed assessments and intrinsic values such as self-worth, self-esteem, and pride or faith in one's own ability (Berry, 2005; Emmanuel et al., 2014; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Rudolph et al., 2001).

While some would suggest measuring and monitoring student achievement and academic success is easiest when using standardized scores, Henderson and Mapp (2002) suggest student success should include (modified from p. 23):

- Teacher behavior and academic skills ratings
- Vocabulary, reading and language skill scores

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- Report card grades/Grade point averages (GPA)
- Scores on standardized tests (e.g. SAT/ACT)
- Enrollment in advanced level classes/AP and honors classes
- Attendance records
- Promotion to next grade for high school students
- Healthy mental, social and physical development

Moreover, achievement research needs to include how students see themselves in terms of concepts such as self-worth and their future selves, especially regarding their social and academic success (Emmanuel et al., 2014; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Oyserman et al., 2007). Therefore, discussion of student achievement should examine not only academic success in a school setting, but also the influence of historical and entrenched social, structural, and systemic inequalities and influences including race, ethnicity, location, class, and access to resources (Bower, 2013; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Nisbett, 2011; Prince, 2014), as presented in more detail in Section Three, rather than academic grades or test scores in isolation (Marchant et al., 2001).

Middle School

Middle schools serve as a crucial transitional period in a child's education, situated between often small, neighborhood elementary schools and very large high schools. Most middle schools serve students in grades 6-8, although there are a growing number of K-8 middle schools (see Carolan, Weiss, & Matthews, 2015; Goldstein et al., 2015). Likewise, most middle schools are structured around teams of core teachers with a common planning time, and elective teachers who teach students in all grades on a rotational or semester basis, although some charter and magnet school offer alternate structures such as grade level

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academies or cross-grade level enrollment (Green, Emery, Sanders, & Anderman, 2016; Schwerdt & West, 2013).

Teaming is therefore a key component of middle school structure. Teams allow students to spend a large part of their day with the same peer group, moving from class to class, while teachers stay in their classes teaching one or two content areas (Oakes, Quartz, Gong, Guiton, & Lipton, 1993). This structure promotes peer support, also considered crucial to student success at the middle school level, as it encourages positive peer social and academic interactions (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Teaming also allows teachers to develop cross-teamed, cross-curriculum content and activities to encourage diversity of instruction and promote student learning (personal communication, District Literacy Specialist, March 21, 2016). The focus on teams in middle school, therefore, leads to the development of small heterogeneous learning communities rather than larger competitive classrooms as commonly found in the high school setting (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development [CCAD], 1989). As a result, middle schools tend to be highly supportive of students' needs, ensuring students are known well by at least one adult, often through the use of advisory programs with small groups of students (Oakes et al., 1993). They also tend to promote student engagement through a variety of intra- and inter-mural activities, clubs, and activities after school (Bowen et al., 2008).

Proponents of middle school regard them as the last chance to identify students at risk of failure and the last chance to help students get back on track before high school. However, critics of middle school point to fixed bell schedules; lecture formats in pseudo-high school classes; and an overall lack of individual student decision-making compared to elementary classrooms where there is greater recognition of student voice (see Rockoff & Lockwood,

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2010; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Likewise, researchers argue that unreasonable and increasing pressure on students to be self-regulating, goal-driven, independent learners prior to their transition to high school results in a lack of success during the middle school years (see Bellmore, 2011; Durlak et al., 2010; Powers & Wagner, 1984; Rudolph et al., 2001).

Success

Success is commonly associated with personal gain, goal-setting, wealth, and a range of physical, social, emotional and financial attributes, including grades or scores in the academic setting (Harper, 2015; Zhu et al., 2014). It has also been described in terms of both academic and personal habits, skills and attitudes (Douglas & Arnold, 2016). Middle school success has also come to be realized as being prepared for the robustness of high school (Roybal, Thornton & Usinger, 2014). However, instead of being explicitly defined in the study, the term *success* was left open to participants to articulate through recounting of their life stories and their experiences in sixth grade. Given that success and failure were discussed within an academic setting, and analyzed within the context of home, school, and community influences, the implication for this study is that academic success is more than, for example, success as a member of a sporting team or earning an A in a class at school. As success in the triad settings may or may not influence academic success at the middle school level, the aim of this study was not to define success, but to see what students themselves thought about how and why they had been successful in sixth grade. Therefore, students were encouraged to develop an understanding of success (and by extension, failure) in terms of *their* experiences, not only in their personal lives but also regarding events and experiences within the school setting.

This study aimed to investigate the extent to which home, school, and community

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influences impact student success, for good or bad, and to use students' stories to determine the influence of this triad in the specific middle school setting. Thus, students' conceptualization of the meanings of achievement, success, and failure, in terms of their own lives and experiences in sixth grade was key to the development of a student-centered narrative. This resulting discussion of success, and by extension, failure, was necessary in order for the participants to gain a sense of awareness of what success means to them in the context of their life and academic experiences. Directly linked to the study's first research question, the use of semi-structured interviews therefore focused on how students experienced success in their lives; in what context or setting this occurred; and who or what helped them to be successful, not only academically, but also socially and emotionally.

Student Voice

Student voice is a growing field of educational research whereby students are provided the opportunity to talk about their learning experiences and education. This includes student participation in, consultation with, and leadership in and outside of school (Quinn & Owen, 2016). It also includes recognizing and encouraging student involvement in school climate decision making, policy, structure, organization, and activities. Student voice has traditionally included student-centered clubs and organizations like Student Councils or Honor Societies, as well as more flexible participatory models such as district wide advisory boards or building level PSTA membership.

However, recognizing student voice empowers students to play an active role in their own learning. It is important to recognize, listen to, and act on student voice as through it students can serve as individual and collective change agents within their own learning environment. It can also serve to promote social skills and civic awareness in an age group

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where students do not often have many opportunities to participate in social or school-based change (Voight, 2015). Indeed, this was the purpose of this study: to listen to successful students' and to analyze their narratives in order to make specific recommendations to improve learning for all students at the site school. Consideration of students' voices regarding their own success and failure and how they are helped and hindered in sixth grade can therefore not only improve learning, but also increase students' sense of worth and purpose (Mitra, 2004; Mitra & Gross, 2009). After all, students at the middle school level are not only beginning to be aware of the influence of relationships with teachers, peers, family and others on their own learning, but are also beginning to see how the learning environment can support or inhibit success. They want to be involved in their own learning, but they also want someone to listen to them (Steinberg & McCray, 2012). Indeed, many commented favorably on their being asked to respond to questions about the learning environment in their site school and their own understanding of success and failure in sixth grade.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is two-fold. Firstly, it examined recent sixth grade students' perceptions of the influence of home, school, and community settings on their own student achievement. Secondly, it applied elements of EST to determine the distribution of said triad influences. This combination of data collection and analysis makes this study unique, for few studies seem to have considered such a triad approach on middle school success (see Bowen et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2011; Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). Few studies have considered sixth-grade students' perspectives concerning their success or academic achievement (see for example, Bishop & Pflaum, 2005; Lee & Bong, 2015; Forrest-Bank et al., 2014), and even fewer have considered EST to

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determine the nature and extent of influences forces on student achievement at the middle school level (Farrell et al., 2007; Lewthwaite et al., 2011).

As a middle school teacher, I want to see my students be successful as young people transitioning to high school. However, to what extent is some students' academic success hampered by factors outside their control? Does the middle school structure make the transition from elementary school more difficult for some students than for others (Holas & Huston, 2012; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Rudolph et al., 2001)? Why do some students become less engaged in school in the middle school years (Akos et al., 2015). How can unpacking students' perceptions of influences lead to systemic change in the site school and its community to better serve middle school learners? Importantly, how can we, as educators, parents, teachers, and community members, address student success at the middle school level by listening to student perceptions of their own learning and recognizing the importance of their voice as a change force within the school setting?

As a result, this study served to investigate what certain successful students perceive to be factors that help and/or hinder success at the middle school level in order to promote greater achievement for all students at the site school. Sixth grade is a pivotal year in middle school, so if this study can make a difference in one school, or even the district as a whole, my desire will be realized. This is what I sought to better understand through this study: How and why certain students are successful, according to their own perspective, in order to make a difference to the learning environment in the site school, and by extension in my school building, and possibly beyond to the district level.

Scholarship

Schools cannot address achievement concerns in isolation (Beatty, 2013; Durlak et

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al., 2010; Evans, 2005). However, while students must assume significant responsibility for their success, “a large measure of responsibility for the education of students lies with the decisions and conduct of the institution” (Carey, 2004, p. 5). Indeed, Henderson and Mapp (2002) discuss how schools and districts can improve student achievement by strengthening bonds between home, school, and community settings by (modified from pp. 61-73):

- Designing programs that support families from preschool through high school.
- Linking efforts to engage families at school or in the community to student learning.
- Focusing efforts to develop trusting and respectful relationships between families and community members.
- Embracing a philosophy of partnership and sharing power with families.
- Making sure parents, school staff, and community members understand children’s educational development is a collaborative effort.
- Building strong connections between schools and community organizations.
- Including families in strategies to reduce the achievement gap among white, middle-class students and low-income students and students of color.

Thus, providing improved communication, equity, and access is crucial for developing stronger relationships between the home, school, and community.

I believe building effective lines of communication between home, school, and community agencies and programs is central to improving student success at the middle school level. Indeed, this use of supportive partnerships between home and school and school and the community not only echoes the village approach of working together to meet all students’ needs, but also reinforces the range of social, economic, and familial factors that

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can impact middle school student achievement. Thus, while school-based curriculum reforms (e.g. extra reading intervention or pre-Algebra classes), may meet the academic needs of some students, schools, families, and community groups need to work more closely together so children “do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7). This focus on how home, school, and community factors may or may not contribute to students’ success in sixth grade was directly tied to the second research question. It also formed the largest part of the interview process, as each student’s story evolved and developed in response to questions designed to elicit details about positive and negative life and school experiences (Patrikakou, 2004). For example, research suggests youth believe they can do better at school if they know their families are interested in their schoolwork, expect them to succeed, and communicate with their teachers and school, so some questions focused on these types of experiences (Patrikakou, 2004).

Finally, after the interviews were completed, the student-centered narratives were coded and analyzed to identify categories of influence according to the triad of home, school, and community settings. Analysis focused on the extent to which home, school, and community settings influence academic success as perceived by the interviewed middle school students. This analysis addressed the “how” and “what” of transcendental phenomenology to ensure the stories were told from participants’ voices and not from my perspective (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004, p. 23).

Summary: Success Not An Achievement Gap

The achievement gap remains a well-documented area of educational research with multiple studies, articles, and books examining effects on student achievement from various angles. This includes influential work by Jeynes (2007, 2011) on parental impact, and the use

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of longitudinal data sets, such as the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), which tracks academic issues for high school students (Ingels, Curtin, Kaufman, Alt, & Chen, 2002). However, the achievement gap, commonly referred to as the academic disparity between White and Black students (Bower, 2013), was not the focus of this study.

Instead, this study was designed to gain a better understanding of the influences that impact student success in sixth grade, rather than examining test result trends on standardized assessments such as MAP tests. While MAP data provided in Tables 1a and 1b (above) served to help identify a site school with achievement concerns, and thus a school which may benefit from the recommendations and findings of a study such as this, this study was not interested in identifying which students were struggling or possible reasons for academic difficulty. Focusing on testing scores would amount to an examination of an achievement gap or deficit approach, while ignoring how out-of-school learning, home and community resources, and extra-curricular school-based and community-based opportunities influence success (Welner & Carter, 2013).

However, expecting *all* students to perform equally on standardized tests, without ensuring equality in resources, quality instruction and external supports from the home, family, neighborhood and community, is to remain ignorant of the many influences which impact student success (Carter, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Stevens, 2010). Hence this study considered how and why selected rising seventh-grade students were academically successful in sixth grade by collecting perception data on the influence of home, school, and community settings. This triad approach not only allowed for the examination of a range of influences on student success, but also highlighted the critical nature of such settings, as being areas in which children closely interact with their environment and form important

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relationships with adults and peers, in terms of overall child development and interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Maxwell, 2016). It also served to value the input of selected students' as change agents within their building by not only providing an avenue through which students' voices could be heard but also by giving shape to specific recommendations impacting student success (see Section Four). However, it is important to remember the burden of improving student success cannot fall on the school setting alone: schools, families, and communities must work together to break down barriers to access and opportunity. This might include a combination of an achievement-focused curriculum, flexibility regarding scheduling and enrollment, and the building of stronger community alliances and partnerships to engage students more both in and outside of school (see also recommendations made in Section Four).

This study sought to determine the nature and extent of influence from home, school, and community settings on middle school student success from selected students' perspectives. Analysis of students' stories and experiences within a specific school setting, and their home and community settings, lead to a shift from causes of academic difficulty for struggling students to how and why certain students are academically successful. As such, the focus of this study moved away from a deficit perspective of achievement to a positive one where student voice became key. By randomly selecting academically successful students as the participant group, I sought to investigate how and to what extent academic success is influenced by the triad settings. After all, if influences on middle school success can be better understood, I believe there is potential to help all students be more successful.

Section Two – Practitioner Setting for the Study

Introduction

This study has attempted to improve the learning environment for a specific school site and its community by analyzing the extent of home, school, and community influences on middle school students' success as perceived by selected successful rising seventh grade students. Applying Bolman and Deal's (2008) frames to organizational change, this study also indirectly examined the impact of structural, human resource, political, and symbolic elements on the efficacy of learning environments before proposing specific strategies and recommendations to address student achievement. As a transformational leader, I wish to employ the findings from this study to make a difference in the specific school setting, its community, and ultimately the district level.

History of the Organization

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has previously accredited the school district in which this study was conducted with distinction. The district serves over 17,000 students and employs over 1,700 teaching staff (DESE, *District Report Card*, 2016a). The district consists of three comprehensive high schools (grades 9-12), an alternative high school (grades 9-12), six middle schools (grades 6-8), and 21 elementary schools (grades pre-K-5). It also boasts an early childhood special education center, a center for special education, a center for gifted education, an alternative placement center, and an extensive regional career and vocational education center.

The school site chosen for the study is a middle school for grades 6-8 in the same school district mentioned above. A review of data also indicated a number of achievement-related concerns in the chosen school, including disparity between Black and White students on the MAP Math and English Language Arts assessments (see DESE, 2016c; Tables 1a and

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1b, above), and lower average daily attendance for Black and Hispanic students for 2015 when compared to White students (DESE, 2016c). Considering the impact racism, bullying, and negative stereotyping can have on student success (Ani, 2013; Bower, 2013; Nisbett, 2011; Prince, 2014), it is worth noting that almost one-third of the population of the site school identified as minority at the time of the study: African American students were 24.5% of the total student population, and Hispanic students were 5.6% of the total school population (DESE, 2016c). However, as student ethnicity was not a focus in the study due to the fact that students' racial identify were not known prior to the protocol being developed or interviews being conducted, it should also be noted that race was not discussed explicitly, although bullying and racism were occasionally brought up by students as influences on student success (namely by Stephen and Owen).

Finally, school site data states 39.4% of the site school's student population currently qualifies for free and reduced lunch (FRL) (DESE, 2016c), although it is likely the school FRL percentage is higher as eligible middle school families do not always apply for assistance (personal communication, District Superintendent, October 22, 2015). This was another example of how data impacted the development of this study, for FRL percentages in a site school can be an indicator of student concerns such as housing, transportation, clothing, food, medical, and other essential needs (National Education Association [NEA], 2011). As such, while an example of privileged, and therefore inaccessible individualized data, the site school's percentage of FRL reinforced the selection of this school as having potential for overall student improvement.

Organizational and Policy Analysis

Organizations respond to change using a range of “design possibilities [that] are

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virtually infinite, limited only by human preferences and capacity” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 50). With this in mind, this study has potential for organizational and policy implications for the specific school building, its community, and the school district. This is especially relevant as the site school has only been a middle school for three years, post a district-wide reorganization of the secondary system in 2013 which resulted in the migration of ninth grade students to the senior high school environment from existing junior high schools and the creation of three additional middle schools from the then junior highs. As such, replication of this study to other middle schools in the district, or other grades in the same site school, could reveal pertinent information on how and why some students are successful in middle school in order to make organizational changes to increase student achievement. After all, while scores on state-administered MAP (see Tables 1a and 1b) are one indicator of possible middle school success, much can be gained from listening to students about the positive and negative influences on their own learning and providing opportunity for their voices to be heard.

Leadership Analysis: Leadership in a Middle School

Mezirow (2009) states transformative learning is often shaped by a defining moment or “disorientating dilemma” (p. 19) that changes someone’s life: mine began six years ago with a catastrophic event which left me disabled and out of work for six months and left me with considerable physical and cognitive issues. I had to learn how to walk and how to think, read, and write at an adult level through an intense program of physical and cognitive rehabilitation, yet less than two years later I was able to begin my doctoral journey. I suffer from a rare condition known as hemiplegic migraines, a variant of migraine that mimics strokes and signals to my brain to shut down the right side of my body temporarily. This has

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been my world for the past six years, yet it shaped me as a person, a student, and a leader within my school.

Hemiplegic migraines therefore provided the impetus for this study as I realized achievement is possible in the face of adversity with the assistance of both covert and overt support from various settings. This realization led to an initial desire to learn how and why students overcome barriers to achieve academic success. However, it also led to the realization that I did not want to focus on negatives associated with an achievement gap. I want to examine achievement in and of itself, via students' own stories of their success and failures, so educators can learn more about the influence of home, school, and community settings on student success at the middle school level.

Being a Transformational Leader

Bolman and Deal (2008) state leaders “need skill in managing relationships with all significant stakeholders, including superiors, peers, and external constituents” (p. 348). Conversely, Kotter (1990/2011) argues leadership is about coping with change to survive and compete. I am a transformational leader in my building as the AVID site coordinator, member of the building leadership team, and department chair. I also aim to be a transformational leader in my school district: I want to make a difference for the students and people I work with, develop new programs, and make recommendations to improve student success for all students.

Ispas and Tebeian (2012) argue transformational leadership and servant leadership, two similar leadership frameworks, are characterized by “the need for leadership dynamic, constantly, and simultaneously directed both toward achieving the organization’s objectives and their influence in attracting followers to contribute to the smooth running of activities

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and optimal professional development” (p. 4). However, Ispas and Tebeian also maintain differences exist between the two: Servant leaders focus on “serving disciples” (p. 7), while transformational leaders are noted for their charisma, personal attributes, and behavior “directed towards personal and organizational objectives” (p. 8).

Similarly, Russell, Stone, and Patterson (2003) argue “the overriding focus of the servant leader is upon service to their followers. The transformational leader has a greater concern for getting followers to engage in and support organizational objectives” (p. 354), although admit both types of leaders show concern for their followers. Other common characteristics between servant and transformational leaders, as argued by Russell et al. (2003), includes the desire to serve, help and lead others to bring about change within an organization. This desire to help others is reflected in my roles as a leader in my building to improve student achievement. For example, my development of a STEAM-focused partnership in 2015 with a nearby college to celebrate diversity and student achievement, independent from my teaching responsibilities, yet driven by doctoral coursework, underscores my transformational leadership style as I strive to help multiple stakeholders.

I believe it is my job to monitor and mentor not only colleagues, but also students, to the best of my ability. To do this, I assume multiple roles and responsibilities other than being a department chair and a classroom teacher, including being co-chair of my building’s Student Council. For example, through Student Council I have helped to improve building culture and climate by celebrating student success on multiple occasions and by engaging students through assemblies, spirit weeks, displays, whole school parties, and competitions. I also value the voice of the Student Council members, consulting with them monthly to identify issues and concerns, and encouraging students to collaborate to develop solutions

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and recommendations to benefit the entire school (Quinn & Owen, 2016).

Thus, through Student Council, I attempt to foster supportive, nurturing, positive teacher-student relationships and encourage students and student representatives to experience leadership roles and service opportunities (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Loukas & Robinson, 2004; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Quinn & Owen, 2016; Thapa et al., 2013). After all, positive teacher-student relationships and a positive school climate in the middle school can have a direct impact on classroom achievement, school connectedness and academic and social success, especially for low-income and minority students (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2012; Loukas & Robinson, 2004; Niehaus et al., 2012).

However, I believe it is not acceptable to recognize only the majority of the school population; schools need to be inclusive and deliberatively (Moses & Rogers, 2013) in their strategic planning in order to address institutionalized inequity (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007; Howard, 2001; Larson & Ovando, 2001). Only by breaking down inherent, maintained patterns and accepted practices can we recognize the social, cultural, and historical phenomena that exist within our community. Furthermore, as I work in a school with more than 20% non-English speaking students, recognizing the existence of bias, prejudice, stereotyping, and racism, and breaking down those hidden barriers is culturally, socially, and academically essential.

I also have a curiosity to understand why and how some middle school students are more successful than others. I have a vested interest in this topic from my perspective as the Social Studies department chair in my building and from having taught middle school students for more than 16 years. Also, as the AVID coordinator, I am explicitly interested in cultivating student achievement to ensure improved college and career readiness. AVID

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places special emphasis on writing, critical thinking, teamwork, organization, and reading skills (AVID.org, n.d.), which is also why I want to examine influences on middle school success: my leadership responsibilities as the AVID coordinator are linked to improving student success and the findings of this study.

However, Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia and Nolly (2004) argue student achievement should be the responsibility of the entire educational setting. They call for schools, teachers, community and parents – the entire micro-system which exists around students to draw on elements of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (EST) – to improve the quality of the education system in order to improve student achievement. After all, schools cannot control all the factors influencing students’ academic engagement or success (Beatty, 2013; Durlak et al., 2010; Evans, 2005). Indeed, to think academic success is only a school problem is to present a very naïve solution to improving scholastic outcomes. Schools can provide interventions and strategies to promote incremental growth towards goals through school-based reform and improved community partnerships, but cannot and should not be the lone change agent to improve student success (Griner & Stewart, 2013). Indeed, Reeves (2003) suggests “consistent application of the 90/90/90 techniques holds promise for improving student achievement and closing the equity gap in schools of any demographic description” (p. 1). These include (modified from p. 3):

1. A strong emphasis and focus on achievement
2. Clear curricular choices
3. Frequent assessment and multiple chances for students to improve
4. A strong emphasis on writing in all academic areas
5. External scoring of student work

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Thus, improving student success includes celebrating and publicizing student achievements, focusing on mathematics, language arts, and reading in all content areas so results in test scores go up in all areas, and not seeing students as failures (Reeves, 2003). All significant stakeholders in a child's environment therefore need to share responsibility for closing the achievement gap and improving student success. As a leader in my own building I seek to use this study to make a difference.

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

Research stresses middle school academic, behavioral, and attendance concerns are red flags for later academic struggles. Balfanz (2007) notes: "middle grade students who fail their courses, attend school less than 85-90% of the time and are seen as having behavioral problems either via suspensions or poor behavior or effort marks seldom graduate" (p. 4). Similarly, students with poor attendance, low academics, and behavioral concerns in middle school are described as crying out for help, yet "because our educational systems are not organized to recognize and respond to these early indicators of falling off the graduation track, 'failing to succeed' students are too often ignored until it is too late" (p. 4). Furthermore, frustration with middle school structure and expectations (Fisher & Frey, 2007); the use of ineffective strategies for struggling students in their first year of high school to improve achievement (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Neild, 2009); alarming rates of ninth graders with failing and almost failing classes at the end of their first semester in high school (Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012); increased ninth grade repeater rates (Balfanz & Legters, 2004); and lack of adequate school and home resources and support (Becker & Luthar, 2002) reinforce the importance of meeting middle school students' academic, social, and emotional needs before they transition to high school.

Enriched Curriculum Development

One area of future growth to achieve the aim of improving student success lies in the enhancement of curriculum to develop relevant and rigorous course offerings, especially when built around college-and-career-ready goals, AVID building and district goals, or advanced course offerings (VanSciver, 2006). For middle school, this includes offering advanced enrollment options, especially in the area of math for students capable of high school level coursework in middle school grades to offset claims that relative math achievement drops in middle school (see Schwerdt & West, 2013). Programs such as advanced level electives, or gifted and talented classes, are other options to increase achievement for students who are academically more advanced in middle school (see Ford et al., 2008). However, it should be noted AVID and AP classes are successful in part because they not only provide rigor, but also structure and supports to increase students' academic success. These supports are crucial, for simply increasing the quality, quantity, or type of more demanding work will not necessarily lead to success or greater career or college readiness (Stevens et al., 2014).

Providing enriched curriculum, developing partnerships with tertiary providers, or providing access to online courses for advanced middle school learners are other ways curriculum development can provide greater flexibility for post-secondary recognition of training and courses undertaken prior to high school and better prepare youth to become efficient 21st century learners (Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2006). Indeed, this need for advanced curriculum was reinforced by the study's findings that the majority of student participants (n=11) were enrolled in Challenge Math (advanced math).

Moreover, enriching the learning environment can also include providing cutting

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edge technology resources to students and teachers and promote the use of technology-based learning through professional development and high quality teaching. For example, the site school had successfully integrated one-to-one technology through the acquisition of ipads (personal communication, District Publicity Officer, October 23, 2015). This emphasis on one-to-one technology can result in students and teachers becoming more adept in a technology rich learning environment. It can also result in equalizing of socio-economic difference as all students have the same learning tools, have access to the same technology resources, and even have access to district provided Wi-fi for use at home if needed (personal communication, District Technology Specialist, October 28, 2015).

Positive Home-School-Community Networks

Research also reinforces the importance of building strong school-to-home networks to increase access and achievement for struggling students (Zhu et al., 2014). Schools cannot be the only solution; they need to work closely with families and community agencies to promote achievement, provide opportunity, enhance learning, and most importantly, reinforce student effort through appropriate supports and strategies in the school setting (Douglas & Peck, 2013). Promoting opportunity and self-development with reinforcement through appropriate school-based strategies and career-development opportunities therefore can help students focus on school and career goals to become efficient 21st century learners (Zhu et al., 2014). This is also where application of district initiatives and programs, such as the use of the AVID system in all middle schools and high schools, can further promote student success by creating challenging yet supportive learning environments for all students.

Summary

Kotter (1990/2011) claims successful organizations combine management and

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leadership: “deciding what needs to be done, creating networks of people to accomplish the agenda, and ensuring that the work actually gets done” (p. 40). As department chair of Social Studies, sponsor of Student Council, and coordinator of our building’s AVID program, I would argue there is a time and place for both skill sets.

Attending to achievement concerns requires strong, effective partnerships with community agencies to support before-, during-, and after-school programs for children in the community, and to foster strong family involvement in, and support of, student learning and home-to-school communication (Edwards & Edwards, 2007; Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Therefore, because this study examines not only barriers to success, but also positive influences which help students succeed at the middle school level, I see myself taking on more of a community presence in the future.

By encouraging students to articulate their understanding of influences on their academic success, the overall goal of this study was to make specific recommendations to improve achievement for the school site and its community. Seeking greater self-awareness of their own achievement (either negatively or positively) is therefore a focus of the research questions stated above and the interview protocol (see Appendix A). Specifically, this study may help school professionals and leaders to improve student support and make organizational changes in the site school to support learning. For example, research suggests becoming aware of students’ emotional and physical needs outside of school can have a direct achievement result if students perceive their school and teachers, as well as the general school and classroom environments, are welcoming, caring and responsive to their needs (Benard, 2003; Chappel, Suldo & Ogg, 2014; Douglas, 2014; Douglas & Peck, 2013; Recruiting New Teachers Inc., 2001). Indeed, a finding from this study supports this research

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in that students repeatedly indicated that their success was at least partly due to their teachers caring about them.

However, leadership means not taking on a project or task alone, but being willing to share and delegate responsibilities as see a task through. Ultimately, it feels good knowing the structures, systems, files, and other organizational supports I have built over the years provide support to help me meet my roles and responsibilities as a building leader. I want to make a difference for those around me by creating systems and structures and ongoing programs designed to help others to perform better. This study is therefore a vehicle for ensuring organizational, policy, and structural changes at a specific school site, community, and even district level, to improve middle school student success.

Schools cannot be the solution to an achievement gap as there are simply too many factors schools cannot control (Durlak et al., 2010; Evans, 2005). In fact, to expect schools to solve the achievement gap alone is to over-simplify both the problem and the solution. Under social justice theory, schools and educational leaders can become “change agents . . . to help bridge the divide and encourage more equitable schooling experiences” (Griner & Stewart, 2013, p. 586), but need to work with home members, school personnel, and community representatives. It will take the entire community working together to address achievement and opportunity for enrichment. Agencies such as the Youth Community Coalition (YC2) are making inroads (Johnson, Nicholson-Crotty, & Schoor, 2013) with their focus on encouraging and enhancing parent participation and collaboration among community agencies to foster improved academic outcomes for all children (personal communication, R. Rowe, April 7, 2015). Similarly, the Cradle to Career initiative by The United Way (Scheltens, 2012) has begun to improve elementary student support, but there remains much

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to be done across the community.

I am a change agent in my building. I have developed initiatives focused explicitly on student achievement: first, an after-school program at a nearby college to provide free access to STEAM-oriented college-level instruction; and second, an attendance incentive program that resulted in an increase in our average daily attendance from 86% to 91% over six months (personal communication, Building Principal, October 15, 2015). However, I also see where future programs could have a positive impact on overall student success. These include providing after-school programs, parenting workshops, and support groups to improve home-school relationships and promote parent technology and homework support skills (see Jeynes, 2011; Oyserman et al., 2007). Targeted initiatives such as these could support parents and help to build stronger home-to-school communication networks (Goldstein et al., 2015). Change will not occur overnight, but my hope is this study will lead to renewed programs and new programs between students' homes, schools, and community agencies to improve middle school success for all students.

Section Three – Scholarly Review for the Study

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Introduction

Many community- and family-based factors potentially impact student achievement, including race (Douglas & Peck, 2013; Prince, 2014; Wiggan, 2007, 2014); family income and education levels (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; NEA, 2011); housing situation and location (Orfield, 2013; Prince, 2014; Woolley et al., 2008); neighborhood influences (Douglas & Peck, 2013; Hopson et al., 2014; Prince, 2014); and an individual's home environment (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Simultaneously, there are many school-based potential influences on student achievement including the need for positive teacher-student relationships (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010); a stimulating curriculum (Renshaw, Long, & Cook, 2015); clear expectations (Douglas, 2016; Gietz & McIntosh, 2014; Gilbert et al., 2014); enrichment opportunities during and after school (Edwards & Edwards, 2007; Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005); and most importantly, supportive home-school and school-community partnerships (Woolley & Bowen, 2007). As such, there is much to learn about middle school success, but ultimately this study comes down to valuing the stories students tell, and learning about the supports and barriers in students' lives, to improve achievement for all.

This literature review serves an important role in reviewing studies concerning historical influences on middle school achievement to inform possible influences that may be revealed in the emerging student-centered narrative prior to conducting the research study. Patton (2002) and Merriam (2009) recommend conducting a literature review to build not only background knowledge but also increase empathy prior to conducting student interviews. However, the literature review also serves to reveal gaps in the extant literature with respect to how the framework and methodology have been used in prior studies

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concerning achievement and middle school student success.

For example, Jones and Deutsch (2013) maintain that influences on today's adolescents are complex and multi-layer in nature, calling on elements of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the main framework by which to examine the extent and type of influence on academic success. As such, discussions of student success need to be about more than grades or school performance. Instead, they need to include how students see themselves in terms of self-worth, resilience, motivation, perseverance, improvement over time, goal-setting in and outside of school, and where they see their future selves on social and academic levels (Berry, 2005; Emmanuel et al., 2014; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Prince, 2014). These in-person characteristics are particularly potent tools for allowing youth to overcome hardship and develop key skills for coping with everyday pressures, although the effects vary by situation to the point that:

those who already possess greater knowledge, skills, and social and financial capital, and who have higher levels of motivation, aspiration, and resilience, have a systematically greater probability of encountering *positive* ... events, and a greater capacity to take advantage of them, while the reverse is true for those with lesser knowledge, skills, and social and financial capital, and who have lower levels of motivation, aspiration, and resilience. (Gaynor, 2012, p. 31)

Discussion must therefore include increasing students' awareness of how particular influences positively or negatively impact academic success and failure. This also values students' roles as players in their own success, in education, as leaders and decision makers in and out of school, and with regards their own learning environment and efforts (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005; Paige & Witty, 2010). After all, students who have opportunities to share in

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school decision making and have choices with respect to their education will be more engaged in the learning environment not only for themselves but also for the betterment of their peers (Mitra, 2004; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). Moreover, listening to rising seventh grade students' perceptions of influences on their academic success also provides insight into what barriers exist and how policies and procedures may be improved, especially concerning behavior, bullying and instruction (see also Voight, 2015). Thus, this study serves to value students' voices as sources of information to improve and examine influences on student success (Haycock, 2001; Haycock & Chenoweth, 2005; Howard, 2001; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Nieto, 1994; Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

However, research on student success should not focus only on the school environment, but must also include discussion of home and community influences. For example, when high parent involvement combines with a high sense of belonging and high teacher support, evidence suggests higher grade averages are possible than for students who report low support at both home and at school (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Thus, when parents provide tangible and socio-economic support, as measured directly through instances of home-school contact, and indirectly through the provision of allowances, rewards, and privileges, students develop a greater base of resilience and perseverance to task (Spera, 2006; Yeung & Conley, 2008; Zhu et al., 2014). Similarly, involvement in extra-curricular and community activities like churches, sporting clubs, and activity centers can shape student perceptions of themselves and assist with the formation of hopes, goals and fears (Anderson, Donlan, McDermott, & Zaff, 2015; Douglas & Peck, 2013; Douglas & Arnold, 2016; Hopson et al., 2014; Prince, 2014).

Therefore, review of extant literature must not only examine academic success in the

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middle school setting, but also historical and entrenched social, structural, and systemic inequalities and influences on middle school success (Prince, 2014). After all, a range of social, physical and emotional contexts, such as schools, neighborhoods, families, friends, clubs and activities, help youth to develop a concept of who they are, or might eventually become and how successful they are as individuals and students (Douglas & Peck, 2013; Lerner et al., 2005). Supporting goal setting and identity seeking in middle school can therefore help students be more prepared for the physical, emotional and academic challenges of both adolescence and higher grades in high school (Romero et al., 2014). As such, educators need to consider the impact of as many factors as possible on students' success in order to improve achievement for all students. Listening to students' voices provides the vehicle by which educators can begin to understand the role these influences play on student success as students remain an obvious source about why and how they are successful (Nieto, 1994; Wang & Holcombe, 2010; Wiggan, 2014).

Review of Extant Scholarship

Influences on Middle School Success

Student success is influenced by many factors including positive and negative influences in schools, neighborhoods, families, and after-school community groups (Douglas & Peck, 2013; Hopson et al., 2014; Prince, 2014). As such, student success is partly a structural issue in the school setting, but also partly a social change issue when looking at social, economic, and cultural influences (Gregory et al., 2010; Howard, 2001; Prince, 2014; Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010). For example, it is not enough for a child to say he or she wants to do better or get better grades if there are inadequate systems and structures at home, at school, and in the community to support such goals (Prince, 2014). As a result,

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educators need to improve student access to high quality teachers and positive, safe, caring school environments, as well as challenging curricula and school programs, and stimulating after-school opportunities, to promote student success.

In order to create the interview protocol, it was first necessary to review as many historical influences on school achievement as possible to ensure effective questioning. This included research on home, school, and community influences on student success, especially at the middle school level. Such research was crucial *prior* to undertaking any phenomenological student-centered study to achieve a greater sense of empathy and to build a better empirical basis for later describing and understanding participants' perspectives (Patton, 2002). What emerged from this review of historical influences was a realization that achievement continues to be a significant educational issue despite many books, articles, and studies written and conducted to try to ameliorate the problem, thus reinforcing my desire to investigate how and why students are successful at middle school.

Home and parenting influences. Home and familial influence has been shown to have an impact on student success. Specifically, research suggests students with parents who are more involved in school, such as through school activities or volunteering, are apt to achieve greater results in school (Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hopson & Lee, 2011). Likewise, parents who are involved in the homework cycle, who sit with youth at the table and read or check through work (Gordon & Cui, 2014), or who monitor the amount of time taken to complete homework (Núñez et al., 2015) are more likely to see their children achieve positive school results (Dupere et al., 2010; Jeynes, 2011; Núñez et al., 2015; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). Similar studies have shown higher achievement when parents discuss school events and concerns with their child at home

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(Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Thus, educators need to strengthen home-school communication to encourage greater participation and involvement from middle school parents (Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy & Weiss, 2007; Mitra, 2006).

After all, the home environment is as important as school, in many respects (Douglas & Peck, 2013). Parents want to be involved in their child's school, but barriers such as access, language, transportation, work and family responsibilities, can make participation difficult (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007). Similarly, schools may face difficulties in access and communication that inhibit the flow of information in both directions which can impact involvement of parents and families (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). It is therefore important for schools to encourage parent participation and involvement by reducing such barriers and increasing their cultural awareness of relevant family and student need (Epstein, 1995; Núñez et al., 2015).

Sadly, however, middle school is stereotypically marked by a decline in direct school involvement by parents, especially as adolescents begin to distance themselves from parents and seek to become increasingly independent (Urdan et al., 2007). However, this decline in parental contact in and over school issues has been shown to have a negative impact on academics (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Kreider et al., 2007; Lam & Ducreux, 2013; Larocque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011; Lerner et al., 2009). Therefore, when schools develop programs to engage parents and support school-home communication, evidence suggests achievement on standardized test scores improves, especially for younger students and lower-income students (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2011). Outreach can include regular parent-teacher communication; content specific workshops and seminars; sending material home to help parents help their children; and interactive homework between parents, siblings

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and the student to encourage communication and involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Recruiting New Teachers Inc., 2001). Often, just increasing communication between home and school can have a positive effect, for it sends the message that the adults in a child's life care about what is happening (Recruiting New Teachers Inc., 2001).

The family and home setting therefore play critical roles in helping youth succeed. For example, adolescents who feel more supported by their home and family are more likely to participate in structured out-of-school time activities, which are in turn linked to academic and social benefits in middle school and beyond (Kreider et al., 2007; Lerner et al., 2009). Thus, praise and the like are unlikely to motivate students in challenging times unless specific, realistic, defined strategies are employed in home and school settings to incrementally build students' self-worth and ability to see they are capable of success (Prince, 2014).

However, when examining the influence of home and family settings, it is also important to understand the cultural framework of the community, the school, and the population they serve (Mitra, 2006). For example, it may not be culturally appropriate or economically possible for parents to attend school functions, yet parent non-attendance may be perceived as parental ignorance or distancing (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Recruiting New Teachers Inc., 2001). It is therefore necessary to tailor programs to meet parent, family, and community needs (Oyserman et al., 2007). For example, it may be useful to apply the categorization by Ravanera and Rajulton (2010) to develop programs based on interaction between students and others accordingly to: (a) informal ties with kin, families, friends, neighbors, and workmates; (b) generalized relationships with local people, people in civic groups, and people in general; and, (c) relationships through institutions (p. 73) to identify

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where influences exist in students' lives outside school and how to meet the needs of those individuals as specific groups within the school.

No matter where resources come from – whether in combination with community resources or from the family alone – it seems the more a family supports their children's learning, the more the children tend to do well in school and continue their education (Oyserman et al., 2007; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Rillero, 2016). Parents want to be consulted and valued when it comes to their child's education (Lam & Ducreux, 2013). They want their values about education to influence their children through speech and deed (often in the form of praise and rewards), or through example in the case of formal education and employment (Urdan et al., 2007). However, this also includes others in the family such as siblings and extended family members (see Dupere et al., 2010; Jeynes, 2011; Morton, 2014; Núñez et al., 2015; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006).

Research on familial impact has also included comparisons between single-parent and two-parent homes and the influence of extended family members (Ravanera & Rajulton, 2010), especially for African-American and Hispanic students (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Plybon, Edwards, Butler, Belgrave & Allison, 2003). When considering the impact of home and family influences, it is therefore important to consider who influences children's achievement, where this is occurring, and how this influence takes shape. This includes the influence of individuals, such as through child-mother and child-father relationships, and particular values and attitudes inherent in the family or extended family group (Ravanera & Rajulton, 2010). It also includes discussing school activities; monitoring out-of-school activities; contacts with school staff; and volunteering at and attending school events, including parent-teacher conferences (Dupere et al., 2010; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996), as

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shown in Figure 6, below.

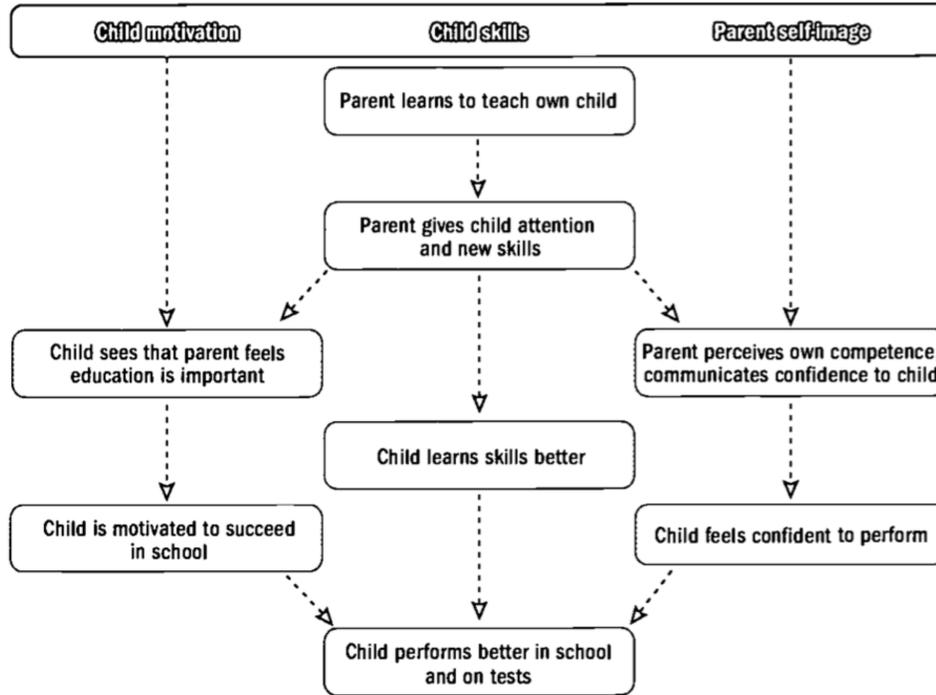


Figure 6: How Family Involvement Affects Student Achievement
Source: Recruiting New Teachers Inc., 2001, p. 9

Indeed, parents are crucial players in the achievement mix for they ultimately know their child the best and can help their child at a personal level (see Figure 6; Oyserman et al., 2007; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Rillero, 2016). After all, all parents, regardless of income, education, or cultural background want their children to do well (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, as educators, we need to include parents more in the educational process.

Ultimately, improving parental involvement and participation in schools can positively impact student performance, as further demonstrated in Figure 7:

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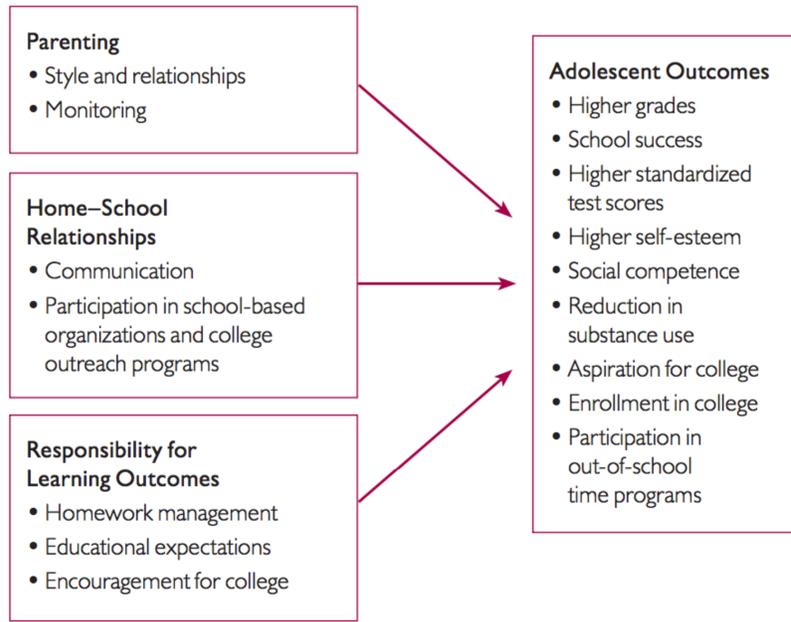


Figure 7: Areas of Student Achievement Gain

Source: Kreider et al., 2007, p. 2.

Thus it would seem increased parental involvement can have a positive impact on a student's sense of worth and motivation (see Figure 3), and on a student's sense of success (see Figure 4), especially in terms of their goal-setting, and future career and college aspirations. This was evidenced in this study, for example, when Regina commented on the influence her mother has had on her deciding a college path to her mother's alma mater, Washington University in St. Louis; or in the case of Natalie who commented that her father's success in college basketball meant she wanted to go to his alma mater, The University of Missouri.

Similarly, home and familial influences, such as the role played by extended family members like aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents (Morton, 2014; Stewart, 2008), or the impact of working parents and single parent homes (Cohen, 2006; Edwards & Edwards, 2007; Gaddis & Lauen, 2014), have been identified as historical influences on middle school success, although the impact of one parenting role over another is difficult to isolate (Dupere et al., 2010). Indeed, a number of participants commented positively on the influence of

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extended family members, from grandparents with whom they stayed as respite from their primary living situation [Stephen] or called regularly on the phone for advice and support [Benjamin and Kate], to aunts, uncles, and cousins from whom students such as Liz, Kate and Regina received direct assistance, including homework help on Challenge Math. Consequently, there is need for further research on familial or home influences, as well as school and community influence, on middle school student success.

Indeed, parental involvement can take many forms, as outlined by Epstein (1998) who suggested six key roles, including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community, and needs to be fostered. However, parent participation in middle and high school is markedly less than in elementary school for most student groups (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), so it is important that schools encourage parents to be actively involved in their children's education. Effective parent involvement provides "the connection between home and school that can offer teens the support they need to succeed in today's world" and helps teach students to achieve more both personally and academically (Recruiting New Teachers Inc., 2001, p. 10), although Urdan and colleagues (2007) question the impact of parents over a successful student's autonomous and motivated nature, or the student's *self*, as indicated in Section Four when discussing this study's findings.

School-based influences. Improving student achievement requires developing, monitoring, and sustaining supportive relationships between teachers, parents, students, and the greater community for systemic change to be effective. Research suggests school improvement must begin with creating a supportive, nurturing school culture with positive teacher-student relationships (Cohen, 2006; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Johnson & Uline, 2005;

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Marzano, 2011; Murray & Zvoch, 2011; Thapa et al., 2013). Yet, how is this achieved?

Programs such as Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavior Support (PBS) have been touted as successful measures to improve student achievement, but have had mixed results due to issues with fidelity, staff support, and resources (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton, 2010). Likewise, mentoring has been presented as a step in the right direction, but if students do not feel teachers care about them, research indicates there may be little gain (Chappel et al., 2014; Vega et al., 2015). For example, research has indicated strong relationships are especially important for African American and Latino students as positive motivation during the school day to build a sense of worth and belonging (Cleary & Chen, 2009; Halawah, 2006; Klem & Connell, 2004; Horvat et al., 2003; Vega, et al., 2015). Teachers need to take an interest in students' lives, offer to help struggling students, and demonstrate physical and emotional friendliness to break down perceived and real barriers (Marzano, 2011). Here again, the team approach of a successful middle school has the ability to provide a supportive, nurturing environment often lacking once a child transitions to high school (Fisher & Frey, 2007). Indeed, all students commented positively on receiving help from teachers in a supportive, nurturing environment, although Liz and Stephen were critical when it came to overall school safety.

Research also highlights the importance of positive building-wide experiences and school climates for students, especially in the more turbulent early adolescent years of middle school. Evidence suggests, for example, that achievement can be positively impacted when students feel accepted and valued by others (Spitzer & Aronson, 2015). Student success can also be affected when school is perceived to be helping students develop positive skills, values, and behaviors (Loukas & Robinson, 2004). Moreover, when teachers use a

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combination of sensitivity and congeniality towards students, students become engaged and cooperative learners and there is greater achievement as students see school supporting their social and academic goals (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). Thus, when schools challenge and support students, student achievement increases (Renshaw, Long, & Cook, 2015; Reyes, et al., 2012).

School improvements that address bullying and harassment concerns, and the use of supportive programming through advisories or homerooms, can also have a positive impact on the subjective experience of school (Mitra & Gross, 2009; Voight, 2015). Research further suggests that as students' perception of their classroom and school learning environment becomes more positive, their beliefs about themselves and their academic abilities will increase (Spitzer & Aronson, 2015). Classroom- and school-level strategies and interventions can result in a more positive, safe, supportive learning experience and help students feel they belong and are welcomed (Cohen, 2006; Gietz & McIntosh, 2014; Good et al., 2010; Spitzer & Aronson, 2015). Belonging and worth are therefore crucial concepts related to academic achievement, for they can promote resilience to negative stressors and events and promote feelings of success and achievement (Fenzel, 2000; Lee & Bong, 2015; Spitzer & Aronson, 2015). When students feel connected to school and feel they belong, they look for teachers to support them academically and emotionally: achievement improves as a result of this sense of connection, with greater self-confidence and self-worth (Berry, 2005; Emmanuel et al., 2014; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Prince, 2014).

Schools need to support the development of intrinsic values by promoting a culture where student success is celebrated, where students are encouraged to participate in activities

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and clubs, and where teachers, counselors, and administrators are aware of students' psychological, social, emotional, physical and academic needs. As discussed in Section Two, I attempt to do this through my building leadership roles as the AVID coordinator, co-sponsor of Student Council, and Social Studies department chair. After all, creating and conveying a caring, engaging, and supportive learning environment, with the cooperation of effective home-school and school-community networks, to form a supportive learning community is vital for ensuring student success (Howard, 2001). However, when adults in schools are not acting upon students' needs, students feel withdrawn and isolated and achievement declines (Benard, 2003; Spitzer & Aronson, 2015).

Another area where schools can have a direct achievement impact is in terms of improving home-school communication. Parental involvement has been shown to decline during the middle grades and in high school (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lam & Ducreux, 2013; Larocque et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2009; Kreider et al., 2007; Sanders & Epstein, 1998), however, increasing these rates has been shown to have multiple academic achievement benefits for students of all ages and from families of all racial, economic and educational backgrounds. These benefits include (see Henderson & Mapp, 2002; modified from p. 24):

- higher grade point averages and scores on standardized tests or rating scales
- enrollment in more challenging academic programs
- more classes passed and credits earned
- better attendance
- improved behavior at home and at school
- better social skills and adaptation to school

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Henderson and Mapp (2002) therefore stress the importance of an effective school climate, but argue that an effective school climate is required before such gains through parent involvement are likely to be realized. Thus, high standards and expectations “for all students and curriculum, as well as instruction and assessments aligned with those standards,” together with “effective leadership, frequent monitoring of teaching and learning, [and] focused professional development” remain core characteristics necessary to ensure improved student achievement (p. 24). Hence, the relationship between schools and families, while important, relies on a strong foundation at the school level.

As funding for curriculum and resources becomes more of a problem for districts and states, the question of equity, of resources and opportunity to rigorous curriculum, and the need for highly qualified teachers becomes more significant (see Carter & Welner, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Verstegen, 2015). This is also evidenced by recent data from the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR), which reveals significant barriers to overall college and career-readiness across the nation (OCR, 2014). Investment through education and government policy and local, state and federal structures, is needed to reduce inequality and improve access, especially for minority and low-income students (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Mayer & Tucker, 2011). Putting time, money, and resources into a combined home, school, community approach, will help to construct “family support policies that ensure children grow up in stable, secure homes and neighborhoods; and early-childhood education policies that promote cognitive and social development” to address student achievement (Reardon, 2013, p. 15). Clearly, if school districts are going to address student achievement there needs to be a concerted effort to unite school, home, and community resources.

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Certainly, achievement and the achievement gap go hand in hand, but the focus is usually on disparity in standardized test scores or behavioral and/or discipline records, between Black and Hispanic, White and Black, and White and Asian students (Anderson et al., 2007; Bower, 2013; Carpenter et al., 2006; Evans, 2005; Gregory et al., 2010; Griner & Stewart, 2013; Morris & Perry, 2016). However, the bottom line is this: school is not the only influence to be discussed when attempting to improve achievement in middle school. In fact, the range of factors noted in this literature review reinforces the importance of this research study: use a triad approach to learn from students themselves about what is working and not working in the specific school setting. There are too many influences on middle school student success and too few studies have attempted to learn from middle school students' perspectives or listen to students' voices, despite students being the obvious source about why and how they are successful (Nieto, 1994; Wang & Holcombe, 2010; Wiggan, 2014).

Community and neighborhood influences. While schools are crucial influences on student achievement, research indicates participation in activities outside school hours can also positively influence student academic achievement. In particular, neighborhood and community influences can influence the development of adolescent identity and positive relationships with others (Douglas & Arnold, 2016; Douglas & Peck, 2013; Woolley et al., 2008). Indeed neighborhood influences can serve as positive or negative influences, a “fictive-kin”, to replace or supplement the role played by absent or busy parents (Douglas, 2014, p. 4). As such, the influence of neighborhood locations and activities, peers, youth groups, sports teams, and organized and informal clubs and activities, should also be investigated when considering influences on student success.

Neighborhood and community influences can also include after-school programs such

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as tutoring and mentoring, after-school clubs and activities, and organized church and youth groups have been shown to have positive impacts in students' lives (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 2012; Douglas & Peck, 2013; Durlak et al., 2010). For instance, Ferrari, Linville and Valentine (2003) found youth who attend programs such as 4-H demonstrated improved academic behaviors (including better school attendance, more positive school attitudes, and better grades) and had more improved personal and social skills (such as positive relationships with adults, opportunities to make new friends and greater self-concept & self-esteem). Likewise, Lerner et al. (2005) documented specific student achievement benefits for belonging to a 4-H club: members contributed more to their communities (by 25%), had lower levels of problem behaviors (by 41%), earned better grades (twice as likely to earn a B average or above), and were more engaged with school (behaviorally and emotionally) than youth in other out-of-school activities.

Community based organizations such as 4-H have also shown repeated positive impact on student achievement. For example, in a 2006 study, 4-H alumni reported 4-H participation had a stronger impact, in comparison to their experiences in other youth organizations, in the development of public speaking skills, healthy lifestyle choices, learning to learn, and development as leaders (Mass, Wilken, Jordan, Culen, & Place, 2006). Clearly, participation in structured after-school youth groups can help improve public speaking, self-discipline, self-responsibility, and teamwork skills (Boleman, Merten, & Hall, 2008; Boyd, Herring & Briers, 1992; Bruce, Boyd & Dooley, 2004). So why are more students not involved in such activities?

Part of the difficulty lies in providing quality programs for youth today. Successful after-school organizations and activities can impact student learning and the development of

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self-worth and social efficacy, but the physical nature of the space has as much an impact as the adults and programming being offered (Prince, 2014). Prince (2014) also claims the space is integral to overall student success: as everyday places “invested with care and esthetic appeal reflect a sense of pride, commitment, and worth not only about the environment but also its inhabitants” (p. 699). Thus, the physical setting of a successful after-school program – the theater, studio, classroom, garden or community center – becomes “an active ingredient in a young person’s developing sense of self” (p. 699). Successful after-school programs need to provide a sheltered, safe environment with organized activities and events, as well as encourage leadership and ownership of learning if achievement-related gains are to be realized (Mueller, Phelps, Bowers, Agans, Brown-Urban, & Lerner, 2011).

Furthermore, the reality is youth-serving organizations and activities must compete for out-of-school hours and resources and in-school clubs and activities (such as with school bands, sports teams and other extra-curricular activities). They also must compete with growing disenchantment among teens and engaging student interests and time (Lauver, 2004; Little & Lauver, 2005). For some students, family, work, and other outside-of school commitments take up scarce after-school hours. Clubs and activities are also sometimes seen as boring or a waste of time by teens; no matter how interesting the programming or how caring the adults within them (Durlak et al., 2007; Little & Lauver, 2005). Indeed, a myriad of programs, locations, and organizations compete for student members, parent and other adult volunteers, funding, resources, and locations to operate successful clubs, activities and projects (Ferrari et al., 2003). As a result, if community and after-school participation can positively impact student achievement, the task becomes how to increase student participation in such activities and how to ensure greater access to such programs.

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Research has also shown that participation in structured after-school organizations and activities promotes not only extraordinary learning opportunities and academic support, but also increased family engagement and the development of stronger peer and mentoring networks (Ferrari et al., 2003). Similarly, after-school programs offering tutoring and mentoring, and organized youth groups can also be positive influences on student achievement (Benson et al., 2012; Durlak et al., 2010). However, how can access and opportunity be improved so more students benefit? What is being done to increase student participation in such activities, especially if access and transportation makes it difficult for some students to do so? This is where partnerships between schools and community groups can impact student learning by sharing resources, promoting access, and encouraging student participation in structured, youth-centered after-school programs.

It is also necessary to consider the impact of other neighborhood and cultural influences on student achievement. For example, educators need to be cognizant of cultural framework influences on students (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Not every student wants to move away or leave their family network or desires to improve their social, economic or educational standing through formal post-secondary education: a cultural difference reflected when considering place and familial influences on many Hispanic and Black students (Harper, 2008; Prince, 2014; Ravanera & Rajulton, 2010). For example, the association of place with ability can lead to negative stereotyping and bias which in turn influences “how young people think about themselves, including who they are right now and who they might become” (Prince, 2014, p. 709), although it can also have a reverse effect whereby youth aim to prove their family wrong to break away from these stereotypes (Urduan et al, 2007). Stephen, who commented in his interview that he did not consider his neighborhood to be

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very safe due to busy roads and a neighborhood bar, as well as the influence of having a cousin in jail, spoke of this very effect.

Indeed, research has also shown that residential location can implicate student success, especially when combined with poverty and crime (Boyle, Georgiades, Racine, & Mustard, 2007; Gordon & Cui, 2014; Gregory et al., 2010; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Kim, Mazza, Zwanziger, & Henry, 2013; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Woolley et al., 2008). Specifically, living in low-income or segregated housing can lead to negative stereotyping, low self-image, and poor self-concept for youth with lower academic achievement (Borman et al., 2016; Orfield, 2013; Prince, 2014; Woolley et al., 2008). In fact, the location of a child's home and its place in a neighborhood can directly impact achievement, especially if goal setting, self-worth and ability are criticized due to indirect stereotyping and prejudice (Hopson et al., 2014; Prince, 2014).

Students' overall future work and education-related goal setting can also be affected by location and type of neighborhood, as shown in studies related to youth aspirations, self-worth, and neighborhood influences in public housing areas in Chicago, Detroit and San Antonio (Borman et al., 2016; Orfield, 2013; Prince, 2014; Woolley et al., 2008). Sadly, some youth in these areas were stereotyped by outsiders as "lazy, underachievers, welfare recipients, and unreliable – damaging images linked to people because of place" (Prince, 2014, p. 710), instead of being challenged and encouraged by adults around them to seek post-secondary careers and education. Indeed, it is not uncommon to see a difference in the quality of teacher instruction, curriculum design, and overall resources and funding received between middle-class White and Asian students, and low-achieving Black, Hispanic, and poor students (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Gaynor, 2012; Verstegen, 2015).

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Similarly, students who have high mobility, moving to and from different residences or different schools during the school year, can also be negatively impacted by the effect of place due to a lack of permanency, and increased family and employment instability (Voight, Shinn & Nation, 2012). As Prince (2014) argues, adults need to be the “gatekeepers” to open doors for youth and to develop positive places and opportunities for students to experience success that may not be possible in their home or neighborhood settings to foster “brighter future self-concept ... vital to their future and well-being” (p. 710). After-school participation in organized and informal activities can help to offset negative influences attached to location and neighborhood influences.

However, location can also include positive neighborhood characteristics such as increased access to resources, community involvement and volunteering, and provide structure to mitigate anti-social and negative influences in association with crime, violence, gentrification and poverty (Anderson et al., 2015; Hopson et al., 2014; Witherspoon & Hughes, 2014). This includes claims that community programs and after-school activities can provide positive influences on adolescents when offering a combination of academic and interest-based curriculum for middle school students (Afterschool Alliance, 2011; Brown et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2010; Jones & Deutsch, 2013; Rothstein, 2005). Results though are mixed regarding the efficacy of community influences and programs on student achievement, most often due to difficulties in reporting of attendance, funding, staffing, and measures of improvement (Benson et al., 2012; Durlak et al., 2010). For example, Durlak et al. (2010) noted in their meta-analysis of after-school programs that while reading and math achievement gains may be possible, such gains might not be due to academic benefits associated with the program itself.

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Commingle influences on student success. While this literature review has investigated a range of home, school, and community influences on middle school student success, some influences exist in more than one setting. This especially includes coaches and peers as historical influences on student success in middle school.

Coaches. It has been argued that coaches of sports teams can have a greater influence and impact on achievement than family groups and individuals by providing a cultural capital or support structure outside the family unit (Mayer & Tucker, 2011). Similarly, Ravanera and Rajulton (2010) claim the influence of such extra-familial networking is persistent and influential because parents tend to be more focused on the educational progress of children over time and therefore invest in the “acquisition, management, and deployment of social capital to benefit the members, including children” even as family structure and roles changes over time (p. 64).

Peers. It is seems clear that social settings in and outside of school can impede and benefit student success (see Wentzel et al., 2010). However, what role do positive or negative influences from peers or groups have on student success (Darensbourg & Blake, 2014; Drolet et al., 2013; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; McCormick & Cappella, 2015; Wang & Eccles, 2012)? After all, if middle school students lack strong peer supports, even temporarily, social and academic ramifications can impact success (Bellmore, 2011; Kingery, Erdley & Marshall, 2011). This was supported by concerns raised by a number of participants who commented that making friends was a concern (see also O’Toole et al., 2014; Sebanc, Guimond & Lutgen, 2016). For example, James stated:

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Without my friends, I would be like, I would have no one and I would be, like, a lonely guy without friends who would be made fun of all the time and I would, like, stay in my room all day.

Indeed, O'Toole and colleagues (2014) echo this by claiming “having friends [is] one of the most important mediators of difficulties during the move from one educational setting to another, and making new friends [is] one of the most important benefits” (p. 123).

Understanding the Role of Ecological Systems Theory (EST)

While the focus of this literature review was to locate studies and research pertaining to the historical influences on middle school success from the triad of home, school, and community settings, it also served to isolate possible frameworks on which to inform the study. This included researching possible theories pertaining to achievement, middle school, and adolescent development (see Section One). Thus, while ecological systems theory (EST) was chosen as the most relevant theory to inform this study, this literature review revealed EST has rarely been applied to understanding influences on middle school success (Farrell et al., 2007; Lewthwaite et al., 2011).

According to EST, the core of the *micro-system* is the inter-relationship between a child and his or her immediate surroundings such as home, school, and peers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; see also Figure 5, below). This first level of interaction is crucial, because it is where a child forms most of his or her relationships and spends most of his or her time. However, it is also where a child is most likely to be affected by the physical conditions of the actual environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Maxwell, 2016). In comparison, the second level, the *meso-system*, includes interactions between the individual and the micro-level and those outside the immediate environment, but these are not in the form of

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direct relationships. The third level, the *exo-system*, further indirectly affects a child through decision-making processes and by the events and people located in it (such as school boards or parents' places of employment) in that a child indirectly participates or decisions are made affecting the child without his or her direct input. The final level, the *macro-system*, includes interactions between a child and his or her morals, lifestyle, culture, history, and traditions as whole-life influences. Finally, overseeing this layered system is what Bronfenbrenner later termed the *chronos-system* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), added in 1989 to form the more common *bio-ecological model*, referring to the fact that influences in the environment an impact a child's development over time.

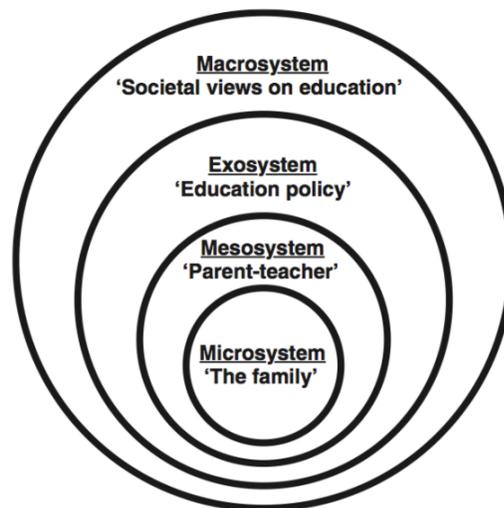


Figure 8: Nested Model of Ecological Systems Theory
Source: Neal & Neal, 2013, p. 725

Focused on highly contextual relationships between how the individual “exists within the environment and all the social interactions that take place within and between them” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 24), EST reinforces the human development side of adolescence that remains applicable today. While Neal and Neal (2013) have explored EST as interconnected networks instead of separate layers of influence, elements of EST remain

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applicable for examining combined influences on student academic success from home, school, and community settings (Martin et al., 2011; Neal & Neal, 2013; Wong, 2001). This is especially so when considering overlapping and complex networks and social interactions in and outside of school, and how a child's academic success is affected at the *micro-* and *meso-*systems in particular (Jones & Deutsch, 2013; Maxwell, 2016; McCormick & Cappella, 2015; Neal & Neal, 2013) as shown above in Figure 8.

Ecological systems theory thus supports this study's findings of an interplay between individual, social, family, community, and school influences (see Section Four), although Tudge et al. (2009) caution using EST as an analytical tool in any research study due to its evolving nature. Applying elements of EST to determine which of the triad has a greater effect on student achievement, and in which system of child development, however may lead to implementation of specific recommendations to benefit student achievement and student services (see Section Four).

Why is Middle School Success Worth Studying?

Middle school is a significant departure from elementary school for most students as students in grades 6-8 move from class to class throughout their day. Moving from teacher to teacher, instead of staying with one to two teachers for their day as they did in elementary school, students are required to manage many transitions in middle school in terms of both time and space. They also are in a much more competitive environment at the middle school level which places a great deal of demand on students to be successful, independent learners (Maxwell, 2016; Mitra, 2004). As such, middle school becomes a time of great emotional, cognitive, and physical transformation: children enter as tweens (aged 10-12) and leave as teenagers (aged 13-14) on the road to high school (Rueger, Malecki & Kilpatrick, 2008).

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Middle school is a trying time in many ways, but creating a supportive environment is key to ensuring student success. Being aware of the obstacles and supports that exist in a school is part of the solution to ensuring success, which is why this study asked students to focus on their own achievements from their own perspective to include potential positive and negative influences rather than from the perspective of administrators or teachers. This methodology has rarely been attempted to investigate middle school student success; yet it seems a golden opportunity to hear from students about their own understanding of their own learning. For example, while it has been argued that middle school success is possible if students have high expectations placed on them regarding academics, are challenged by a relevant and rigorous curriculum, and the school climate is supportive, caring and respectful (Maxwell, 2016; Milner, 2010), how true is this of the site school investigated in this study?

The original *Turning Points* report (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), considered a significant impetus for the development of the middle school model across the nation, likewise claimed success in middle school depends on highly supportive environments in student-centered teams, supported by quality teachers, quality instruction, and strong home and community partnerships. *Turning Points 2000* not only emphasized the importance of a student-centered focus for middle school, but as shown in Figure 6, but also stressed the role of home, school and the community on middle school student success.

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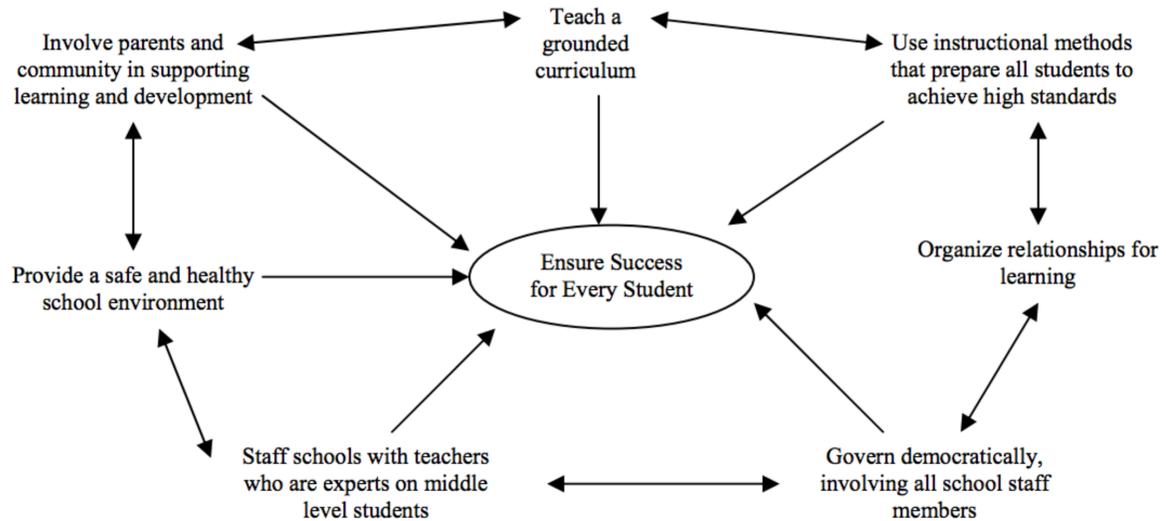


Figure 9: The *Turning Points 2000* Success Cycle
Source: Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 25

However, is middle school the best delivery model to meet the various needs of this age group to ensure academic success? Indeed, research suggests middle school may not always be the best learning experience for early adolescents due to overcrowding, poor teacher relationships, poor school attendance, low parent involvement, and lack of classroom structure (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Schwerdt & West, 2013), yet what are educators doing to improve student success? How can educators help students who struggle to be successful in middle school?

As mentioned already, middle schools emphasize teaming and support close-knit communities “that permit close, caring relationships among adults and students [to] build a school wide climate of trust, respect, and common purpose” (Oakes et al., 1993, p.468), but they are not ideal. According to Fisher and Frey (2007), some districts have dismantled middle schools in favor of K-8 buildings (e.g., New Orleans, Miami-Dade, and Boston) due to achievement concerns (see also Carolan et al., 2015; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010).

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Conversely, Fisher and Frey (2007) argue if “the principles of middle education (personalized learning environment, flexible time usage, a focus on coherent academic experiences) were truly realized, these achievement declines would diminish” (p. 204). It would seem, therefore, there are benefits and weaknesses to the middle school model; although this study is not offering an exploration of these, but rather the desire to identify and rectify concerns in the home, school, and community settings to improve student success.

What remains clear is the importance of middle school as an early indicator of possible future high school struggles or eventual drop-out. According to Kennelly and Monrad (2007), sixth grade success remains a crucial indicator of academic success for more than half of sixth graders with who “attend school less than 80 percent of the time; receive a low final grade from their teachers in behavior; and fail either math or English” go on to become high school drop-outs (p. 1). Similarly, eighth-graders “who miss five weeks of school or fail math or English have at least a 75 percent chance of dropping out of high school” (p. 1). Likewise, lack of participation in extra-curricular activities in middle school has been shown to be a possible red flag for future drop-out in high school, placing more weight on middle school programming (Bowers, Sprout & Taff, 2013).

Although the national on-time graduation rate from high school is improving, there is a need to gather information from young people’s experiences as to how and why their academic achievement has been affected (Zaff, 2014). This is especially the case for middle school where research studies have barely touched on the idea of combined influences from home, school, and community settings affecting success. Thus, learning about these effects prior to high school, from students themselves, validates the purpose of this study and reinforces the importance of achievement in the middle school grades.

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Summary

This literature review sought to review how home, school, and community settings historically have affected middle school achievement. The triad approach of home, school, and community influences undertaken in this study echoes the foundational work of Sanders and Epstein (1998) whose parent-school-neighborhood studies built the groundwork for the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University. It also echoes Carey's (2013) argument that home, school, and community, environments need to be actively involved in the educational process if systemic improvement is to be achieved. However, to date, the triad approach has rarely been applied at the middle school setting for or with sixth grade students. Thus, while individual influences such as poverty or gender, and groups of students such as African-American, Hispanic students, and school athletes have been subjects of historical research as noted in the sections above, this study offers a unique approach.

My hope is that this study will better inform building and district leadership about influences on middle school students. Thus, I want to be a true change agent and help the specific site school "bridge the divide and encourage more equitable schooling experiences" for all its students (Griner & Stewart, 2013, p. 586), ultimately utilizing a village approach to improve student success not only in the site school, but also through future application in my school and the district as a whole.

Section Four – Contribution to Practice

Introduction

As the Dissertation-in-Practice model lacks a more traditional format for the presentation of findings, I have taken the liberty to present four separate components. Each one serves a different purpose and is therefore directed to a different audience. These are:

- a) *An accounting of students' perceptions of what is meant by success and failure.* This is organized by participant pseudonym and provides an overview of how students conceptualized success and failure in and outside of school. This summary therefore provides a convenient overview of students' perceptions with respect to the first research question: How do middle school students define academic success and failure?
- b) *A summary of students' perceptions regarding the influences on their success.* This is organized by participant pseudonym in order to provide a contextual base for the study. This summary presents an overview with respect to the second research questions: How have home, school, and community influences helped and/or hindered academic success in middle school? Without it, I feel the reader lacks the opportunity to fully embrace the richness of each student's story, to understand the essence of who and what helps the participants be successful, and gain an understanding of how students have overcome barriers and obstacles to be successful.
- c) *A separate report to the Superintendent of Schools.* This report will also be shared with the site building principal and his leadership team. This section offers a summary of the key components of the study and serves as an overview of the dissertation. Of course, recipients will be invited to consider the dissertation in its entirety at their leisure if they desire more information, such as with respect to the

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literature review (Section Three).

- d) *An executive summary for the Superintendent's Cabinet.* This has been requested by the site district's research board and thus is a single-spaced abridgement of the report to the Superintendent to make it more user-friendly to its intended audience.

Students' Perceptions of Success and Failure

Students were asked two foundational questions at the beginning of the semi-structured interview to shape this study: What does it mean to be successful and what does it mean to fail? Probes followed these questions as necessary to encourage students to explore these concepts as they related to their success in sixth grade (see Appendix A). These included: “Can you tell me about a time when you have been successful in or outside of school?”; “How did people or places help you be successful?”; “Can you tell me about a time when you have experienced failure? How did you get over that?”; and “How did people or places help you through the experience?” What follows here is a verbatim accounting of how students interpreted their own success and failure, arranged in alphabetical order based on student’s pseudonyms. I chose not to present this in summary form, for to do so would be to interpret students’ voice with adult eyes: after all, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate student perceptions of influences on student success.

Benjamin

Success is ...

- To be successful is to do the best you can at what you are doing. It doesn't matter what you're doing, like, you could be doing the worse class there is because you aren't the smartest person, but if as long as you are doing good in it, that would qualify you as being successful
- ... outside of school you don't have to think about, like, getting good grades and getting into good classes, and ... if you're not a good person and you're not doing good things, you're not being successful outside of school, and if you are doing good things and you are like, trying to be a good person, even if you are not a good person

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but you are trying to be a good person, I'd say you are successful

Failure is ...

- Well, in Challenge Math, my first semester grade was a C- because I wasn't really doing my homework and I wasn't really trying as hard as I could've been. ... But it doesn't matter what you know, but it was mattering what I did and I needed to do my homework.
- I also had only had, like, a B+ in English, which wasn't the best I could do
- What does it mean to fail? Do your worse! --- I did the worse thing I possibly did and I think I failed in that situation. I got in trouble for making a bad decision.

Ellie

Success is ...

- So I feel like success is based on a mindset, so, if you..., it's almost like goal setting, like, ...How I wanted to be successful was to get all As. That was how I wanted to be successful and I achieved that, so I think of myself as successful and ... like, I don't think being successful means you have to follow lines for each person. I mean, everyone has a different success range depending on, like, what your family life is like, what teachers you had ...

Failure is ...

- Well... its not that you don't necessarily reach your goal... it's that ... you can't fail unless you don't try, is what I try to think of it as... I mean, if you leave a question completely blank on a test and you just don't answer it, then you are failing because you don't try. I mean, you could have got it right by just randomly circling.

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Grace

Success is ...

- I think success varies with each person. It is not just a set thing like in a dictionary, but it's not entirely set to you. You will have different goals from another person, so you will have a different experience of success

Failure is ...

- Not accomplishing what you want to accomplish. ... Getting an A- on a test when I could have got an A

James

Success is ...

- I would say that it means having good grades, have good friends, not be a bully, because, like... You just need to be nice to everyone around you. I mean you are successful if you have some good friends around you. I mean, you don't have to be rich or famous. You should just have good grades.
- I mean the only difference would be, is that, the only difference would be outside of school, good grades are not needed outside of school to be successful, but it still makes a difference because having good grades can still make a difference in the real world.

Failure is ...

- When I fail, I just try again and don't let it get the best of me. ... I didn't actually do very well in Math, so I copied of another piece of paper, but then, like, I got better in Math in January though.

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Jason

Success is ...

- Ummm, being successful to me means, like knowing that you've tried your best in school. I mean, like if you didn't try your best ... you should always try your best because either if you like already do good enough without trying too hard, then you should try to your fullest potential, because then you will do even better, but if you can't succeed, ... I mean teachers aren't going to get mad at you for trying.

Failure is ...

- To be honest, if you are always trying, like every single day no matter what you do, you try your best to do it, there shouldn't be any such thing as failing, unless if you don't try. ---- ...
- So, inside of school, I think it is probably having all the pressure of having all your other work you need to get done. ... So if you have lots of work in one subject and you're thinking about it too much in another subject, you are not getting any of the information in the subject you are currently doing. So that was a big problem for me, because we did get lots of work sometimes.
- getting distracted by outside of school stuff sometimes impact you

Kate

Success is ...

- Well at this level, it's like, what your goals are and you want to reach them, so you are successful if you reach them, if you reach your goals.

Failure is ...

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- I guess, to fail... you could just say not to reach your goal ...Right. Like you were trying to get 100% but you only got 80% or something, like that wouldn't be as bad as getting 59% or something

Liz

Success is ...

- It means you are driven to do well, so you get very far in life and you know what you want to do and you do it, so you have goals and you reach them and, so you have plans.
- Well, inside school it is more like turning in assignments and getting good grades. Outside of school it is more like joining clubs and having a good social life.

Failure is ...

- Well, ... if you don't get where you want to go ... well, that's not necessarily failing, but ummm, failing would be, like, underachieving.
- Well, like, I turned in something late, or if I forgot to turn it in or something, and then like, getting a bad grade. I mean its not really failing, but it's bad.

Natalie

Success is ...

- To be successful means you do really good on something, where... if you are talking about school, you get an A on a test or pretty high, or, in an athletic or sport event, you get first place or something like that
- I was on the A honor roll both semesters, which was real good, and I never got a test

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lower than a C, which I felt really good about.

- I won ... one of my basketball teams, we were undefeated. And in softball, I only struck out one time

Failure is ...

- I had to drop out of softball because I hurt my shoulder. ... I felt bad that I wasn't being, like, successful. I felt that I let down my team and my family.

Opal

Success is ...

- To be successful, I guess that would mean that ... you having mostly As and Bs
- People who are successful usually are neat ... they have neat binders and stuff. And they carry a book around and you can tell how fast they read because their book will change every week

Failure is ...

- I got a C- on a challenge math test
- Sometimes I need to practice more ... like I'll procrastinate and sit and get distracted
- Sometimes I need to pay more attention on just getting my work done.

Owen

Success is ...

- to have good grades, and not get in trouble, and just follow the rules [...]
- like listen to my parents... listen to like police officers and stuff

Failure is ...

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- I made a really wrong decision and got in trouble
- like in an elective not passing it? ... had a failing grade

Regina

Success is ...

- Maybe having control over what you do and like to do, and being good at what you do
- You have different things to do, and at home, it is more like clean your room or walking the dog. But at school it is more like getting good grades, because at school it ALWAYS affects you, but at home it might affect you later but might not.

Failure is ...

- Do not try at all and do not want to try at all and not being successful means not doing anything about something that might happen
- If I am not successful then feel like I will have failed or I will get no where in life.

Stephen

Success is ...

- It means to work hard and get good grades and study, so you can come up and you will know the things to do.
- Like, at school, sometimes, you do sports and we do get success in school but not always. Like, in baseball...

Failure is ...

- Like, ... you are not even trying and you are flunking grades purposely

Summary of Influences on Success

What follows here is a summary of students' comments as they related to their own perception of influences on their success. This is organized in alphabetical order by participant pseudonym. This summary seeks to present an overview to address the second research question: How have home, school, and community influences helped and/or hindered academic success in middle school?

Benjamin

Benjamin comes over in his interview as being highly focused and goal-driven. He commented, for example, that success means doing his very best in everything he does. He lives at home with his parents and younger sister, although he humorously commented that his younger sister was a “negative influence” because she reminds him how *not* to behave. He attributes much of his success to the influence of his family, including his parents who “do whatever is necessary and ... help [me] by like, by like, helping me with anything I need” and who will “say I am not trying my hardest on something, and they motivate me by reminding me of my goals to do better.” He also talked about his parents checking his grades each night to see:

... if I didn't have something turned in or something like that, [and]... If I had a bad grade on something, and they would, like, ask me, what happened there? And if there was something wrong with the system, they would tell me to like, go to school and tell them [the teachers] about it.

Benjamin also commented favorably on the support his family give him regarding his interest in politics, stating that his parents have sent him to visit his uncle and aunt in Washington, D.

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C., and summarizing the many family members he has with political experience as lobbyists and employees in Jefferson City.

Benjamin has a well-defined sense of maturity when discussing what success meant to him and who and what helped him to be successful. He stated:

... to be successful, you have to be successful not just in one area, but you need to be successful in all areas. ... if you are successful in one area, you need to be successful in all areas, like in the community so people get to like you, at home, so they encourage you and you act like a good person, and at school, so you can apply those things and be a good person and a good leader.

He is also very self-aware of his own role in determining his success: he worries that he does not always do his best or being “a good person.” Benjamin reflected, for example, on an incident in school where he made a bad decision and got in trouble as being something that could affect his reputation because “what YOU do matters”, and his future success all because he had let his “temper get the better of [him].”

However, Benjamin is also aware of how important participation in school can be and was in band, Quiz Bowl, and Chess Club, stating:

I think I learned [from Chess Club] that if you have a plan and you are heading straight forward and someone else messes it up, you have to think of a new plan to do your plan. And in Quiz Bowl, if there is something you don't know, don't get disappointed if you don't know it, just push on, because you'll know the answer next time someone asks a question like that.

Being involved in the school and community also made him feel proud which furthered his success because “if you feel good yourself, that makes you, like, successful.”

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Lastly, regarding the influence of individuals outside of his family, Benjamin commented that his friends are not a big influence, stating he helps them more than they help him because he usually knows what to do. He did comment positively on the school overall, although he thought some teachers were too lenient and inconsistent when it came to rules. He also commented positively that his teachers were “really nice” and they “would help me to get a better grade... and like, if I did something wrong, they would help me to turn it into a right.”

Ellie

Ellie is highly involved in activities outside of school with gymnastics taking up much of her free time. She attributes much of her success in school to the dedication and perseverance she has learned through gymnastics, but also to the support she gets from her mom with respect to gymnastics and school. Of her home and community support, she says: “I mean, everything I have there helps me to be better in school ... I mean, if I didn’t have my family or I didn’t have my activities that I do, I don’t think I would be as successful in school.” She concludes by saying:

I can’t stress enough how much my family helps me. They help me so much. I feel like I have support in school a lot. I mean, I do, but that is because I form support when and where I need it. So like, most people think when they are at school that they have no one there for them, that they are all alone, they have no one at school, and, I know I have my mom downstairs, and everyone is like, but your mom’s here, but even if she wasn’t, I know I could go to the teachers, I could go to the principal, I

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could go to people if I need help, I could go to the counselor. I mean, that's what all those people are here for.

Grace

Grace's focus was on how school can help her be successful and she commented on support from teachers through both RtI, especially for Challenge Math help from friends and teachers, and after-school clubs such as Reading Club and Math Counts. However, she also had the most to say concerning how to make school better, stating the main concerns were at lunch time due to long lunch lines and crowded tables. She said, "by the time we got through the lunch time, we only had, like, 10 minutes to eat, so we talked some, but we didn't talk too much 'cause we just wanted to eat." Her suggestion to rotate the dismissal of tables to the line and also at the end of lunch so students at the same tables were not always last seems reasonable and validates the use of student voice to identify and solve school climate issues. She also commented that her main source of motivation was herself and then wanting to help herself and her brother do well in school. In terms of friends, she said they did not play much of a role, except for one who was also on her softball team. Part of the problem was that she did not see friends outside of school much because of her neighborhood, which was small and there were not many families in it.

James

James attributed his success in school to the combined influence of the triad approach. His enthusiasm for teachers and administrators was encouraging as an example of the effect a positive school environment can have on students. His comment that teachers:

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helped me with my homework you know, teach me, and ... I actually have trouble sometimes with understanding directions, so they like told me what the question actually means and, if I had, like late work, they actually helped me with remembering. ... They were just amazing...

reveals the positive relationships he had with his teachers. However, he also was equally enthusiastic about how his friends contributed to his success: "I like hanging out with friends 'cause, I mean, that is the main thing with me. I mean, I am just so social and I just love my friends. I love my friends. They are just the best..." and commented on a number of friends who helped him in math (not Challenge Math), orchestra, and P.E. Indeed, James stated:

Without my friends, I would be like, I would have no one and I would be like, a lonely guy without friends who would be made fun of all the time and I would, like, stay in my room all day.

Similarly, James was enthusiastic about the support he received from his mom, who helps him "in every way possible" and quizzes him on his schoolwork to help him be successful. In the end though it was the support from home that James contributed much of his school-based success: "I think my mom helps me by far, like, the most, but my friends are like, like, second helping me the most, and my teachers help me third."

Jason

Jason summarized his interests as including playing with his dog, playing soccer, or maybe calling a friend over when he had free time. However, he also admitted to playing video games and being on the computer. According to him, he was successful because of this

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balance between being a “normal 12 year old boy” and being focused on what is important in life by doing the best he can. Jason stated success both in and out of school means:

... knowing you’ve tried your best in school. I mean, like, if you didn’t try your best ... you should always try your best because either if you already do good enough without trying too hard, then you should try to your fullest potential, because then you will do even better.

Jason also attributes a lot of his success to his own willpower and hard work. However, he says that his family motivates him by trying to make him do his work on his own, although he admitted asking his mom and dad to help him with math.

A positive, caring school environment was an important influence on Jason’s success, although he did pause to negatively comment on the 30+ class size in Challenge Math which made getting individual help more of a challenge. Here though, Jason attributed his success in such a large class due to the fact that he was more focused, “more serious” in that class than any of his other classes. In general, Jason affirmed that school and teachers jointly helped him to be successful:

Teachers helped me out a lot and lots of my teachers are really funny, too and so they definitely livened up the class a lot. ... I mean the environment and teacher matters a lot to me ... Like, my Science teacher was hilarious and so it made it one of my favorite core classes to be in also because I loved the Science class and what we learned in there.”

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Kate

Kate's perspective is that her friends are the main reason for her success, although her parents and extended family play a lesser role. She recognized the influence of people outside of school, including friends in her neighborhood, friends who have the same music instructor for flute, and most especially her extended family, including aunts who live close by who are able to help her with math. In general it seems Kate also has a very supportive and motivating relationship with her parents, whom she says help her, but encourage her to figure things out on her own. For example, she commented that her parents will use concrete strategies like contracts and verbal and written reminders to stay focused on her schoolwork, as she sometimes will procrastinate and be in a rush to finish her work. This self-awareness came out repeatedly in her interview as she talked openly about her need to be better organized, despite her note taking skills.

Regarding her success in school, Kate repeated referred to a group of friends who support and encourage her, but are also highly competitive. She said: "I think my friends just have an influence because we all kind of strive to be on the A honor roll. And we did, too. So we all just try..." before admitting that sometimes she fell behind because she did not always work as fast as the others. This influences her sense of success, if not her actual academics, because "[She doesn't] want to be the straggler with my friends. It's not that like not want to be weak, it's like being the same in a good way..."

Lastly, Kate also was one of a few students who voiced explicit concerns regarding the overall school environment. Specifically, she stated:

I think they should ... have a couple more hall monitors. Because one time there was an argument on the stairs which made kids late coming back to class. And, I know

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there were teachers there, but they didn't get their very fast and lots of kids were late back to class... I mean, I think they try to, but there's so much things going on and when they are waiting outside their classrooms in the hallway, they tell kids to keep going but, like, there's just so many kids and not enough teachers.

Liz

Liz admits she is a very shy, quiet person and attributes much of her success to the support she receives at home. She commented that her parents are very supportive, but they encourage her to be involved at school, "to make me join stuff so I am not like closed to anything..." She also attributes much of her success in school to the fact that her older siblings set a competitive tone in the home and she has grown up with the expectation of having good grades and doing well in school. She says of her brother, for example:

Well, my parents are always pushing... like ... to make sure you get stuff handed in on time ... and my siblings of course... my brother is really good at math, so he can help me understand stuff when I don't get it and they are really good at making sure I don't fail.

Liz was one of only a few students to comment adversely on the effect her neighborhood has on her success in that, while quite and small, her neighborhood has had instances of local crime that concern her. She says she likes to walk the dogs but that she often sees police being called to one particular house, which concerns her and is "not very calming." However, in general she feels her neighborhood is safe.

Lastly, regarding school-based influences, Liz was one of few students who expressed concern about safety in school, stating "there were a lot of fights in the cafeteria

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because there were seating issues because there weren't enough seats", suggesting extra tables as a solution.

Natalie

Natalie is very sports-minded, focused and goal-driven. Despite health issues this past year as a sixth grader, Natalie continues to play multiple sports outside of school. She attributes much of her success to her sports to the input of coach, who motivates her to "get As and stuff, because she is like, if you do bad in a test, I'm going to bench you." However, Natalie also states her competitive nature helps her be successful: "I want to do well in everything I do."

Natalie also has a very supportive family network around her and commented on her family playing a critical role in her success. She also talked many times of how she learns from her parents and members of her extended family, including uncles and grandparents: "I also get motivated by them, because, it makes me feel really good, because, ummm...they all went to college and they all graduated and stuff, so I want to make them proud."

However, while Natalie described her talents in sports as a reason for her success, she also is aware of her own weaknesses and how her success can be impacted. This includes physical issues, but also her need to improve her reading and math skills. To achieve this goal, Natalie described how one of her friends challenged her to meet reading goals and how other friends and she made a study group for math that would meet after school sometimes. In fact, Natalie said her friends were the main reason for her school-based success because:

I kind of feel like my friends might help me with my school life more than my parents are because they are not here with me and around me, and they don't know what I

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deal with every day, like, with teachers and stuff. So, I think they help me more with my school life, but my parents help me, like, with everything else outside of my school life.

Opal

Opal's perspective is that her success is closely linked to family support. She lives at home with her parents and a younger brother, but described a number of times how her parents or her uncle, or her grandparents encourage and motivate her, saying "High Fives!" and helping her set realistic goals. She asks for challenge math help most of the time from her dad and uncle, although commented that they "don't know how to teach her because they learned it differently from how I do it." As such, she attributes part of her success to self-motivation to do well, her ability to stay organized, and how she will seek out other resources including friends and online assistance, such as with Khan Academy, to get answers for math, although Opal admits she is easily distracted in Math and sometimes needs to practice and persevere to get her work done. Opal also participated in intramurals and choir, but does not think these helped her be successful, with the exception of making friends. She said most of her teachers were great, but she expressed concern about bullying in the hallways that teachers "just let go."

Owen

Owen recognizes that his friends play a large role in helping him be successful as he would ask them for help "when [he] was stuck" or would sometimes give them a call if he "needed help or forgot something." He said his friends helped him with school, homework,

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and in sports and that his friends helped him “to become a better person and player.” He also said he has a good relationship with his parents who “drive [me] to practice for basketball and football”, but that his two high-school aged sisters do not help him much because they have their own lives and things they do. Overall, Owen attributed his success in school to good habits in note-taking, organization, and because he paid attention in his classes. He also thinks he was successful because he asked his teachers for help when he needed to improve his grades. Owen said his teachers were “mostly nice” and they helped by reviewing questions in class. He said World Languages and Challenge Math were the most difficult because there was always a lot of homework. He does not want to disappoint his mom, believes he is a good person because he obeys the rules and listens to his teachers and parents so he “does not get in trouble” at home or school.

Regina

Regina’s opening discussion of what was meant by success revealed the balance she seeks to establish between home and school influences in her life. She stated:

At school, you have different things to do, and at home, it is more like clean your room or walking the dog. But at school it is more like getting good grades, because at school it ALWAYS affects you, but at home it might affect you later but might not. Time and again, Regina talked about the importance of doing well in school, but especially of the influence of her mom.

She describes her mom’s “look” and her mom “always being in the back of [her] mind” and of her mom is a motivator who also encourages her to do well:

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My big goals are to get into a good college... something better than M...., or even M... [Laughs] Just get good grades. My mom always tells me even elementary school matters because you get into the habit of listening and turning in your homework and it then in middle school the habit stays with you, and then in high school it really matters, and then in college it really, really matters.

In fact, Regina barely acknowledged the influence of her dad (who lives in another state) and her older sister, saying her mom knows how to help her do well in school and provides a lot of encouragement and motivation.

However, Regina also is aware of how her home environment contributes to her success, stating:

I have a desk but sometimes I do it [homework] in the kitchen or sometimes in my room at my desk. Sometimes I just get home and crash on the couch, I don't sleep, but just rest and that sometimes helps me do my homework.

She also acknowledges using re-focusing strategies to improve her work completion and to lessen procrastination, which she admits is one of her weaknesses. On this regard, she also commented favorably on the role played by teachers, who are "nice" and helpful, and her friends, who help her "stay on track", especially if she misses something or doesn't understand something.

Stephen

Stephen lives part time with his mom and part time with his grandparents and admits that both living arrangements help him to be successful, especially as he says he does not really get on well with his step-dad or step-brother. Part of the problem is that he and his

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step-brother, while only two months younger, “don’t get on much.” Instead, Stephen described how his mom and grandparents helped him directly during sixth grade. This included his mom “reading over questions and ... studied with me” to prepare for quizzes and his grandparents helping him with his sports, reading and homework.

Stephen also commented that he knew his home life both helped and hindered his success, stating that he did his homework at a “bar where we have these seats and ... that’s usually where I do it” instead of in the room he shared with his brother. He said working at home was often “distracting” and he tried to get help at school from teachers instead during RtI (a type of study hall support). He also said he liked staying with his grandparents because they could help him a lot with his schoolwork.

Stephen was very proud of his accomplishments in band during his sixth grade year, but said part of the reason for not participating in clubs and activities was difficulty with transportation. While he did not say he lived close to school, he said he lived in a kind of rougher neighborhood near a sports bar where it was not always quiet or safe. In fact, he commented that staying after school was not usually an option because he would have to walk home, and he did not like walking in his neighborhood because of traffic, a busy road, and the local sports bar.

Much like Liz, Stephen also expressed concerns about school safety, stating that fights were a worry. He offered the following as a suggestion: “maybe watching so once there is a fight, the teacher would actually be there to break it up. Like, be on the camera and watch the camera so they can tell the teachers where to go.” However, apart from this concern, he stated school was generally good and that his teachers were helpful.

An Examination of Places and Faces as Contributors to Middle School Success: A

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... always try to do well in school. Like sometimes, the environment you live in can have a serious impact, but I mean, school is a different place, so it's where you can socialize and make friends and like, be safe... it is a place where you can seriously, like, calm down and have a different place to be, but also try your best in class to get the best education because you should be glad you have a good education.

Jason [pseudonym]

Introduction

Jason's words hit home regarding the importance of doing well in school, but also hint at various home, school, and community factors which can influence a student's success. In this study, I sought to examine these combined influences on middle school student success by considering who and what helps students to be successful according to students' perspectives. Too often student achievement is tied to what schools are, or are not, doing, but this study was designed to consider more than school influences in order to improve our understanding of the impact home, school, and community settings have on middle school student achievement. Thus, by listening to students' voices, valuable insight can be gained regarding how middle school student success can be improved.

Study Design

Applying a phenomenological approach in the form of a qualitative investigation of students' perceptions regarding their own success led to data collection at one particular middle school in the district. This use of one school setting sought to reinforce the commonality of a single site school (Merriam, 2009), as opposed to gathering data from students' voices at disparate locations with different school climates, personnel, and programming. As a result, while this study does not suggest a participant pool of twelve students can be generalized to a district with thousands of students, it does profess to value

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student voice as an important tool in understanding influences on students in at least one school in the district. Thus, future research could expand this study by examining student voices, drawing from participants at more than one building, across more than one grade level, to determine possible generalization of this study's findings.

Participants

Twelve students were interviewed during the 2016 summer school session, following a multi-step invitation and selection process, with the approval of the site principal and the assistance of the school guidance office. All participants met the following criteria:

- a) Students were rising seventh graders who had completed sixth grade at the site school;
- b) Students had no Ds or Fs at the last interim grading period prior to the end of sixth grade and no office referrals at that point in time;
- c) Students had at least a 90% attendance rate for their sixth grade year in following with district guidelines; and
- d) Students were not considered a member of a protected class according to IRB restrictions on vulnerable children.

These criteria were decided on with the input of my dissertation committee and the site principal's, however, it should be noted that it was not the intent of this study to suggest that students with preclusions such as these are not successful or cannot be successful, particularly in light of research that speaks to problematic disproportionalities related to office referrals for students of color (Gage, 2016; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; McIntosh, Mercer, Nesse, Strickland-Cohen, & Hoselton, 2016).

Summary of findings

According to information contained in the student-centered narrative, home, school, and community settings were found to influence sixth grade student success. This was not a surprise, given the research that exists for each of these settings as historical factors on student achievement. What was surprising, however, was the degree of influence indicated by students for each setting and the importance attached to different people and settings by students as they discussed how and why they had been successful in sixth grade. When broken down using the triad approach, each setting was seen to influence middle school student success in different capacities, as indicated below:

Home Influence

To investigate the impact of home and family influences on success in school, questions included: “What type of help do you get from your parents?”; “How do your parents react when you are successful in school?”; and “How do you think your family has influenced you to be more successful in school?” to gain a better understanding of students’ perception of home and family influence. Analysis of the student-centered narrative led to a number of interesting findings concerning the influence of the home and family on student success. This included:

- a) A desire to make the *family proud* is a motivator to be successful;
- b) Involved parents provide *encouragement, advice, practice, limitations, and high expectations*;
- c) *Siblings* can be positive (and negative) influences;
- d) Family members can be positive (and negative) *role models and mentors*;
- e) The *physical setting and resources available* in the home can help and hinder

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success.

- f) Students felt *indebted* to parents for rewards and celebrations of their success (of varying financial amount)

Indeed, the narrative revealed four main domains of influence in the home setting: parents, resources, siblings and extended family (as shown in Figure 10a), although the extent of influence varied from parents who “will do whatever is necessary” [Benjamin] to parents who help directly with homework and studying for tests [Kate, James and Jason].



Figure 10a: Visual Summary of Home-based Influence

Review of literature further supports the role of parents and extended family members on student success (see Section Three of the complete dissertation). However, this influence can be positive and/or negative, as shown in Figure 10b.



Figure 10b: Visual summary of Parental Influence on Student Success

Several students thus claimed parents were important influences in their lives both directly and indirectly, stating they wanted to do well in school not only for themselves, not also for their parents [Kate, Jason and Natalie].

For example, Regina talked about her mother reinforcing her goal to attend the University of Washington after finishing high school. Similarly, other students talked about their parents and family members being positive role models in terms of career and goal-setting and motivation to do well in school [Natalie, Jason and Kate]. Others talked about how their parents’ and extended family members’ reactions affirmed their success and/or failure and how students saw this as a motivator or incentive for continuing success. For example, students talked about getting a “disappointing look” [Regina], or being given the “mom look” [Ellie] if they had poor grades in a quiz or assignment as being a strong

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motivator to do better or improve their grades. Other participants talked about having consequences in the form of punishments, including being grounded from the computer for getting in trouble with teachers [Benjamin], or being given extra chores because of poor effort [Regina], or being talked to by grandparents at report card time [Regina].

Similarly, Opal claimed restrictions placed on her and her brother's use of technology by her parents as being related to her success in sixth grade:

Well, my parents also limit our technology or our electronics. Like, my brother and I share a phone and we only get 1-2 hours on electronics each day, like, we are told to be outside or to read and stuff ..., so I think that helps us to be organized and on top of school stuff.

Thus, setting high parental expectations such as these, in combination with restrictions and rewards, are “often associated with independence and self-sufficiency in adolescence” (Urdu et al., 2007, p. 13) and reminds us that when parents place limits on television or encourage reading, and are actively involved in what goes on before, in, and after school, there is a positive influence on achievement (Halawah, 2006).

However, not all students live in two-parent homes, a fact which changed the nature and type of support found in the home setting. Specifically, half of the students interviewed live with one parent only, and two students, Grace and Stephen, both commented on the pressure and upset they felt as a result of being in a recently divorced home [Grace] or living with grandparents part time [Stephen]. In particular, Grace talked about relying more on her “family” outside of the home in the form of friends, both of her own and of her mom, whom she considers to be like a real family. Grace also commented on the support she gets from her older sister, especially when it comes to understanding her Challenge Math work and her

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outside interests in gymnastics. Grace and Stephen both described their parents' divorces as difficult and upsetting to the point that Stephen said his parents' divorce had provided him motivation to do better in school and to be a role model for his little brother.

Indeed, while parents were mentioned most frequently in the student-centered narrative in terms of home-based influences, participants also talked about siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandparents as influence on their school success (as shown in Figures 10c and 10d). For example, Benjamin commented that he gained a lot of help from his grandparents because "they are politicians and that's what I want to be. I ask a lot of questions and have learned a lot about how the government works from my grandfather."

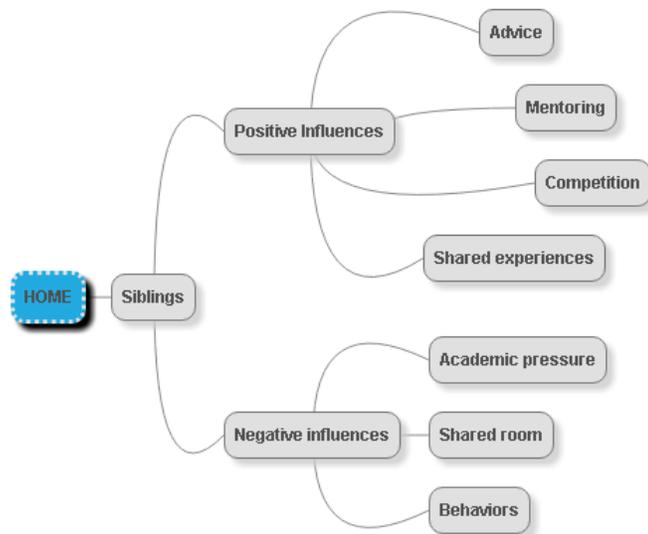


Figure 10c: Visual Summary of Sibling Influence on Student Success

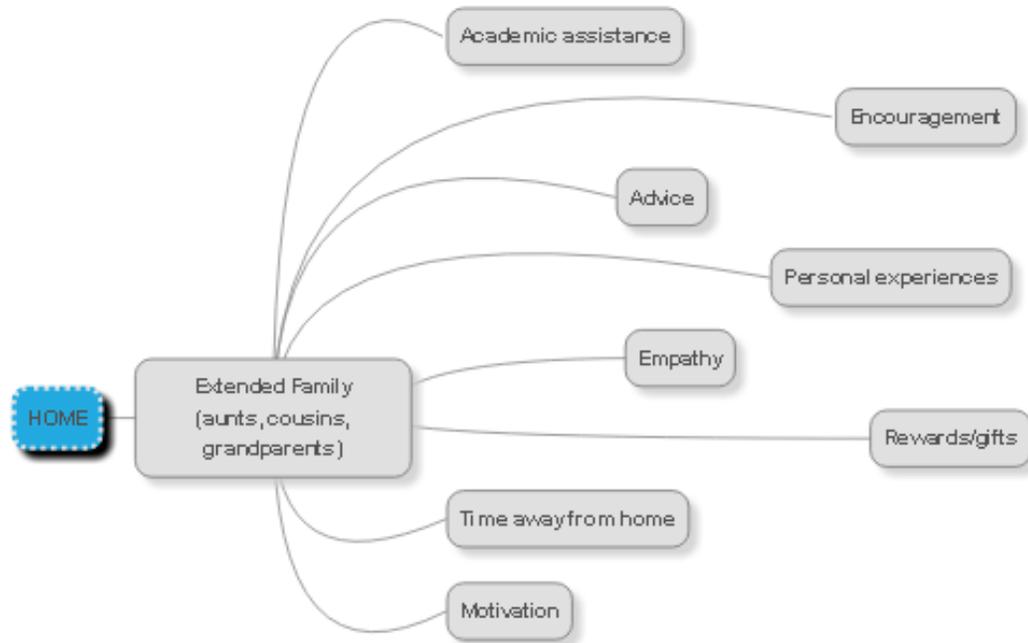


Figure 10d: Visual Summary of the Extended Family’s Influence on Student Success

Indeed, this multi-layered nature of family-based influence reminds us that role models and a desire to disprove low expectations of family members, or a desire to avoid replicating bad decisions made by other family members, can be strong motivators for student success.

For some students, family also seemed to fulfill the role of mentors and tutors, especially when the going gets tough regarding academics [Kate], personal issues [Ellie], or sibling dynamics [Jason and Stephen]. This connection to others in the family, apart from parents, included some students being role models for their siblings [Grace, Benjamin, and Opal], or having relatives who are role models to them, either as negatives (such as not wanting to “be like my cousin who is in prison” [Stephen]) or positives (such as successful siblings who set a competitive tone in the home [Kate], or older siblings who sometimes help them directly with their school work [Ellie, Natalie, and Owen]).

Likewise, some students talked about staying with family members in the summer [Benjamin], or with grandparents on a temporary but regular basis [Stephen], or talking to

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family members on a regular basis [Ellie] about school and their goals. Other students talked about participating in activities because of family connections [Benjamin and Natalie], and being rewarded materialistically for success, including being given money, gifts, or meals and treats [Benjamin, Jason, Owen, and Natalie], which provided incentive to be successful.

Historically, parental influence has been shown to be an influential role on student success by building student motivation, providing support and structure, and establishing expectations, restrictions, and rewards. Students talking about their parents' spending money on them as a reward for success supported this type of parental influence. However, it also suggests a degree of financial stability in many families as they provide rewards or recognitions to students when they are successful, wherein such inferences reflect the possible impact of financial ability on the student success (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Indeed, participants commonly referred to rewards and punishments in the home as being influences, but also how other resources helped them to be successful, as shown in Figure 10e:

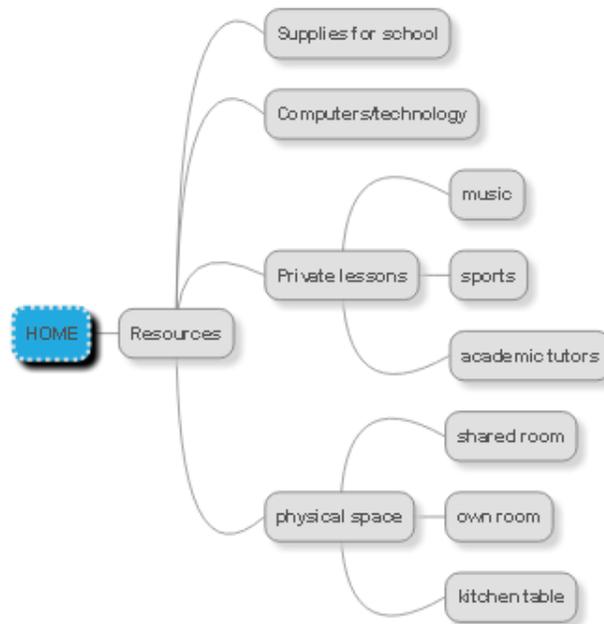


Figure 10e: Visual Summary Resources in the Home That Impact Success

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Analysis of the student-centered narrative, as shown above in Figures 10a-10e, reinforces the complexity of influence the home setting provides for, and to, students, as well as the potential impact of the home setting on student success. For example, while some students talked of receiving direct parent academic assistance, it was most often in the form of checking work, quizzing or studying notes, or getting assistance with Challenge Math.

As a result, the central finding related to home-based influence is that family member influence seems to have moved away from the trend indicated in the literature review of concrete, direct assistance, to more of a inter-personal influence, especially with mentoring and role modeling when it comes to goal setting, future career interests, and character development.

School Influence

To investigate the impact of school and the school setting on students' success in sixth grade, the semi-structured interview began with an investigation of what was meant by success and failure in school before moving on to discuss how teachers and the school setting helped. Specific questions included: "How did you manage to overcome difficulties in your subjects?"; "To what extent do you think the school is a safe and caring school?"; "Who or what helped you to be successful in school?" and investigation through discussion of services and supports such as RtI or EEE (an enrichment program for gifted students), or clubs and activities after school.

Axial coding of student responses led to the following trends being identified as influences on student success in the school setting:

- a) Teachers were a *positive influence*, described variously as being "nice", "helpful", "motivating", "supportive"

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- b) School *celebrated, rewarded, and recognized success* through parties, A honor roll, IPR bands, semester-based academic awards
- c) After-school *clubs* provided practice and enrichment (yearbook, choir, band);
- d) Classes were *challenging* (Challenge Math, band/orchestra)
- e) The school *climate* was generally safe and caring

Thus, like home, school seems to play a substantial role in determining the type and extent of success students were able to achieve in sixth grade.

According to the literature review, the school setting is a significant area of influence over student success. This includes the influence of a supportive school culture, high academic standards, and positive teacher-student relationships on achievement (see also Milner, 2010). This is not a surprise, however, given how many hours a student is in school daily and across the school year, the number of interactions students have with teachers and others, although such interactions can be positive and negative, as shown in Figure 11:

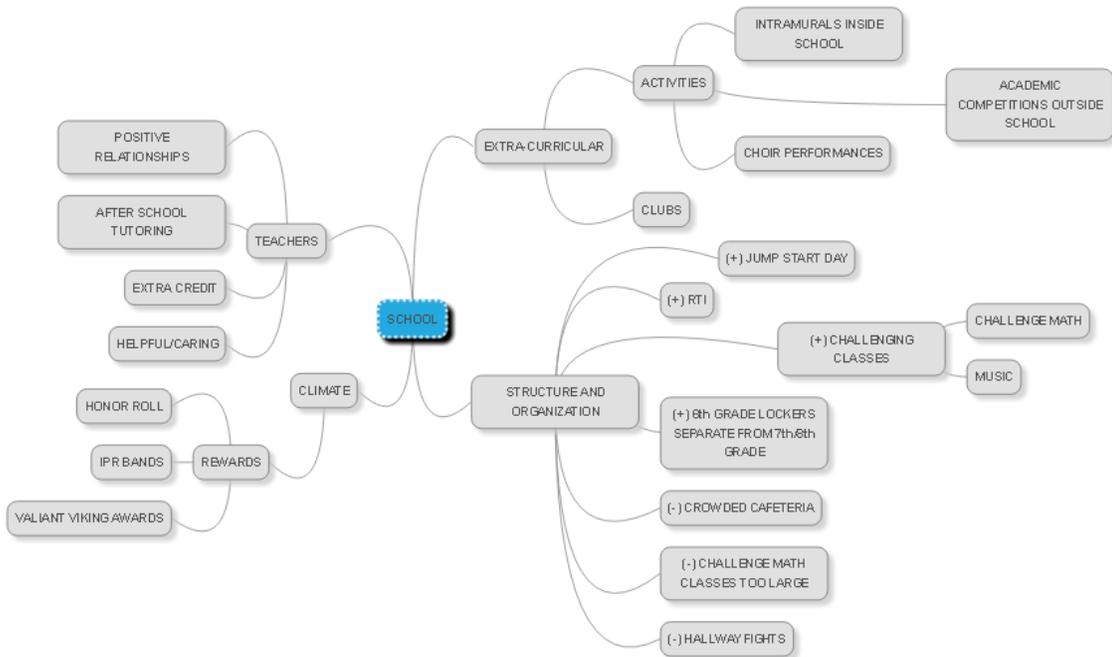


Figure 11: Visual Summary of School-based Influences

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However, while student narrative revealed a general consensus that the school was safe and caring, a few areas of concern were raised by students. These concerns included too many students in the challenge math classes to benefit from individual teacher assistance; too many students at each table in the cafeteria; and not enough supervision in the stairwells and hallways during passing time. However, when considering students' perspectives of how the school setting influenced their success, overall trends included how teachers and others did to provided formal and informal support when students were struggling; how the school climate was positive and celebratory; and how students felt challenged yet helped in their classes.

In particular, students mentioned the positive influence of supportive relationships with teachers and positive characteristics such as their teachers being “nice” and “helpful” [Ellie, Grace, James, Jason, and Regina]. The student-centered narrative also included references to there being a positive school climate: students felt success was celebrated and recognized and many suggested this celebratory climate helped motivate them to do better in school. Specifically, the use of a public A Honor Roll (for students with mostly As for grades) each semester was perceived to be a common motivator within the school setting that contributed to student success for most students. Similarly, common factors that students believed influenced their success in school included the use of challenging and supporting curriculum in the form of Challenge Math and band and orchestra classes and clubs.

Indeed, the student-centered narrative strongly supported the use of enrichment via high-interest, challenging classes such as band, orchestra, world language and advanced math classes like Challenge Math, and involvement in multiple clubs and sports with adult coaches and mentors (Dawes et al., 2014). All but one student in the study [Stephen], was enrolled in Challenge Math, although all students commented that math was the most difficult class in

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terms of time management and work completion, stating that while some teachers offered help through tutoring, or parents and other family members were crucial for helping to understand math concepts. This use of advance math options, as part of the growing *Algebra for All* movement (Hemphill & Hill, 2013), has been supported as a wise curriculum move, specifically if combined with committed and caring teachers and already motivated students, to prepare more students for high school level math

Indeed, it has also been suggested that enrollment in accelerated math classes can improve college and career readiness and overall achievement, with the rate of middle school students taking algebra or higher level math courses in eighth grade doubling in recent years across the nation (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2015; Domina, 2014). However, while math enrichment may be an effective achievement and acceleration strategy and increase the opportunity for students to learn advanced concepts and content, opponents argue too many students are unprepared for advanced work and thus fall behind their peers in later math courses in high school (see Clotfelter et al., 2015; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010).

Therefore, the repeated criticism of how difficult Challenge Math was in terms of quantity and quality of work, especially in the larger class of over thirty students where there was a lack of supportive learning environment, from all but one of the student participants, is a worry. This negativity, especially in terms of the pace and amount of work and the repeated need to seek assistance from parents, family members, and friends, also reflects concerns over whether all sixth grade students taking Challenge Math are developmentally ready to cope with advanced algebraic concepts, even if they have been placed or tested into higher math courses (Clotfelter et al., 2015; Domina, 2014; Hemphill & Hill, 2013).

Conversely, when it came to considering possible advantages of attempting an

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advanced or challenging curriculum, it was interesting to note that all but one of the participants was enrolled in either band or orchestra classes in school; six students participated in an after-school choir club; and five of the twelve students received private music instruction outside of school. The advantage of music instruction, like the use of advanced math for motivated students, has been promoted as a positive achievement gaining strategy (Arts Education Partnership, 2011). Furthermore, it has also been suggested that music education, either formally through school, or informally through private lessons, helps develop a child's self-esteem, self-confidence, and overall sense of worth (Hallam, 2010; Rickard, Appelman, Murphy, Gill & Bambrick, 2012). Indeed, perhaps all middle school students could benefit from some type of general music classes, given the research to suggest music education promotes numeracy, linguistic, and literacy skills, and individual focus and creativity, along with better performance on academic performance tests (Hallam, 2010). This may well be a programming decision worth investigating at the district level for the future to improve student achievement at the middle school level.

Surprisingly, however, while most students were involved in school-based extra-curricular activities such as choir, math counts, Quiz bowl or yearbook club, not all students were involved in school-based activities. Those who did not participate in clubs said the main problem was finding time to participate (n=2) because they played sports, or did not have transportation to their home (n=1) to allow them to participate. Two students stated that clubs were not very helpful and that they only participated because their mother or father told them to [Liz] or because peers were also involved [Owen]. Making clubs relevant to youth is an issue raised by the extant literature (see Lerner et al., 2005), while finding time to participate is certainly a concern for students who are involved in multiple activities outside of school.

Community Influence

Community influence in terms of setting was another area of surprise when analyzing results from the student-centered narrative. Very few of the participating students were involved in organized, community-based activities, or acknowledged the influence of community settings on their success in school. For example, only two students commented that youth groups at church or church choir played a significant role outside their family's religious practices of going to church each week [Natalie and Opal], and none were members of organizations such as 4H or Scouts, as examples of organized community-based activities designed to promote civic leadership and community involvement, per the advantages outlined by Lerner et al. (2005) and Ferrari et al. (2003). However, many students commented how actively they were involved in sports organizations and teams outside of school [excluding James, Kate, Liz, and Opal], and that they thought their teammates and coaches were positive influences on their success, to the extent that coaches were like members of their family [Jason and Natalie].

A literature review also supports multiple *community influences* including peers outside of school and participation in activities, clubs and organized groups. However, for the most part, the students in the study focused not so much on physical places, but on the influence of individuals in their personal and family networks or neighborhoods and communities and the skills they acquired through such associations, as summarized here:

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Figure 12: Visual Summary of Community-based Influences

Thus, the reliance on people outside the family home and school setting as influences on success was another trend revealed by the student narrative not extensively supported by the literature review. These included adults, such as coaches and family friends, but also the positive influence that one's own peers had on academic help and of providing important positive social contacts outside of school. For example, Jason commented: "I love my coach. She is like, like, my third parent." While Natalie's comment that her coach "motivates me to get As and stuff, because she is like, if you do bad in a test, I'm going to bench you, so that hurts because I am one of the best, one of the top players" reinforces the mentoring and encouragement role often played by coaches who are not in the school setting.

However, another trend that emerged from the analysis was that friendships outside of school were not as influential as the literature review suggested; perhaps because many participants were involved in so many activities that contact with friends was restricted mostly to the school setting. For example, Natalie stated she relied on her teachers more than

her parents and friends because she was too busy with her sports outside of school to see many friends who were not also on her sports teams, although she commented that being a team leader meant she tries to help her fellow players as much as she can: “If they have a question, I’m like, come and ask me and I’ll help you in any shape or form and I’ll help you understand ... and stuff like that.” Similarly, while some students commented on the importance of having friends in school [Benjamin, Grace and James], others said the social aspects of having friends outside of school, in their neighborhoods, sports teams or in private sport and music lessons, was an important positive influence on their overall success [Jason, Kate, Natalie and Regina].

Discussion of Central Themes

Axial coding of the line-by-line analysis led to the development of three key themes as reasons for how and why the student participants had been successful in sixth grade at the site school according to their own perspectives. Crossing over the triad settings of home, school and community these trends support the existence of multiple, simultaneous, influences on sixth grade students, and came down to: a) the importance of *self*; b) who and what *help* students be successful; and c) extrinsic influences on success.

The Importance of Self: *Me, Myself and I*

Initial review of the many historical influences on middle school achievement in Section Three of the study led to the suggestion that home, school, and community influences could help to explain how and why rising seventh grade students had been successful. However, what emerged from an analysis of the student narrative was the influence of a fourth area: the role of *self* as a determinate of success, especially in terms of self-motivation and feelings of self-worth. However, this trend was only superficially supported in the

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literature review as an influence on student success.

Instead, the student narrative revealed that participants universally see themselves as being crucial in determining their own success. Students commented over and over again on the importance of them being positive, working hard, and of knowing when they were “cheating” themselves [Benjamin] or “procrastinating” [Regina, Liz, Kate] or not working to the best of their ability [Jason]. Thus, a very well developed understanding of overall strengths and weaknesses emerged from the narrative, to the point that self became a new and emerging theme to help explain sixth grade student success.

The idiom, *me, myself and I*, is a useful way to interpret the role of self as revealed by analysis of the student-centered narratives. Students see themselves partly in isolation, the *me*, who has to balance the time and academic pressures of middle school. They see themselves as having to focus their attention, of knowing when to ask questions in class or when to seek help from parents or others in their family, or of being organized and good note-takers. Furthermore, they see themselves as *myself* when they assign blame for their failures on themselves and when they realize weaknesses they need to overcome, such as talking less [Benjamin] or moving seats to avoid distractions [Jason]. However, perhaps the most enlightening realization is when students see themselves as being responsible for their own learning either with the support of others, or by themselves: *I*. This includes a realization of their own goals (in and outside of school), a beginning sense of their possible career paths and responsibilities as adults, and discussions of how they overcame problems or obstacles to be more successful. While students ascribe some of their success to individuals such as teachers or parents or family members (and less so to community based influences outside of school such as coaches and peers), time and again, the student narrative revealed a strong

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sense of centrality: they were responsible for their ultimate success in school. Thus *me, myself, and I* reflects the importance students place on themselves in terms of success and failure, and their ability to rise above both, and their ultimate desire to improve their success. This ability to question and interpret one's own importance, aside from the influence of the triad settings, was an unexpected finding, but also lends itself to concern that middle school students may not have the developmental tools to deal with such pressures, and would benefit from increased in-school mental health and counseling services to reduce some of the pressures students were voicing.

Who and What Help Students Be Successful: *Faces and Places*

The literature review conducted prior to data collection suggested home, school, and community settings would each play a role in determining the reasons for sixth grade success. Furthermore, as stated in Section Two, very few studies have attempted to use a qualitative approach with middle school students to investigate student perception of how and where such influences take place to help students be successful. However, what emerged from the student-centered narrative was the realization that it is not so much the setting, but the combined effects of *people* in those settings that impacts student success. Thus a reconceptualization of community was necessary: faces and places seem to be more important to student success than participation in defined community activities either as an individual or in a team. This in turn led to a greater awareness of who and what is meant by the term *community*. It would seem, on the basis of student perception, that community included one's neighborhood with good and bad influences, but also included individuals such as neighbors, friends, coaches, and private instructors, while two students specifically mentioned the influence of their church choir and youth group [Opal and Natalie].

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Student participation in organized community activities, such as 4-H or Scouts, has been touted in the literature as ways through which students can develop skills leading to academic success (Ferrari et al., 2003; Lerner et al., 2005). While some students obviously participate in such activities, participants in this study did not. Most did, however, talk about the influence of people outside of their home and school: friends, coaches, neighbors, and so on, as noted above, as further reason for their success. It was also interesting to note that students gave credence to the influence of the physicality of their community, home, and neighborhoods as supports for success, with some students discussing negative input such as traffic and local crime [Kate and Liz] or the proximity of a local bar [Stephen]. This also included student comments on how and where they did homework outside of school, such as at the kitchen table [Stephen], in their living rooms [Regina], in their bedrooms [Kate and Liz], or even the public library with friends, or at friends' homes [Liz and Natalie].

In conclusion, it was interesting to see how students were very aware of different locations being useful for different reasons: seeking out isolation or assistance from others when needed. This awareness of student perceptions of who and what is meant by community also led to the conclusion that it is not so much the organizational aspect of community setting which influences student success, but the social and emotional support gleaned from people in those areas when and where students are interacting with others outside of the home and school setting.

Extrinsic Influences on Student Success: *A Double-edged Sword*

The third central theme to emerge from the analysis process echoes the idea of success being a double-edged sword. In other words, students find there are positives and negatives associated with success in home, school, and community settings. For instance,

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students commented often that parental encouragement has a lot to do with their own motivation to do well, or on how rewards associated with success, either at home or in school, motivated them to do even better in school. This included meals out [Regina], gifts [Jason], or other such materialistic and extrinsic rewards from parents. Indicating a degree of financial security and investment from parents in their child's success, such rewards varied from small ice cream treats [Natalie] to laptops [Jason] to a series of dinners out [Regina] as rewards for school-based and/or community-based success. Similarly, Natalie expressly mentioned how school success was often met by praise, while James mentioned being rewarded with extra time playing video games. On the other hand, community-based success, often in the form of sports victories, resulted in family-oriented celebrations such as out meals [Natalie] or trips to Dairy Cream or Dippin' Dots [Jason]. Of course, not all parents rewarded success materialistically, nor every time. Often the reward was the simple pleasure in knowing you made your parents happy [Benjamin], verbal praise [Opal], or a phone call from grandparents [Kate] when a particular goal was met.

When it comes to examining the role of extrinsic influences on success, there was also a high level of expectation from particular individuals and motivation in the form of goal-setting that helped to explain how and why students were successful in sixth grade. This included students being motivated by family, teachers, and peers to do better. More often than not, students discussed how knowing expectations were challenging yet realistic, such as in Challenge Math [Regina], was a direct motivator to do well in school, along with one-on-one parent involvement in helping with homework. Likewise, students positively commented on the motivation of friends and family members also doing well in school as being an influence on their own success. As Liz commented, her siblings "are over-achievers and they

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all get good grades”, so she feels she is expected to do equally well as her older siblings.

Not all extrinsic motivations were positive, however. Some students commented that parents and teachers had punishments and consequences for not being successful. This awareness in how failure helped them be successful is also an interesting finding from the study, for students needed to conceptualize their success in sixth grade from both positive and negative perspectives. Knowing, for instance that cheating in math by copying from other students was a particular motivator to do well in math by the end of the school year [James]. Likewise, being in trouble with teachers for letting his anger “get the best of me” was a powerful motivator for Jason to change his coping mechanisms in school. Sometimes, just knowing there were consequences for failure, whether big or small, was enough to do better and to improve grades [Regina and Liz], with students explaining that extra chores and “cleaning my room extra well” [Regina] were not preferred consequences for lower grades.

As a positive though, this third theme also reinforced the importance attached to a positive learning environment. Multiple students commented on the positive effect that school-based rewards and celebrations had on their achievement. For instance, Grace commented that having IPR bands for each grading period was a highlight of her sixth grade year. These bands were given to students who had no tardies, no grades lower than a C and had not been late to school for each IPR (interim progress report) or grading period. The IPR bands gave students a visual and materialistic reward, including silicone bands they could wear on their wrist for other students to see and a small party each grading period. Such recognitions at the school level serve as positive reinforcements for doing well, as do other initiatives such as no-tardy parties and academic awards each semester. Regina and James both commented with pleasure that they received academic awards, given to only a dozen or

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so students in each grade level each semester, and were disappointed they only received the recognition in first semester. It certainly seems that school-based recognitions were held in high esteem as a reward and a motivator to do better, culminating in the A honor roll each semester as the ultimate recognition [Benjamin and Natalie].

Ecological Findings

Secondary analysis of the student narrative was also undertaken to determine the ecological footprint of home, school, and community influences on student success at the site school. This analysis consisted of mapping student comments from the open-coding stage using the framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to determine frequency of influence. Results of this mapping of ecological based influence, as opposed to thematic influences revealed in the axial coding stage discussed above, reveal a range of positive and negative factors on student success, as shown here as Figure 13:

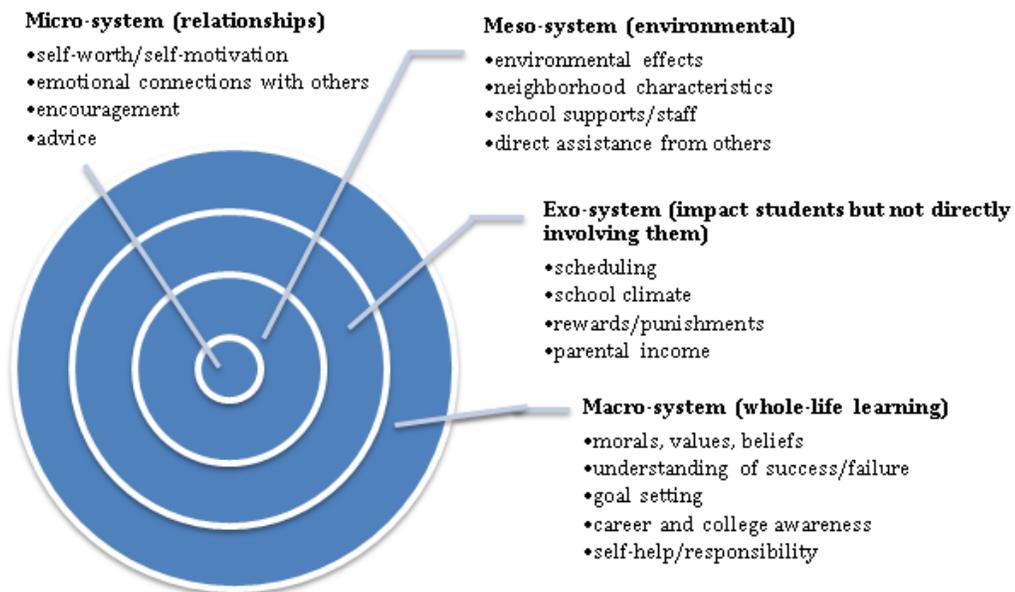


Figure 13: Distribution of Influences Modeled on Ecological Systems Theory

Likewise, further analysis of influences into the EST systems revealed another unexpected pattern of influence at the site school:

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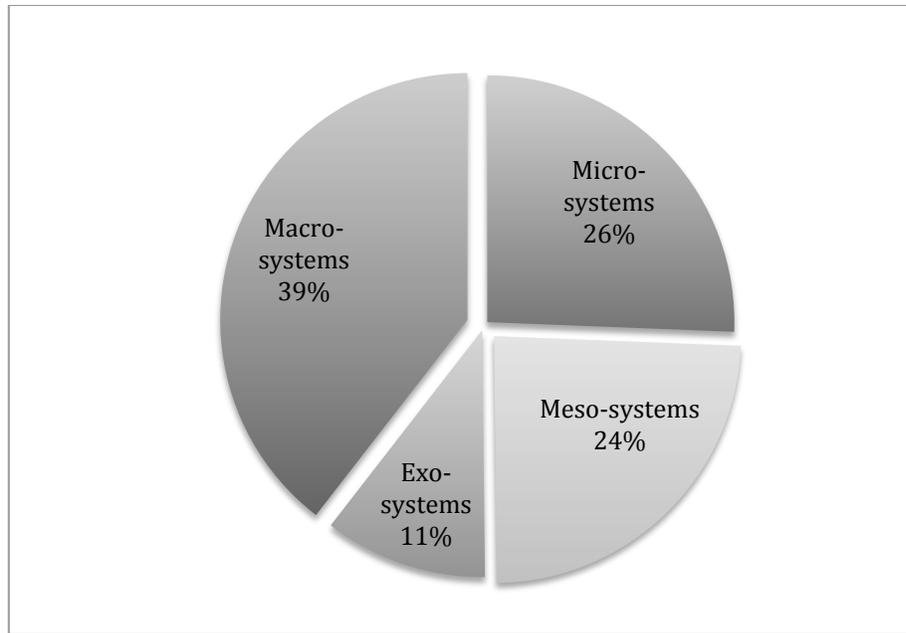


Figure 14: Visual Summary of the Site School's Ecological Footprint

While research suggests the micro- and meso-level are the most influential of achievement influences, Figure 14 reveals a wide range of distribution of influence once the secondary analysis was completed across all settings and all levels.

Importantly, an ecological finding was that the micro- and macro-systems were more influential on student success according to the analysis of the student narrative. However, it should be noted this distribution of influence, arranged via levels of interaction from a qualitative study, has not been attempted prior to this study, and as noted in already, EST has not been widely applied as a theoretical framework to investigate middle school student achievement. Therefore, distribution of influences reinforced not only the centrality of interpersonal and personal relationships at the micro-system level on student success, but also a heavy representation of influences from the macro-system level, suggesting successful students are more influenced by the morals, values, and beliefs they encounter than research has previously suggested.

Recommendations

Students generated a number of specific recommendations related to organization, supervision, and instruction at the site school. However, examination of the axial coding also revealed other recommendations embedded in student perception of influences on success.

These student-based and study-based recommendations include:

1. Continue to encourage student enrollment in high-level, challenging, rigorous classes such as music and advanced math classes. Such investment in relevant and rigorous learning opportunities via the school setting may help prepare students for the challenges they will face in high school (Harris, Deschenes, & Wallace, 2011). This is also supported by systems such as AVID (see AVID.org) which promotes college readiness for all students through advanced opportunities and rigorous classes.
2. Reduce class numbers in advanced math classes to promote positive engagement between students and teachers. Three students commented on class size of over 30 being a significant impediment to their success and their reliance on peers or extended family members for help.
3. Change the organizational structure of school lunch to minimize conflict. Specifically, students commented on crowding and large table groups as a concern in the cafeteria. One student commented that she would like table groups to be randomly chosen to leave the lunchroom so it was not always the same group leaving last. This suggestion not only raises an area of concern, but also validates the importance of listening to students' voices in order to improve conditions at school.
4. Other organizational suggestions regarding fighting were to increase staff presence in the hallways and monitor security cameras so teachers could quickly respond to

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difficult areas or conflicts. Again, while this may or may not be feasible, this is another example of recognizing the value of student voice as a organizational tool for reform and improvement at the school level.

5. Encourage parents to be more involved in the sixth grade learning environment and provide assistance with understanding coursework. In particular, math came up time and again as students stated parents did not know how to help them in math. While pre-algebra and algebra are designed to be a challenge, students often stated peers and teachers offered assistance more than parents. Indeed, research suggests students and parents need to interact at home over schoolwork, and especially in math, to have a positive impact on student success (Hemphill & Hill, 2013; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Providing workshops or opportunities for students and parents to work together on concepts related to pre-algebra coursework would also build productive home-school communication to support student success.
6. Involve students in decision making, especially in terms of promoting systemic change with respect to policies concerning bullying, instruction and behavior to improve the overall school climate and strengthen affective school-home and student-teacher support networks, as shown in Figure 15.

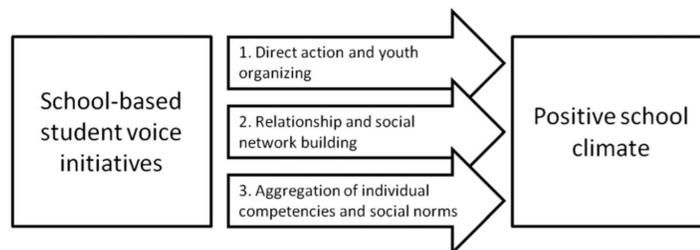


Figure 15: How Student Voice Can Affect School Climate.
Source: Voight, 2015, p. 312.

Thus, improving student based self-worth skills and coping strategies so students are

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- not overly negative about themselves may be an area of development that schools should investigate.
7. Applying organizational theory to school improvement requires leaders first to identify needs at the building, student and instructional level (Yukl, 2010). Therefore, valuing student voice and establishing positive, supportive relationships with students can encourage teachers and building leaders to identify building and student need. This could include surveying students regularly to mine for data about organizational and instructional needs, as well as individual student concerns. Such surveying could also support work being currently undertaken by the Mental Health Coalition throughout the district and support school improvement goals to promote student success (personal communication, Building Principal, July 19, 2016).
 8. Music instruction, like the use of advanced math for motivated students, has been promoted as a positive achievement gaining strategy (Arts Education Partnership, 2011; Hallam, 2010; Rickard, et al., 2012). Perhaps all middle school students, or at least sixth graders, could benefit from a required general music class in their schedule?
 9. Making clubs relevant and accessible is an issue raised by the extant literature (see Lerner et al., 2005) and by students, so schools and the district need to continue to improve access and opportunity for students to participate in clubs and activities, especially when transportation or funding are an issue.
 10. Expand this study by examining student narratives from students at more than one building, across more than one grade level, to determine generalization of this study's findings.

Conclusion

As educators we must seek to identify the causes of stagnation and success in our schools, and attempt to remediate and reform these issues to address achievement. It is also the responsibility of policy makers, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members to identify why and how students overcome barriers to achieve success. Indeed much can be learned from the perspective of successful students to guide school-based reform, improve student support services, and develop effective community programs and partnerships (Ani, 2013).

Student perception of self, and significant others from the home, school, and community settings, reinforces the micro-level of influence on student success. However, the importance students placed on their own values and beliefs—strongly linked to the concept of self—reinforces the importance of the macro-system on student success. Thus, due to many influences on student achievement when using EST as a model, while it has been suggested that schools develop the meso-system to improve academic success, especially by fostering improved parent-home-child communication (Rillero, 2016), this study reveals a more individualized influence on student success. Although, it can also be argued that the inter-personal and social aspects of the micro-system remain powerful influences on student achievement, partly due to the influence of peers and affective student-teacher relationships, and the amount of time a child actually spends in the home, school, and community settings that form the micro-system.

Executive Summary to the Superintendent's Cabinet

Purpose of the study: To examine the influence of home, school, and community settings on rising middle school success.

Participants: Twelve students were interviewed from a total of 123 possible candidates. Students were selected on the basis of having: completed 6th grade at the site school; 90% or more attendance in sixth grade; no Ds or Fs on the final IPR in sixth grade; and not being a member of a protected class of children per IRB requirements (i.e. not wards of the state, no IEP or 504 plan, not hearing impaired, not ELL students).

Data collection: Students participated in a one-on-one interview lasting from 33-50 minutes. Interview protocol investigated what it meant to be successful and how students believe home, school, and community settings helped them to be successful.

Findings: How and Why Certain Students Are Successful in Middle School

Home-based Influences

1. Students expressed the following home-based influences on their own success:
 - a) A desire to make the *family proud* is a motivator to be successful;
 - b) Involved parents provide *encouragement, advice, practice, limitations, and high expectations*;
 - c) *Siblings* can be positive (and negative) influences;
 - d) Family members can be positive (and negative) *role models and mentors*;
 - e) The *physical setting and resources available* in the home can help and hinder success.
 - f) Students felt *indebted* to parents for rewards and celebrations of their success (of varying financial amount)
2. Four main domains of influence exist in the home setting: parents, resources, siblings and extended family (as shown in Figure 6), although the extent and type of influence varied and can be positive and/or negative.
3. Family member influence seems to have moved away from the trend indicated in the literature review of concrete, direct assistance, to more of an inter-personal influence, especially with mentoring and role modeling when it comes to goal setting, future career interests, and character development.

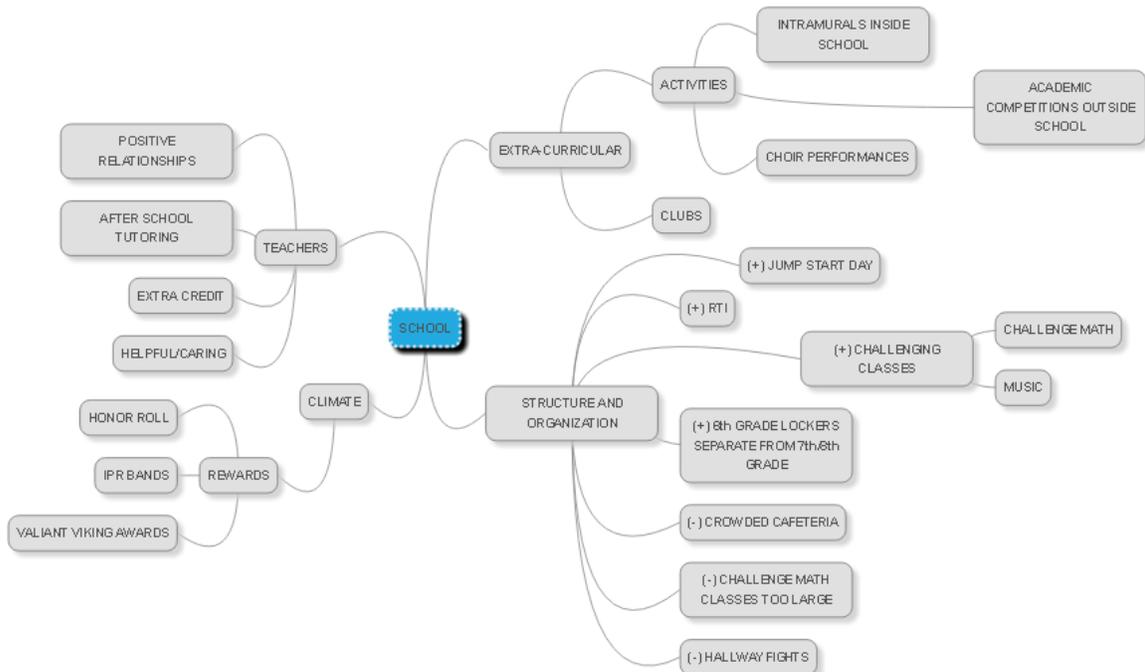
School-based Influences

1. Students expressed the following home-based influences on their own success:
 - a) Teachers were a *positive influence*, described variously as being “nice”, “helpful”, “motivating”, “supportive”
 - b) School *celebrated, rewarded, and recognized success* through parties, A honor roll, IPR bands, semester-based academic awards
 - c) After-school *clubs* provided practice and enrichment (yearbook, choir, band);
 - d) Classes were *challenging* (Challenge Math, band/orchestra)
 - e) The school *climate* was generally safe and caring
2. Repeated criticism of how difficult Challenge Math was, especially in large classes of

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over thirty students where there was a lack of support, is a worry. This negativity reflects concerns over whether all sixth grade students taking Challenge Math are ready to cope with advanced algebraic concepts (see Clotfelter et al., 2015; Domina, 2014; Hemphill & Hill, 2013).

- School influences are positive and negative in a number of areas:

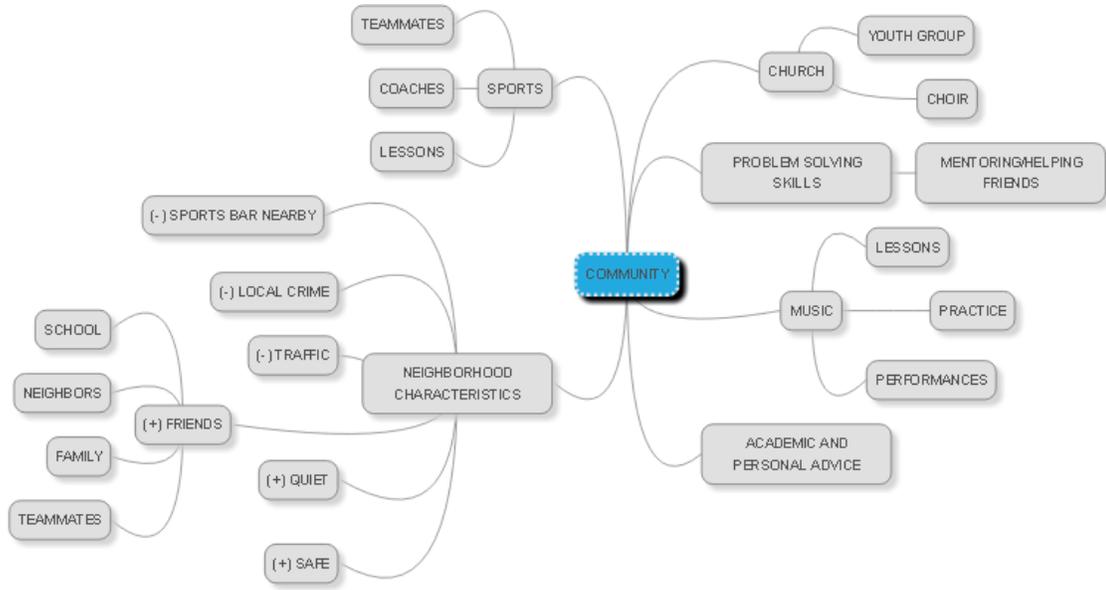


- All but one participant was enrolled in either band or orchestra classes in school.
- Most students participate in clubs or activities in school. Two students said the main problem was finding time. One student said he lacked after-school transportation.

Community-based Influences

- Students focused not so much on physical places, but on individuals such as coaches and family friends, as well as peers.
- Very few students were involved in organized, community-based activities. None were members of organizations such as 4H or Scouts.

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Central Themes

The Importance of Self: Me, Myself and I

- 1) Students had very well developed understandings of their strengths and weaknesses.
- 2) Students see themselves partly in isolation, the *me*, who has to balance time and academic pressures of middle school.
- 3) They see themselves as *myself* when they assign blame for their failures on themselves and when they realize weaknesses they need to overcome.
- 4) They see themselves as *I* when they are responsible for their own learning either with the support of others, or by themselves. This includes a realization of their own goals (in and outside of school), a beginning sense of their possible career paths and responsibilities as adults, and desire to overcome problems or obstacles.
- 5) Students exhibited a strong sense of centrality: they hold themselves responsible for their success and failure and desire to improve their success.

Who and What Help Students be Successful: Faces and places

- 1) It is not so much the setting, but the combined effects of *people* in those settings that impact student success.
- 2) Influential individuals include neighbors, friends, coaches, and private instructors
- 3) Students were very aware of different locations being useful for different reasons: seeking out isolation or assistance from others when needed, so it is not so much the organizational aspect of community setting which influences student success, but the social and emotional support accessed from people in those areas.

Extrinsic Influences on Success: A Double-edged Sword

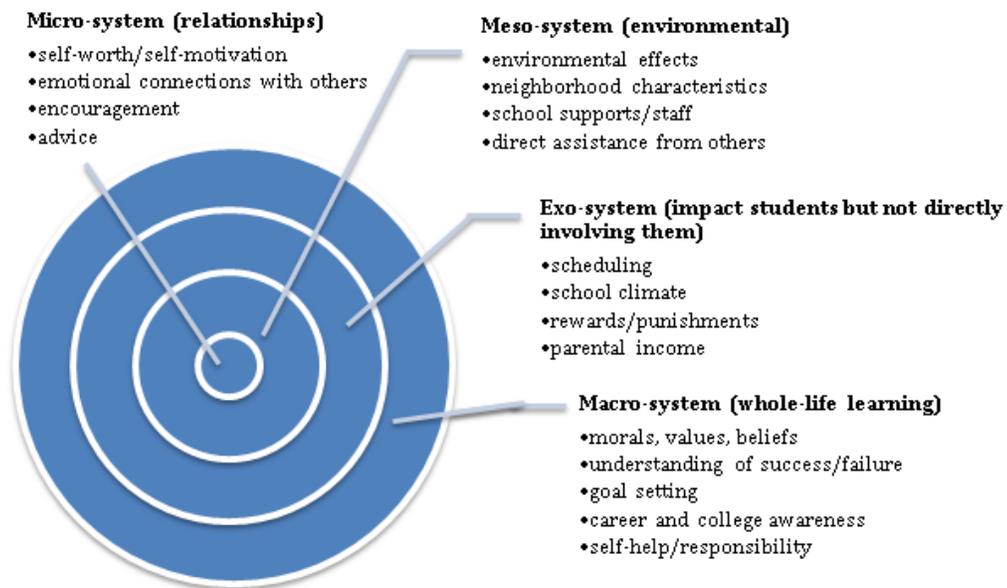
- 1) Students recognize positives and negatives in home, school, and community settings.
- 2) Parental encouragement and rewards have a lot to do with their motivation to do well at home or in school, although sometimes it equals praise instead of actual rewards.
- 3) Some students commented that parents and teachers had punishments and consequences

for not being successful. This awareness in how failure helped them be successful highlights both positive and negative student perspectives.

- 4) A positive learning environment is crucial. School-based rewards and celebrations were held in high esteem as a reward and a motivator to do better.

Ecological Findings: Positive and Negative Influences on Success

An important ecological finding was that the micro- and macro-systems were more influential on student success than previously thought. The distribution of influences reinforced not only inter-personal and personal relationships at the micro-system level on student success, but also a heavy representation of influences from the macro-system level, suggesting successful students are significantly influenced by the morals, values, and beliefs they encounter in their lives.



Recommendations

Student-based and study-based recommendations include:

1. Continue to encourage student enrollment in high-level, challenging, rigorous classes such as music and advanced math classes. Such investment in relevant and rigorous learning opportunities may better prepare students for the challenges they will face in high school (Harris, Deschenes, & Wallace, 2011). This is also supported by systems such as AVID which promotes college readiness.
2. Reduce class numbers in advanced math classes to promote positive engagement between students and teachers. Three students commented on class size of over 30 being a significant impediment to their success, which in turn led to a reliance on peers or family.
3. Change the structure of school lunch to minimize conflict. Students commented on crowding and large table groups as concerns. A student suggestion is that table groups be randomly chosen to leave the lunchroom.
4. Other organizational suggestions regarding fighting were to increase staff presence in the hallways and monitor security cameras so teachers could quickly respond to difficult

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areas or conflicts.

5. Encourage parents to be more involved in the sixth grade learning environment and provide assistance with understanding coursework. In particular, math came up time and again as students stated parents did not know how to help them in math. While pre-algebra and algebra are a challenge, students often stated peers and teachers provided assistance more than parents. Research suggests students and parents need to interact more over schoolwork, especially in math, to have a positive impact on student success (Hemphill & Hill, 2013; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Providing workshops on concepts related to pre-algebra coursework would also build productive home-school communication to support student success.
6. Involve students in decision-making, especially to promote systemic change with respect to bullying, instructional, and behavioral policies to improve the school climate and strengthen affective school-home and student-teacher support networks.
7. Value student voice and establish positive, supportive relationships with students to help identify building and student need. This could include surveying students regularly to mine for data about organizational and instructional needs, as well as individual student concerns. Such surveying could also support work currently being undertaken by the Mental Health Coalition and support school improvement goals to promote success.
8. Music instruction, like the use of advanced math for motivated students, has been promoted as a positive achievement gaining strategy (Arts Education Partnership, 2011; Hallam, 2010; Rickard, et al., 2012). Perhaps all middle school students, or at least sixth graders, could benefit from a required general music class in their schedule?
9. Making clubs relevant and accessible is an issue raised by the extant literature (see Lerner et al., 2005) and by students, so schools and the district need to continue to improve access and opportunity for students to participate in clubs and activities, especially when transportation or funding are an issue.
10. Expand this study to include students from more than one building, across more than one grade level, to determine generalization of this study's findings.
11. Expand the study to include students from all backgrounds and abilities. Of course, expansion of this study to include all students would also need to consider other selection criteria such as race, socio-economics, neighborhood access and location, in order to create as broad a fabric of student perceptions as possible.

Conclusion

It is the responsibility of policy makers, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members to identify why and how students overcome barriers to achieve success. Much can be learned from the perspective of successful students to guide school-based reform, improve student support services, and develop effective community programs and partnerships (Ani, 2013).

Student perception of self, and significant others from the home, school, and community settings, reinforces the micro-level of influence on student success. However, the importance students placed on their own values and beliefs – strongly linked to the concept of self – reinforces the importance of the macro-system on student success.

Section Five – Contribution to Scholarship

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Dear Dr. Alexander T. Vazsonvi

Editor-In-Chief *Journal of Early Adolescence*

Please find the attached article for consideration to *JEA*. This article presents findings concerning the influence of home, school, and community settings on middle school students' success. The original study was a phenomenological investigation into sixth grade student success as part of my dissertation to investigate *why* students in a selected middle school do or do not achieve greater academic success. This led to an examination of the following research questions:

- 1) How do middle school students define academic success and failure?
- 2) How have home, school, and community influences helped and/or hindered academic success in middle school?

The study also extends scholarly research by applying ecological systems theory to analyze the resultant student narrative, leading to a specific ecological mapping of influence for the selected participants (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In conclusion, this study is important for two reasons: 1) few middle school studies to date have considered student perspectives when investigating possible positive and negative influences on student success from a combined approach of home, school, and community settings; and 2) few studies to date have applied ecological systems theory to create an ecological footprint of influences on middle school success. In both instances, my hope is this article advances educational policy, organization, and instruction to improve middle school student success.

Sincerely,

Tracy Worthington

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Places and Faces: Examining the Influence of the Home, School, and Community Triad on
Middle School Success From the Perspective of Selected Sixth Grade Students

November 13, 2016

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I am a teacher in Columbia Public Schools with nearly 20 years of classroom experience. My research interests include the benefits of student voice to improve achievement, and especially how and why middle school students are or are not successful. This includes how school and district organizational management, policy, and reform, and overall climate and instruction, may lead to improved student success.

Places and Faces: Examining the influence of the home, school, and community triad on middle school success from the perspective of selected sixth grade students

Studies point out gradual declines in academics and behavior during the middle school years (see Akos, Rose, & Orthner, 2015; Bellmore, 2011; Farrell et al., 2007). However, the reality of this decline is students with academic and social deficits may become lost in an educational system that struggles to address their needs. Compounding academic struggles in middle school, as measured by failing school grades, low scores on curriculum-based assessments, and low state- and district-administered assessment scores, may lead not only to stagnation of a struggling student's achievement, but also widen the gap between such a student and his or her higher achieving peers (Evans, 2005). As such, this study sought to examine how and why selected rising seventh grade students were successful in a particular mid-West metropolitan middle school through application of an ecological systems theory lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Rationale

The rationale for this study was *why* students in a selected middle school do or do not achieve academic success. This led to an examination of three related problems: (1) what is meant by *success and failure*; (2) how home, school, and community factors *contribute* to students' academic success; and (3) to what *extent* home, school, and community factors influence academic success?

School may be the primary learning context for youth, but students need to be supported in a caring, challenging, environment to promote success for all. As educators, we need to develop a better understanding of the various influences middle school students must contend with. However, addressing middle school achievement should not focus only on

underachieving or failing students. Schools need to help *all* students be successful, not just those who are perceived or noted to be struggling or underachieving (Harper, 2015; Paige & Witty, 2010).

Student Voice: A Catalyst For Change

Student voice is a growing field of educational research whereby students are provided the opportunity to talk about their learning experiences and education. This includes student participation in, consultation with, and leadership in and outside of school (Quinn & Owen, 2016). It also includes recognizing and encouraging student involvement in school climate decision making, policy, structure, organization, and activities. Student voice has traditionally included student-centered clubs and organizations like Student Councils or Honor Societies, as well as more flexible participatory models such as district wide advisory boards or building level PSTA membership.

However, recognizing student voice empowers students to play an active role in their own learning. It is important to recognize, listen to, and act on student voice as through it students can serve as individual and collective change agents within their own learning environment. It can also serve to promote social skills and civic awareness in an age group where students do not often have many opportunities to participate in social or school-based change (Voight, 2015). Indeed, this was the purpose of this study: to listen to successful students' and to analyze their narratives in order to make specific recommendations to improve learning for all students at the site school. Consideration of students' voices regarding their own success and failure and how they are helped and hindered in sixth grade can therefore not only improve learning, but also increase students' sense of worth and purpose (Mitra, 2004; Mitra & Gross, 2009). After all, students at the middle school level are

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not only beginning to be aware of the influence of relationships with teachers, peers, family and others on their own learning, but are also beginning to see how the learning environment can support or inhibit success. They want to be involved in their own learning, but they also want someone to listen to them (Steinberg & McCray, 2012).

One possible strategy for improving student success at middle school is to listen to what students have to say: Learn from their perspective about *their* needs and how the overall school culture, climate, and learning environment can be improved. Listening to students' concerns and suggestions, as well as their perceptions regarding what it means to be successful in middle school, can help educators understand the nature and extent of influence facing middle school students (Quinn & Owen, 2016; Voight, 2015). Indeed, many participants commented favorably on their being asked to respond to questions about the learning environment in their site school and their own understanding of success and failure in sixth grade.

Accessing selected students' voices also recognizes the wisdom students' hold concerning reasons for their own success and failure (Hatchman & Rolland, 2001). For example, Haycock (2001) claims that when students were asked about home life, money, violence and so on as possible concerns affecting their achievement, they admitted these were concerns, yet stated what hurts the most is that schools seem to offer less. This lack of resources and opportunity can be especially problematic for students in under-resourced, over-crowded, schools (Allen, 2015; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Harper, 2015).

This study serves to value students' voices in an attempt to examine influences on student success (Haycock, 2001; Nieto, 1994). Indeed, students have "important lessons to teach educators and we need to begin to listen to them more carefully" (Nieto, p. 420). After

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all, students can be transformative agents, yet are usually provided little opportunity to make an affective change or become effective school leaders (Mitra, 2004; Nieto, 1994; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Educators need to listen to the positive and negative influences on student success, including the influence of home, school, and community settings as places of influence, and the friends, teachers, mentors, and family members as faces of influence (Hatchman & Rolland, 2001). For example, do students see their success related only to academics, or is there a personal or social influence impacting success? To what extent do students see success affected by family and home influences? How and why are some students more successful than others in the middle school grades?

Purpose of the Study

Middle school is a launching pad for a successful secondary and post-secondary education, as middle school success remains a significant indicator of future success in high school (Balfanz, 2009; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Indeed, Kennelly and Monrad (2007) claim sixth grade success is a crucial indicator of academic success, for more than half of sixth graders who “attend school less than 80 percent of the time; receive a low final grade from their teachers in behavior; and fail either math or English” go on to become high school drop-outs (p. 1). Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to examine what selected rising seventh grade students, in a common school setting, understand about influences on their own learning using a triad approach of home, school, and community settings. However, the secondary purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the triad influences students’ academic experiences (Brion-Meisels, 2016). Thus, by applying elements of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), analysis also led to the creation of an ecological footprint of perceived influences on selected middle school

students' success.

Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

Based on a system of ecological environments, “nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3), ecological systems theory was the perfect theoretical framework on which to structure this study, for it reinforces the complex interplay between a child and his or her environment. It also relates directly to the triad approach by maintaining that an individual is affected over time by everything in the surrounding environment, starting from the closest, most intimate, most direct and most influential, the *micro-system*, and moving out to the global and more internalized *macro-system* (see Neal & Neal, 2013, p. 725).

Thus, highly contextual relationships between how the individual “exists within the environment and all the social interactions that take place within and between them” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 24) form the foundation of ecological systems theory. Indeed, analysis of the student narrative revealed such relationships in the triad settings, although the *micro-* and *macro-* systems were ultimately seen to be more influential on participant success than has been suggested by the likes of Jones and Deutsch (2013); Maxwell (2016); McCormick and Cappella (2015); and Neal and Neal (2013).

Existing Gap in the Literature

This study presents a novel approach: Analyze a student-centered narrative to determine the extent of influence from a triad of home, school, and community settings on the academic success of rising seventh grade students from their own perspective within an ecological systems theory framework. After all, while there have been studies on one or two of the triad settings (see Berry, 2005; Lee & Bong, 2015; Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthony,

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Gonzales, & Jenson, 2014; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012), there have been few attempts to examine all three settings regarding middle school student success (Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). Moreover, while there have been qualitative studies on high school and elementary achievement (see Agabrian, 2007; Allen, 2015; Hatchman & Rolland, 2001; Land, Mixon, Butcher, & Harris, 2014; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015), the use of semi-structured interviews to investigate middle school student success has been limited (Lee & Bong, 2015; Forrest-Bank et al., 2014). Finally, very few studies have examined middle school success from a broad ecological standpoint (Farrell et al., 2007; Lewthwaite, 2011).

There is much to learn about middle school success. Discussions must recognize the influence of places and faces on student success, but also value students' roles as players in their own education, as leaders and decision makers, and with regards to their own learning (Paige & Witty, 2010). Listening to rising seventh grade students' perceptions of influences on their success therefore provides insights into barriers that exist (see Voight, 2015). However, research on middle school success should not rest solely on the school environment.

Jones and Deutsch (2013) maintain influences on today's adolescents are complex and multi-layer in nature. As such, achievement discussions need to be about more than grades or school performance. They must examine historical and entrenched social, structural, and systemic inequalities and influences including "facets of social identity such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender" (Prince, 2014, p. 701). This also includes influence from schools, neighborhoods, families, peers, and factors such as location and family socio-economics (Akos et al., 2015; Douglas & Peck, 2013; Hopson, Lee & Tang, 2014; Prince, 2014; Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010). They also need to include how students see

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themselves in terms of self-worth, motivation, perseverance, goal-setting, and where they see their future selves heading (Allen, 2015; Ani, 2013; Berry, 2005; Lee & Bong, 2015; Prince, 2014; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012).

However, despite such research, there remains a clear gap in the literature: How does the triad of home, school, and community settings affect middle school student success? What will students' perceptions of successes and failures reveal about middle school students' beliefs concerning influences on their own learning? How can listening to student stories help identify positive and negative influences that have hindered or helped success in sixth grade? Finally, how can an ecological footprint of influences on student success improve middle school experiences and student support for all?

Design and Methods

This study was heavily influenced by a constructivist/pragmatist paradigm to seek an understanding of why things occur, what happens, and how to deal with problems in a real world setting. When coupled with the researcher's background as a middle school history teacher with almost twenty years' experience, there was also a strong epistemological desire to understand how and why middle school students are successful in school and the local community. As an educator and a leader, the researcher wanted to understand how to improve student success without re-creating the wheel: What could be learned from successful students to help students who are not successful, without this study being just about a middle school achievement gap.

Research Questions

The study focused on what information can be revealed from a student-centered narrative concerning the influence of home, school, and community factors on academic

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achievement at a selected middle school. Therefore, the research questions were:

- (1) How do middle school students define academic success and failure?
- (2) How have home, school, and community influences helped and/or hindered students' academic success in middle school?

Methodology: A transcendental phenomenological approach

Extant research on middle school student success encompasses a range of emotional and social foci; yet this study delved into largely uncharted waters by exploring the influence of home, school, and community supports on student success using a transcendental phenomenological research lens. Thus, this study sought to identify student-centered *positive* (i.e. what successful students are doing, using, or saying) and *negative* influences (i.e. barriers, challenges, or lack of success) on middle school student success, rather than focus on a deficit approach focused on student failure. The above research questions guided data collection through the perspectives of rising seventh grade students, rather than through the interpretations, experiences, or opinions of the researcher as an outsider (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, the commonness of a single middle school, with its signature space and time settings and climate, cemented the use of a transcendental phenomenological lens (Moustakas, 1994).

Setting

The study took place in a specific middle school in the researcher's own school district. The setting was a traditional 6-8 middle school with a population of just over 500 students, in a city with a population of approximately 115,000, located in a mid-West state. However, the school was not the researcher's place of work, in order to remove potential ethical barriers or areas of conflict. Instead, the site was chosen primarily for convenience of

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location to maximize data collection and to minimize travel for students and the researcher. It was also chosen because the school has few English Language Learner (ELL) students (one of the protected status categories according to IRB guidelines for research using children), and because review of local and state-based data revealed concerns in the form of attendance and standardized test scores.

The commonality of a single site school was preferred as the setting, as opposed to gathering data from disparate locations with different school climates, personnel, and programming. As a result, while this study does not suggest a participant pool of twelve students can be generalized to a district with thousands of students, it does profess to value student voice as tool for understanding influences on students in at least one school in the targeted district.

Participants

The focus of this study was not on student failure, as often characterized by multiple failing grades and/or office referrals, but on students who had experienced consistent success during their sixth grade year. A total of 12 students were interviewed during the summer school session in June 2016 over the course of four weeks. The guidance office, with the approval of the school principal, originally created a list of 123 students who met particular selection criteria. Students were selected based on the following: a) passing grades at the final grading period in sixth grade in all classes¹; b) 90% or above attendance for the academic year (following the district attendance goal); and c) no office referrals as measures of major disciplinary action.

From the original list, forty students were randomly selected and letters of

¹ Grades are most likely to be directly impacted by influences in and outside of the sixth grade learning environment (Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001).

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explanation, together with participation invitation, consent and assent forms, were mailed to students' home addresses. However, a second pool of potential participants was created by crosschecking the original list against the summer school attendance list resulted in a second pool of potential participants after only a few participants responded to the initial mailing. At this point, twenty students were randomly selected from the second list as potential participants and invitations were mailed and emailed directly to student homes and their parents. With only eight students having agreed to participate, a third round of invitations was then mailed and emailed to another ten students and their parents in an attempt to gather twelve participants as had been recommended by the researcher's dissertation committee. At the conclusion of the third round of contact, four more families agreed to participate, bringing the total to twelve. Incentives for participation were also built into the study with three retail gift card drawings for students who completed the interview process in an attempt to improve student participation rates.

Regarding demographics, the final gender ratio in the participant pool mimicked the ratio of male to female students in the school's sixth grade population (49% male at the site school; 42% male for the final group of study participants). Similarly, the ethnic ratio of the participant pool mimicked the sixth grade population (i.e. 26% of the sixth grade population was African American and 25% of the students interviewed in the study were African American). No Hispanic students were randomly selected from the initial pool or the summer school crosschecking process. Students were also excluded from the initial participant pool if they were ELL students, had an IEP or 504 plan, were wards of the state, and/or hearing or visually impaired, according to IRB restrictions.

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Interview process

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected middle school students, as outlined above. The use of semi-structured interviews has not been widely used in middle school research to consider the effect and extent of combined influences on student success (see Lee & Bong, 2015; Forrest-Bank et al., 2014; Sanders & Epstein, 1998), however, this allowed exploration of many tangential traits and influences which had been shown in the literature to influence student achievement.

Individual interviews were chosen as the data collection tool because they are a powerful way to gain “insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experiences of the individual whose lives reflect those issues” (Seidman, 2006, p. 14). After all, who better to interview than those who are experiencing the middle school “essence” Merriam (2009, p. 25) talks of than students themselves? Thus, individual interviews with selected rising seventh grade students from the same school allowed a narrative to emerge from a common, experiential, academic setting (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002).

The interview protocol included a combination of general questions to investigate intrinsic issues such as success, self-worth, and goal setting, and purposeful questions focusing on the triad approach. *Home-based factors* such as parental and extended family involvement in school and success in school were investigated via the interview process. Likewise, *school-based* influences including school culture, academic standards, and positive teacher-student relationships were also discussed. Finally, *community and neighborhood influences* such as location and type of housing, and participation in church groups, organized activities, sports, and peer groups were also discussed.

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Interviews were conducted in a private, one-on-one setting, to help students feel comfortable and help the researcher maintain a professional and ethical stance through the use of a respectful, quiet interview environment. There was originally going to be a three-interview model based on Dolbeare and Schuman (as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 17), however, conversations with rising seventh graders had varying degrees of detail and storytelling. As a result, interviews lasted between 30-50 minutes with no need to conduct multiple interviews to complete the interview protocol. All interviews were recorded on a laptop computer as an audio file for later transcription, and students created their own pseudonyms (Agabrian, 2007; Ani, 2013; Berry, 2005).

The Analytical Process

A three-step analysis was conducted on the student-centered narrative. The first step was to use *open coding* of the student narratives to identify information related to home, school, and community influences (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Open coding facilitated identification of broad concepts and themes from the student-centered narrative related to the triad approach and helped to eliminate information not applicable to triad influence on student success.

The second step was more precise, with *line-by-line coding*, to identify the “essence” of middle school success (Merriam, 2009, p. 25) via students’ perspectives and experiences (the third phase of the transcendental approach). Line-by-line coding isolated specific details from the students’ stories and experiences about the phenomenon of influence on middle school success (Agabrian, 2007; Creswell, 2013). It was also a crucial step prior to determining the extent or distribution of influence using ecological systems theory.

Finally, the third step, *axial coding*, was used to interpret data through an ecological

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systems theory lens to examine the interplay between individual, social, family, community, and school influences on middle school achievement. This final step led to the mapping of student comments, emerging themes, and influence trends, into a concentric circle format (see Neal and Neal, 2013). It also revealed the importance of relationships between children and their peers, teachers, parents and others at different stages during their educational journey in terms of positive and negative influences and was instrumental in the formation of the final ecological footprint of the student narrative.

This use of a multiple step analysis plan helped to achieve distance between the researcher's experiences as a middle school teacher and the details students provided through the interview process. This process was necessary to avoid transference of authority or power due to the researcher's position as a middle school teacher in the district: she wanted to be seen simply as someone who knows something of middle school structure, rather than a teacher from the same district. Indeed, students were not told the author was a teacher, but only a doctoral student at a local university.

Findings

The study findings supported the hypothesis based on the literature review that home, school, and community settings influence sixth grade student success. This was not a surprise, given the research that exists for each of these settings as historically influential factors on student success. What was surprising, however, was the type and degree of influence indicated by students for each setting and the importance attached to different people and settings as a way to explain how and why participants had been successful in sixth grade. When broken down using this triad approach, each setting was seen to influence middle school student success in different capacities, as follows:

Home influence

Analysis of the student-centered narrative revealed four main sources of influence in the home setting: parents, resources, siblings, and extended family (see Figure 1):



Figure 1: Visual summary of home-based influences

However, this is not a complete surprise, for research indicates parents and extended family members play a significant role in a student’s academic success (see Jeynes, 2011; Morton, 2014; Núñez et al., 2015). Moreover, such influence can be positive and negative. For example, Urdan and colleagues (2007) discuss how family role models and a desire to disprove low expectations of family members, or a desire to avoid replicating bad decisions made by other family members, can also be a motivator for student success. The student narrative revealed similar trends, as students discussed supportive influences in the home and family setting. Thus, while parents were mentioned most frequently, students also talked often about siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandparents as influences on their school success. For example, Benjamin commented that he gained a lot of help from his grandparents because “they are politicians and that’s what I want to be. I ask a lot of questions and have learned a lot about how the government works from my grandfather.”

For some students, family members seem to fulfill the role of mentors and tutors when the going gets tough, especially regarding academics [Kate], personal issues [Ellie], or sibling dynamics in the home [Jason and Stephen]. However, this connection to others included negatives, like not wanting to “be like my cousin who is in prison” [Stephen], and

positives, like academically successful siblings who set a competitive tone in the home [Liz]. Thus it would appear from this study that the influence of family members has moved away from the trend indicated in research of concrete, direct assistance to more of an indirect influence, with mentoring, goal setting, and character development being mentioned most often by participants as follows in Figures 2a-2d:



Figure 2a: Visual summary of the influence parents have on student success

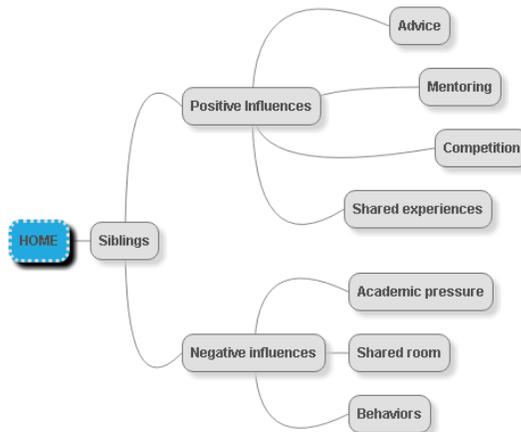


Figure 2b: Visual summary of the influence siblings have on student success

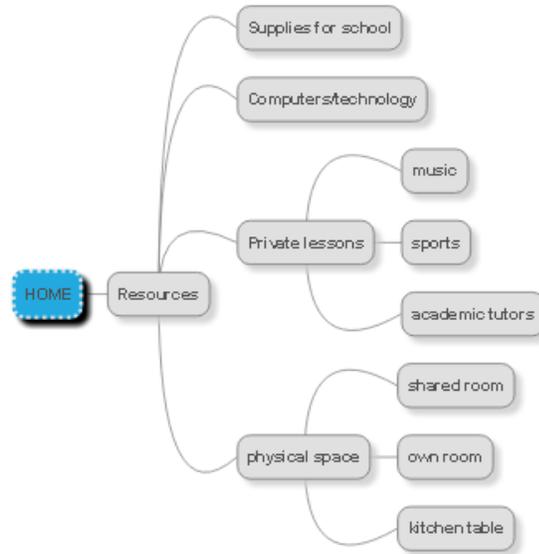


Figure 2c: Visual summary of the resources in the home setting that impact success

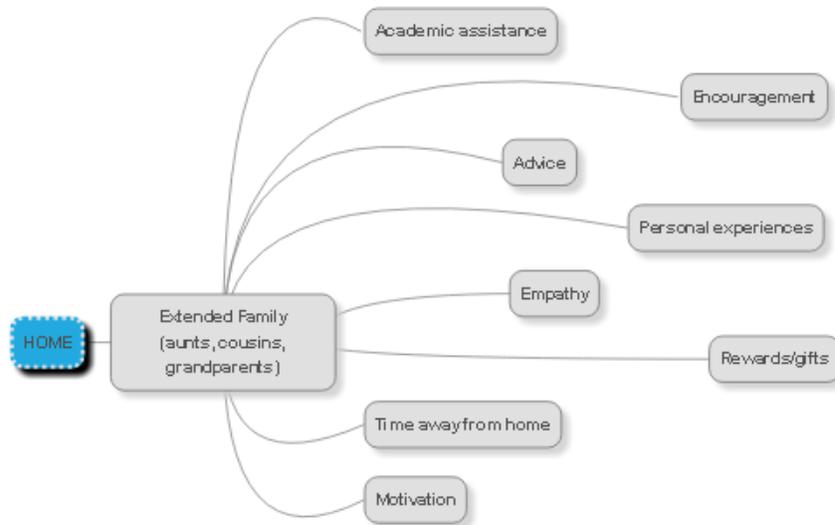


Figure 2d: Visual summary of the influence the extended family has on student success

School influence

Schools cannot control all the factors influencing students’ academic engagement or success, nor act in isolation to improve student success (Evans, 2005). Therefore, interviews began with an investigation of what was meant by success and failure before moving on to discuss how teachers and the school setting helped students be successful. Specific questions

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included: “How did you manage to overcome difficulties in your subjects?”; “To what extent do you think school is a safe and caring school?”; “Who or what helped you to be successful in school?” and discussion of services and supports such as RtI (a type of study hall support), EEE (an enrichment program for gifted students), and clubs and activities after school.

The student narrative revealed a general consensus that the school was safe and caring, with a few areas of concern such as too many students in Challenge Math classes (an advanced math class) to benefit from individual teacher assistance; too many students at each table in the cafeteria; and not enough supervision in the stairwells and hallways. However, the repeated criticism of how difficult Challenge Math was in terms of quantity and quality of work [Kate, Liz, Ellie], especially in the larger class of over 30 students where there was a lack of supportive learning environment [Jason], is an organizational and instructional worry. This negativity, especially in terms of the need to seek assistance outside of school echoes research-based concern over whether sixth grade students taking Challenge Math are developmentally ready to cope with advanced algebraic concepts (see Clotfelter et al., 2015; Domina, 2014; Hemphill & Hill, 2013).

However, when considering students’ perspectives of how the school setting influenced their success, students were mostly positive, commenting often on what teachers and others did to provide formal and informal support when students were struggling; how the school climate was positive and celebratory; and how students felt challenged yet helped in their classes. Clearly school culture, high academic standards, and positive teacher-student relationships influence on student success (see also Berry, 2005; Darensbourg & Blake, 2014; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Marzano, 2011; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013; Wiggan, 2014). However, this is also not a surprise, given how many

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hours students are in school across the span of the school year, and the numbers of interactions students have with teachers and support staff, such as counselors and administrators as shown, below, in Figure 3.

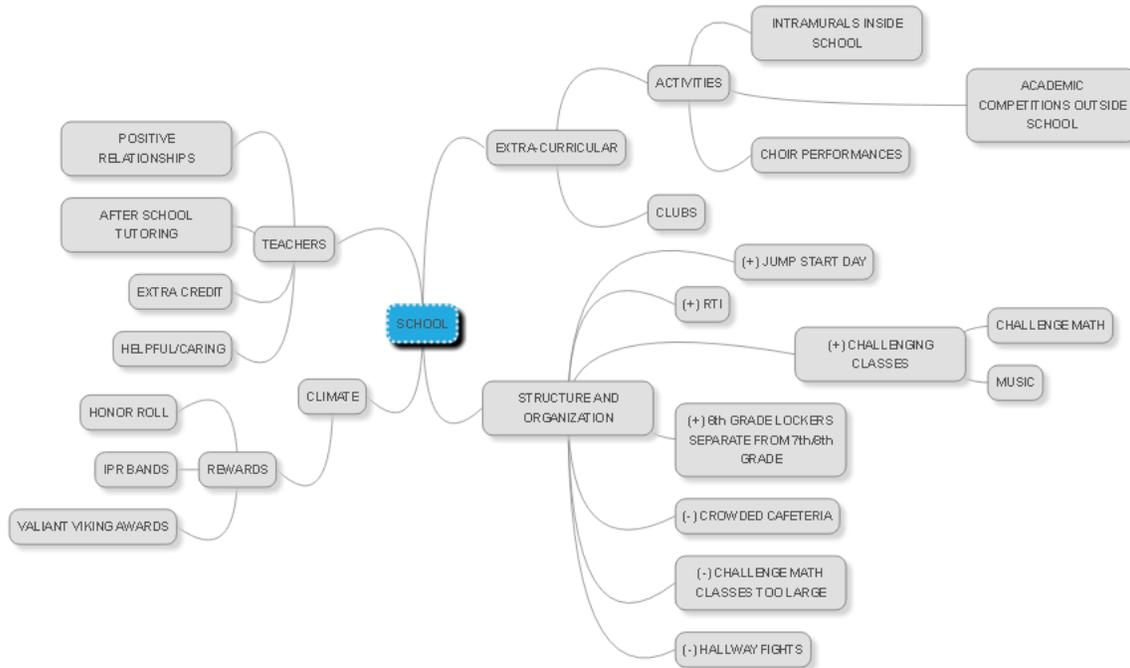


Figure 3: Visual summary of positive and negative school-based influences

It was also interesting to note the possible relationship between advanced classes and student success, for all but one of the participants was enrolled in either band or orchestra classes in school; six students participated in an after-school choir club; and five of the twelve received private music instruction. Music instruction has been promoted as a positive achievement gaining strategy and possibly could benefit all students in the middle grades (Hallam, 2010). After all, it has been suggested that formal and informal music education promotes enhanced fine motor skills, superior working memory, cultivation of better thinking skills, improved retention and recall of verbal information, and improved attentiveness, perseverance and creativity, as well as improved self-esteem, self-confidence, and overall sense of worth (Arts Education Partnership, 2011; Hallam, 2010; Rickard, Appelman, Murphy, Gill, & Bambrick,

2012).

Surprisingly, however, while most students were involved in school-based extra-curricular activities such as choir or yearbook club, not all students were involved in school-based activities, with two students citing prior commitments to sports or transportation difficulties being reasons why they were not involved [Natalie and James]. Two other students stated clubs were not very helpful and that they only participated because their parent(s) told them to [Grace] or because peers were involved [Liz and Owen]. Making clubs relevant to youth is a concern raised in the extant literature (see Lerner, & Lewin-Bizan, 2009), but these comments also serve to remind educators to be cognizant of the demands placed on students and families in terms of time and resources, and the importance of providing opportunity and access for all.

Community influence

Community influence in terms of setting was another surprise when analyzing results from the student-centered narrative. Very few of the participating students were involved in organized, community-based activities. For example, only two students commented that youth groups at church or church choir played a significant role outside going to church each week [Natalie and Opal], and none of the participants were members of 4H or Scouts or other organized community-based activities which promote civic leadership, personal development and community involvement (Lerner et al., 2009).

While research reveals multiple community influences on student success, for the most part, student stories focused not so much on physical places, but on the influence of individuals in their neighborhoods and communities (see Figure 4). For example, Jason commented: “I love my coach. She is like, like, my third parent.” While Natalie’s comment

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that her coach “motivates me to get As and stuff, because she is like, if you do bad in a test, I’m going to bench you, so that hurts because I am one of the best, one of the top players” reinforces the mentoring and encouragement role often played by coaches who are removed from the school setting.

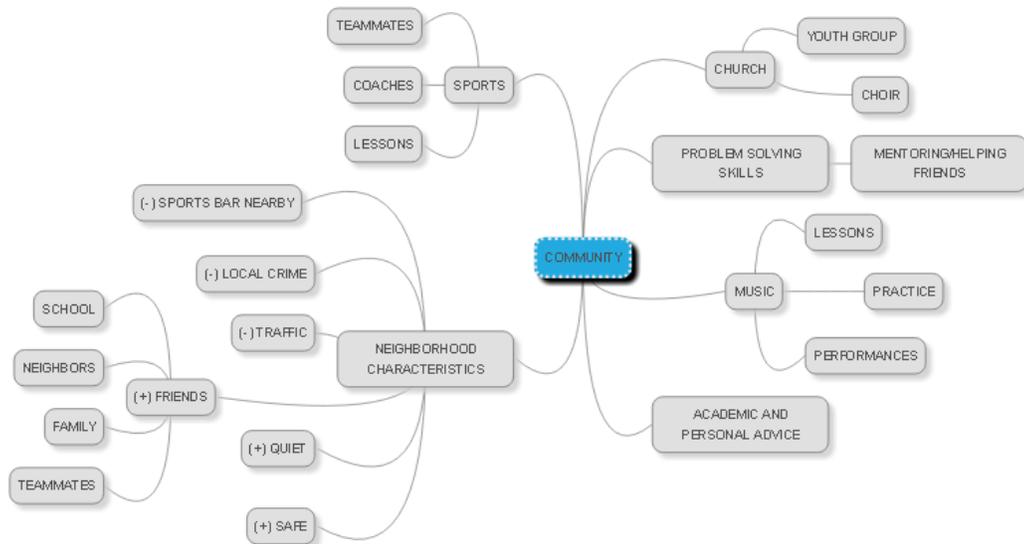


Figure 4: Visual summary of positive and negative community-based influences

Another interesting pattern revealed in the narrative was that friendships outside of school were not as influential as research suggests (see Bellmore, 2011; Brion-Meisels, 2016; Darenbourg & Blake, 2014; Véronneau & Dishion, 2011); perhaps because many participants were involved in so many activities that contact with friends was restricted mostly to the school setting. For example, Natalie stated she relied on her teachers more than her parents and friends because she was too busy with her sports to see friends who were not also on her sports teams. Similarly, while some students commented on the importance of having friends in school [Benjamin, Grace and James], others said the social aspects of having friends outside of school, in their neighborhoods, sports teams or in sport and music lessons, helped their overall success [Jason, Kate, Natalie and Regina].

Discussion of Central Themes

Three key themes emerged as reasons for how and why the student participants had been successful in sixth grade at the site school, crossing over the triad settings of home, school and community. Reinforcing the existence of multiple influences on sixth grade students, these themes come down to: a) the importance of *self*; b) who and what *help* students be successful; and c) extrinsic influences on success.

The importance of self: *Me, myself and I*

Initial review of the many historical influences on middle school achievement led to the hypothesis that home, school, and community influences would explain how and why selected rising seventh grade students had been successful according to the pre-stated selection criteria. However, what emerged was the influence of a fourth area: the role of *self* as a determinate of success. This was not expected, although research supports schools facilitating of such areas of child development through the use of advisory or guidance programs and by the development of supports such as teaming in middle school (see Fisher & Frey, 2007; Maxwell, 2016).

The student narrative revealed that participants universally see themselves as being crucial in determining their own success. Students commented over and again on the importance of being positive, working hard, and of knowing when they were “cheating” themselves [Benjamin], “procrastinating” [Regina, Liz, Kate], or not working to the best of their ability [Jason]. Thus, a very well developed understanding of their overall strengths and weaknesses emerged, to the point that the importance of self became a new and emerging theme to explain sixth grade student success.

The idiom, *me, myself and I*, is a useful way to interpret this role of self. Students see

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themselves partly in isolation, as *me*, who has to balance the time and academic pressures of middle school. They see themselves as having to focus their attention, of knowing when to ask questions in class [Benjamin], or when to seek help from parents or others [Regina], or of being organized and good note-takers [Grace and Opal]. They see themselves as *myself* when they assign blame for their failures on themselves and when they realize weaknesses they need to overcome, such as talking less [Benjamin] or moving seats to avoid distractions [Jason]. However, perhaps the most enlightening is when students see themselves as being responsible for their own learning: *I*. This includes a realization of their own goals (in and outside of school), a beginning sense of their possible career paths and responsibilities as adults, and discussions of how they overcame problems or obstacles to be more successful.

Therefore, while students ascribe some of their success to individuals such as teachers or parents or family members (and less so to community based influences outside of school such as coaches and peers), the student narrative revealed a strong sense of centrality: students saw themselves as being ultimately responsible for their success in school. *Me, myself, and I* reinforces the importance students place on themselves in terms of success and failure, their ability to rise above both, and their desire to improve. This ability to question and interpret one's own importance, aside from the influence of the triad settings, was an unexpected finding, but also lends itself to concern that middle school students may not have the tools to deal with such pressures, and would benefit from in-school counseling services to reduce some of the pressure students were voicing.

Who and what help students be successful: *Places and Faces*

The literature review conducted prior to data collection suggested home, school, and community settings would each play some role in determining sixth grade success. However,

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a pattern emerged that it is not so much the setting, as was hypothesized from the use of a triad approach, but the combined effects of *people* in those settings that impacts student success. Thus a reconceptualization of community was necessary: places and faces are more important to the selected students' success than participation in defined community activities.

While some students participate in community activities such as sports and church [Natalie and Opal, respectively], most did not. Most students talked about the influence of people in their community: friends, coaches, neighbors, and so on as reason for their success. Some students also commented on the physicality of their neighborhoods as negative influences on success, such as traffic and local crime [Kate and Liz] or the proximity of a local bar [Stephen]. Likewise, awareness of community influence included comments on how and where they did homework outside of school, such as at the kitchen table [Stephen], in their living rooms [Regina], in their bedrooms [Kate and Liz], or the public library with friends, or at friends' homes [Liz and Natalie]. However, it would seem that community includes not only the student's neighborhood, but key individuals such as neighbors, friends, coaches and private instructors.

It would seem students were very aware of different locations being useful for different reasons: seeking out isolation or assistance from others when needed. This awareness of who and what is meant by community led to the conclusion that it is not so much the organizational aspect of community setting which influences student success, but the social and emotional support gleaned from people in those areas when and where students are interacting with others outside of the home and school setting.

Extrinsic influences on success: *A double-edged sword*

The third central theme to emerge from the analysis process echoes the idea of

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success being a double-edged sword. In other words, students find there are positives and negatives associated with success in home, school, and community settings. For instance, many students stated that parental encouragement has a lot to do with their own motivation to do well, or on how rewards associated with success, either at home or in school, motivated them to do even better in school. This included meals out [Regina], gifts [Jason], or other such rewards from parents. Indicating a degree of financial security and investment from parents in their child's success, such rewards varied from ice cream treats [Natalie] to laptops [Jason] for school-based and/or community-based success. Similarly, Natalie expressly mentioned how school success was often met with praise, while James mentioned being rewarded with extra time playing video games. On the other hand, community-based success, often in the form of sports victories, resulted in family-oriented celebrations such as out meals [Natalie] or trips to Dairy Cream or Dippin' Dots [Jason]. Of course, not rewards were materialistic. Sometimes the reward was the pleasure in knowing you made your parents' happy [Benjamin], verbal praise [Opal], or a phone call from grandparents [Kate].

When it comes to examining the role of extrinsic influences on success, there was also a high level of expectation from particular individuals such as family, teachers, and peers to do better. More often than not, students discussed how knowing expectations were challenging yet realistic, such as in Challenge Math [Regina], was a direct motivator to do well in school, along with one-on-one parent involvement in helping with homework [Ellie, Grace, James, Regina]. Likewise, students positively commented on the motivation of friends and family members also doing well in school as being an influence on their own success. As Liz commented, her siblings "are over-achievers and they all get good grades", so she feels expected to do equally as well as her older siblings.

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Not all extrinsic motivations were positive, however. Some students commented that parents and teachers had punishments and consequences for not being successful. This awareness in how failure helped them be successful is another interesting finding, for students conceptualized their success in sixth grade from both positive and negative perspectives. For instance, James commented that cheating in math by copying from other students was a motivator to do well in math by the end of the school year. Likewise, being in trouble with teachers for letting his anger “get the best of me” was a powerful motivator for Jason to change his coping mechanisms in school.

As a positive though, this third theme reinforced the importance attached to a positive learning environment. Multiple students commented on the positive effect that school-based rewards and celebrations had on their achievement. For instance, Grace commented that having “IPR bands” for each grading period was a highlight of her sixth grade year. Such recognitions at the school level serve as positive reinforcements for doing well, as school-based recognitions were considered motivators to do better.

Ecological findings

Final analysis of the student narrative was also undertaken to determine an ecological footprint of home, school, and community influences on student success. This analysis consisted of mapping student comments using ecological systems theory to determine frequency of influence. Results of this mapping of ecological based influence reveal a range of positive and negative factors on student success (see Figure 5).

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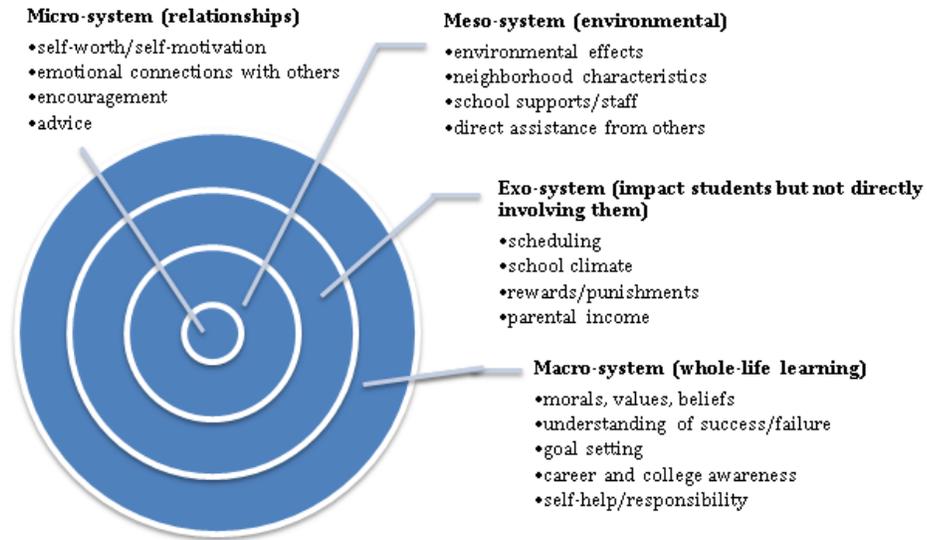


Figure 5: Distribution of influence modeled on ecological systems theory

However, further analysis of these influences revealed an unexpected pattern of distribution (see Figure 6), contra to research suggesting micro- and meso-systems are the most influential on student success (Lewthwaite, 2001; Rillero, 2016).

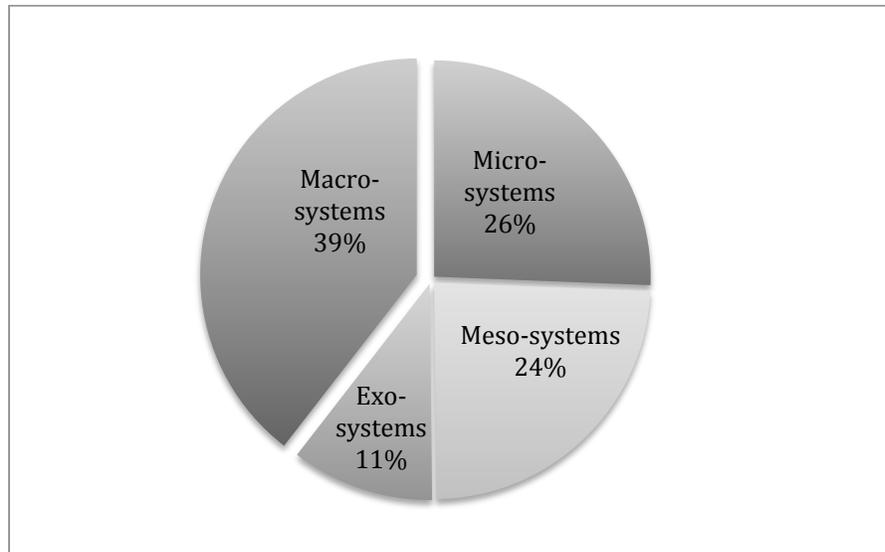


Figure 6: Visual summary of the site school's ecological footprint

This final distribution of influences therefore reinforced not only the centrality of interpersonal and personal relationships at the micro-system level, but also revealed a heavy

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representation of macro-system level influences, suggesting successful students are influenced greatly by the morals, values, and beliefs they encounter in their daily lives.

Student perception of self, and significant others from the home, school, and community settings, reinforces the micro-level of influence on student success. However, the importance of values and beliefs reinforce the influence of the macro-system. Indeed, the secondary analysis process suggests macro-system inputs have a far greater influence on student success than was expected prior to conducting this study (see Figure 6, above). As such, while the inter-personal and social aspects of the micro-system remain powerful influences on student achievement, it may be wise for schools, families, and community agencies, programs and individuals to develop mental health and coping strategies and programs to promote student success.

Conclusion: Success not Achievement Gap

As educators we must seek to identify the causes of stagnation and success in our schools, and attempt to remediate and reform these issues to address achievement. It is the responsibility of policy makers, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members to identify why and how students overcome barriers to achieve success. Indeed, much can be learned from the perspective of successful students to guide school-based reform, improve student support services, and develop effective community programs and partnerships (Ani, 2013). The significance of this study is two-fold. Firstly, it examined recent sixth grade students' perceptions of the influence of home, school, and community settings on their own success. Secondly, an application of ecological systems theory led to the mapping of triad influences for a particular middle school setting. This combination of data collection and analysis makes this study unique: Few studies identified so far have considered the combined

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influence of home, school, and community forces on middle school achievement; very few have done so according to students' own perspectives with sixth grade students; and even fewer have considered ecological systems theory to determine the extent of influential forces on student achievement.

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Section Six – Scholarly Practitioner Reflection

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The dissertation has greatly influenced me as an educational leader and as a practitioner-scholar. Specifically, the doctoral program improved my time management, task completion, and collaborative ability skills. It gave me greater opportunity to demonstrate my skills in organization and problem-solving through collaborative projects during coursework and as a leader within my building. It also provided a vehicle through which I could develop and express my desire to do more to help students be successful!

Significantly, one of my greatest achievements during the doctoral process was to develop a community partnership between my building and a local college in the form of a free after-school student enrichment activity. This program, now in its third year, was expressly designed to promote middle school student achievement through exposure to college-level instruction via a STEAM-based curriculum. I am very proud of this partnership, for it allows middle school students to experience not only college level instruction, equipment and facilities, but also exposes them to career and college readiness skills and knowledge. I do not think I would have had the courage to develop such a program on my own, without the theoretical and practical guidance provided by Dr. Arnold during the fall semester of my second year of classwork.

Likewise, doctoral coursework has provided me with a greater understanding of my transformational capacities within my building as a member of the building leadership team and department chair, and has led to my taking on additional building-level leadership as the AVID site coordinator. Four years ago, when I began the doctoral program, I was a new member of the leadership team, struggling to find my way and to meet expectations. Four years later, at the conclusion of the dissertation process, I am much more confident in my ability to speak out as a member of that team and to play a more decisive role in my building

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as a building leader, and as a coach for and leader of my building's AVID Site Team.

Finally, as a practitioner-scholar, while I have published before, the dissertation process reinforced my researching, writing, and editing skills: taking a document of more than two hundred pages down to a manageable, concise thirty pages, suitable for publication, was certainly an eye-opening endeavor! Similarly, my ability to develop a research study, conduct data collection within a very tight time frame, and analyze and interpret results for communication to relevant parties has reinforced for me the transformative role I can play within my building and my community. It also has provided me the opportunity to share my knowledge and experiences at a state-wide conference; something I do not know I would have had the courage to do beforehand. I have thus learned to defend my point of view and to be purposeful in my writing and focus according to the needs of my intended audience. I look forward to playing more of a role in the future to improve student achievement at the middle school level in my building and in the district as I can see where my research study can have future implications for more than one site school.

Appendices

APPENDIX A
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

I have some questions concerning your experiences as a middle school student. Remember, the answers you give will remain strictly confidential and will not be associated with your name in any way. The following questions will help guide our discussion about the effects home, school, and community influences have had, and continue to have, on your overall school achievement.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to be successful? Can you tell me about a time when you have been successful in or outside of school? How did people or places help you be successful?
2. What does it mean to fail? Can you tell me about a time when you have experienced failure? How did you get over that? How did people or places help you through the experience?
3. What are some things that might stand in the way, or be barriers to you being successful?
4. What motivates you or pushes you to do well at school?
5. What do you want to do when you finish school? How do you see yourself achieving this goal? Who or what might help you? What are some difficulties you think you might have?

FAMILY INFLUENCE

1. What comes to mind when I use the word “family”?
2. Can you describe your home life? What are some things you do at home in your spare time? What are some of your responsibilities at home?
3. Think about how your parent(s) and your family help you. Can you tell me how family members help you be successful in and out of school?
4. How does your family react to your success and/or failure? Can you give me some examples?

SCHOOL INFLUENCE

1. Can you describe what it is like to be a student at this school? Can you tell me about your most memorable experiences (good and bad) from 6th grade?
2. Do you feel cared for in this school? Do you think this school is a safe, caring place? Can you describe some of the reasons or examples for why you feel this way?
3. Can you describe how the school and people here help students to be more successful? Can you tell me about how you have been helped this year?
4. Do you participate in any clubs, teams, or activities in school? If so, what are they?
_____ What skills do you think you learning through these activities?
5. What suggestions would you like to make to help this school be better?

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COMMUNITY INFLUENCE

1. Think about various aspects of neighborhoods like housing, buildings and facilities, transportation, and safety. What is your community and neighborhood like? What do you like most about your neighborhood? What changes would you like to see happen in your neighborhood?
2. Do you participate in any clubs, teams, or other activities outside of school [not including school sports/clubs etc.]? If so, what are they? _____ What skills do you think you are learning through these activities?
3. Do you have friends that you hang out with? In what way are friends an influence on you?
4. Can you describe how your friends help you overcome difficulties in and outside of school? For example, do friends help you be more successful in school? Can you explain how?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

1. Think about what we have talked about so far. Can you describe how particular people and places, including at home, in school, and in the community, have helped to shape you as a person and as a student?
2. Do you think one area (home, school, or community) has played more of a role in your success in sixth grade than another? Can you explain why you feel this way?
3. What was the most interesting part of sixth grade? What are the highs and lows of this past year?

NOTE: Resources consulted when generating the interview protocol included the Self-perception Profile for Children (SPPC) (Fenzel, 2000); the HOME-SF inventory (Glad, Jergeby, Gustafsson, & Sonnander, 2014); the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth: Child and Adult Cohort *Child Supplement* (CS), *Child Administered Supplement* (CSAS), and *the Young Adult Questionnaire* (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007); and the Relationship and Motivation (REMO) scale (Raufelder, Drury, Jagenow, Hoferichter, & Bukowski, 2013). Other sources consulted include Epstein, 1998; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Spitzer & Aronson, 2015; Zhu, Tse, Cheung & Oyersman, 2014.

**APPENDIX B
LETTER OF INVITATION**

February 16, 2016

Dear Middle School Parent(s),

My name is Tracy A. Worthington. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my Doctor in Educational Leadership and I would like to invite your son/daughter to participate.

I am studying how middle school students think home, school, and community settings affect sixth grade academic success. If you decide to allow your child to participate, your child will be asked to meet with me for between 45 minutes to 1 hour on 2-3 different days to discuss their experiences.

Interviews will take place either during the after-school tutoring/Activity Bus time during the regular school year, and/or during summer school. Interviews will be held in a private location, such as a teacher's classroom or office, where no one else will interrupt or hear the conversation. The interviews will be audio taped so I can accurately reflect on what is discussed and so I can later transcribe and analyze them. The tapes will be kept for seven years after the end of the study, according to the University of Missouri's research rules. Also, please note that your child's identity will not be revealed and students will either be given or will choose a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Your child has been chosen to participate in this study due to his or her being a current or recent sixth grade student at West Middle School. We hope others in school and the school community will benefit from this study, but your child's participation is voluntary. There is no penalty if your child wishes to stop participating in the study, or you wish to have him or her stop at any time. Participation, non-participation, or withdrawal in the study will not affect your child's grades in any way.

If you have questions about this study, please feel free to contact the primary investigator, Tracy A. Worthington on (573) 214 3210, or her advisor Dr. Ty-Ron Douglas on (573) 882 8221. You may also contact the University of Missouri's IRB Office if you have questions concerning the research process (573) 882 9585.

If you would like your child to participate in this study, please read and complete the attached parent consent form. If you do not wish for your child to participate, you do not have to do anything, and this letter and form can be thrown away or recycled.

With kind regards,

Tracy Worthington
(573) 214 3210
tawt3b@mail.missouri.edu

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APPENDIX C PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

Your child is invited to participate in a research project conducted by Tracy A. Worthington, a Doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri.

TITLE OF THE PROJECT: Unpacking Middle School achievement: How students perceive the effect of home, school, and community influences on their academic success.

This informed consent explains your child's voluntary participation in a research study. It is important you read about this study and then decide if you wish your child to volunteer. If you have any questions about the wording or terms provided in this consent form, or the requirements of this consent form or the study itself, please contact Mrs. Worthington on (573) 214 3210.

PURPOSE:

Research has shown when schools, families, and community groups work together, children “tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7). The purposes of this study are to learn: (1) what middle school students understand about success and failure at middle school; and (2) how middle school students think home, school, and community influences have impacted their academic success. We hope to determine if one area of influence has a greater effect on student middle school achievement than another by hearing from current or recent sixth grade students about their school experiences. This will help schools and the community build strong, effective partnerships so all students can be more successful in middle school.

PROCEDURE AND DURATION:

Students will participate in a minimum of two and a maximum of three sessions (depending on how much time is needed to complete the interviews). Interviews will be between 45 min-1 hour in duration. They will be held between 2:35-3:45pm on school days when the Activity Bus is available (during the regular school day), or between 7:30am-2:35pm during the regular summer school day. Interviews will be conducted in a closed classroom or office with Mrs. Worthington. They will be audio-recorded for later transcription purposes.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS:

Subjects will not benefit directly from the study but could possibly benefit by thinking about how their academic success can be affected by home, school, and community influences.

POSSIBLE RISKS:

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research study. If a student should experience emotional upset during the interview for any reason, the school principal will be alerted. The student will also be given the option of terminating participation in the study.

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WHAT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY?

We will do our best to make sure that your child's answers are kept private. Information produced by this study will be stored in the investigator's files and identified by a pseudonym only. Identifying comments and remarks will be removed in the final study. Neither student records nor identifying data will be recorded, accessed, or used by the researcher. All student names and other information will be replaced with pseudonyms. All information obtained during the interview process will remain confidential.

TRANSPORTATION:

Students who ride a school bus already will be able to take the Activity Bus home after the interviews have ended if participation is during the school year. If the Activity Bus is not used, parent pickup, walking home, or other method of transportation will need to be arranged by the child and/or parent during the regular school year. If participation is during summer school, interviews will be conducted during the school day, so no extra transportation will be required.

POSSIBLE EXCLUSION:

Students have been selected to receive this invitation to participate on the basis of being enrolled as a full time sixth grade student at West Middle School. Students who are wards of the state, visually or hearing impaired, or English-language learners (ELL) have been excluded from receiving an invitation to participate. Students who know the principal investigator, or whose families are known by the principal investigator, will also be excluded.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS:

Students who complete the interview process will be eligible for a gift card drawing in return for participation in the research study. At the completion of all the interviews, eligible students' names will be put into a drawing for a retail gift card (i.e. three gift cards valued at \$20 each). The gift card drawing will be conducted at the conclusion of all interview.

RIGHT TO REFUSE OR WITHDRAW:

Your child's participation is voluntary. Your child will need to complete an assent form prior to the first interview. You may refuse for your child to be in the study and nothing will happen. Your child can also refuse to answer any questions, and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions, feel free to contact the primary investigator, Tracy Worthington at (573) 214 3210, or her advisor, Dr. Ty-Ron Douglas at (573) 882 8221. You may also contact the University of Missouri's IRB Office if you have questions concerning this research study on (573) 882 9585.

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**ACCEPTANCE AND SIGNATURE – PLEASE RETURN WITHIN 7 DAYS TO THE
SCHOOL GUIDANCE OFFICE IN THE ENVELOPE PROVIDED**

On reading the above information, please complete the following declaration:

I have read the information provided above and all my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to the participation of my child in this study. I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

Parent / Legal Guardian Signature

Parent / Legal Guardian Signature

PRINT NAME

PRINT NAME

NAME OF CHILD

DATE

APPENDIX D
CHILD ASSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

You are being invited to participate in a research project conducted by Tracy A. Worthington, a Doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri.

TITLE OF THE PROJECT: Unpacking Middle School achievement: How students perceive the effect of home, school, and community influences on their academic success.

This informed consent explains your child's voluntary participation in a research study. It is important you read about this study and then decide if you wish to volunteer. If you have any questions about the wording or terms provided in this consent form, or the requirements of this consent form or the study itself, please contact Mrs. Worthington on (573) 214 3210.

Why YOU are invited?

You are invited to be in this study because you are a full time sixth grade student at West Middle School and we want to learn from students about what affects academic success. We want to learn about your experiences in middle school and your success and failure, and how home, school, and community influences have impacted your learning. This will help the school and the community build strong, effective partnerships to improve overall student achievement and student supports so all students can be more successful in school.

What will happen?

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to answer questions in one-on-one interview with Mrs. Worthington for between 45 minutes and 1 hour, depending on how much time we need. We might need more than one session if we end up needing more time to talk about everything, but there will be no more than three sessions.

Can anything good happen to me?

The study will not benefit you directly, but you might end up learning how home, school, and community influences have affected your schoolwork.

Can anything bad happen to me?

There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. However, if you were to get upset by anything we talk about during the interview you can always skip a question or come back to it, or talk to the principal or counselor at school. You should also tell you parents if you are upset by anything we talk about, too. You can always stop participating in the study if you want without any penalty.

Payment to participants

If you complete the interviews, your name will go into a drawing for one of three gift cards valued at \$20. Only students who complete the interviews will have their name in the drawing. The drawing will be conducted after all interviews have been completed.

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What if I don't want to do this?

If you say you do not want to be in the study, you just have to tell us. No one will be mad at you. You can also say yes and later change your mind. You can quit at any time. The choice is up to you [and your parent(s)].

Transportation

If you usually ride the Activity Bus after school, you will still be able to ride the Activity Bus after we complete the interviews each day, if the interviews are conducted during the regular school year. If interviews are conducted during summer school, they will be conducted during the school day, so no extra transportation will be required. If the Activity Bus is not used during the school day, you will need to arrange your own way home with a parent, or walk home as normal. We will finish interviews in time for the Activity Bus each time, which is why we may need to complete the interview in more than one session.

Who will see my information?

The only person who will hear and see your information will be Mrs. Worthington. Your information will be audio-recorded for transcription later, but the final document will be given a pseudonym (which you can chose, if you wish). All identifying details and facts will be replaced with fake ones so your identity will be protected. We will do our best to make sure that your answers to questions are kept a secret.

Who can I talk to about the study?

If you have questions about this study, you can ask the primary investigator, Tracy Worthington at (573) 214 3210 or her advisor, Dr. Ty-Ron Douglas on (573) 882 8221. You may also contact the University of Missouri's IRB Office if you have questions concerning the research process (573) 882 9585.

**ACCEPTANCE AND SIGNATURE
PRIOR TO INTERVIEWS BEGINNING**

Do you want to be in the study?

YES *NO*

Will you be attending summer school at West Middle School?

YES *NO*

Signature of Child

Date

A copy of this form will be given to you.

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VITA

Ms. Worthington was born in Sydney, Australia, but emigrated to Missouri, USA in 1998. She has had a long interest in the welfare and education of middle school students, given her almost 16 years of teaching experience at the middle school level and admits she has a passion for teaching 8th graders!

As the first person in her immediate family to graduate from high school and college, Ms. Worthington looks on herself as being a life-long learner. She especially enjoys learning about history and has taught high school and middle school history classes across many different time periods throughout her career, although says she is torn between Ancient Egyptian History and U.S. History.

She completed her honors undergraduate degree in Ancient History and English at the University of New England, Australia in 1992 before moving to Tasmania, Australia in 1993, where she completed her post-graduate teaching studies. Whilst in Tasmania, she taught senior high school humanities subjects in Hobart for four years, before emigrating to Missouri with her husband and young son in 1998.

In 2000, after completing her certification to teach in Missouri, Ms. Worthington resumed her teaching career, taking a position at the then Jefferson Junior High School in 2001. She taught U.S. History and Government as a teaching specialist in the Special Education Department there for seven years before returning to the general education classroom in 2008 to focus on 8th grade U.S. History. She says she loves the passion and excitement middle school brings; and is now in her 16th year of teaching 8th grade!

In 2003, whilst a graduate student at Columbia College, Ms. Worthington celebrated the birth of her daughter, before going on to graduate with her M.A.T. in Special Education

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in 2005. After a hiatus of a few years, Ms. Worthington then decided to pursue her doctorate, with a focus on middle school education, at the University of Missouri, in 2012. Ms. Worthington also completed her principal certification coursework and building-level administrator exam concurrently with her doctorate coursework, and hopes to move into an administrative position in the near future. She would like to expand her administrative and leadership skills at the building or district level, especially given her experience with AVID and curriculum development. Regarding her future interests, she is eager to expand her study on either a longitudinal basis, to examine how middle school success influences later high school performance, or via a larger cross-district model to examine how and why middle school students are successful.