SHAME SHAPESHIFTERS MASKING AS DIENGAGEMENT:
A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY EXAMINING
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT-RELATED
EMOTIONS IN HIGH SCHOOL

A DISSERTATION IN
Education Administration

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of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of
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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Each student brings their past experiences, current working identity, and cultural perspectives with them into the learning environment, which is a highly charged emotionally reciprocating space where information is being exchanged. Disengagement is cited as being problematic to educators, inhibiting them from supporting students to achieve at their highest level. The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to discover if what educators refer to as disengagement is shame manifesting itself outwardly. The shame space was found to be created when there was a gap between how the individual was perceived and societal expectations they failed to meet. Shame re-storied the way that experiences were perceived and recalled, which was connected to the variances in how students displayed disengagement within the learning environment.

The study took place with individuals, ages 18–30, recruited by snowball sampling, through social media and electronic communication such as e-mail or text messages in several Midwestern states. Snowball sampling involved asking a number of people who else
to talk to about their high school experiences (Patton, 2015). Creating spaces to hear from those directly involved with the phenomena, the following central question was addressed: How and in what ways might shame be reflected in students’ learning environments? Data collection included documents such as a written response about the students’ experiences in school, 15 in-depth interviews, descriptive memos, and researcher’s field notes. The resulting outcome was the Strugglish Superhero Storyline, which is my theory for understanding the nature of shame and three-act structure—the Strugglish Superhero Storyboard move from the shame space toward success.
APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Education, have examined a dissertation titled “Shame Shapeshifters Masking as Disengagement: A Grounded Theory Study Examining Academic Achievement-Related Emotions in High School,” presented by Ashley Nicole Smith, candidate for the Doctor of Education degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .............................................................................................................................. iii

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS ..................................................................................................... viii

LIST OF TABLES ...................................................................................................................... ix

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .............................................................................................................. x

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................................... xii

PREFACE ................................................................................................................................. xiii

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................. 1

   The Problem ....................................................................................................................... 2

   Purpose of the Study ......................................................................................................... 13

   Research Questions ........................................................................................................... 16

   Theoretical Framework ..................................................................................................... 16

   Overview of Methodology ................................................................................................. 27

   Significance of the Study ................................................................................................. 30

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ..................................................................................................... 32

   Shame, Trauma, and the Anchoring Memories of Adolescence ....................... 35

   Reality Checking of Internal Shame Stories ................................................................. 50

   Academic Experiences and the Learner Lens ................................................................. 67

   (Re)storying Shame Shapeshifters ..................................................................................... 82

3. METHODOLOGY .............................................................................................................. 100

   Rationale for Qualitative Research .................................................................................. 103
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Researcher</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of the Study</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. RESULTS</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Process for Generating Shame Theory</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting to the Theory: Themes Identified in the Data</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. DISCUSSION</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering Research Questions</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications and Recommendations</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Reflections</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. CONSENT FORM</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE SURVEY</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The Theory of the Strugglish Superhero Storyboard</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The Strugglish Superhero Storyboard</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sample Demographics of Interview Participants</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Demographics of the Larger Sample</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Question 5: Think about Your Experience in High School and Please</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer “Yes” or “No” to Indicate Your Response</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Themes that Created a Shaming Experience in ACT I: (Re)Awakening</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inciting Incidents: (Re)flex or (Re)ceive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Themes that Created a Shaming Experience in ACT I: (Re)hash, (Re)hear, or (Re)connect</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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made us analyze whose voices were missing from our current contexts and the possible implications of those groups not having a seat at the table. This is now something I am especially sensitive to in my current role, which has caused me to push an equity agenda wherever I go. To Dr. Caruthers, you have taken me under your wing since my master’s degree, and I appreciate you engaging me in the art of mental tug of war until I am able to present a comprehensive research-based argument—at which point you change the rules to the game, showing me there is always more to learn. You not only pushed me further than I thought I could go, you showed me the keys to unlock my own potential. Now I can even empirically ground my own experiences. I have never had to engage in #pointhustlin, but you made me work for every single point on every single rubric, and I love you for it.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents and all of the K–12 educators whose fingerprints on my life in my formative years allowed me to not only accomplish my goals but to fulfill my purpose.

K–12

To Mrs. Christensen, my kindergarten teacher, who saw something special in me and pushed me to be better. Thank you for realizing that even at a young age, I had leadership skills. To Mrs. Portera, my sixth-grade teacher, who embodied cultural awareness and validated us based on the potential she saw in each one of us. This was the first time I ever felt love in a classroom setting. To Mrs. Wolford, my English 12 AP teacher, you kicked my butt, and I never thought my first “C” would have made me so proud. You have no idea how giving me a chance to be successful may have altered the whole course of my life and how I saw myself as a writer.

Before K and Beyond 12

To my younger sister Danielle, who knew that all those days we spent playing school would spark a passion inside of me. Thanks for being my first “student” and for your constant encouragement along the way. It really means a lot to me to know I make you proud. To my mom, Pastor Ramona, and dad, Pastor Rordy, who covered my life with prayer and who taught me to seek God for myself, it is because of you that I have a strong sense of identity. You taught me to embrace my uniqueness and that I was not supposed to fit in because I had a calling on my life. Thank you for being the first educators in my life and for supporting me along the way.
“Ashley,” the teacher whispered as she knelt down beside me, “It’s your turn to go out in the hall and read.” In my heart I heard, “Since you can’t figure out how the letters d-o-g come together to form the word “dog,” I’m sending you out of the room to be someone else’s problem.” Instantly, I felt queasy and blinked back tears that would only call more attention to myself and make the situation worse. I knew the granny just wanted to help me, and it was not her fault the school put the rocking chair in the hall, but I hated when other classes would pass me and see me struggling to read. It made me feel stupid.

I used to think reading was like those colorful Magic Eye puzzles they used to print in the newspaper where you had to look at it really hard, sometimes with one eye open and your head cocked to the side, before the picture would suddenly appear. I would stare at the words on the page and see nothing but letters. I could sound out each letter’s sound but did not understand how the sounds came together to form words. Everyone else seemed to get it but me. I made myself a promise that when I could see the words, I would find a way to never have to go to the hall for anything ever again. The lesson I learned was, it is not okay to struggle.

Before I developed a dislike for most breakfast foods, I used to love eggs. One day my parents were in the kitchen spelling things that would go on the holiday menu. I thought I heard something familiar, so I ran to my room, wrote the letters down and sounded out e-g-g-s. I sounded it out slowly and then a little faster and then even faster. Suddenly, I heard a word I knew. I ran to the kitchen and shouted, “eggs,” you said we’re having “eggs.”
I danced around that whole kitchen because I knew I finally got it. My parents looked at each other and said, “Well, I guess spelling things won’t work anymore.”

Once I cracked the reading code, I feverishly read my way through our school library. I would finish my work early just so I could read. I remember hearing something about “use it or lose it,” and I was afraid that I would lose the gift of reading if I did not use it all the time. I went from being a struggling student to the gifted program, which changed my perception of school and how I was seen by my teacher, classmates, and myself.

However, learning to read was a frustrating process for me, and there were many times when I shut down and wanted to accept that I may never learn to read. Fortunately, my support system, which included my teachers, parents, the granny, and other school personnel, refused to allow me to give up on myself. The feeling of shame due to my own identity as a reader, accompanied by the audible grunts of other students when my name was called to read aloud during round-robin reading, is something that I will never forget.

This was not my last experience with shame, but over the years it has taken on many different forms like the mythical creatures referred to as shapeshifters that transform into animals or people although their emotions remain constant.

Incidents of déjå vu or hot spots could be brought on by an experience, one of the senses being activated, or an emotion. My senior year in high school, I found out about honors classes called AP. Although I had never been in one before, it sounded like something that would prepare you for college, so I enrolled in English 12 AP. The first day of class, some of the student had been left off of the roster, so there were not enough desks for all of us. As I stood against the wall along with others, I tried to figure out how to balance my
books and papers so I could take notes. The teacher said, if you want to drop the class, you will have permission to get a schedule change. A group of students left the room. She then described the class, strategies we should be familiar with, words we should know, books we should have read. Suddenly out of nowhere, my stomach felt queasy, my heart started racing, and I felt like a surfer wiping out as a wave of emotion threatened to drag me under as I struggled to gasp for air. I was once again that little second grader and my heart heard, “You’re not good enough, you can’t compete with these other students. Quit before you embarrass yourself or before all these smart kids find out you’re not one of them. Who do you think you are, trying to pretend to be something you’re not? Go be someone else’s problem.” My chest was tight, and I felt like I was suffocating, but somehow, I managed to raise my hand to ask about the summer reading assignment. The teacher looked at me with horror in her eyes and asked who else did not receive the summer reading assignment. A group of us raised our hands, and she apologized but told us that there would be a test at the end of the week. If we did not pass, we would not earn a seat in the class. Again she offered us an escape, telling us we could have our schedules changed. More students left the room, and everything in me knew I should be walking out the door, but my legs would not move. Suddenly, a resolve came over me and I decided that I would be earning a seat in the class.

I went to the bookstore that evening and bought the book. I barely understood the first few pages and wondered how I would ever get through. The night before the test, I still had 100 pages to go, so I stayed up all night. When I dozed off, my mom would come wake me up; when I cried, my mom encouraged me to dry my eyes because I could not see the words
through tears. My dad agreed to give me some extra time to read and took me to school just in time for the test during second block. I finished the book in the car on the way to school.

When the teacher passed back the test, she gave it to me in that rolled up kind of way, which is teacher code for, “Look at that when you’re all alone because you’ll probably cry.” I was exhausted and headed down to the counselor’s office disappointed that I even set myself up by caring about something so trivial like earning a seat when I did not even know what AP stood for. I took the test out of my bag to throw it away in the trash can and glimpsed the score. I indeed had earned an “F,” but something again rose up in me, and I went back to the class. I told the teacher that I did not know anything she was talking about, but I knew I could learn, and I begged her for the opportunity to have a seat in the class. I promised her that I would try my hardest. She must have felt sorry for me, because she granted my request on a trial basis. I eventually learned that AP stood for Advanced Placement.

This class changed the trajectory of my entire life, and I fell in love with the art of English. I found the power of words and learned that there is beauty in the midst of struggle. I came in early and stayed after school; all-nighters became a common practice for me on paper due dates or novel tests, but my focus was no longer on what people thought about me because I was proud of myself for taking the risk. I learned how to ride the wave of shame and can now recognize it no matter what shapeshifting form it takes. The first semester, I earned a C, and it was the only C I had ever earned in my educational career. My final grade in the class was a B, but it was so special to me because I worked my butt off for it. I wanted something and fought for it.
Unfortunately, there are many students who disengage and lose the fight because they are no match for the shame shapeshifters—the essence of my research.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many high school students may have stories of struggle similar to mine that originate in the early grades, but instead of overcoming the frustration, shame, and emotions associated with their personal definitions of struggle, some students accepted defeat and re-defined how they would choose to identify themselves. My support system—in this case my parents—actively engaged in my identity formation process; and when I tried to explain that I did not like reading or that I may never learn to read well, they introduced the word “yet” to my vocabulary and forbade me to use words like “never,” “always,” or “can’t.” Early in the identity formation process, some students may have seen the struggle as permanent, thus impacting how they viewed themselves as learners and cementing negative memories and emotions embedded in the learning process. I contend generating theory to understand the emotional lives of students during moments of struggle may be tied back to an early memory, shame cycle, or phase during the identity formation process which may have become a part of the student’s internal narrative. Dillard (2008) suggested that in our research and teaching, we often forget the power of our memories and how they are always with us: “memory can be thought of as a thing, person, event that brings to mind and heart a past experience—and with it the ability to (re)-member, to recall and think of again” (p. 89).

My personal experiences with my own journey through struggle helped me to empathize and work with my middle school students when I was an English teacher; and they allow me to listen for the underlying issues when working with students in my current role as the assistant principal at a high school. We are simultaneously navigating various places and
spaces, and memories are always with us (Dillard, 2008). Ultimately, I claim the political and cultural/racial memory of this work, especially for black and brown students who have been historically marginalized, but I contest the standardized empirical narrative representing deficit perspectives surrounding these population groups. Dillard (2012) detailed the act of (re)membering as a (re)storying technique to create liberatory spaces:

While I speak here of how acts of (re)membering might provide spaces of resistance to political, cultural, and social seductions for African ascendant people, I am also arguing that (re)membering as a response will always and in all ways also raise up contested cultural spaces and locations that are deeply spiritual, situated, and embodied. (p. 17)

Opting to (re)flect on my own journey, the lens that I used to view myself as a learner was fractured, altering my own perspective about who I was, who I could become, what I could do, and how I thought others viewed me. As educators, our goal is for all students to graduate high school and pursue post-secondary goals; but for students who may have a history of struggling or struggle transitioning to high school, graduation seems impossible. In an effort to decrease the number of students who drop out of school, I want to identify the emotions that students experience while learning to assist those in the educational system with strategies that take students through the learning cycle, so they come out on the other side feeling empowered. I have elected to (re)member (Dillard, 2012) through my own memories of shame associated with struggling through academic achievement-related emotions.

**The Problem**

Oftentimes in the field of education, an emphasis is placed on test scores and results because we are focused on end goals such as graduation percentages, but we continue to neglect meeting the needs of all of our students. On the first day of high school, freshman
year, about one out of every four students walking in the door will fail to earn a high school 
diploma. Every 26 seconds, a student disengages and gives up on their education in the 
United States, which is about 7,000 students a day, equating to 1.2 million students dropping 
out each year (Miller, 2011). Although we have seen a significant decline in recent years, this 
may be due to students accessing alternate options which allow them to get a diploma but not 
in a regular school setting (McFarland, Cui, Rathbun, & Holmes, 2018; McFarland et al., 
2018). Furthermore, dropping out before earning a high school diploma is often a behavioral 
manifestation of the cessation of the cumulative social-psychological disengagement process 
that typically originates in earlier grades (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012; Davis & Banks, 
2019; Finn, 1989; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Lessard et al., 

For the purpose of this study, disengagement was characterized as having the 
following qualities: active withdrawal from activities within the learning environment; 
passively compliant; unmotivated to rise above adversity or to face challenges during the 
acquisition of knowledge; apathetic and unwilling to participate regardless of ability; and/or 
disconnected from the social realm of the school community (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & 
Pagani, 2009; Dean & Jolly, 2012; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Gray, 2017; King, 
McInerney, Ganotice, & Villarosa, 2015). Along the dropout continuum, there are typically 
signs that indicate a student is struggling to engage, which may include: anti-social behaviors 
which denote feelings of alienation (Finn, 1989; Sweeten, Bushway, & Paternoster, 2009); 
increased classroom and/or school misconduct (Archambault et al., 2009; Christie, Jolivette, 
& Nelson, 2007; Fall & Roberts 2012; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Stearns & Glennie,
failing grades (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Saeki & Quirk, 2015); negative student-teacher relationships; delinquency (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wang & Fredricks, 2014); drug or alcohol use (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wang & Fredricks, 2014), and absenteeism (Archambault et al., 2009; Christle et al., 2007; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010; Lessard et al., 2008). These students may not identify with school as an institution of learning and education and leave school with many adverse social experiences and a lack of academic qualifications (Archambault et al., 2009; Christle et al., 2007; Finn 1989; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010).

In today’s educational system, there is a belief that the underlying causes of dropping out are often entangled within the notion that some students just do not care. Diversity and inclusion of all is embedded in our moral fiber as well as national sense of worth; however, our current context for education in the United States is filled with students who may feel marginalized by our current practices (Riele, 2006). Within the context of a larger longitudinal study in Canada, Lessard et al. (2008) conducted a narrative inquiry and interviewed 80 students, giving them an opportunity to “tell their stories” regarding the context surrounding their decisions to drop out of school. They conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews that were videotaped, audio-taped, and later transcribed. They discovered individuals who dropped out were primed for the event by family turmoil and/or ongoing problems in school which they titled “setting the stage.” Researchers described the next phase as “teetering” as students withdrew from elements of school and engaged in problem behaviors such as truancy, drug abuse, spacing out, or fighting. The instability that the students were internalizing was manifested in their actions, and some turned to peers who
encouraged delinquent acts as students gave up and did not reach out to anyone for help.

Instead of continuing to fight through, Lessard et al. (2008) found there was a “pivotal moment” or “gradual fade out” disengagement process that eventually led to students “ending the journey” and never returning to school.

Decisions to drop out during high school are especially ill informed considering many students are not fully aware of the “expectations of the world” (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Gaps continue to persist within our educational system, and already disadvantaged populations continue to be marginalized and fall through the cracks of inequity, which eventually leads students to turn their backs on school. This is a heavily researched topic in the field of education (Buckhalt, 2011; Cuffe, Waddell, & Bignell, 2017; Darden, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2011; Dumas, 2016; Fine, 1991; Ford & Moore, 2013; Frankerberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Langworthy, 2015; McElderry & Cheng, 2014; Mendoza-Denton, 2014; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; von Stumm, 2017; Worrell, 2014).

For racial or cultural groups that have been systemically considered as “others” because of the laws meant to keep individuals locked into a hierarchical system, school may be a constant reminder that they are not valued. Researcher, Michelle Fine (1991) conducted a study in an urban high school in New York finding that the dropout rate for students of color is a structural problem. In large cities, dropping out seems to be a type of tradition that spans generations and includes some of the same practices that previously used such as the overcrowding or segregation of “low skill” students from their more skilled counterparts (Fine, 1991, p. 15). These historically unjust practices are still being used and increases the
feelings of alienation widening the gap that leave students of color an even larger barrier to overcome. The lack of cultural awareness and honoring the gifts that students bring into the classroom in conjunction with the lack of resources found in urban schools further erodes academic possibilities for students of color (Fine, 1991). Historically marginalized populations have additional layers to contend with because integration did not mean that the best ideas from the separate environments were combined, it just meant that students of various cultures or racial groups went to school together (Bell, 2004; Frankenberg et al., 2003). Remnants the separate and unequal belief system continue to persist within education and students that do not fit the mainstream ideals are not only pushed to the fringe, their disengagement is viewed in a hostile way and they are often targeted and criminalized (Dumas, 2016).

There is a wealth of literature on the topic of dropping out, but much less attention has been given to the achievement-related emotions that students experience in school, with the exception of testing anxiety (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). Although social and emotional learning has become a buzzword recently, these competencies focus on the development of five areas, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. While these areas are important, there is much ambiguity about the emotions felt by learners as they close the cognitive dissonance gap regarding competencies, ranging from confusion to understanding (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013). The connection between emotions and learning is largely absent in most of the discussion about the challenges that educators are facing in schools and why a segment of our population is not choosing to finish their secondary education (Bridgeland et al., 2006,
As human beings, our emotional lives shape academic experiences, which directly impacts motivation and ability to engage with academic content because emotions shape how we define and perceive ourselves, how we think we are viewed by others, our perceptions of and relationships with others, and actions taken to improve our current context (Graham & Taylor, 2014). Within the educational setting, learning occurs in a social environment amid the social-emotional context of teacher to student as well as student to student relationships, and emotions are involved during the exchange of information and knowledge (Oades-Sese et al., 2014). The reciprocation of these messages entangled with emotional underpinnings, social and relational health, and memory and identity significantly impact academic learning and performance (Oades-Sese et al., 2014).

Emotions serve as a guide for our cognitive processes that contribute to the ways in which we learn, including perception and attention (Rowe, Hirsh, & Anderson, 2007); memory (Storbeck & Clore, 2008); and decision-making and problem-solving skills (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987). Emotions affect our ability to engage with others and the academic content, our psychological and social health, and our neuroimmunological functioning as well as determining if we are in an emotional space to have an optimal learning experience (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). Academic emotional space is created when students identify with school as an institution of learning. Identification with school is characterized by the student’s sense of belonging to the learning community and the worth they place on education (Archambault et al., 2009; Finn, 1989). In a quantitative study involving a sample of 14,781 base-year 10th grade students, Fall and Roberts (2012) found
that identification with school directly impacts academic and behavioral engagement, which influences students’ personal belief systems about their abilities to play active roles in controlling the outcomes of their own educational experiences. Students who feel a sense of belonging and are connected to the school are empowered to actively participate in order to gain academic skills as well as learn appropriate social behaviors—both of which are characteristics missing from students who choose to leave school (Christle et al., 2007; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Finn, 1989). There is no one-size-fits-all answer to why students disengage and choose to end their secondary education journey prior to receiving a diploma; however, far too little attention has been paid to academic achievement emotions and the root causes of disengagement—one of which may be shame (Kim, Thibodeau, & Jorgensen, 2011; Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Previous theorists and researchers have defined or contributed to the following attributes of shame:

• “Shame involves fairly global negative evaluations of the self” (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 24)

• “Shame is more likely to result from a loss of positive affect associated with devaluation of the self” (Gilbert & Andrews, 1998, p. 5).

• “Shame can be defined simply as the feeling we have when we evaluate our actions, feelings, or behavior, and conclude that we have done wrong” (Lewis, 1995, p. 2)

• “an extremely painful and ugly feeling that has negative impact on interpersonal behavior” (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 3)
• “An intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (Brown, 2006, p. 45).

When shame exists in the classroom, it makes the task of learning even more difficult, as explained by Oades-Sese et al. (2014):

Shame is caused by children’s belief that their behavior, feelings, or actions do not meet their own standards, rules, and goals as well as those of their parents, peers, and teachers. It is also caused when children hold themselves responsible for their failure and when they make a global attribution. These cognitive attributional processes lead to shame….While all children and adults experience shame to some degree, it is the prolonged shame that leads to individual differences in children’s emotional problems and school and performance difficulties. (p. 251)

Shane’s (1980) seminal research, related to the intersection of shame and learning, highlighted the ways in which shame shows up in classrooms. The ways in which students learn to overcome failure when attempting to learn new information and prior shaming experiences that students may have had in school may serve as barriers to learning (Shane, 1980). The learning cycle begins with the realization that “I do not know,” and there is a gap between “what I know” and “what I need to know.” While tackling new challenges, it is imperative that emphasis be placed on the task versus self. Tangney and Dearing (2004) describe what could happen if students internalize failure by focusing on self and are not supported in an emotionally safe learning environment:

Other children focus less on the task and more on the failure and its implications for their developing sense of self-worth. These children are more likely to experience shame. They are more likely to become “stuck” in shameful feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness. In fact, shame can seriously undermine children’s ability to learn in a challenging environment by lessening their chance of success in future endeavors. Feeling shame, children often simply stop trying. (p. 187)

This description provides insight into the psychological processes which may cause some students to display disengagement behaviors that precede a student making the decision to
drop out of school. The behavioral manifestations further illuminate a core reason that explains why some students appear to be disengaged, which could be associated with the emotions related to shame including: defensive maneuvers, withdrawal behaviors, avoidance, isolation, hiding, and silence (Brown, 2006; Gilbert & Andrews, 1998; Tangney & Dearing, 2004); denying responsibility, blaming others (Leeming & Boyle, 2013; Tangney & Dearing, 2004); feeling paralyzed, disabled, and powerless (LeDoux, 2003; Leeming & Boyle, 2013); feeling hostile and angry (Brown, 2006; Tangney & Dearing, 2004); aversive experiences related to feeling demeaned, reduced, disgraced, or diminished (Gilbert & Andrews, 1998); and overwhelming feelings of confusion, fear, or judgment (Brown, 2006). I find it possible that what is referred to as disengagement in the field of education coincides with manifestations of shame.

The concept of shame is complex and may be imperative during learning processes, but the paradoxical nature of disengaged students is that there may be too many barriers (internal and external) that forestall the student from actively engaging in school as a learning institution. In this study, shame is viewed as having two components: (a) external shame, which focuses on the social aspects of shame and how an individual believes they live in the mind of others; (b) internal shame, which derives from how individuals judge themselves (Gilbert & Andrews, 1998). Researcher-storyteller Brené Brown (2012) gave insight into the root of shame: “Shame is the fear of disconnection—it’s the fear that something we’ve done or failed to do, an ideal that we’ve not lived up to, or a goal that we’ve not accomplished makes us unworthy of connection” (p. 68). Negative appraisals that are evaluative of the global self often lead to academic disengagement (Oades-Sese et al., 2014).
shame is the driving force behind the disengagement divide plaguing our schools and the reactions we see exhibited by students including the “I do not care” attitude, and choosing to drop out is their outward expression of not knowing how to deal with shame in a healthy way.

Shame experiences that occur in the most vulnerable stage of development, such as adolescence, may become anchoring events which function as reference points as our brain organizes memories as well as the generation of future expectations (Pinto-Gouveia & Matos, 2011). Shame then becomes the lens of negativity students may use to form perceptions of how they might exist in the minds of others as well as the judgments they make about themselves (Gilbert & Andrews, 1998; Lewis, 1995; Pinto-Gouveia & Matos, 2011; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Perhaps disengagement is the response to current or recalled shame experiences in which a threat to their social selves is perceived that activates cognitive reference points triggering biological, neurological, and emotional reactions manifested outwardly as fight, flight, or freeze (Dean & Jolly, 2012; Gilbert & Andrews, 1998; Pinto-Gouveia & Matos, 2011). Recent evidence suggests that shame can be experienced as trauma, which affects academic performance (Lee, Anderson, & Klimes-Dougan, 2016). Lee, Anderson, and Klimes-Dougan (2016) surveyed 245 undergraduate college students, using a 227-item survey to investigate the role of shame in previous potentially traumatic experiences with regards to academic performance. This quantitative study was part of a larger project. A path analysis was used to analyze the data and found that as students experienced stressors following potentially traumatic events, the number of events were directly and negatively linked with perceived academic performance. The ways in
which students viewed their academic performances were “adversely influenced because of the traumas they experienced may have elevated their stress levels, which may disrupt their daily routines, disturb their vulnerable emotions, and/or impair their cognitive functions” (p. 47). Hence, disengagement from learning was associated with shame. Findings from this study have implications for adolescent students as they navigate schooling.

Park, Holloway, Arendtsz, Bempechat, and Li (2012) addressed the severity of the topic of disengagement, making a claim that it is one of the most persistent problems in educational settings. They stated, “Students who are bored, apathetic, or anxious in learning settings often disengage behaviorally, and ultimately are at-risk for underachievement and/or school dropout” (p. 398). This claim was considered earlier in Roderick and Camburn’s (1999) analyses of school transcripts of a first-time ninth grade cohort consisting of 27,612 students within Chicago public schools. Forty-two percent of the freshman failed at least one core class during the first semester of their freshman year; 24% failed over half of their core, and 14% failed 75% or more of their classes. The findings suggested commonalities among the interconnected factors that shape student performance. The majority of students failed classes for three main reasons: students did not attend classes, they did not complete or turn in the required work, and students did not pass tests. I contend that these students may not have been able to cycle through academic achievement-related emotions, specifically shame, in a healthy way so they used avoidance and other strategies to protect themselves from exposure. Shame re-stories the way that experiences are perceived and recalled, which may be connected to the variances in how students display disengagement within the learning environment. This formed the basis for the study.
Purpose of the Study

A call came over the radio that a freshman student was caught skipping class, and she was brought to my office. As I looked at her grades, I realized that she had failed every class the previous semester and was currently failing all her classes. I asked her why she was skipping class, and she rolled her eyes, started popping her gum, and said, “Do what you gotta do, all y’all are the same anyway so just give me my consequence and leave me alone.” At this point, I got up, closed the door, and told her that this was her intervention in which she had two choices: 1) She could keep doing things her way and watch her dreams go down the drain, or 2) Be honest and allow me to help her. I let her sit there for a while, when suddenly she burst into tears saying, “What the hell do you expect from me when my sister dropped out, my mom lives with her boyfriend who beats her, and none of my friends like me anymore because of something that happened over the summer. Plus, I can’t even read the stuff them teachers give me anyway.” My heart went out to this young lady, and we created a plan for her to get caught up in her classes.

Just as I was finishing, a strained voice came over the radio stating a teacher needed a security escort because a freshman student had been disrespectful to his teacher and yelled obscenities across the room once again. I immediately began to dread the upcoming interaction, because this young man and I had just had this conversation the other day, and this was his first day out of in-school-suspension (ISS). I could hear his voice as he was yelling at our security personnel about how the system was designed to make him fail, and he was blaming every single adult in the building. As he came nearer, I got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach because I was at a loss about what to do or say next. He sat down in the
chair, and we had a staring contest that seemed to last forever until he yelled, “What are you looking at me like that for?!”

I gathered myself, and in my calm voice I asked, “What do you want from us?”

He said, “I don’t want nothing from y’all.”

Exasperated, I asked, “What do you want to do once you have graduated?” At this point he looked surprised and seemed to calm down a little bit.

“I want to own my own business.”

After that we used backwards design to plan what he would need to do to begin building his business. Since that day, the only time I see that young man is when he stops in to say “hi.” We have many students with these huge aspirations but who do not seem to understand what it takes to get there. Because they are so lost and overwhelmed with their current situations, they decide it is not worth it.

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to generate theory, grounded in data, that explains how and in what ways shame affects students in the learning environment. I hypothesized that while there were multiple reasons why students disengaged from learning, I believed that shame was also attributed to academic disengagement in school. This inquiry took place through theoretical sampling with 15 volunteers who consented to discuss issues of shame connected to their schooling experiences. Theoretical sampling supported the selection of participants according to the descriptive needs of the emerging concepts and theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2007; Morse, 2010). Multiple sampling strategies were used throughout the course of the study due to the nature of grounded theory methods. For the study, the purposive sampling strategy of group characteristics was used to...
analyze questionnaires from a larger group of 34 individuals, ages 18 to 30, to assist me in identifying patterns pertaining to the focus area of disengagement (Patton, 2015). I incorporated comparison-focused sampling to identify the various dimensions of the similarities and differences to interpret the research implications. Theoretical sampling generated and documented the emergent theory and helped to examine the validity of the theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Patton, 2015). Incorporating the academic disciplines of sociology, psychology, neurobiology, and educational research provided insight into the phenomena of the ways in which students experience shame during learning. This contributed to the literature with regard to dismantling institutional barriers by providing theories regarding what we can do to better support students. The expectation is that a framework can be developed to shift paradigms in order to promote academic excellence to meet the needs of all learners.

Grounded Theory is a methodology in which theories are generated from data collection and analysis about patterns of human behavior or a social phenomenon (Engward, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This qualitative inquiry seeks to understand how people experience a phenomenon and then work through the dilemma to arrive at a resolution (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 2017). Interviewing multiple participants about their individual processes can illuminate if there is a pattern or common solution that individuals take to then generate a theory that can be applied to a larger sample that fits the description of the smaller sample from which the theory was generated (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Regardless of the researcher’s hypothesis about the social phenomena, a neutral stance must be taken to avoid predetermining an a priori stance of the data (Engward, 2013). Theory development may
assist in illuminating phenomena that may not be heavily studied by other researchers and
discovering how shame may reshape the ways students interpret their school experiences.
Research questions served as a guide to investigate the nature of struggle. I offered a
preliminary hypothesis of disengagement and discovered in the grounded theory process a
connection with shame in the participants’ data.

**Research Questions**

Through questioning and exploring experiences, I investigated the thinking about the
phenomenon of shame through the constructivist grounded theory method. The following
questions guided the study. One central question and three sub-questions were addressed:
Central question: How and in what ways might shame be reflected in students’ learning
environments?

a) In what ways might memories of shame during childhood be related to students’
experiences in school?

b) What are common triggers of shame for students?

c) How do students recover from shaming experiences?

**Theoretical Framework**

In looking at today’s students, educators must review some of the instructional
systems to accommodate the shift in demographics that our public schools have undergone. I
brought to this study assumptions that our current system contains elements of
discrimination, racism, classism, sexism and other -isms which are institutional practices
designed for one group to always be on top and another to remain on the bottom. Reinforcing
and legitimizing oppressive policies and practices, the history of education in America has
created a legacy of inequality that favors some students over others. The national conversation over whose lives matter has re-ignited a spirit of social justice which has caused our educational system to be confronted with questions about whose education matters. Re-focusing on equity is occurring in some schools, so that all students have opportunities to perform at the highest level regardless of race, ethnicity, class, or economic background. As educators work toward embodying the elements of equitable educational systems, catering to student needs, personalizing experiences, and supporting high outcomes for all students, spaces for the dismantling of dominant ideology that dictates power structures create room for uncommon leaders to emerge. Un-silencing voices that have previously been muted and creating an environment where shaming is no longer a classroom management strategy can bring about a paradigmatic shift, allowing students to share moving toward an atmosphere of belonging. Lessons that change students’ belief systems last a lifetime, creating fearless individuals who stand up for what is right despite the status quo. Empowered students push themselves to be successful despite the hardships and obstacles that may present themselves. This will positively impact our communities and decrease the negative societal impact that occurs when students decide to drop out.

Dropping out of high school is an issue that impacts society on multiple levels (Chase, Hilliard, Geldhof, Warren, & Lerner, 2014; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). Of particular importance are typically indicators that schools can use to identify students who may be on the dropout continuum. The main purpose of this study was to generate theory in order to help educators understand the nature of students’ struggle with shame that may be associated with disengagement, leading to dropping out of school. The theoretical framework
consisted of the working tentative theories and concepts as well as empirical literature regarding the reasons for and in what ways high school students struggle with the emotions associated within the educational context (Maxwell, 2013).

Therefore, I begin the theoretical framework by exploring the shame, trauma, and the anchoring memories of adolescence that view identity formation as an underlying foundational knowledge area, because adolescence is a crucial period for many students as they seek to define themselves and become more individualized (Erikson, 1968). Shame is an internalized social construction that happens between individuals, but there are ways to move through this emotion and ultimately become more resilient. This formed my second topic of reality checking of internal shame stories.

Next, analyzing academic experiences and the learner lens allowed a detailed look at how students develop an academic identity because school as a social setting plays an important role in the construction of the adolescent identity (Flum & Kaplan, 2012). Shame may trigger negative behaviors that students display, causing them to lash out, leave school, or disengage from learning (Reimer, 1996). Lastly, shame shapeshifters within school culture are ever present because school is a microcosm of society. I investigated how it shows up in communication, connections, content, and culture and climate. Strategies are needed to re-engage struggling students and to work with them more effectively on their paths toward graduation. A paradigm shift must occur within schools initiated by the leadership team to institutionalize practices regarding struggling students, because labeling them but never seeking to work with them to meet their needs is not healthy for society (Noguera, 2003). Adopting democratic professional practices within a restorative practice framework may
allow a chance to learn appropriate ways to repair harm or negative relationships in order to work through shaming experiences.

**Shame, Trauma and the Anchoring Memories of Adolescence**

Adolescence is a phase in which developmental negotiations and enhanced emotionality as social stimuli are particularly potent while growth is occurring biologically and psychologically, all of which determine physiological experiences (Spear, 2010). Classical theorist Erik Erikson (1968) referred to the adolescent time period as “stormy.” He expressed the importance of this time period: “For, indeed, in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity” (p. 130). Hoover (2004) expounded upon this point: “Simply stated, identity provides one with a sense of well-being—a sense of being at home in one’s body, a sense of direction to one’s life, and a sense of mattering to those who count” (p. 63). The teenage years mark a time of heightened awareness of social negotiations that are taking place as adolescents struggle to determine their places among various groups and in the larger society. Additionally, there are increased levels of stress-related hormones, which may give a plausible explanation for the moodiness that is characterized by the phase (Spear, 2010). As adolescents are reckoning with their identity, there is a high value placed on social norms, and any violation of these norms could cause a threat to the boundaries of their identities and social images which may bring on a shame response (Bogolyubova & Kiseleva, 2016). The harmful nature of shame victimizes the social norm violator because they see the situation as accidental, uncontrollable, and something that must be suffered through; often these events can become an internalized part of their memories (Bogolyubova & Kiseleva).
Shame memories control the emotions, mind, and body as the self recognizes this as a threat. The negative sense of self and fear of disconnection leads the individual to protect themselves by further disconnecting—thus, retreating into themselves and creating a shame cycle (Cunha, Matos, Faria, & Zagalo, 2012). Using a correlational analysis in a quantitative study, researchers found the more shame traumatic memories an individual experienced, the more depressive symptoms they had. In this study, participants included 1,101 adolescents; 57.4% were female and 42.6% were male, representing all high school grade levels. The study included 18.3% 9th graders, 38.0% 10th graders, 27.7% 11th graders, and 16.0% 12th graders who were recruited in several secondary schools in the Northern and Central regions of Portugal. The students filled out the self-report questionnaires in the presence of the researcher while in class, and all students who were recruited participated in the study.

Researchers discovered that shame experiences early in life condition emotional memories that may trigger intrusions and a physical-emotional stimulation, leaving the individual to feel inferior and disconnected. These feelings may cause the individual to approach the next adverse life event with a defeatist perspective as the memory has impacted how the adolescents view themselves. Additionally, individuals with more shame traumatic memories criticize themselves harshly due to decreased self-compassion and self-soothing abilities, and they are less capable of practicing self-care due to difficulty regulating these experiences (Castilho, Carvalho, Marquews, & Pinto-Gouveia, 2016). During the adolescent transitional phase of adolescence, students are vulnerable to shaming experiences, which makes it imperative to determine if perception is indeed reality.
Reality Checking of Internal Shame Stories

Shame is a social construction, but often assumptions are made without questioning whether the internalized metacognitive simulations are accurate (Gilbert, 2003). Our perceptions guide our reality and as explained by theorist Gilbert (2003), “Without approval and recognition we can feel (and often are) devalued, subordinated and excluded” (p. 1212). The constant comparison to others is likely to cause individuals to have deficit perspectives of themselves, projecting a sense of powerless; thus lowering the social status and causing shame, which continues to move cyclically. Further, the social factors of race, ethnicity, culture, and identity form the backdrop that determines the academic well-being of all students (Carter, 2006).

Using a mixed-methods approach, Carter surveyed and interviewed a sample of 68 low-income, native-born African American and Latinx students, ranging in ages from 13 to 20, to investigate how they negotiated the boundaries of their various worlds, placing an emphasis on school and peer groups. The findings consisted of several significant insights, one of which was that Black and Latinx students of similar socioeconomic backgrounds resisted the phenomenon of acting white and showed ethnic solidarity when their peers transgressed these boundaries. The implications of tracking had a significant impact on students because in the high-track classrooms with advanced coursework students used styles and emulated behaviors that were perceived as assimilating with the dominant culture which matched their classroom environments. The social bargaining that takes place may cause individuals to deny parts of themselves to assimilate with in-group characteristics in order to resist marginalization by the crowd.
Carter (2006) pointed out “cultural straddlers” which were students who navigated between dominant and nondominant communities, having multiple cultural repertoires they code switched, blending in but maintaining various elements of their identities. The researcher argued for schools to promote interculturalism so students who cannot decode the system can fully participate. By fully embracing the multiplicity of their social identities, these students were able to be themselves, mitigating any shame that may be present because they protected themselves through the “stormy” times by adding facets to their identities instead of being forced to choose. Researchers found it is possible that adopting a viewpoint of interculturalism served as a buffer against feelings of judgment or any trauma associated with not living up to the invisible social contract inspired by shame. When students bring these feelings with them into the classroom, they can influence their ability to perform at their highest level and may re-color how they view themselves as learners (Shane, 1980).

**Academic Experiences and the Learner Lens**

More often than not in the field of education, the emphasis is placed on the cognitive features of learning, but the epicenter of learning involves an affective stimulus; thus engaging cognition, which prompts a behavioral response (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). The learning environment is a highly charged emotional space with reciprocity being enacted as information is being passed and processed at various rates depending on the quality of the relational networks which influence students’ achievement (Valiente, Swanson, & Eisenberg, 2012). Thoroughly documented is the concept that positive teacher-student relationships are linked to positive educational outcomes; however, researchers have found this link is anchored in the perceived emotional support exchanged
between individuals through verbal and non-verbal forms of communication (Mazer, McKenna-Buchanan, Quinlan, & Titworth, 2014). Teacher communication competence such as immediacy, clarity, cultural sensitivity, and culturally responsive pedagogies could trigger emotional processes in students that heighten activating emotions like shame, boredom, and hopelessness or they could promote high expectations necessary to create resilient learners (Caruthers & Caruthers, 2007; Mazer et al., 2014). Although teachers are enacting their academic roles, they are emotional beings who influence the social dynamics of their classrooms. Increasing students’ self-concepts as learners should involve integrating cognitive and affective factors. Learning community support systems include peer-peer relationships that are emotionally encouraging, which makes the environment more conducive to achievement mastery even when students lack self-efficacy (Caruthers & Caruthers, 2007; Matthews, Banerjee, & Lauermann, 2014; Mazer et al., 2014; Valiente et al., 2012).

Emotional patterns influence every aspect of life, and learners have to be validated in learning acquisition efforts, which influence how they see themselves through the learner lens, thereby scaffolding mastery learning orientation (Matthews et al., 2014). A heavily documented topic is that African American males and other marginalized populations may view school as a more hostile environment due to instances of injustice, including disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates, lack of cultural relevancy, overrepresentation in special education, and other systems of oppression that may cause psychological disengagement such as academic disidentification as individuals embrace an oppositional identity to keep from subscribing to dominant cultural ideology (Cokley,
McClain, Jones & Johnson, 2012). However, to present a counter-narrative to dominant ideology, Cokley et al. (2012) took a mixed-methods approach including both survey and interview data. Sixty-eight participants representing lower socio-economic groups included 26 Latinx and 42 African Americans students from ages 13 to 20. Researchers analyzed how these individuals viewed school and their futures. The participants, along with members of their families, took part in a larger quasi-experimental longitudinal and separately funded study of 317 low-income African American and Latinx families from different neighborhoods in Yonkers, New York.

The findings confirmed that this group of youth subscribed to the dominant ideology about the value of education, believing that it was a practical means to success and critical to social mobility. In general, all the students upheld the normative belief that education was important to their futures. When asked about the possibilities of career choices, they did not limit their choices about what they thought they could do, although their experiences and knowledge of various career choices were limited (Cokley et al., 2012). Engaging emotionality is especially important for marginalized adolescents, because even those who struggle can become motivated and self-regulated in academic contexts if they perceive themselves as integrated and valued members of the academic community (Caruthers, 2007; Matthews, Banerjee, and Lauermann, 2014).

(Re)storying Shame Shapeshifters

To create an optimal environment that is conducive for a successful academic experience for students, they must positively be connected to families, schools, and their communities. School cannot engage students without their families playing a major role in
their academic success (Unger, Russell, Connelly, 2014). Consequently, it is vital for students to be surrounded by positive adult influences that can encourage them to do well in school and help with their coursework. Research literature also suggests that community and neighborhood characteristics play a role in defining students (Witherspoon, 2009). Outside factors influence how student think about academics as well as the attitudes they have about school. The contexts of the familial unit, school as a social setting, and community influences form the support system for students that is necessary for them to graduate high school and become contributing members of society. Human beings need connections, and Witherspoon (2009) described the feelings of connection within the academic context: “A sense of connection or connectedness is generally described as feelings of support, safety, and respect, but also includes feelings of belonging, attachment, and engagement in specific contexts” (p. 199). The contexts examined in the literature review include a) Communication – (Re)contextualizing the School Community; b) Connections – (Re)storative Relational Frameworks; c) Content – (Re)framing Egalitarian Embodied Curriculum; and d) Culture and Climate – (Re)humanizing, Liberating and Empowering All Learners.

These contexts are significant to the institutionalization of restorative practices for healing shame experiences of students. Restorative is a paradigm that views educators as the instrument for building and maintaining healthy relationships; and, as defined by Ted Wachtel, founder of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, “Restorative practices is a social science that studies how to build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making” (Wachtel, 2013, p. 1). Restorative characteristics of positive intentional relationship building include treating
students with dignity and respect in a communal environment where support and accountability are high and mutuality is embraced so individuals work with one another (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). In a 2004 study involving 18 Australian schools, researcher Shaw (2007) investigated the underlying assumptions and rationale used when implementing restorative practices. Participants endorsed restorative values that provided an opportunity for them to teach transformational relationship management and social skill development grounded in ideals such as justice, citizenship, ethics, democracy, student voice, and participation. Restorative practices can provide students with the understanding and experience to understand the impact of their behaviors on the collective context while ensuring students are held accountable for their actions by providing them with support to maintain healthy relationships (Shaw, 2007; Wachtel, 2013, 2016).

For some teachers and administrators, restorative practices represented a paradigmatic shift in the way they viewed discipline to create a more justice-oriented environment where students’ emotional needs were at the forefront as students were engaged in problem-solving conversations (Shaw, 2007). Ultimately, implementing restorative practices meant many schools had to shift the thinking of all authority figures to values that promoted healing over hurting, which meant the culture was significantly changed from punitive to participatory (Shaw, 2007). The relationships that high school students have with school personnel help them develop as they transform into adults and also create deeper emotional engagement with schooling (Christle et al., 2007).

I elected to use qualitative inquiry through grounded theory to investigate the connections between disengagement and shaming experiences for a cohort of suburban high
school students. I provide a summary of the overview of the methodology with a more
detailed discussion in Chapter 3. Through examining shame shapeshifters that may be
masked as disengagement, I hope to provide educators with a framework to address
disengagement in more positive and growth-producing ways.

**Overview of Methodology**

Qualitative inquiry studies how people and groups make meaning while in their
natural settings in order to make sense of how these meanings are interpreted by individuals
or groups (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Patton, 2015). The nature of qualitative research
involves delving into the world of another in order to understand their world; to analyze it
and share it so that others may also come to understand. Various strategies are used in order
to extrapolate a participant’s worldview as stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2008): “Qualitative
research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case
study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical,
interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings
in individuals’ lives” (p. 3). The materials collected form the data for the inquiry project, as
the researcher captures stories in the participant’s own words to understand their perspectives
and experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2015).

The setting for the study was not a particular location; through the use of social
media, electronic communication such as e-mail or text messages, and word of mouth,
participants could come from anywhere in the United States, but ultimately they represented
several states in the Midwest and one Northwest state. The 15 participants were drawn from a
larger sample of 34 participants that consisted of 22 females and 12 males, predominantly
African American ranging from ages 18 to 30. These 34 participants completed a mixed methods survey regarding their high school experiences with the opportunity to explore issues of shame.

Following Institutional Research Board (IRB) guidelines regarding research with human subjects, consent was obtained from a smaller sample of 15 participants, who agreed to be interviewed with the use of open-ended questions that comprised in-depth interviews followed by an invitation to participate in a focus group to discuss findings of the study. Creswell (2013) described the type of individual or individuals that should be participants in the study: “individuals who are accessible, willing to provide information, and distinctive for their accomplishments and ordinariness or who shed light on a specific phenomenon or issue being explored” (p. 147).

Once the 15 participants were identified through purposeful sampling, I proceeded to collect data, initially planning for a two- to three-month field phase of the study, which was shortened to one month due to delays in IRB approval. Multiple data sources for the study included a mixed questionnaire with both quantitative and qualitative questions and participant interviews. Conversations about their views regarding high school experiences were intended to offer details about incidents that may be connected to shame. I also kept a journal for drawings and writings during this period and engaged in memo writing, which served as another form of data, useful for generating theory.

I used the grounded theory procedures to generate theory as further outlined in Chapter 3: The Methodology. The grounded theory process consists of five basic components which include theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, coding, theoretical memoing, and
The constant comparative analysis method is integrated throughout each of the components as a means to fully understand the data (Charmaz, 2014). The process of grounded theory begins with recruiting a sample of individuals through theoretical sampling that have experience with the research phenomena and can answer the research questions (Patton, 2015). I used theoretical sampling combined with maximum variation sampling, which is a purposive sampling technique to ensure a diverse group of individuals are interviewed who have a variation in perspectives ranging from those viewed as typical to those who are more extreme with regard to the phenomena (Patton, 2015).

Throughout the data collection phase, data were coded and analyzed in order to simultaneously construct meaning and make decisions about what data to collect next as theory was formed through coding empirical indicators (Draucker, Martsolf, Ross & Rusk, 2007). After the initial exploration phase of data collection, I moved to deepen verification of the data by testing the categories of meaning against additional data to cultivate empirical properties to assist with emergent analytic theory development (Charmaz, 2015; Patton, 2015). The constant comparative method of analysis was used during the coding process to ensure the data were grounded in empirical evidence. Initial coding is the term used in this study, but it is also referred to as open coding; it allows the researcher to scrutinize what is happening in the data (Charmaz, 2014). Through the grounded theory framework, the theoretical assumptions are constantly tested until saturation occurs within categories and the research questions can be answered (Charmaz, 2014; Grbich 2013; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The process of gathering and analyzing data is cyclical and repetitive due to the simultaneous data collection and analysis that must take place.
Significance of the Study

High school students make the decision to end their high school careers for many different reasons, but before the cessation of the dropping out process, there are typically warning signs that indicate a student is struggling. This study may assist schools with an understanding of struggling with academic achievement-related emotions from the students’ perspectives, grounded in data to develop theory to inform practice. As schools move toward equity and individualizing the educational experience for all learners, it is imperative that educators listen to the voices of students to find out why and in what ways they are struggling so we can (re)engage them. Listening to the voices of those who were in the midst of the struggle could allow us to find ways to help students with their needs. A large and growing body of literature has investigated the course that many dropouts take along with the thought processes or behaviors exhibited by dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Chase et al., 2014). Many of the current studies on disengagement pay particular attention to the behaviors that eventually lead students to decide to leave school, but I want to analyze the role that shame plays in this process (Archambault et al., 2009; Christle et al., 2007; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010; Lessard et al., 2008).

A paradigm shift is imperative among educators with regard to understanding the nature of disengagement as well as changes in practices so that educators can institutionalize school-wide strategies to promote opportunities for success for struggling students. Schools may see evidence of students struggling and shame through: school attendance (De Castella, Byrne, & Covington, 2013); discipline, suspension, and expulsion records (Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012; Stearns & Glennie, 2006); continually low and failing grades,
and lack of connection with staff members within the school community and/or lack of involvement in school-sponsored clubs or activities (Archambault et al., 2009). Though educators may be aware or have an overall sense that something may be preventing the student from fully engaging in school, they may not fully understand the multi-layered nature of internal travail in order to seek the appropriate assistance for students. The present study may possibly make several noteworthy contributions to extend our knowledge of the underlying internal factors that may be manifested as outward expressions that we label “disengagement.”

Qualitative research was essential for this study because it allowed those who may not advocate for themselves to tell about their experiences in school and their views on their educational path. There may be a high premium on comfort, which could make the learning cycle as well as the process of giving and receiving constructive feedback difficult. An environment in which students feel they need to protect themselves from the uncertainty, risk, shame and emotional exposure may prohibit them from fully engaging, which could be problematic. Inquiring about the root causes of disengagement and the stories these previous high school students communicated regarding schooling due to actions or perceived actions from those within the learning setting, I wanted to call attention to how educators can examine institutional structures that create these perceptions. The qualitative data collected might be used to examine next steps in a (re)culturing process as school ideal values are students compared to current realities. By engaging in the (re)storying process, perhaps schools can become more accessible to populations struggling to fit the current model.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disengagement is a process that causes students to demonstrate myriad issues which culminate in students dropping out of high school. Students who are bored, apathetic, under significant amounts of trauma or stress, or anxious in learning settings often disengage behaviorally and may be at risk for dropping out (Park et al., 2012). Although disengagement is a process spanning multiple years—perhaps as long as a school career—and the inciting incidents may be difficult to determine, the termination of a high school career prior to graduation signifies the concluding event. The purpose of this study is to explore the intersection of academic achievement-related emotions and disengagement to determine if shame plays a role in how students view their school experiences. The overarching question that guided the research was: How and in what ways might shame be reflected in students’ learning environments? The sub-questions that assisted in answering the overarching question were:

- In what ways might memories of shame during childhood be related to students’ experiences in school?
- What are common triggers of shame for students?
- How do students recover from shaming experiences?

To assist with empirically-based conclusions about the underlying complexity that may be present when conducting the study, previous literature was studied.

I found that relevant literature examining shame and disengagement in high school was plentiful until the search terms (shame) and (disengagement) and (high school) were
used together. This limited the subject to education, which resulted in 391 peer-reviewed academic journals, books, magazines, conference materials and eBooks across all library databases. The most articles written in a year using those terms was six articles in 2016, but two of them were on menstruation in Uganda. After consulting with the educational research librarian at my institution, I decided to expand the search to include other disciplines. This resulted in 60,017 resources, with 21,350 of them being academic journals written in English. The studies that pertain to my research focus on shame and disengagement in the learning process appeared to be older and developed in other countries. More contemporary issues discussed bullying, eating disorders, mental health, and trauma within schools. Search terms were revised throughout the process after intensively studying topical areas of academic achievement-related emotions, secondary school, engagement, and specific kinds of shame such as racial shame, gender and shame, and identity and shame. The review of the literature situated study into a research context that drew on what is already known about disengagement and academic-related emotions. Through this study, I intended to expand the literature and make more explicit the connections between disengagement and shame. The literature review is divided into four sections, with each contributing to the background knowledge necessary to fully understand the nature of the problem.

The first section addresses how shame, trauma, and the anchoring memories of adolescence may influence students’ academic experiences if shame is part of the individual’s foundation. As identities are formed, there is an internal narrative or life story that is developed (McLean & Fournier, 2008) within this life narrative could be elements of shame that cause the limbic system to be overshadowed with feelings of fight, flight, or
freeze as the body biologically experiences shame as trauma (Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 2010). The second section discusses reality checking internal shame stories to separate perception of the self from reality, which is co-constructed in the midst of others with the influence of culture. Sometimes individuals are shamed within society due to group affiliation, which could be rooted in historical hierarchical social statuses (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Sue et al., 2007). The third section posits that shame may show up in classrooms and have implications for teaching and learning. In this section, I address academic experiences and the learner lens. Teachers who intentionally navigate students toward identity exploration while providing safeguards in which to explore their possible selves have seen students experience breakthroughs regarding the learning process in general, which prevents them from disengaging (Sinai, Kaplan, & Flum, 2012).

The final section (re)orients current practices to explore shame shapeshifters within school culture toward one of understanding to (re)situate internal narratives that are formed through shame toward a restorative paradigm to aid educators in finding ways to engage the struggling student. If educators want to disrupt the process of disengagement, they have to look for signs and affirm students’ identities while building healthy relationships to re-engage students. Looking at a sample of ethnically diverse previous high school students who displayed indicators of disengagement, I wanted to know what it would have taken to re-engage them academically. With the support of adults, students need to critically check their perceptions and how they see themselves as learners while their academic support system actively eliminates institutional shame from school culture. These elements formed the basis of my literature review, setting the foundation for the study.
Shame, Trauma, and the Anchoring Memories of Adolescence

Adolescence is the transitional period from childhood to adulthood as students undergo cognitive and biological developmental changes; embark upon identity exploration as they seek independence from parents; create an expanded relational network by forging bonds with other adults and their peer-group in the pursuit of belonging and acceptance; conceptualize versions of their future selves; contemplate values of the culture they deem meaningful to adopt and determine the societal roles they will accept or reject (Faircloth, 2012; Klem & Connell, 2004; Siegel, 2015). Self-identity is co-constructed through the way others view and respond to the student as well as previous experiences which may manifest through scripts and memories (Dunlop & Walker, 2013; George, 2014). Research has shown that the personal memories developed in adolescence become an integral part of identity and one’s life narrative (Flum & Kaplan, 2012). The narrative, if it consists of negative experiences, is damaging for the adolescent identity if shaming memories become anchoring memories, and it is especially harmful if these shaming experiences take place at school. The connectedness of various elements forming an individual’s identity, including the neurological, physiological and biological responses when shame is embedded in the identity, is explored in subsequent sections.

Adolescent Identity Multiplicity

In deconstructing childhood identity, adolescents are newly aware of their surroundings and fluidity of their roles across environmental landscapes as these social and emotional conditions are analyzed inside the mind, modulated by culture, which ultimately plays a role in shaping the brain (Choudhury, 2009). Juxtaposed with every superhero origin
story, adolescence is the time period where the metaphorical protagonist learns how to use their superpower through trial and error in the midst of battle. Recent technological advancements such as sophisticated brain imaging techniques have allowed scientists to detect protracted cortical development beyond childhood that peaks during adolescence, suggesting that this critical time period is associated with higher executive functional and social cognition, including the development of social and emotional processing, emotion regulation, intention comprehension, risk assessment, decision-making, cognitive flexibility, and impulse control (Choudhury, 2009). Adolescents are informed by their environment with enhanced abilities to pick up vocal cues and read facial expressions and body language to determine the culture-deemed appropriate social responses for the given situation. They can conduct a risk assessment to gauge the amount of danger present in a given situation, what problem-solving skills may be necessary, or determine how emotions should be displayed to preserve or advance social positioning.

Unfortunately for our adolescent hero, there is no bat-cave or private training ground for them to practice honing their skills away from the public eye. These lessons must be learned while interacting with others in the family, at school, during daily activities, and other experiences; and in this era of social networking social failures may be immortalized on the internet forever. Using a cross-sectional, correlational method design, researchers Cyr, Berman and Smith (2014) recruited 268 diverse high school students from three public high schools in central Florida to complete several self-reported surveys about identity status, anxiety, relationships, peer conflicts, and how much time they spend on-line. The results showed that students had constant and easy access to various forms of communication
technologies, with web-based applications and social networking sites diminishing the readability of cues such as facial expressions, body language, tone, and vocal inflection. Although there were not significant correlations between technology usage and identity exploration, there was a significant correlation in the amount of time spent on communication technology and identity distress. The constant use of devices does not prohibit identity formation, but researchers found it “might be exacerbating the level of anxiety and distress often associated with this process” (Cyr et al., 2014, p. 89). The ease with which one can develop alternate identities on-line may be helpful to those who have difficulty with the face-to-face social interaction involved with this developmental task. An interesting finding was that communication technology was related to a decrease in the quality of peer relationships which students may purposefully use as a means of distancing themselves from others (Cyr et al., 2014). Creating an intentional wedge between themselves and others, students who have difficulty with navigating the social landscape and identity formation process may protect themselves by hiding behind a screen. With the rise of technological interaction, there is an increase in psychological maladjustment regarding identity development and relationship quality (Cyr et al., 2014). This may forestall some students from fully engaging with others in school, which is an important developmental social context.

For an adolescent to pursue identity exploration and development freely and fully, they must have a foundation of secure attachment relationships in order to thrive (Crocetti, 2017). The concept of identity is multi-faceted, ever-changing, and anchored in the past as it is used as a guide for navigating the present. Identity is closely related to self-esteem often
shaped by messages from the larger society. In 1978, theoretical psychologist and social theoriest, Amos Wilson wrote his seminal work, *The Developmental Psychology of the Black Child*, which explained the multi-faceted nature of identity through socialization. He discussed the process of assimilating to the expectations, values, and norms of a particular group contributing to the sense of belonging necessary to feel part of the community (Wilson, 1978). He noted socially accepted behavior varies by culture and what may be socially acceptable for one group could be inappropriate for another. Yet, the coursework for educators includes entire class periods dedicated to understanding the period referred to by seminal theorist Jean Piaget as “tremulous and stormy” (Crocetti, 2017; Marks & Coll, 2018) with limited attention to issues of culture. Erik Erikson’s groundbreaking developmental theories required identity scaffolding for students to feel safe exploring, while learning theorist Lev Vygotsky helped educators maximize the learning environment with zones of proximal development.

Hare (1977) refuted earlier literature (Long & Henderson, 1968; Richmond & White, 1971) that revealed White children had higher self-esteem than Black children. The self-esteem of Black children was often described negatively with explanations that they were often judged by homogeneous communities of color (Bewley, 1977; Simmons, 1978; Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973). Furthering negating this notion, Jean Phinney (1989) explored the concept of ethnic identity and the progression towards identity security (Crocetti, 2017; Marks & Coll, 2018). John Ogbu explored the intersection of race and intelligence and how it played out in educational achievement (Ogbu, 1973; 2003). Although school is not a secluded environment, it should be a safe place for adolescents to explore
various facets of their identity in context with other individuals in the same phase of life with support from trained educational professionals.

On the contrary, school as a social setting could prove to be detrimental to the identity of students if the environmental messages sent to students are identity devaluing. As one walks into a school, signage conveys what values are important to the school culture, display cases are physical representations of what or who gets celebrated, and pictures highlight the visual narrative of the school community and who is or is not included. The messages conveyed in the physical setting of a school are relayed to individuals about their social group affiliation, which are referred to as social identity contingencies. “Social identity contingencies are possible judgements, stereotypes, opportunities, restrictions, and treatments that are tied to one’s social identity in a given setting” (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008, p. 615). Without having any prior personal experience in the setting, cues can determine the extent to which a person will trust and feel comfortable.

In a three-part experiment, African American and White professionals were exposed to hypothetical corporate settings using a recruiting fair model with various diversity philosophies present through photographs, brochures, representation at the booth, and a quotation by the company president to see which cues heightened threats or created trust. Purdie-Vaughns et al. (2008) found that when cues convey the threat of identity-contingent evaluations, trust is undermined, but when cues signal affirming contingencies that are not identity contingent, trust can be sustained. However, setting cues do not undermine feelings of trust and safety for White professionals in the way that it impacts those from historically marginalized groups. Ethnic affirmation and identity buffer the effect of environment
pressures by providing a protective stabilizing effect on self-esteem, helping individuals to respond positively to adverse situations that could cause discrimination stress (Romero, Edwards, Fryberg & Orduña, 2014). For White adolescents, belonging to the dominant group and identifying as American was important to their sense of ethnic identity, but an achieved state of ethnic identity is vital for people of color because generally American means mainstream culture, which does not include them (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007).

Schools and workplaces are saturated with cues that reflect the broader society signaling the devaluation of certain social identities (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). These messages conveyed through the physical space activate expectations about how individuals felt they were going to be treated by those around them. In schools, features such as the lack of diversity in a hall of fame or display cases for solely athletic accomplishments send signals to those not fitting into the school’s mainstream culture that lower the trust and comfort in their places in that school. If individuals interested in music were to find out that the school has a strong music department and they felt included there, the threat could be lifted, and they could have their sense of trust restored but would remain vigilant for cues that support or threaten this new knowledge. Sometimes schools go with a generic look, careful not to represent any culture to send the message that everyone is accepted. Despite these attempts to remain neutral Purdie-Vaughns et al. (2008) discovered when colorblind cues or low cues related to students of color were present, African Americans expected their race to be problematized, activating institutional distrust. Evaluating the contextual environmental messages in schools including classrooms and open areas allow identity
affirming messages to be conveyed so that adolescents can feel a sense of freedom to explore who they are and who they would like to become.

When students are going through the adolescence phase, their brains are in a sensitive state, and feeling confined to fit into a category or being labeled thwarts exploration as individuals, forcing them to fit into predefined categories. In a quantitative network analysis study examining the labels that students use for themselves when discussing gender and sexual identity, researchers White, Moeller, Ivcevic, and Brackett (2018) enlisted the help of Lady Gaga to disseminate a survey to students, which resulted in an oversampling of LGBTQ students. The average age of the participants was 15.89, but the large national survey pool of 19,385 participants living in the United States, with all 50 states represented, was racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse. Researchers discovered most adolescents used the predefined traditional labels to define their gender and sexual identities, but a substantial group rejected fitting into a category and generated their own: “Of note, questioning and unsure were labels present in the top five most commonly reported for both nontraditional gender and sexual identities” (White et al., 2018, p. 248). Some of the newer labels such as pansexual, queer, and asexual do not imply a gender identity when expressing a sexual identity; thus, it breaks apart the co-dependency and stigma embedded in some of the more traditional labels found on most school forms that ask students to choose identifiers (White et al., 2018). Identity development is an essential task of adolescence, and schools have to be mindful of which groups are being excluded as explained by Purdie-Vaughns et al. (2008): “Each group at risk of devaluation holds a core set of identity-based concerns” (p. 627). Priority must be given to recognition, acceptance, validation, equity, and other
inclusionary practices that allow adolescents to fully explore their diverse identities with educators who have developed cultural competencies to support students through this developmental phase.

**Shame in Anchoring Memories**

Identity is the answer to the question “Who am I?”; it is the essence of what makes us unique. Shame is the idea that who I am is not enough and my flaws will be exposed to others, thereby diminishing my social standing proving that I am unworthy of belonging (Brown, 2006; Gilbert & Andrews, 1998; Lewis, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). When memories of these feelings of unworthiness become essential to our life story, it can have debilitating effects on our psychological health and physiological well-being. Individuals who have shame memories that function as traumatic memories may be more prone to depressive symptoms (Matos, Pinto-Gouveia & Costa, 2013), but when shame memories serve as a cognitive reference point, shame can become key to our core identity, framing the way we view our life story (Pinto-Gouveia & Matos, 2011). Seeking to explore the nature of shame as an autobiographical memory, central to our life narrative and personal identity, Pinto-Gouveia and Matos (2011) used a battery of self-report questionnaires with 811 participants to discover linkages between the centrality of shame memories, external and internal shame, and psychopathology. In the study, there was evidence to support the finding that:

> Individuals [for] whom shame memories function as turning points in the life story, as crucial components of their personal identity and as reference points to everyday inferences, then to believe they exist in the mind of others as undesirable, inferior, or defective and to feel and judge themselves as inferior, bad or inadequate. (p. 286)
Adults’ recollections of羞恥 experiences affect their physical, emotional, and cognitive abilities and are experienced as trauma, as stated by Cunha, Matos, Faria and Zagalo (2012). “These threat memories can texture the whole sense of self and become central to self-identity, structure one’s life narrative, forming a highly available reference point to attribute meaning to past, current and future experiences” (p. 206). Shame memories activate physiological responses that often have physical manifestations that may be difficult to control, curtailing the development of positive self-esteem.

Exploring the internal working models of self and the translations of shame feelings into symptoms of anxiety and depressions, Cunha et al. (2012), wanted to find out how shame experiences were central and traumatic to adolescent identities and life stories. Their sample included 157 boys and 197 girls from 7th through 12th grade in Ciombra, Portugal public schools. Before any data were collected, participants were given a brief introduction to the concept of shame, and then participants were primed by recalling a stressful shame experience from childhood or adolescence. Students self-reported by measuring themselves using the following scales: Centrality of Event Scale; Impact of the Event Sale-Revised; Other As Shamer; Internalized Shame Scale and Depression; Anxiety and Stress Scale. Researchers found that individuals whose shame memories acted as traumatic events and who regarded these events as significant life story turning points negatively perceived themselves and thought others had the same negative perception. There was an overall negative self-image formed in the minds of individuals that experienced shame early on:

Shame experiences early in life, act as conditioned emotional memories that may trigger intrusions, physiological arousal and avoidance and become central to adolescents’ self-identity and life story, and thus engender a sense of current threat to the (social) self, leaving one to feel inferior, flawed, unlovable, undesired and alone.
These feelings of inferiority and disconnectedness from others seem to be constellated around a sense of self as negatively seen by others and judged by the self, which in turn may render the adolescent more vulnerable to enter defeat and threat emotional states when facing adverse life events. (p. 213)

Shame becomes the cornerstone for how individuals make meaning of their lives and how they answer the question “Who am I?” These skewed senses of the selves are grounded in altered self-perceptions of how individuals perceive they are being viewed by others, which may be different from reality.

Students bring their whole selves into the classroom including newly discovered superpowers, these conditioned emotional memories, distorted self-perceptions, and other emotional phenomena while they are picking up environmental cues, undergoing the developmental tasks of adolescence, and making sure they keep their grades up in school. For students dealing with deep-rooted feelings of unworthiness, school could be seen as threatening places where they are forced to further exploit underdeveloped parts of themselves through answering questions aloud when they are called on in class; showcasing skills through homework, art projects, music contests, theater productions, athletic exhibitions, homework correction; class discussions and small group work; and other academic performances. Students are asked to put themselves on display, which means that school could be a shaming place for some individuals.

The school is a microcosm of society, and classroom infrastructure has to promote all learners and avoid triggering those dealing with feelings of unworthiness. This led researchers Carvalho, Dinis, Pinto-Gouveia and Estanqueiro (2015) to hypothesize that individuals who recall shaming, criticism, and put-downs in childhood and adolescence would experience more depressive symptoms into adulthood. Analyzing the data from 161
White Europeans and Portuguese adults between the ages of 18 and 65 who completed several self-report measurements, researchers found that individuals who reported shaming experiences in the context with others as central to their identity experienced more depressive symptoms. Outside of those rare cases of individuals who have found ways to live a life of seclusion devoid of all human contact, contact with others is unavoidable. When self-identity themes involve shaming experiences in the midst of contact with others, it could serve as a reference point for everyday inferences, eliciting high arousal, fear and other negative emotional experiences associated with full impact of sensory emotional meaning assigned at the time of the experience (Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 2010). Simply put, trauma creates scars on memory (Porter & Peace, 2007).

Engaging self-protection as a means to not re-injure old wounds, there is a barrier that interferes with processing that is built in the schema of individuals to avoid contact with the memory that causes a threat; consequently, the unwillingness to be in contact with the memory and process is often what leads to depression (Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 2010; Talarico, LaBar & Rubin, 2004). Most of the brain is focused on suppression, which means that during our interactions we are not fully engaged in the present moment (Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 2010). Though operating in the present, shame may cause the individual to experience another moment in time. When it comes to shame, the saying about time healing old wounds is not applicable. The greater the emotional intensity of the event, the longer and more accurately and vividly the event will be remembered, regardless of the memory’s age (Porter & Peace, 2007; Talarico et al., 2004). When shame is internalized as a traumatic
memory, serving as an identity reference point, a new anchor will have to be constructed to hold the reimagined identity in place so that perception is closer to reality.

**Trauma Triggers and Shame Stressors**

Historically, shame was used as a classroom management technique with the dunce cap, names written on the board, and more currently as a safe seat in the corner or suspensions, which are a means to punish students with the goal of altering student behavior (Stearns & Stearns, 2017). Though it has been empirically proven that these exclusionary techniques are not effective, many are commonly used in schools across the United States as discipline practices. Using a longitudinal study design, researchers Hunt, Slack, and Berger (2017) wanted to examine the association between adverse childhood experiences (ACE) exposure by age five and the presence of behavioral problems in middle childhood among a diverse sample of children living in the United States. Drawn from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW), a sample of the 4,898 children born in large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000 were interviewed either by phone or in person at ages 1, 3, 5 and 9. Of the 40 data sets that were compiled, roughly 75% of the study’s group was exposed to at least one adverse exposure. The heightened ACE experience may be due to this study using a more socioeconomically diverse and less educationally advanced sample than the original study.

The most commonly reported ACEs were parental anxiety or depression (44%), domestic violence exposure including emotional, physical, and sexual violence (26%), and emotional abuse (22%). Notable trends found in the data include “Black children demonstrated higher total externalizing behaviors and were more likely to have an attention
deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) diagnosis compared to the other Hispanic and White children after exposure to 2 or more ACEs” (Hunt, et al., 2017, p. 400). Although White children were less likely to be exposed to high levels of adversity compared to Black and Latinx children, “highly exposed White children were at particular risk for problem behaviors” (Hunt et al., 2017, p. 400). Researchers hypothesized this may be due to feelings of anger or resentment when comparing their circumstances to others in the mainstream and thinking they are entitled to better circumstances.

Some students did not experience any behavioral manifestations due to early experiences with trauma because “children in high-stress environments eventually develop some degree of immunity” (Hunt et al., 2017, p. 400). Students adapted and learned to cope with adversity in ways that made them less susceptible to behavioral problems (Hunt et al., 2017). ACEs and other traumatic stress have detrimental effects on developing neural networks and on the neuroendocrine systems that have remained hidden until recent developments within the neuroscientific community (Anda et al., 2006). There is a strong relationship between early adverse experiences and substance use and abuse, difficulty sustaining long-term attachments, poor sleep quality and impaired physical activity, which are linked to greater risk for mental health issues (Anda et al., 2006). Damage stemming from ACEs include complications regulating metabolic and hormonal systems that foster a psychological equilibrium and resilience to life stressors as well as adult health outcome inequalities, such as damage transmitted through interwoven social and biological mechanisms across the life course (Nurius, Green, Logan-Greene & Borja, 2015).
Those reporting four or more ACEs were more likely to report high school non-completion and household poverty, periods of unemployment, and lower incomes, which was further perpetuated by children growing up in the environment, so the effects were cyclical and intergenerational (Metzler, Merrick, Klevens, Ports, & Ford, 2017). There is a common misconception that those who are economically disadvantaged can climb the financial ladder to end up in a higher socioeconomic class; however, researchers Metzler et al. (2017) discovered:

in the U.S., 70% of those who are born in the bottom fifth never reach even the middle of the economic ladder; African American children born into poverty have an even greater rise of remaining in poverty as adults than white children born into poverty. (p. 146)

There have been educators who accuse students of not wanting their education or not caring enough, but the issue is deeper than a simple want or belief. These trauma stressors impacted the dopamine release system, which is the primary reward system that cause individuals to look for these same rewards in other sources (Anda et al., 2006). If the educational environment is not providing students the sense of reward to fulfill their needs, this explains them looking elsewhere for a sense of accomplishment. School systems could consider other alternatives to exclusionary practices to address behavioral problems that may be a result of ACE, such as trauma informed and responsive practices and implicit bias training, which might reduce these discriminatory and negative disciplinary practices (Metzler et al., 2017).

Not all shame is associated with an ACE, an anchoring memory, or a key to identity, but recent evidence suggests that any type of shame can be experienced as trauma, all of which affect academic performance. In a study by Lee, Anderson, and Klimes-Dougan (2016), 245 undergraduate college students in China were given a 227-item survey as
researchers investigated the role of shame in previous potentially traumatic experiences with regard to academic performance. This quantitative study was part of a larger project, and a path analysis was used to analyze the data; it found that as students’ exposures to stressors following potentially traumatic events were directly and negatively linked with perceived academic performance, their perceptions of performances were altered. The ways students viewed their academic performance were “adversely influenced because of the traumas they experienced may elevate their stress levels, which may disrupt their daily routines, disturb their vulnerable emotions, and/or impair their cognitive functions” (Lee et al., 2016, p. 47). Shame is a social construct determined by the cultural norms. When there is a cultural expectation that proficient academic performance is a core value, then individuals not meeting the goal may be seen as dishonoring their culture or families, which may elicit shame (Lee et al., 2016).

There are several schools of thought that encourage the use of shame as a social tool, because it serves the purpose of allowing individuals to recognize that they have not abided by society’s social-moral codes, and reintegrative shaming controls crime as a potent weapon of social control (Braithwaite, 1989; Zhang & Zhang, 2004). Individuals who subscribe to this idea of shame being beneficial believe that triggering shame in individuals allows them to want to make corrections to restore their place to bring about social restoration and balance. Researchers Ang and Khoo (2004) investigated high shame culture in Singapore using a multidimensional approach to evaluate the behavior and self-perceptions of children and adolescents from 331 secondary students from three different schools. The mean age for the sample was 13.67. Researchers concluded that the act of shaming individuals publicly or
by approbation was supposed to cause remorse, but the effects were counterproductive because public exposure or admonishment produced humiliation rather than shame. If the adolescent perceives the shaming as unjustified humiliation, then it could result in hostility and anger rather than more constructive responses that prompt the individual to make corrections. At the core of shame is the issue of low self-worth, and the body experiences it like trauma, which may not prompt the individual to make amends to restore the social-moral code that was broken, as described by Ang and Khoo (2004):

> Because shame affects the entire self rather than just a specific behavior, the shame prone student has difficulty drawing a clear distinction between self and other as well as between self and behavior, and hence he/she does not have the capacity to respond adaptively to interpersonal conflict and unpleasant interpersonal exchanges. (p. 31)

Capacity for empathy has to be built so that students understand the feelings of the other, which may cause them to repair any damage done. Using shame has proven to be counterproductive, as it may cause further negative responses as self-protective strategies take over, because the stories that students tell themselves about the situation may not be accurate. This concept is presented in the next section.

**Reality Checking of Internal Shame Stories**

What we know about our responses to shame is largely based upon empirical studies that investigate how the body experiences shame, including biological survival responses of fight, flight, freeze, and appease (Duros & Crowley, 2014; Gilbert & Andrews, 1998; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992). The emotions associated with shame may span a broad spectrum such as anger, depression, or withdrawal, which could generate a desire to hide, disappear or even to die (Lewis, 1995); it can evoke a sense of being bad, worthless, or contemptible and has been associated with a shrinking feeling and powerlessness (Dearing &
Tangney, 2011). It has also been described as a crippling of adaptive self-functions (Tangney et al., 1992). Physiologically, shame is experienced as trauma. Memories of highly emotionally stimulating events are better encoded in our brains because the stress hormones that are released during the encoding serve as reference points (Berntsen, Willert, & Rubin, 2003). Our brains use these reference points to organize our life story, which is a key component of our identity. The unwillingness to be in contact with encoded shaming emotional experiences has paradoxical effects since suppressing and avoidance lead to an increase of those experiences and emotional dysregulation (Dinis, Carvalho, Pinto Gouveia, & Estanqueiro, 2015). The overwhelming sensations that accompany shame seem to occupy the mind, but because critically analyzing the situation from an objective standpoint is difficult, our interpretation of the shaming event goes unquestioned and is encoded in our minds as our current reality. Shame alters our interpretation of reality, creating a contradictory dilemma as individuals are left to figure out if the lens of shame allows for a clear view of the self. This is examined in subsequent sections.

Shame and the Stories We Tell Ourselves

In a study conducted by Lindsay-Hartz, De Rivera, and Mascolo (1995), researchers developed structural descriptions of guilt and shame using a phenomenological methodology centered around “conceptual encounter,” which was developed by de Rivera and Kreilkamp in 1981. Participants were engaged in an interactive process in which they contrasted their own concrete experiences of the phenomenon with the investigator’s conceptualization and working definitions. Nineteen participants (10 males and 9 females) between the ages of 18 and 65 were interviewed in three phases. Phase one consisted of an individual interview
during which they were asked to describe in-depth a personal experience with shame and another experience of guilt. In the second phase, after the participant described all they could remember about the incident, they were asked 20 probing questions designed to explore all aspects of the experience. In the final encounter phase, structural descriptions that had been developed were tested, revised, and validated, and what resulted were four elements that are included in each descriptor: situation, transformation, function, and instruction. Situation is a reaction regarding a transaction that creates personal perspective and interpretation of the meaning of the experience or event. Concerning shame, the situation descriptors include:

We experience this emotion when upon viewing ourselves through the eyes of another, we realize that we are in fact who we do not want to be and that we cannot now be otherwise. We usually try to avoid being who we do not want to be. Yet, we have somehow not avoided this, often because we have been unaware of the implications of our acts or have not understood something about ourselves that is now revealed to us. (Lindsay-Hartz et al., 1995, p. 278)

The situation descriptor has implications for our developing identities as our evaluations of our internal selves and our perceived relational positions change how we interact with others. It is possible that our perceptions of our relational positions are incompatible with how others view our actions.

Transformation reflects our ways of being in the world including the biological, psychological, neurological, and social changes that occur in our bodies; how we relate to other people, space, and time. Shame transforms our worldview and may elicit physical and emotional responses:

Being who we do not want to be, we shrink in relation to our previous image of ourselves and we are exposed before the other. As we shrink, a single characteristic or action seems to define the whole of who we are; we are worthless; and our view of the world may shrink to one small detail. (Lindsay-Hartz et al., 1995, p. 278)
This one small detail that we extract and magnify is largely dependent on the previous image in comparison with the new image, but the lens used to view any image could be problematic. Function involves the adaptive or maladaptive movement that serves to preserve core personal values and is directly related to instruction, which is the “impulse to act in certain ways” (Lindsay-Hartz et al., 1995, p. 274). When in the midst of a shaming experience, it triggers function: “Upholding our ideals about who we want to be and maintaining our commitment to a social determination of who we are” followed by instruction “we wish to hide in order to get out of the interpersonal realm and escape our painful exposure before the other” (Lindsay-Hartz et al., 1995, p. 278). When an individual is experiencing shame, shifts within their perception take place altering how they feel they are viewed by others (Gilbert & Andrews, 1998; Lewis, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). This is articulated by sociologist Thomas Scheff (2003) as he posits that shame is the “premier social emotion.”

With shame shifting perception, it is difficult to trust emotional impulses surrounding the event although they are triggered by memories which seem to be accurate as details about the event surface timelessly and involuntarily. Berntsen and Rubin (2002), along with a team of 130 interviewers, conducted face-to-face interviews in the homes of 1,241 respondents over the age of 19 to discuss their emotional involuntary memories that had occurred across their life span. Researchers wanted to find out what type of conscious memories were readily available without any attempt to retrieve them and how individuals handled having these memories. Several significant themes were constructed from this work, such as social censure. Connecting with others was important to those who had negative involuntary
memories: “People with traumatic and sad experiences have a need to share their memories with others and to express their emotions” (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002, p. 647). However, people in the social circles of the individuals who needed to share were often reluctant to listen and feeling uncomfortable, they may have interrupted disclosure attempts by shutting them down, changing the topic, or avoiding contact with the traumatized person. Researchers also found, “As a consequence, people with traumatic experiences are often forced not to share their memories with others in order to maintain social contact and avoid stigmatization” (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002, p. 647). Potential confidants who could challenge the validity of the events or feelings experienced were not emotionally present for the individual, causing them to further internalize the situation as well as the experience of not being able to share.

The theme of life change was reflected in the study, as highly negative life events were more likely to be followed by more significant life changes than highly positive events (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002). The instability that was experienced in the midst of the change was not a positive feeling; therefore the negative events surfaced more; but researchers found that memories of all sorts of emotional events, whether positive or negative, lose their emotional intensity over time (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002). Adding to the trauma research, dissociation was a theme describing how the traumatic event may stay inaccessible for conscious recollection and may be retained at the unconscious level to protect the personal identity from becoming overwhelmed with the entirety of the memory (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002). Memories that derive from traumatic experiences may not be reliable because they often contain errors and distortion (Conway & Loveday, 2015). Over time, the incident
becomes more integrated and accessible as the individual gains freedom from the emotional stress associated with the trauma (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002). Sometimes involuntary memories or recollections appear as a result of a specific cue in our environment or through an interaction with one of our senses (Conway & Loveday, 2015).

Although memories may be thought of as being factual, they represent a version of the truth through the eyes of the individual. “Memories are shaped in their construction by the working self and the working self determines what knowledge derived from experience becomes encoded in the autobiographical memory knowledge base” (Conway & Loveday, 2015, p. 576). Memories are our derivation of the experience and never fully represent the entirety of the current experience because the individual’s past experiences determine how memories will be constructed in the remembering imagining system (Conway & Loveday, 2015). Memories are mental constructions that help individuals make sense of the world, and to some degree all memories are false in that they do not represent the past literally but are more like imaginations that assist in the adaptation to a wide array of social interactions (Conway & Loveday, 2015).

In the moment, it may be difficult to rely on perception, but as time goes on, the events are woven together to form the tapestry of our lives containing patterns, with each thread being necessary to hold the identity in place. A sample of 134 participants were recruited by McLean (2008) in Canada with 49 participants in the older group and 85 participants in the younger group to complete a self-defining memory interview that took about 1.5 to 2 hours. There were gender differences in the retelling of the interviews as female participants were more like to have a theme and engage in processing their
connections through more elaborated narrative selves, disclosing details about more personal topics. The younger group were in the midst of constructing their life’s narrative, so they focused on change and transition, using reflection to better understand themselves or problem solve as they directed their attention toward the future. The researcher discovered the memories that the older group recounted had thematic coherence and they maintained a continuous sense of self in the threats of loss and life changes in a fully formed narrative reflecting stability. The stories they told may have been metaphorical, as their self-reflections were more integrated as they lived in the moment (McLean, 2008).

The older group had developed full embodied answers to the identity question, “Who am I?” and were more accepting of the answers in spite of the choices they made, events that may have happened, and interactions that may have shaped them. Bluck and Habermas (2000) add to the explanation concerning the reason the older group may have had themes for their lives: “The tendency to create meaning from life’s events has been characterized as a motivational need which fulfills individuals’ striving to see purpose in life in order to set goals, to justify actions and values, to maintain a sense of control and efficacy, and to bolster self-worth” (p. 133). Instead of focusing on any negative elements of the self or engaging in self-judgment, self-blame or globally negative evaluations of the self, the older group were able to validate their worthiness. The research showed that with age, maturity, reflection, and a global view of the connectedness of life’s events, an individual can trace recurring patterns to make assessments. “Only when life’s phases are linked together can one make an evaluative judgment concerning the life already lived” (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p. 132). Perhaps the constructions that are created as events are occurring are premature in their
renderings along with the emotions encoded in our memories, making it hard to trust these constructions and physiological responses even though they may seem real to us as they are happening. Engaging in the reality checking process by questioning our versions of our current realities may be a necessary step because as shown through the research, perception is not always reality.

**Dominant Ideology and Shaming “Those People”**

Shame is a social construct that exists in relation to others. It can be elicited by an unwanted identity which is when an unintended characteristic is attributed to an individual by themselves or when it is ascribed to them by others that misrepresents their idealized version of themselves (Ferguson, Eyre, & Ashbaker, 2000). The core construct of unwanted identity was helpful in explaining why shame was aroused in myriad situations involving differences in shame experiences by men and women. In a study examining the role that gender differences play in unwanted identities, Ferguson, Eyre, and Ashbaker (2000) administered the TOSCA-2 to undergraduate student participants, 48 men and 84 women ages 18–28 with a mean age of 20.14 that were primarily White from Utah State University. This research tool includes 16 hypothetical situations that represent violations of socially accepted behaviors. In addition to these scenarios, researchers developed seven new situations to present to participants in the TOSCA-2 format to present 23 scenarios to evoke a response to measure shame, guilt, unwanted identity, and anger.

It has been a traditionally held view that women more frequently intensely internalize introjective emotions such as shame, guilt, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, and sadness whereas due to gender-role expectations, men express more extra-punitive emotions such as
anger. The results of the study demonstrated that men experienced greater shame intensity than women in situations that threatened traditionally masculine identities. Women reported greater intensities of shame only in situations where unwanted identities were at stake.

“However, when confronted directly with identity-threatening contexts, as was the case in the present study, both men and women may realize just how horribly ashamed they would feel” (p. 153). Ferguson et al. (2000) stated:

It seems reasonable to surmise that shame involves adopting the evaluative standpoint that one has possibly revealed a dreaded flaw in the self. This dreaded flaw can bear on a wide variety of characteristics, including the person’s physical attributes or skills, cognitive or creative competencies, sexuality, capacity for intimacy, interpersonal skills, and tastes, preferences, or reactions to situations relative to important others. Intense expressions of shame thus represent the individual’s horror at, or about, the thought of actually being one’s dreaded or unwanted self, either when imagining one’s own or another’s view of the self. (p. 149)

The unwanted identity incited shame, which unleashed a self-protective response of anger, which prompted the individual to withdraw, attack themselves, attack others, or avoid the situation (Elison, Lennon, & Pulos, 2006). Some of the automatic responses that were expressed may be biological in how our bodies respond to situations but some of the responses may be learned, which can never be extinguished but can be kept passive by higher order cortical processing (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002; Ferguson et al., 2000). Sometimes social norms set the stage for shaming experiences because individuals who do not subscribe to the dominant version of normal or have been pushed to the margins by society will never feel worthy by a society that continues to devalue pieces of their identity.

The American high school is supposedly a microcosm of society, but it is predicated on mainstream cultural ideals and traditions, as stated by Convertino (2015): “Salient cultural ideals invoked in the American high school include, but are not limited to, competition,
obedience, standardization, patriotism, heteronormativity, and assimilation” (p. 369). Cultural ideals must be maintained to win at the system and affirm the identity of the individual. Spatial capital regulates belonging and exclusion in 21st-century traditional schools. For individuals not abiding by the social norm of high school, shame is used as a tool to keep individuals in line or they are forced into the margins or, as labeled by Convertino (2015), “misfits.” American high schools produce misfittedness. In an autonomous start-up public charter high school with 180 students representing all 33 zip codes in Sundale City—50% White, 35% Latinx, 5% Black, 5% Asian American, 5% American Indian, 40–45% free/reduced lunch—20% have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in contrast to the district average of 10–12%. In Convertino’s (2015) three-year long ethnographic study from January 2007 to December 2010, the researcher conducted bi-weekly participant observations inside and outside of the school; life history interviews with eight parents, eight teachers and eight students; focus groups with four different groups of 15 to 20 students to cross-check findings about the phenomenon of misfittedness; a parent survey to cross-check findings from parents and archival data sourced from local, national, and school texts. It was determined that groups of individuals who did not fit the mainstream ideals were pushed to the fringes and eventually cast out of the “normal” high school experience.

Within the American high school, social categories represent a disciplinary apparatus that praise those who fit in with feelings of belonging and punish those that do not, with exclusionary practices that are used in multiple forms. These include social isolation (not identifying with any particular social group or category); popularity ladder (micropolitics of
inclusion and the management of difference, an instrument for regulating populations); hegemonic values (homogenous cultural center, differentiate conforming bodies from nonconforming bodies, normalizing Americanized viewpoints and values); social constitution (contributing to the institutional marginalization and exclusion of youth from traditional school spaces and shaping of social space); and cultural production of youth identities in 21st century schooling in the context of a changing world (Convertino, 2015).

Many students did not chose to leave traditional high schools, “Rather, they had been ‘forced out’ because they could not ‘fit in’ to idealized cultural forms invoked in the imagined American high school and, consequently, were often vulnerable to not only symbolic violence but also emotional and physical harassment” (Convertino, 2015, p. 373). Systems of belonging were developed by analyzing commonalities within the experiences that united the students. This new system that operated independently of the mainstream system defied the ideals that they had to fit in, “In this sense, misfits embody and enact spatial tactics of resistance invoked in the local production of 21st century school spaces that ‘initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself’” (p. 375). Student who chose marginality and found belonging with others also were forced out to the fringe as they created new identities and communities. Creating these new identities shifted the shame narrative so they could “fit in” by being misfits.

The social construction of shame can influence how we view ourselves, as our perception of ourselves is altered by the messages we receive from others. The multiple facets of our identity allow us to simultaneously be associated with various groups, but when
there are common unfavorable viewpoints about an aspect of our identity due to group affiliation, it can trigger shame, causing us not to be the best version of ourselves, which could be a cyclical process as a self-fulfilling prophesy. In a seminal four-part study conducted by Steele and Aronson (1995), researchers hypothesized that when a widely-known negative stereotype about one’s group exists and any actions or features that confirm the stereotype in one’s own eyes or the eyes of others, it could impair or disrupt intellectual or physical performance by redirecting attention to the threat; thus, dividing focus on the task. The findings indicated that when a test was presented as a measure of ability, Black participants performed worse than White participants, but when the test was presented as less reflective of ability, Black students matched the performance of White students (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

The aforementioned study is evidence that stereotype threat can impair the intellectual ability and performance of individuals who may be capable of doing the work but if one is not believed to be capable of doing one’s best by changing the wording of the instructions, the outcome of the test did not represent the student’s actual ability. I contend that the student may have felt some elements of shame about the negative stereotype, and it impaired their ability because they had to divide their focus to put effort in suppressing the fight, flight, freeze response or thinking about how they were viewed in the minds of others based on their group affiliation. The intersectionality of identity and socialization presents additional childhood precursors that students of color must contend with when determining which social norms to value (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). In relation to the identity development for students of color, researchers Spencer & Markstrom-Adams (1990), found
that there are often periods of racial and ethnic reconciliation based on factors related to

cultural identity. Many youth of color are constantly navigating negative attitudes toward

who they are coupled with the mainstream cultural ideals and traditions of the American high

school.

Further advancing stereotype research, Keels, Durkee and Hope (2017) sought to

examine the links between racial-ethnic microaggressions along with education and

psychological outcomes in a longitudinal investigation using data from the Minority College

Cohort Study with 221 Black and 312 Latinx students who began college in the fall of 2013.

Analyzing the students’ experiences with academic inferiority, preconceived expectations of

aggressions, and forthcoming stereotypical misrepresentations, researchers concluded that

racially and ethnically hostile educational contexts are detrimental for students’ academic

achievement and mental health. Black students reported significantly higher levels of

academic inferiority microaggressions which related to discouragement at school, being

made to feel isolated and inferior, possibly by minimizing their classroom contributions in

the context of mostly White and diverse high schools. Researchers recommended paying

more attention to the racial stressors that exist in primary and secondary schools. In order for

microaggressions to decrease, students of color have to self-disclose their experiences with

individuals of the majority group to elicit empathy while individualizing points of

understanding which much be accompanied by supportive allied bystanders (Keels et al.,

2017). The concept of “othering” is not usually overt and vocalized, but it is felt and

transmitted through non-verbal communication between people.
Analyzing the intersectionality of space, identities, and power in the social realm of school is imperative so we can bring groups in from the margins so they can experience liberation allowing them to be free to explore all aspects of their identity without fear. Being attentive to the identity negotiation taking place and allowing it to be fluid as students try on various ways of being among shifting school shapes are necessary so the shame stories can be (re)written into narratives of empowerment.

**Moving Through, Recovering and Becoming Shame Resilient**

Using a grounded theory methodology, Brown (2006) consulted interview data from 215 women to discover how and why shame is experienced and strategies employed in response to shame. Shame resilience theory emerged from the process and situates shame as a psycho-social-cultural construct inextricably tied to relationships, connection, cultural expectations, and the real or perceived failure of meeting those expectations. Participants experienced shame as a layered web with conflicting and competing expectations of who the women were “supposed to be” in conjunction with the roles they needed to play which were either imposed, enforced, or expressed by individuals or groups and constantly reinforced by media culture. Due to competing demands, the feelings of entrapment were inevitable as “the shame web entangled them with unattainable expectations or multiple conflicting expectation that could not be simultaneously met; therefore, connections had to be severed or forfeited” (Brown, 2006, p. 46).

Shame resilience theory is a continuum that has shame and empathy on opposite sides and suggesting that shame resilience is developed by “decreasing the feelings of being trapped, powerless, and isolated” by increasing opportunities to experience “empathy by
increasing connection, power, and freedom from the shame web” (Brown, 2006, p. 47).
Experiencing an empathetic response from another person was most powerful in moving through shame, although self-empathy was also helpful. Connection featured mutual support and shared experiences as a safety net for exploring other creative options, allowing individuals to move away from the social/cultural expectations to be validated in their constructed identities. The last concept of power included awareness, access to choose, and the ability to affect change which may occur externally among the intersection of the social/cultural space or internally in the psychological processes of how the experience is translated and understood.

Demonstrating elements of the management and repair of shame, researchers Leeming and Boyle (2013) analyzed 50 anonymized written narratives from participants at a British university including 31 undergraduate students ages 18 to 22, eleven mature students, and eight university employees using the contextual constructionist epistemology. Arguing that managing and repairing shame is a social and intrapsychic process, researchers highlighted that participants wanted to restore their sense of their position and renegotiate their unwanted identity. In some of the instances recounted, individuals felt the shame was deserved and the possibility of repair was in the hands of another individual who could choose to support, accept, and forgive the participant or cause further feelings of shame. This was especially prominent when individuals were explaining situations when they were young enough for others deemed to have the right to make judgments on behavior, such as parents or teachers, who caused them to feel shame based on the power dynamics present. The acceptance by others was not as necessary in private experiences of shame.
Furthering all of the aforementioned concepts of repairing shame, Van Vliet provided detailed steps into how individuals repair shame. Volunteers who had experience with recovering from a shaming event were recruited in a large Canadian city through newspaper advertisements and advertisements at a Canadian university. Van Vliet (2008) recruited 13 total participants who ranged in age from 24 to 70 and were socio-economically, educationally, and culturally diverse to participate in a grounded theory study with semi-structured interviews being the main method of data collection as the researcher was a doctoral student. Participants recounted a range of events and situations that caused them to feel shame, the researcher grouped them in four categories: (1) social, moral, or personal transgression; (2) personal failure; (3) ostracism or social rejection; and (4) trauma. The researcher found that the accounts detailed shame throwing individuals into a “painful state of disequilibrium” interfering with their ability to cope as it struck the “core of the individual’s being, with the most positive aspects of the self-bearing the brunt of the attack” (p. 237). In the research, it was explained by Van Vliet (2008) that shame had three functions:

Specifically, shame (a) undermines the individual’s positive self-concept (b) damages the individual’s connection to others, and (c) results in a diminished sense of power and control. This assault on the self is associated with efforts at avoiding the pain and with withdrawal behaviors. (p. 237)

The theory that was created rebuilding of the self was constructed as a core category occurring through five primary processes including: connecting, refocusing, accepting, understanding, and resisting which allow the individual to emerge as a stronger human being “who is more confident, powerful, independent, and accepting, as well as someone who is better able to resist future assaults on the self” (p. 238). The feelings of shame did not
disappear, but they were pushed into the margins, separated from the core self, becoming part of the larger identity landscape instead of remaining the central focus.

In the connecting process, individuals moved away from withdrawal and isolation by moving towards friends, family, community, or a Higher Power. This leads to the next process of refocusing: “With refocusing, individuals shift their energy and attention to goals, interests, and positive behaviors that enhance the self and counterbalance the negative judgments and powerlessness associated with shame” (Van Vliet, 2008, p. 239). In the accepting phase, there is a willingness to work through the painful feelings associated with shame and confront it. This usually involves an emotional release such as crying, yelling, or discussing the feelings with a confidant who will not further exacerbate the feelings of shame. After acceptance, the individual tries to fully understand why the event occurred in order to extrapolate meaning evaluating their role, the role of others, and circumstances outside of their control and possibly viewing it within the context of their sociocultural belief system. In the final phase of resisting, the individual directs their actions and attitudes to create barriers that protect themselves against external assaults by challenging the social structures that exist and decreasing their internal vulnerability to future attacks. The rebuilding theory involves “restoring the individual’s sense of interpersonal connection and social place” as the individual grows through adversity and stress to become a better version of themselves (Van Vliet, 2008, p. 242).

In another article using the same research, Van Vliet (2009) focused on the attributions in the process of overcoming shame, such as decreasing the discrepancy gap between the self-concept and self-ideals by embracing a more realistic view of themselves,
increasing their responsibility for solutions, or looking toward the future instead of focusing on the past and decreasing the tendency towards self-blame. There are two types of self-blame with characterological self-blame having detrimental effects, because “individuals blame themselves for being who they are as people and see their negative traits as being global and stable”. On the other hand, behavioral self-blame promotes adaptive qualities because “the focus is on specific behaviors that can be modified,” reinforcing the belief that individuals can construct their futures by their efforts (Van Vliet, 2009). Concluding that “shame motivates a distancing from others and appears to interfere with the ability to experience empathy,” it was suggested to use cognitive-behavioral approaches to assist individuals from a victimized mentality where uncontrollable things happen to the individual as they make global assessments about themselves to a more empowered state where they can remain stable isolating the situation and their behaviors from the core self (Van Vliet, 2009).

**Academic Experiences and the Learner Lens**

The nature of the interrelated concepts of engagement each play a definite role in the learning process: affective engagement, behavioral engagement, and cognitive engagement. Affective engagement entails positive emotions during class, such as interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner et al., 2009); and behavioral engagement refers to observable behavior such as time on-task, overt attention, classroom participation, question asking, and choice of challenging tasks (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Cognitive engagement involves mental effort, such as meaningful processing, strategy use, concentration, and metacognition (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). In the growing body of research on the affective
state, the difficulty of measurement is apparent due to what many researchers contend is the problem encountered in separating emotions from any other dimension of engagement (Gross, 2002; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; King & Areepattamaniil, 2014; Park, Holloway, Arendtsz, Bempechat, & Li, 2012). Through behaviors, it is evident that students who are not emotionally engaged embark upon the process of disengagement. “A growing body of evidence suggests that students who do not feel emotionally engaged in their academic life often begin to disengage behaviorally and cognitively as well, and ultimately are at risk for poor academic outcomes” (Park et al., 2012, p. 390). As educators, it is imperative to engage students emotionally so that they can be more successful in their academic endeavors. Shaming experiences may be expressed as disengagement, which is a cyclical process. In order to build resilience it is necessary to examine the roles of emotions, engagement, and academic identity development in the learning process, which is the goal in the following sections.

**Emotional Lives Shaping Academic Experiences**

Emotions are activated when something important or meaningful is happening or when we are striving to attain a goal that resonates with our personal value system where a high level of cognitive performance is desirable (Gross, 2002). The emotional patterns that are developed over the course of life guide actions and outcomes as explained by Gross (2002): “emotions call forth a coordinated set of behavioral, experimental, and physiological response tendencies that together influence how we respond to perceived challenges and opportunities” (p. 281). Emotions influence how we view life’s adversities and possibilities; altering the affective state toward a positive orientation is crucial for learning. Exploring this
concept, King and Areepattamannil (2014) conducted a quantitative study using questionnaires to explore the linkage between academic emotions and cognitive/meta-cognitive strategy use with 1,147 secondary school students in the Philippines, where the average age of the students was 14.20.

Findings suggest that the students who regularly experienced enjoyment, hope, and pride were more likely to use multiple cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies when attempting to learn material, and they had an adaptive orientation which helped them broaden their cognitive repertoires. Boredom and anger had detrimental consequences in the learning environment because it caused students to disengage from the task and externalize negative behaviors. If emotions are the link between our cognition and behavior, then controlling the way individuals experience the world in an academic setting where educators are teaching students to convert new knowledge into action, emotion regulation determines the success of the lesson (Gross, 2002).

In a three-part study involving cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental designs, researchers King, McInerney, Ganotice and Villarosa (2015) examined the relationship between happiness and school success in the Philippines where English is the medium of instruction from the primary to the tertiary level. The 338 participants in study 1 were from a university with over half of the students being in their first year and an average age of 18.53 years. Study 2 consisted of 676 students with an average age of 14.84 from two public secondary schools that participated across two time points to answer questionnaires. In study 3, 98 students from the College of Education were recruited to participate in the experiment with an average age of 18.12. Analyzing the results, researchers were able to
conclude, “The presence of positive affect signals that life is going well and that there is no need to engage in fight/flight behaviors in order to survive” (King et al., 2015, p. 70). Engaged students are able to learn more because they experience positive affect, which allows them to think freely and widely about the topic; but when more negative affect is present, they have “narrowed thought-action repertoires” (King et al., 2015, p. 70).

Using all engagement modalities facilitates learning and achievement within the learning environment. Taking a more holistic view of students who may be struggling to achieve may involve more than simply analyzing scores or other data commonly used in the context of schools. “Too often, researchers and educators have had the tendency to compartmentalize students’ academic problems” but a more balanced view may allow educators to view “students’ overall emotional state as a possible factor that influences these academic problems” (King, et al., 2015, p. 70). Solid teaching strategies must be reunited with attention to the emotional state of students within the social-developmental context so that students can perform at their highest level.

Cognition can no longer take precedence over emotions because “How we regulate our emotions matters: Our well-being is inextricably linked to our emotions” (Gross, 2002, p. 281). In the field of education, emphasis is placed on the acquisition of knowledge, and moderating how students feel during the lesson or the affective states students cycle through as they learn new material is often missing from the equation. Advancement toward understanding connections between emotion, social functioning, and decision making within the neuroscientific community has empirically proven that the neurobiological functions most heavily recruited in schools are subsumed within emotional processing (Immordino-
Yang & Damasio, 2007). With the potential to revolutionize the understanding of how students learn, researchers analyzed patients missing a brain region. “After sustaining damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, these patients’ social behavior was compromised, making them oblivious to the consequences of their actions, insensitive to others’ emotions, and unable to learn from their mistakes” (p. 4). With a compromised ability to evoke emotions associated with past memories, the patients could not use their past to inform their present behavior, nor could they read social feedback cues for corrective decision-making.

When emotions were dissociated from the patients’ rational thought, the learning process was compromised because “emotion may play a vital role in helping children decide when and how to apply what they have learned in school to the rest of their lives” (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007, p. 5). Devoid of the emotional cues, it was impossible to translate the new learning into application. Researchers Immordino-Yang and Damasio contend that “it may be via an emotional route that social influences of culture come to shape learning, thought, and behavior” (p. 5). The idea that educators can solely access cognition using effective teaching strategies without also engaging emotions is prevalent within the educational community and explains many of the issues such as multi-dimensional disengagement that plagues many of our schools. Learning can only inform real-world functioning if the individual has access to emotional, social, and moral feedback, which must be present for individuals to truly engage in the learning process. This is explained by Immordino-Yang et al):

The more people develop and educate themselves, the more they refine their behavioral and cognitive options. In fact, one could argue that the chief purpose of
education is to cultivate children’s building of repertoires of cognitive and behavioral strategies and options, helping them to recognize the complexity of situations and to respond in increasingly flexible, sophisticated, and creative ways. (p. 7)

Learning cannot happen in a purely rational domain because emotions guide our reasoning to the sector of knowledge pertinent to the present situation or problem for recall which also inform our expectation of future outcomes (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Relying heavily on the cognitive domain may be the reason that some students are struggling in school because they cannot activate their emotions on their own when it comes to school due to past experiences that could be the reason they disengage.

**Multi-Dimensional Disengagement**

Engagement has been defined as “someone’s active feelings and thoughts about how the world does and ought to function, and agency represents the formation of specific intentions that guide subsequent action” (Thorkildsen, 2007, p. 115). Engagement is key to students feeling connected to school, thus increasing their participation in school sports, clubs, activities, and events. Researchers cannot agree on one specific term for engagement, so it has a range of indicators and terms:

Engagement encompasses a range of behaviors and attitudes, with researchers and theorists applying different labels to these behaviors, such as “participation,” “identification,” “attachment,” “motivation,” and “membership.” Terms such as “alienation” and “withdrawal” signal the converse of engagement. Thus, engagement is a general concept that includes many specific behaviors and attitudes. (Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007, p. 1021)

In earlier research, all of these words were used to signify a uni-dimensional form of engagement. Recently, a multi-dimensional approach is encouraged to fully understand the engagement phenomena. There are three widely held categories under the umbrella of engagement, including: behavioral engagement which refers to positive conduct, effort, and
willful participation in classroom and/or school-related activities; emotional engagement, referring to students’ affective reactions in classrooms; and cognitive engagement, encompassing the depth of processing and ability to self-regulate one’s investment throughout the duration of the learning process (Fredricks et al., 2004; Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008). These three constructs form a tripartite of engagement, with their inverse representing disengagement.

Students who fully participate in the learning process may be rewarded by seeing a favorable outcome, but if the result of the process is adverse, then students’ perceptions of their learning abilities could be conceived negatively, with social, behavioral and cognitive implications that may result in disengagement (Archambault et al., 2009). Academic disengagement is a phenomenon studied by researchers and theorists as they attempted to explain why students disengage, the inciting incidents that caused students to begin the process of disengagement, the ways in which they disengaged, and the impact disengagement had on the trajectory of the student as they became an adult, along with role disengagement played in their adult lives (Fredricks et al., 2004). Disengagement is a process that causes students to demonstrate a myriad of issues such as low attendance; higher discipline infractions; low test scores; low grades; low participation in clubs, sports and activities; and disconnection from adults within the school that may culminate in students dropping out of high school (Archambault et al., 2009).

Archambault et al. (2009) observed the multi-dimensional constructs of engagement of 11,827 seventh through ninth graders in the French-Canadian province of Quebec, Canada to test their hypothesis that low engagement predicts school dropout. When the data were
extracted for independent measures of dropout, only the behavioral dimensions predicted dropout, meaning that “student compliance and attendance forecasted dropout better than student willingness and effort to learn the basic curriculum and how much pleasure was associated with school-related issues” (Archambault et al., 2009, p. 666). Researchers contended that longitudinal evidence may be needed because behavioral disengagement could be manifestations of previous emotional and cognitive disengagement that are mediated by behaviors. Students who are engaged in school participate within the school environment. Common indicators of engaged students may include students following along in the text or in direct instruction materials, contributing to classroom discussions, assignment completion, and the ability to work in groups successfully. When they are engaged in the larger school context, they may participate in extracurricular clubs, activities, and events, and show school spirit. According to Glanville and Wildhagen, identifiers include “both basic behaviors, such as attendance, following school rules, and avoidance of disruptive behaviors, and higher-level behaviors, such as making an effort to learn” (2007, p. 1021).

Although disengagement is a process spanning multiple years to the length of a school career, the inciting incidents may be difficult to determine; however, the termination of a high school career prior to graduation signifies the concluding event. Disengagement affects more than just teachers in school; it has an impact on society as a whole because students who end their schooling before graduation are more likely to have difficulty finding employment, may experience substance abuse issues, and may commit delinquent acts as a result of feeling alienated by society at large (Chase et al., 2014). The effects of
disengagement are felt by many, as exemplified in the work of researchers Rocque, Jennings, Piquero, Ozkan and Farrington (2016). The researchers used data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development to investigate the links between truancy, delinquency, and later life outcomes among a group of male participants they followed from ages 8 to 50. Males who experienced trauma and other environmental risk factors in the first decade of life were at an increased risk of being truant from school. This behavior affected later life outcomes: “truants experienced a wide range of adverse outcomes in middle adulthood, including employment problems, convictions, substance abuse, aggression, and overall adult adjustment problems” (Rocque et al., 2016, p. 607). If educators want to disrupt the process of disengagement, they have to look at indicators and use that data to re-engage struggling students.

Data for high school graduation rates are often skewed and difficult to track because there is no universal measurement system used similarly by all states that tracks enrollment and attrition of students beginning in the 9th grade through earning a traditional high school diploma four years later with their cohort (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, common dropout and completion rate measures include: event dropout rates, which include estimates of the percentage of students who drop out in a given 12-month period; status dropout rates, which are the percentage of students in a specified age range who are high school dropouts; and adjusted cohort graduation rates, which are the students who graduate with a regular diploma within four years of starting ninth grade (McFarland et al., 2016). High school dropouts continue to be a serious concern for our nation, and, although the status dropout rate has steadily declined to about 6%
nationally since 1990 (McFarland et al., 2016), Pharris-Ciurej et al. (2012) challenged that idea in a study in which they used descriptive analysis techniques to compare the unit-record school enrollment data from 1996 to 2005 for a large West Coast metropolitan school district. The multivariate analysis included a sample of 7,441 first-time ninth graders to estimate the “true” aggregate cohort rate of high school graduation. They found that about 46% of students graduate within four years with their original cohort. There are alternative ways to obtain a high school diploma or an equivalency diploma, but the researchers asserted that the issue is more than an issue of statistical importance; they emphasized that “Alternative paths to certification are considered ‘high school equivalents,’ but they do not yield equivalent rewards in the labor market” (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012, p. 723).

There are personal, economic, and societal costs associated with students who drop out of school which affect not only the individual student and their families but impact our nation’s societal well-being (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Chase et al., 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The economic consequences of dropping out are often severe over the life span of students when they make the decision to end their schooling prior to earning a diploma in a highly technological age. It is a decision that affects the quality of their lives. This often means dropouts might have difficulty securing meaningful employment (Sweeten et al., 2009) or have a lower earning potential which could be drastic, as described by Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison (2006). “High school dropouts, on average, earn $9,200 less per year than high school graduates, and about $1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates” (p. 2).
More than just the economic impact, the societal consequences of those who are on the dropout path include: criminal involvement, ineligibility to vote due to their criminal history, antisocial behaviors (Sweeten et al., 2009); higher criminal conviction rates (Bäckman, 2017); higher probably for contracting sexually transmitted diseases (Anderson & Pörtner, 2014); increased risk for needing to use sickness and disability pension (De Ridder et al., 2013); needing public assistance, negative emotions such as regret (Bridgeland et al., 2006); and oftentimes, these individuals do not accomplish future goals (Lessard et al., 2008). The impact on society is intergenerational as it means that students will grow up without the presence of family members or they may experience other adverse childhood traumas associated with typologies of those that drop out of high school. Being cognizant of disengagement indicators, educators need to affirm the learner identity within their students while engaging them behaviorally, as well as cognitively paying special attention to emotions.

**Developing a Student Academic Identity**

When individuals engage in the process of learning, they go through the process of taking the learned material and merging it with memories and new thoughts and ideas to see where it fits in their current schema. As new knowledge is acquired, it inherently influences the identity construction process as one has to grapple with the impact of the new thoughts on beliefs, values and other learned material (Flum & Kaplan, 2012). The learning process can create discomfort as a dissonance is created and the mind attempts to resolve the dissension. The psychological and emotional distress that could occur during the learning process could manifest in actions that are varied with regard to individual temperament, and this could
interrupt the interest-excitement or enjoyment-joy affect (Dean & Jolly, 2012; Wachtel, 2016). Students are in classes learning throughout the day, and these mental negotiations are constantly taking place. Instructors have to be sensitive to relevant theories with regard to the identity formation process that is involved with the learning process. Educators have to find ways to help students navigate the acquisition of new knowledge in healthy ways individually as well as collectively (Brown, 2015; Graesser, Ozuru, & Sullins, 2010).

There are various pieces and elements to deepen the learning experiences for students. “Complex learning requires learners to generate inferences, answer causal questions, diagnose and solve problems, make conceptual comparisons, generate coherent explanations, and demonstrate application and transfer of acquired knowledge” (D’Mello & Graesser, 2012, p. 147). This form of learning can be contrasted with shallow learning activities, such as memorizing key phrases, facts, and procedural learning. Complex learning is inevitably accompanied by failure, so the learner moves along a continuum of affective states which are presumably more affectively neutral in shallow learning (D’Mello & Graesser, 2011). During complex learning, because the learner is grappling with difficult concepts that may be new for a sustained period of time, various emotions are experienced. A healthy flow through the learning cycle can positively shape an individual’s learning identity, mitigating some of the discomfort that may be experienced as students know that teachers are there to serve as their guides (Brown, 2015; Forgas, 2002; Shane, 1980).

In a two-part study, researchers D’Mello and Graesser (2012) recruited 28 undergraduate Psychology students in study 1 and 30 undergraduate students in study 2 from a mid-south university in the U.S. to test the transitions among affective states with special
consideration to emotions related to academic achievement. They presented a model of affective dynamics that learners experience when they encounter the unfamiliar, transitioning from:

- novelty (surprise), experience impasses (confusion), diagnose what went wrong (confusion), make mistakes, get stuck (frustration), discover a relevant insight (with delight and possibly eureka), get re-engaged (possibly in an engaged and flow-like state), or simply give up and disengage (boredom). (p. 153)

Even though the material that students learn may be complex and may not fit into what anything they know already, students have to access the deeper levels of their comprehension and as they do that, it connects to their emotion, altering their affective states and how they view themselves as learners:

Cognitive processes that underlie inference generation, causal reasoning, problem diagnosis, conceptual comparisons, and coherent explanation generation are accompanied by affective states such as irritation, frustration, anger, and sometimes rage when the learner makes mistakes, struggles with troublesome impasses, and experiences failure. On the other hand, positive affective states such as flow, delight, excitement, and eureka are experienced when tasks are completed, challenges are conquered, insights are unveiled, and major discoveries are made. (D’Mello & Graesser, 2011, p. 145)

In complex learning, cognitive and emotional engagement occur simultaneously and are encoded in the learner’s memory, affecting their academic identity.

The social setting of school is a crucial context for identity exploration and development as adolescents find their niche through exposure to new ideas, social interaction within peer groups, involvement in student organizations and/or sports as well as the relationships they build with adults. In spite of the job description given to many educators, “The role of educators, therefore, is to organize academic experiences and opportunities that would encourage students to question their self-aspects and investigate and consider
alternative perceptions, values and goals” (Sinai et al., 2012, p. 197). The groups students belong to and the social connections they make with other students play significant roles in shaping their identity.

Sinai, Kaplan and Flum (2012) wanted to know the features that promote safety and scaffold identity instruction in a literature class in an agricultural youth village in the center of Israel. The participants included 66 ninth-grade students split evenly between two literature classes with the same teacher they looped with since seventh grade. The teacher knew every student well and created a safe classroom culture for difficult conversations. A majority of the students were considered to be among the high socio-economic status (SES) group living close to the village, with about 20% of the students belonging to the middle SES and a few students who were living with foster families. The students had literature class four times per week. The data consisted of lesson planning with the instructor, who was a seasoned teacher with 14 years of experience; classroom observations; homework; exploration journals; and focus groups. A phenomenological approach was used to analyze data with inductive and deductive coding techniques. The result of the study was content-based, identity-oriented activities that not only challenged the students to self-reflect, they increased motivation for subject matter content. Some students experienced discomfort, but the teacher was knowledgeable and scaffolded to assist students through the process, dismantling any threats to the student self-worth. To engage in identity development in a classroom, the researchers recommended that educators be familiar with students and the nature of identity exploration, because the teacher initiates the process and then supports students to navigate the process themselves.
Within educational settings, students are asked to reveal their shortcomings in front of a teacher who has a position of authority and multiple critical others (Gilbert & Andrews, 1998) and to lean into the discomfort of the threat to the social selves (Lewis, 1995) while exposing their inadequacies (Brown, 2015; Shane, 1980). The reward for being resilient through what may be a cognitive and social shaming process, while resisting the biological response to increasing their knowledge base by acquiring new concepts, is argued by seminal shame and learning researcher, Paul Shane (1980). He suggested:

What a teacher tries to communicate to his charges is that denial or flight from cognitive inadequacy is not appropriate, and that the way to deal with cognitive shame is to explore and acquire, to master and become competent. Thus, the by-product of overcoming cognitive shame is learning. (p. 352)

As students try to navigate the learning process, experiment with different identities, and acclimate to various social norms, they may disengage to protect themselves (Flum & Kaplan, 2006). Supporting students as they navigate the identity-based risk-reward system might help mitigate some of the dissonance associated with part(s) of student’s academic identity such as racial or economic class norms that may be inconsistent with academic success (Dean & Jolly, 2012). Throughout the learning process, chemical action is taking place in the brain, triggering physiological responses as identity shifts occur, and the old identity may be in conflict with the new identity (Brown, 2015; Dean & Jolly, 2012).

Intentionally and consciously examining educational practices that affirm students’ academic identity as students make sense of who they are and who they desire to be while students construct and reconstruct these self-perceptions and self-definitions can allow students to participate in an adaptive learning loop (Dean & Jolly, 2012; Flum & Kaplan, 2006). In a freshman English class designed for students reading below grade level, a teacher
I observed used mindfulness techniques by starting off the day with breathing and affirmations. The students commented how it helped them start more centered and they began to talk about themselves more positively. By the end of the year, a majority of the students in the class grew by three reading levels because the teacher affirmed who they were and who they could become.

(Re)storying Shame Shapeshifters

At a district diversity council meeting that I lead with a colleague, I shared my story of shame in the preface with a group of students, staff, and teachers while we were in a philosophical chair format as part of a restorative lesson focusing on active listening. We used the compassionate witnessing process taught to me by one of my professors at the International Institute of Restorative Practices, Dr. Frida Rundell, to explore the underlying issues within a moment in time. One of the students posed a question that caused me to think deeply. She asked, “Did the shame ever go away?” Another student said, “I wonder if that might have something to do with the fact that you’re struggling with your dissertation.” At that moment, it clicked for me, and I realized that although I have become an accomplished writer, scoring high marks on my papers throughout my educational career, somewhere inside, that little second grader still questions if it is okay to struggle. The 12th grade me still wonders if I am good enough to write a whole dissertation or to be called Dr. Ashley Smith. My chair, Dr. Loyce Caruthers, is my fairy academic godmother, refusing to allow me to give up on myself, mirroring the support system I had as I struggled to learn to read. The students made me realize that I have become more equipped at managing the shame, I am more resilient in the face of shame, but I still succumb to the effects of shame. I have realized
that it takes on different forms of shapeshifting until I address its presence, thereby empowering myself to move forward. During the reading phase of this study as I prepared the required research proposal, I was keenly aware of all the ways that shame is present in the school environment. This is conceptualized in the following sections.

**Communication – (Re)contextualizing the School Community**

The student’s family is often left out of the discussion as members of the school community and is viewed as additional or optional; however, family engagement is a critical factor in student motivation, academic achievement, and mental, social and emotional health (Warren, Hong, & Rubin, 2009). Life skills influence academic success and are part of home-based involvement but considering young people develop their self-perceptions, values, and skills through the relationships they have and/or opportunities made available to them (Auerbach, 2007), may include different participants within the community. By having a more communicative view when working with families as stakeholders within the school, community holistic support can be provided for students so they can reach their full potential and fully engage in the academic setting.

As part of a larger multi-method longitudinal study examining how multiple contexts influence adjustment among an ethnically and socio-economically diverse sample of middle school students, researchers Witherspoon, Schotland, Way and Hughes (2009) addressed research questions about the profiles of connectedness, gender, and ethnic differences and how these profiles were related to psychological adjustment. Their sample included 437 sixth graders from two cohorts comprised of the following demographics: 29% Chinese American, 26% White, 23% African American, and 11% Puerto Rican and Dominican.  

83
85%–95% of the students in the schools they attended were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The most notable findings were that having a connection to school and/or at least one other above average connection to another context may contribute to higher achievement and lower levels of depression because of the safety and security adolescents are able to feel in their arenas of comfort. Youth that find themselves in under-resourced families, schools, and/or neighborhoods may be at a disadvantage because these contexts do not promote pro-social behavior (Witherspoon et al., 2009). Students rely on the intersection of multiple environmental supports in order to thrive across contexts.

When engaging families, it is important to assess barriers that may stand in the way of them being present at school events. Focus groups were conducted with 50 parents and 76 staff members in six schools in a Midwestern state where the program, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and culturally responsive practices were used to elicit information about disciplinary reform, communication, parental involvement, and school satisfaction (Baker, Wise, Kelley & Skiba, 2016). The data in this phenomenological study were coded using applied thematic analysis. Five thematic findings were reinforced by participants: providing opportunities for involvement, improving communication, welcoming families into the building, time conflicts or making time, and moving from involvement to engagement. Some strategies for involving parents offered by the parent focus group were providing childcare at school events, using weekends as a meaningful time, arranging transportation, and providing food as part of the weeknight activities (Baker et al., 2016). Oftentimes, parent shaming occurs as it is assumed by school personnel that parents are too busy to take the time to be at school events or to attend students’ games or activities; but
when forced to choose between working to provide for the family and showing support by being present, competing values may play a role.

Baker et al. (2016) found that parents needed frequent and multiple forms of communication about school events and proactive communication from teachers about the progress of their children. Language was identified as a barrier, so parents asked for translators at meetings and that school documentation be provided in the student’s home language. Additionally, it was proposed that a needs assessment should be conducted to generate ideas that would address the issue of scheduling and time. The staff in the focus groups were able to identify barriers that prevented them from viewing parents as partners, but the solutions they proposed were disconnected from the barriers. Recommendations for working with families included focusing on the strengths that parents bring to the table versus the barriers that get in the way (Baker et al., 2016).

Communicating with the larger community and shaping the overall narrative about the school’s role within the neighborhood along with the successes and needs are crucial to develop allies among parents and community members. Throughout a three-year ethnographic study in which over 200 interviews were conducted, Philadelphia researcher McWilliams (2017) used 800 hours as a participant-observer and analyzed participants’ perceptions regarding attending a traditional neighborhood school in the midst of other options within the urban educational market. With the opening of several charters in the area, the enrollment of the school had dropped significantly, highlighting fears that the school may be eligible for closure, creating feelings of hopelessness among stakeholders within the school community. The overarching perception of the school was that it was stigmatized by
shaming labels that “dangerous” neighborhood schools are “bad” and they are filled with “bad kids” because they are non-selective. Budget cuts deprived students of resources such as arts, sports, clubs, and caring teachers along with declining maintenance to the physical environment, which contributed to the stereotype-enforcing messages that were disproportionately depicted in the media. The school community and the neighborhood began internalizing these labels, texturing the negative discourse as stated by McWilliams (2017): “The shame they feel when these conversations map institutional stigma directly onto their sense of personhood and self-worth, as I argued earlier, shapes not only their perceptions of education’s intrinsic value but its utility value for their future aspirations” (p. 235).

Communication became the lifeline for the students to believe that their needs could be met in spite of the competition of another school. Reputation is the repeating of narratives that are believed by others without any factual evidence. In the era of school choice, reshaping the narrative that gets told is vital for community morale.

The narration of an African-American senior named Eric was included in the study by McWilliams (2017). He pointed out the importance of the role that schools played in the community, stating, “The school is the meeting ground, the connection place” (p. 234), which invokes the significance of a space for communication and togetherness. Explaining the community dynamics, Eric described people in that city typically remain in the neighborhood, which creates a sense of ownership, collective responsibility, and pride. Illustrating this point in his narrative, Eric expressed that the school presents the opportunity to know diverse people while gaining empathy for their experiences, which combats ignorance. Developing the communicative health between families, the school, and the larger
community is necessary so students can be supported holistically on their educational journeys.

**Connections – (Re)storative Relational Frameworks**

Educational lingo uses the word “with” when describing elements of community togetherness, but oftentimes there is no choice on behalf of the individual. Discipline handbooks may include prescriptive ways of dealing with situations and educators tend to assign consequences but say they are working “with” students. This argument is furthered by Rundell (2007): “Many of us are used to serving others by doing things ‘for’ ‘to’ or ‘against’ them. Continual awareness and reflection are required to work ‘with’ people” (p. 54)

Classroom environment and relationship building play a role in helping students work through any shaming experiences or helping them develop resilience to the shame affect (Brown, 2006). Every student needs to have at least one caring adult within the school for them to feel connected (Lessard et al., 2008). There are adults who have gifts for building relationships with students and there are those who have to work at it. Restorative Practices, as a lens for healthy relationships and healing from shame, can be adopted and easily embedded within any culture. “Restorative Practices invites the character of societal institutions, groups, processes, people, places, and programs to work with social conflict, including the prevention or early intervention levels of harmful behavior and injustices” (Rundell, 2007, p. 59). Instead of just placing a Band-aid on the hurt that has occurred, the goal of restorative practices is to find ways to release the shame that may be experienced by charting a way to restore the relationship by involving those that were harmed to find solutions forward. Restorative practices are more than just a framework; they are a state of
being—a set of principles that permeates multiple areas of life, an idea that the individual is the toolbox which requires adding tools and processes for building and sustaining positive intentional relationships (McCluskey et al., 2008; Rundell, 2007; Saufler 2011; Wachtel, 2016).

Connection is crucial for adolescents going through the transformative phase as they prepare to enter adulthood. Restorative practices can be used as a framework to build strategic relationships in order to create a community. As stated by Saufler (2011):

A fundamental principle of the restorative approach is that relationships are central to learning and development. In a restorative school, all adults model this principle in their interactions with students and each other. The restorative approach focuses on how we act in relationships, address problems, manage discipline and resolve conflict. (p. 3)

Adults must work to have restorative relationships with each other to develop a sense of community, and they must also develop these relationships with students. If we continue to allow relationship building to magically happen without providing teachers and students with processes for repairing harm, acknowledging shame, leaning into difficult emotions, practicing equity by meeting students’ needs, sustaining healthy relationships by soliciting feedback, and other strategies, then outdated exclusionary practices will continue to persist.

Students are able to thrive when they view their teachers as caring individuals who have their best interest at heart.

In a United Kingdom study examining the exclusion of boys from school, the principal researcher decided to do an action research study, using one of the participants to explore how the methods of restorative practices could work with one student (Standing, Fearon, & Dee, 2012). The school had recently implemented restorative practices and
students participated in restorative conferences, group mentoring, discussions, classroom conferences, and circles, and staff members logged the students’ behavior in a computer system. The school was new to the process, so not all staff used the processes with fidelity.

The findings included that teachers had to be “on board” for restorative practices to work and to develop the desire to become restorative by viewing situations through the lens of restoration. This allowed the student to repair the harm that was caused by his misbehavior, supported him through the reconciliation process, and held him accountable for high expectations. Ultimately, the student ended up getting excluded, but at his new site, he was given a chance to start using the skills he picked up and behaved maturely and responsibly, which surprised the previous staff (Standing et al., 2011). The student kept being reminded of his mistakes in a quasi-restorative environment where some teachers believed in the power of repairing relationships and holding the student accountable, while others had low expectations and deficit thinking about what he could accomplish. When given a chance to have a new identity, the student was able to fully practice his new learnings.

Restorative Practices is an emerging field with paradigmatic implications. To build upon the work, researcher Schumacher (2014) conducted a two-year study with 12 weekly Talking Circles that involved 60 adolescent girls in an urban high school for approximately 257 hours. Data collection methods also included individual semi-structured interviews with 31 students, five teachers, and two gatekeepers, along with archival documents and observations. Noteworthy findings suggested that the “Talking Circle is a safe, collaborative space for the development of growth-fostering peer relationships, resulting in three primary outcomes—deep relational bonding, authentic expression of emotions, and evolving capacity
for empathy” (Schumacher, 2014, p. 9). The researcher was able to witness the development of three key emotional literacy skills in students, including “active listening, anger management, and interpersonal sensitivity” (Schumacher, 2014, p. 9). The use of a talking piece, a squishy ball, empowered the speaker to feel heard, and typically misunderstandings were cleared up once everyone had a chance to tell their side of the story. Reflective inquiry was used as a supportive element to stimulate self-reflection and encourage intergroup thinking and empathy development, as it “opened space for them to explore meaningful issues together, which positively affected the relational bonding” (Schumacher, 2014, p. 10). An adult facilitator was a participant in the circle but also served to keep the integrity of the circle process, guiding students toward deeper identity exploration while providing insightful conclusions. Creating a safe, trusting atmosphere was of the utmost importance to the researcher, since the social condition was essential toward students building growth-fostering relationships:

Because the environment was safe and secrets were not violated, many girls were finally able to connect to their raw emotions, especially fear and anger, and use the Circle as a constructive channel for discharging pent-up emotional energy. Many reported that the relational support and empathic responses often surprised them, which increased their self-confidence and self-worth, and gave them a sense of being loved and cared for. (Schumacher, 2014, p. 10)

The circle became a healing space for many of the students where they achieved higher order self-assessment skills that helped them deal with shame and conflict in more productive ways. This had a positive impact on some of the school’s social problems (Schumacher, 2014). By honoring the collective wisdom of the group and feeling they brought something to the table, students exchanged relational currency with one another, which allowed them to
embrace their authenticity. Pairing some of these practices with content would provide an ideal learning environment for most students. This is explored in the next section.

**Content – (Re)framing Egalitarian Embodied Curriculum**

One of the most pressing charges of any 21st-century leader is creating more equitable educational experiences for students by looking through the social justice lens as we make research-based decisions regarding curriculum. To do this, educators have to be willing to acknowledge the ways in which they have not advanced democratic values, “Developing a new cultural praxis requires leaders to name and understand how they are complicit in practices that exclude” (Esposito & Normore, 2015, p. 151). Students deserve to be taught the fully embodied curriculum which not only tolerates, but honors all voices, recognizing the power that curriculum holds when lifted off the page. This is contextualized by Ladson-Billings and Brown’s assertion that “curricula are not static, neutral documents of fact but rather are dynamic, ideological, cultural artifacts that do something” (2008, p. 153). Due to the nature of life itself, curriculum is not static and is constantly evolving as we are evolving as individuals within an ever-changing society. Curricula do not need the teacher in order to be activated, and educators must ensure that students see themselves in every subject matter, because too often people of color are regularly reminded that they are “outsiders to the development of civilization, scholarship, and culture” (Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008, p. 153). This may be because “curriculum development in public schools is increasingly directed by sources outside the learner’s lived worlds” (Nieto, Bode, Kang & Raible, 2008, p. 187).
Educational institutions decide what is important for students to know based on the prevailing belief system of what it takes to be successful within society. Ladson-Billings and Brown (2008) made a poignant statement followed by a thought-provoking question, “If indeed schools as organizations sanction particular forms of knowledge and skills through their curricula, what knowledge is worth knowing for students as citizens of democratic and diverse nations?” (p. 154). The word “worth” is notable because we assign value to subjects, topics, and skills based on whether we include them in the curricula. To correctly address the inequitable circumstances within our society, educators have to find ways to use curriculum to address problems, as suggested by Ladson-Billings and Brown (2008). “If we recognize that social inequity is antithetical to what the society stands for, then we must find ways through our education system to address these inequalities” (p. 156). One powerful way of addressing the unspoken questions regarding the “we,” “us,” “our,” and “them” that are often presented within texts or language used in schools is to analyze and (re)frame content and curriculum in ways that embrace multi-culturalism. In a sixth-grade science classroom in a Title I public urban middle school, researchers Adjapong and Emdin (2015) employed Hip-Hop pedagogy to co-teach with students as the professionals and call-and-response to engage the class. A student volunteer, the co-teacher, would be given the lesson plan to review the night before as homework in preparation to teach class the following day. The student was able to enhance the lesson so that it incorporated their culture and reflected their teaching style. During class, the teacher would sit in a student desk to participate and guide the co-teacher if there were any issues with content. Rhythmic call-and-response was used to
reinforce definition of basic scientific words and an effective way to activate students’ long-term memories to aid in the memorization of the terms.

Students reported that the approaches allowed them to actively participate and that they were able to relay the scientific content to their peers in a more effective way because they were “insiders” in the student community. Adjapong and Emdin (2015) discussed the emotionality present in the lessons:

when a student explained that they had fun while engaging in Hip-Hop pedagogical approaches in the science classroom, I related that to positive emotional energy, which has ultimately been beneficial to the learning experience of students and their interactions with one another. (p. 75)

Approaching the curriculum in this way created a different platform for student agency, voice, and choice while they obtained knowledge from peers. Using a social equity lens as an expanded way to view curriculum to further address root issues present within educational systems, the researchers viewed the dichotomy of the tensions from a shared perspective of a language, literacy, and culture framework. Using content to un-silence voices that have previously been muted might allow for the creation of spaces for students to share their knowledge, which will create an atmosphere of belonging (Bridges, 2011). All students have the right to have access to the curriculum and should have the opportunity to be included.

Teaching students to use critical consciousness to question the hidden curriculum and unexamined assumptions is a necessary skill as they examine those that may benefit from mainstream thinking and institutional norms (Apple, 2004). Common understandings should be examined as well as the validity of uncontroversial knowledge claims, because when it comes to a pedagogical stance, neutrality does not exist. Being able to empathize and view situations from multiple viewpoints is a necessary emotional and mental skill in order to
examine relationships between actions and outcomes. Alshurman (2015) explained, “Democratic practice is characterized by the habit of taking into account other people’s views and considering the consequences of an action and its impact on others beyond its advantage to the agent” (p. 863).

In a seventh-grade gifted English classroom in Chicago, a diverse group of 29 students participated in a nine-week unit that exemplified culturally sustaining pedagogies in which they explored critical consciousness (Machado, Vaughan, Coppola, & Woodard, 2017). Throughout the unit, students explored the multiple communities in which they were affiliated, which aided them in understanding themselves and others more deeply. Using the insider perspective, they applied a critical lens to the material they were studying to create their own poems with influences from their wide cultural landscapes across time, place, and space. Future implications for those attempting to use culturally sustaining pedagogies to support hybridizing identity and curriculum in English are to: “1) encourage linguistic play and hybridity; 2) help students position themselves as experts/insiders; and 3) privilege alternative forms of cultural capital in the genres students read, compose, and perform” (Machado et al., 2017, p. 378). As students develop mental processes and cultivate their voices, they are able to view the world from a critical viewpoint, which causes them to engage academically while developing agency (Hantzopoulos, 2015).

Teachers are important social capital for students and greatly impact whether or not students identify with school. Teacher behaviors and characteristics influence student outcomes; thus, reflection on the use of the hidden curriculum is necessary to examine unintended outcomes (Christle et al., 2007; Esposito & Normore, 2015; Fall & Roberts
2012). Analyzing the school’s hidden curriculum is required to shift the culture towards a democratic context and close the gaps. As stated by theorists Esposito and Normore (2015), “The features of the hidden curriculum are domination and marginalization” (p. 147). They pointed to the severity of allowing these practices to continue: “The hidden curriculum can perpetuate situations where some benefit while others are disenfranchised” (p. 148). Students who feel a sense of belonging are connected to the school and empowered to actively participate in order to gain academic skills as well as learn appropriate social behaviors (Christle et al., 2007). Curriculum experiences where students get to be actively involved by exploring real world problems cause individuals to have a passion and fire that will sustain them in the face of failure:

A democratic curriculum invites young people to shed the passive role of knowledge consumers and assume the active role of “meaning makers.” It recognizes that people acquire knowledge by both studying external sources and engaging in complex activities that require them to construct their own knowledge. (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 17)

Adopting these ideals as foundational principles when analyzing curricular choices may help ensure that schools are providing the best educational experiences for students. Expanding the school community to include families, building stronger relational bonds, and making equitable curricular choices can improve the culture and climate of the school, freeing students to become the best version of themselves. This is investigated in the final subtopic.

**Culture and Climate – (Re)humanizing, Liberating, and Empowering All Learners**

The school’s identity can be found in the school’s culture, which encompasses the unwritten rules, expectations, priorities, values, beliefs, norms, traditions, and boundaries that have been established from previous experiences by the people within the school setting that
create a sense of community (Gruenert, 2008; Otto, 2006; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). School culture serves two purposes: “to define the group’s response to its central problem with external environment and to help maintain internal relationships” (Otto, 2006, p. 3). People in any healthy organization must have agreement on how to do things and what is worth doing, which is important in a school setting. Wigfield and Eccles (2002) contended that achievement-related beliefs, values, and goals are among the most important determinations of school achievement that affect the academic lives of students and their future trajectories. Academic excellence, equitable learning environments, and inclusive socio-cultural practices must be institutionalized in the school’s culture so all students can learn, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, sex, social class, or economic background (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). Catering to the needs and supporting high outcomes for all students by working with staff is the goal for all transformational school leaders. Elements of morality are embedded in the role of an educational leader, which include treating people with dignity and respect because it is the right thing to do (Neider & Schriesheim, 2014).

In a purposeful sample of elementary principals leading six campuses located in a small suburban school district in Texas, Allen, Grigsby, and Peters (2015) documented findings demonstrating the importance of transformational leadership (TL) processes, empirically proving that all five factors of TL (including idealized attributes, idealized behaviors, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration) exhibited significant positive relationships with the seven dimensions of school climate. Principals who motivated teachers and expressed optimism excited the staff, influencing them to feel more positive about the overall climate of the school. The staff members in their
buildings felt that they were valued partners in the school where they could express their needs and work with the leader to address any concerns, creating more job satisfaction as they were willing to put forth extra effort.

In another study investigating the relationship between the social orientation of principals in combination with transformational leadership, Allen, Grigsby, and Peters (2015) conducted a social network analysis and multilevel analysis using correlational methodology with 702 teachers and 51 principals of 51 Dutch elementary schools in the Netherlands. Results included the more the principal engaged in TL the more likely teachers were to take risks in developing and implementing new knowledge and practices. Teachers were more apt to seek the advice from TL, and the leader was closely connected to the staff, allowing them to challenge the status quo to provide more equitable experiences for students.

Democratic education is a theory with an emphasis on democratic values (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) that is accessible to families from various backgrounds (Korkmaz & Erden, 2014) in an educational system that focuses on the whole student (Elliott, Bradbury, & Gardner, 2014). Instructional leaders indirectly impact student engagement and achievement by working to improve teacher behaviors and engaging in reflective practice behaviors. Within the cultural context for democratic education, professionals work with one another focused on student-centered learning experiences in order to work with social justice as the lens. Korkmaz and Erden (2014) compared the characteristics of democratic schools to determine the commonalities and found that the school culture grounded in democratic values permeates ways that things are done in schools:

A general evaluation of all the findings of this study leads to the following rough definition of democratic school: It is a democratic community where everybody—be
they adult or child—has equal rights and power, where this power is exercised in making decisions based on direct participation about the school and every aspect of their lives at school, especially on issues of the education of learners, based on openness, transparency, respect, responsibility, collaboration, participation, flexibility, and antidiscrimination; a democratic school also practices learner-centered education and aims at the enhancement and development of the wider society, as much as the school community. (p. 372)

Our country was founded on justice and equity, and democratic values are at core of any definition of democratic education (Elliott et al., 2014). Transformational leadership with a democratic orientation toward culturally responsive and sustaining practices are a way to address equity and social justice issues, as they allow educators to analyze their thoughts about society and ways to use their sphere of influence to better serve marginalized populations. Berryman, Nevin, SooHoo, and Ford (2015) presented a framework with a new slant on the topic:

We argue that school leaders must disrupt and change the status quo that all too often perpetuates student marginalization and underachievement. In order to do this, leaders need to understand that schools have traditionally had a role in reproducing the fabric of the society in which they are located, that leaders are part of the power base, and that, under the school’s mandated policies and within their own spheres of influence, school leaders have the power and the responsibility to make more of a difference for all marginalized students. (p. 149)

As educators focus on improving current practices, liberatory learning spaces can be created by placing a greater emphasis on social justice leadership and 21st-century populations such as LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual), multilingual, multi-racial, and historically marginalized populations so that all student groups can have a seat at the table (DiPaola & Hoy, 2015; Esposito & Normore, 2015). Through education, societal problems can be addressed, allowing us to experience “liberty and justice for all” (Pledge of Allegiance, 1954).
One of the main reasons I wanted to become an educator was to make students feel good about themselves by focusing on their assets instead of their deficits. Too often, I am in meetings where the focus is on everything that is wrong versus everything that is going well. Knowing the harm caused by exclusionary practices, I feel the pressure to continue the use of these ineffective punishment practices as part of my job duties. Shame smothers students waiting for their referrals to be processed as they sit outside my office until their name is called. I believe in the power of restorative practices to rehumanize my work, so I try to have restorative conversations with students by becoming curious about the real issues hidden deep beyond the incident that brought them to me and how they can repair the harm. Shame lurks around the school, toxifying the environment and making me feel like I am holding my breath until it is acknowledged, and a sigh of relief releases feelings of liberation. Educators have to make small, relentless pushes on the existing system, working simultaneously from inside and outside to influence the current narrative to create an environment of restoration which alters status quo beliefs about what is possible. When beliefs change, how the work is viewed and the role educators play in activating the potential within students may change, which might cause actions to change. Mentality must change before our current reality will change. Students’ current reality about their educational journeys is the focus of my study, which used the grounded theory methodology detailed in Chapter 3, the methodology.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As I stated in Chapter 1, some students are struggling in school and are not progressing towards graduation. A universal answer to why students drop out may not exist, because various circumstances may influence whether or not a student persists toward graduation, including: family dynamics (Lessard et al., 2008); socio-economic status (Christle et al., 2007); community beliefs (Etzion & Romi, 2015); ability (Stearns & Glennie, 2006); self-regulatory behaviors (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011); negative adult relationships (Sweeten et al., 2009); difficulty transitioning from middle to high school (Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer & Joly, 2008); and various other factors. Indeed, high school students make the decision to leave school for a variety of different reasons; but before the finalization of the dropping out process, there are typically academic and behavioral indicators that a student is struggling. The interpretation of these indicators may be related to the shaming experiences that students have as they cycle through the learning process, which may cause them to disengage. For the purpose of this study, disengagement was characterized as having the following qualities: active withdrawal from activities within the learning environment; passively compliant; unmotivated to rise above adversity or to face challenges during the acquisition of knowledge; apathetic and unwilling to participate regardless of ability; and/or disconnected from the social realm of the school community (Archambault et al., 2009; Dean & Jolly, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004; King et al., 2015).

I investigated if shame influences students’ experiences with academic, behavioral, emotional, and social disengagement in school; thus altering the internal stories they generate
about themselves as learners. This qualitative grounded theory study, based in the
cognitivist paradigm, had a dual purpose. First, I explored why and in what ways
participants recruited through social media, electronic communication such as e-mail or text
messages, and word of mouth struggled as high school students. With the wide range of
recruitment efforts, participants could come from across the country, but eventually dwindled
to several Midwestern states and one Northwestern state. Secondly, I used the data collected
from participants to construct relevant theory around the phenomena of struggling to engage.
As defined by Patton (2015), the unit of analysis is “the focus of the study” (p. 260). The unit
of analysis was post-secondary high school students, ranging from ages 18 to 30, who had
experienced at least one area of disengagement, which was indicated by the quantitative
survey questions asking about involvement. This study’s research questions further clarify its
direction for guiding this inquiry.

In order to fully address the problem and gain insight into the unit of analysis, the
study was guided by the research questions that were introduced in Chapter 1, were the focus
of the literature review, and were then used to guide the methodology. One central question
and three sub-questions guided the inquiry: Central question: How and in what ways might
shame be reflected in students’ learning environments?

a) In what ways might memories of shame during childhood be related to students’
experiences in school?

b) What are common triggers of shame for students?

c) How do students recover from shaming experiences?
By using open-ended questions, my goal was to understand the world of my participants as it related to their experiences within the context of schools as educational settings and to then use empirical data to form relevant plausible theories.

There have been several studies addressing disengagement, dropout typologies, and students who read at a lower level, but there are limited theories about why and in what ways students struggle in school that may lead them to embark upon the disengagement process and ultimately cause them to drop out of school. Further analysis of struggle as a multi-dimensional construct could help educators better understand the nature of struggle in order to find ways to fully engage students and assist them in altering their paths toward graduation. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the qualitative paradigm that guided the accumulation of empirical evidence as well as the systematic analysis techniques used to investigate the phenomenon of interest. In this chapter, I communicate my rationale for using qualitative research and the methodology of grounded theory through a constructivist theory perspective, followed by my role as the researcher. I provide information about the site of inquiry and sampling techniques for obtaining participants. Data sources as well as organization and management processes are discussed, and I demystify the data analysis procedures. Lastly, I explicate limitations of the study, validity and reliability, and crystallization, as well as any ethical considerations. The next section provides information regarding the rationale for qualitative research and the key tenets of the theoretical tradition of constructivist grounded theory.
Rationale for Qualitative Research

Qualitative inquiries study how people and groups make meaning while in their natural settings in order to make sense of how these meanings are interpreted to the individuals or groups (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Patton, 2015). The nature of qualitative research involves delving into the world of another in order to fully understand their world to analyze and share information so that others may also understand. Various strategies are used in order to extrapolate a participant’s worldview. As stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2008), “Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives” (p. 3). The materials that are collected form the data for the inquiry project as the researcher captures stories in the participant’s own words to understand their perspectives and experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2015).

There are several reasons to embark upon a qualitative research journey, but the reason most appealing to me was, “it is also important to acknowledge that you may study something because you want to understand it” (Patton, 2015, p. 18). At every educational institution I have either worked in or visited across the country, struggling students are often the topic of conversation as teachers, administrators, and parents are often perplexed that the same students who may have performed well in previous years, demonstrate indicators of struggle in subsequent years. Foucault (1980) noted that “power is just as much bottom-up” (p. 135), which implied room for resistance. In fact, Foucault insisted, “there are no relations of power without resistance; the latter are all the more real where relations of power are
exercised....It exists all the more by being in the same place as power” (p. 142). A contemporary notion of power suggests that individuals may resist the existence of power of any kind, and resistance may take many forms (Barbalet, 1985; Krips, 1990; McLaren, 2007). In institutions such as schools, students will exercise power to resist hegemonic narratives through memories of shame that control their lives, critiquing the dominant curriculum and the instrumental use of knowledge, its discourses and discursive practices (McLaren, 2007).

The questions that I wanted to answer dissected the social experiences that students are having in schools to construct meaning in order to bring clarity to the phenomena of shame to advance the field of education. Qualitative research was most appropriate for answering the research questions, as I desired to gain insight into the quality of the experiences that individuals were having instead of quantifying those experiences by amount, frequency, or intensity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In order to fully investigate the topic of study, qualitative methods were employed to give me a blueprint to follow in order to guide the procedural steps to ensure the objective was accomplished. Grounded Theory is a methodology in which theories are generated from data collection and analysis surrounding patterns of human behavior or a social phenomenon (Engward, 2013). For this study, I elected to use grounded theory methods from the constructivist paradigm to answer the research questions.

**Grounded Theory**

The grounded theory methodology was originally developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss and further defined by the researchers in their book, *The Discovery of*
*Grounded Theory* in 1967 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This transformational work was significant to the area of qualitative research as described by Saldaña (2015): “Briefly, grounded theory, developed in the 1960s, is generally regarded as one of the first methodologically systematic approaches to qualitative inquiry” (p. 51). The grounded theory process consists of five basic components, including theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, coding, theoretical memoing and sorting (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This empirical inquiry involves a cyclical process using comparative methods to understand how people experience a phenomenon and then work to ground the data within the empirical world in order to generate theory about patterns of human behavior (Engward, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Grounded theory methodology “offers a foundation for rendering the processes and procedures of qualitative investigation visible, comprehensible, and replicable” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010, p. 33).

Regardless of the researcher’s hypothesis about the social phenomena, a neutral stance must be taken to avoid predetermining *a priori* what researchers expect they will find in the data (Engward, 2013; Patton, 2015). Although grounded theory was derived from a quantitative orientation, it is widely used among qualitative researchers as a way to look at data through an objective lens (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). Grounded theory was the methodology chosen because when causal findings from fieldwork are framed using relevant theory, it moves the explanation to a higher level because it generates explanatory theory through systematic processes (Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2015). Using the method in ways that acknowledge participants’ multiple realities accounts for a constructivist view of the
grounded theory approach, which was important to my inquiry. Key to applying grounded theory in this manner is understanding the nature of constructivism.

**Constructivism**

Constructivism is a theory of learning about how one comes to know by resolving discrepancies between our belief systems and what is revealed in experience (Lambert, 2002). Charmaz (2014) held that, “If, instead, we start with the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed, then we must take the researcher’s position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality” (p. 13). The world in which the researcher lives and the experiences the researcher brings to the study is seen as a construction. “The constructivist approach treats research as a construction but acknowledges that it occurs under specific conditions—of which we may not be aware, and which may not be of our choosing” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13).

Participants’ experiences are viewed with curiosity as educators attempt to view the world through the lens of the participant by understanding their stories and probing to gain further clarification into their experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Embedded within the realm of social life is all knowing and learning, which is a common belief held by constructivists (Charmaz, 2014). The qualitative research method of constructivist grounded theory study was used to explore participants’ experiences to generate theories regarding phenomena related to disengagement using the constructivist lens to code and analyze data. Though there are several schools of thought, the constructivist grounded theory position informed this study, which negates that the researcher can be a passive, value-free observer.
Constructivist Grounded Theory

Grounded theory has undergone multiple epistemological shifts and development as it has been adapted to fit the needs of researchers and throughout multiple paradigms (Hall, Griffiths, & McKenna, 2013). In qualitative research, elements of the researcher are embedded in the study. According to the constructivist approach to grounded theory, the researcher constructs meaning, and the researcher’s world is a part of that construction. As the researcher works with participants to understand their world, a co-construction process takes place as the researcher becomes aware of a multi-faceted reality (Charmaz, 2014). Reflexivity involves reflecting inward and is a crucial part of the constructivist grounded theory method. As explained by Charmaz (2017), “Constructivist grounded theory relies on developing and maintaining methodological self-consciousness, which calls for reflexivity of a depth researchers may not routinely undertake” (p. 36). As the researcher, I had to detect and dissect the meanings I brought to the experience to understand how my own personal views and beliefs were reflected in the research. Charmaz (2017) concurs: “This type of self-consciousness involves defining intersecting relationships with power, identity, subjectivity—and marginality—for both the researcher and research participants.” (p. 36).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) discussed theory as emerging from data, but the researcher constructs grounded theories as an involved active agent interacting with people and their past memories using solid research practices (Charmaz, 2015). Combining the constructivism paradigm with grounded theory methods focused the exploration of the research to examine
the ways participants interpret and make sense of their experiences within the context of their world views (Gribich, 2012; Stearns & Glennie, 2010). I was able to situate these interpretations within the larger social environment to understand how the contexts help individuals make meaning to develop relevant theory grounded in empirical data. My role in the inquiry process was imperative; as the qualitative paradigm suggests, the researcher is an instrument in the construction of meaning (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014; Patton, 2015).

**Critical Arts-Based Inquiry**

The findings from this study in Chapter 4 are reported using critical arts-based inquiry, which will be intersected with traditional research methods along with screenwriting techniques. Infusing imagination with transformative ways of making meaning, critical arts-based researcher is “well suited to researchers who anticipate experiences of critical resistance and positive social change through inclusive and emotional understandings created among communities of learners/participants/researchers/audiences” (Finley, 2018, p. 562). The purpose of the critical arts-based research practices is for the researcher to actively engage in bringing the audience into the story to inspire activism while offering new perspectives to perceive and interpret the world (Eisner, 2008; McNiff, 2008). After the open coding process, the pattern of the stories seemed to have three distinct characteristics, which then assumed the three-act structure as the design elements, and the text was placed inside the context and described using storytelling techniques as well as screenwriting terms (Barone & Eisner, 1997).
The Role of the Researcher

As grounded theory methods were used to guide the study, reflection was necessary as information was obtained, because the role of the researcher was integrated within the research. Gaining understanding about a phenomenon and starting a discussion or highlighting ways to effectively assist students who struggle is important to me. Along my educational journey I have heard stories from students about why they failed a class, why coming to school is an issue, or reasons students disrupt class; however, I have not systematically gathered data from students. I desired to understand the nature of struggle and remained completely open to any and all possibilities while desiring to fully comprehend how students’ experiences influence their views on the topic of inquiry. An objective approach was taken much like the one described by Patton (2015): “grounded theory is best understood as fundamentally objectivist in orientation, emphasizing disciplined and procedural ways of getting the researcher’s biases out of the way but adding healthy doses of creativity to the analytic process” (p. 111).

As a qualitative researcher, I actively engaged with participants and involved them in every aspect of the study. As part of my dual role as researcher and a building leader intimately involved with high school students who struggle, I engaged with participants on a more personal level and shared my own experiences with shame, which allowed me to build rapport with them so they trust me to recount their experiences in ways that honor their transparency (Charmaz, 2007). Though I practiced empathetic neutrality by being nonjudgmental and open, I also practiced mindfulness by being focused and attentive in the moment with all of my faculties. As stated by Patton (2015), this task involves “getting
personally engaged so as to use all of one’s senses and capacities, including the capacity to experience emotion no less than cognition” (p. 56). The qualitative inquiry process influenced my thinking and feelings about my topic, but adopting research practices allowed me to strategically monitor the ways in which changes took place over the course of my study.

Qualitative inquiry is a holistic process, and being able to shift from being in the moment to looking at the moment from the outside is a skill that assisted me in empathizing but being able to perform a detailed analysis. Reflexivity was important to this process; “a way of emphasizing the importance of deep introspection, political consciousness, cultural awareness, and ownership of one’s perspective” (Patton, 2015, p. 70). As I attended to my own interpretations of the world around me, this self-exploration process was captured in the form of memos as I wrote extensively, heightening my awareness of a hidden belief system. The memos were ways to subject my own “privileges and positions to rigorous scrutiny” (Charmaz, 2017). Throughout the study, analytic memos helped me to become aware of how I think and allowed me to be cognizant of my thinking patterns as I made sense of the patterns I noticed around me when interacting with participants (Charmaz, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013; Patton, 2015). These elements pertaining to my role as the researcher were maintained throughout the implementation of the study and were carefully integrated into the design of the study.

**Design of the Study**

The purpose of the design of the study is to provide a description of the setting, rationale for setting selection, description of participants, and how participants were selected.
Detailed information concerning each data source are incorporated along with an account for how data were collected, organized, and managed throughout the duration of the research project. Data analysis procedures that analyze my point of view provided contextual evidence about how the data were interpreted along with considerations regarding limitations and ethics. This section discusses content related to the procedural steps used to empirically answer the research questions.

**Setting and Demographic Data**

**Participants.** Participants were recruited through social media, electronic communication such as e-mail or text messages, and word of mouth. All volunteers meeting the following criteria were invited to participate in the study: (a) be able to discuss emotions experienced while in high school and (b) minimum age of 18 years but not over the maximum age of 30. Of the 34 participants that completed the survey, 15 of 22 participants volunteered to complete phase two of the study, which involved in-depth interviews.

**Sampling procedures.** To obtain a sample of participants that had experienced shame in educational settings, snowball purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the study (Morse, 2010; Patton, 2015). In accordance with grounded theory methods, Creswell (2013) described the type of individual or individuals that should be participants in the study: “individuals who are accessible, willing to provide information, and distinctive for their accomplishments and ordinariness or who shed light on a specific phenomenon or issue being explored” (p. 147). Morse (2010) added that in addition to these criteria, participants should also be able to “speak articulately as experts” about the phenomena under investigation.
Post-secondary students who experienced shaming experiences which often resulted in disengagement from school and who were 18 to 30 years of age were selected as participants. I defined disengaged as having the following qualities: active withdrawal from activities within the learning environment; passively compliant; unmotivated to rise above adversity or to face challenges during the acquisition of knowledge; apathetic and unwilling to participate regardless of ability; and/or disconnected from the social realm of the school community (Archambault, 2009; Dean, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004; King et al., 2015).

The selection criteria included: (a) minimum age of 18 years; (b) self-report of being disengaged or affirmative answers to the disengagement questionnaire; and (c) willingness and ability to articulate how the disengagement made them feel. I generated from the first sampling technique a group of 34 participants. Participants that met the criteria and agreed to participate were scheduled for in-depth interviews. Those selected were consented to being interviewed (see Appendix A). Interviews helped me deepen the understandings of the phenomena of why some students struggled to gain further insight with regard to the research questions.

Following the completion of the questionnaire, 15 participants with the most experience with the phenomena were selected for in-depth interviews, which had a conversational tone with open-ended questions related to the research question. All participants chose their own pseudonym that was used throughout the study. Multiple sampling strategies were used throughout the course of the study due to the nature of grounded theory methods. According to Morse (2010):

Because grounded theory is based on symbolic interactionism and processes of negotiating reality and documenting change, grounded theory sampling techniques
must not only explicate the dimensional scope of the phenomena of interest, but also enable comprehensive description of the trajectory of the phenomena over time. (p. 229)

Sampling strategies were altered to saturate categories to further the emergent theory that was constructed: “Theoretical sampling for developing a formal theory involved obtaining data from new participants, previously conducted interviews, additional contacts with participants, observations of participants, and the literature” (Draucker, Martsolf, Ross & Rusk, 2007, p. 1138). Theoretical sampling advanced the theory, and participants were selected according to the descriptive needs of the emerging concepts and theory (Morse, 2010; Stearns & Glennie, 2010).

**Data Sources**

In qualitative research, data are collected as well as produced by the researcher during the fieldwork process. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) characterized the role of data in qualitative research as, “Data involves the particulars you need to think soundly and deeply about the aspects of life you will explore” (p. 117). They further describe data as having a dual nature in being simultaneously the evidence as well as the clues (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The data for this study included the screening information from potential participants with the use of a mixed survey with quantitative data, the responses to open-ended survey questions written by participants, in-depth interview information, and focus group discussion responses in addition to documents produced by the researcher including memos and figures of theory. **Documents.** Documents can be a source of data that provide insight during the fieldwork process to help the researcher think intuitively about the phenomena being explored. Documents are constructed by individuals, making them “social products” that
“reflect the interest and perspectives of their authors” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 54). Businesses, organizations, and institutions produce documents. Patton (2015) stated, “Records, documents, artifacts, and archives, what has traditionally been called ‘material culture’ in anthropology, constitute a particularly rich source of information about many organizations and programs” (p. 376). Documents are written to people in the entity as well as to others about the entity, and both methods can be revelatory for researchers during fieldwork. Elicited documents include surveys with open-ended questions (see Appendix B) and the journal I kept during the data collection and analysis phase of the study (Charmaz, 2014). In this study, I kept descriptive field notes and a journal in order to capture a snapshot of a “slice of life” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Reflective field notes are analytic memos; they are described in the data analysis section (Bogdan, & Biklen, 2007; Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006).

**Interviews.** Interviews serve a purpose in qualitative research as the researcher adds to a growing body of knowledge that is simultaneously conceptual and theoretical as the researcher attempts to delve into the world of the interviewee to explore the meanings of life and the role that their experiences play in their construction of this world (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). As I listened to informants’ perceptions of their socially constructed world and their interpretations of the events coupled with their recall of their emotions, I generated a context-bound understanding of the interview data using memos and descriptive field notes (Mojtahed, Nunes, Martins, & Peng, 2014). All preconceived notions related to shame were set aside for adoption and understanding of the participants’ views and reflective insights. Common understandings of words became
clarification questions as I encouraged interviewees to explain terms in their own words, so the interviewer did not make assumptions about what was being said. Interviewing is an active process in which the interviewer must remain alert for interesting insights into phenomena (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002).

With each question, the interviewee reveals more about themselves as well as the phenomena being explored in a conversational atmosphere so that the participant does not feel like they are being interrogated, which may result in them shutting down (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). During an intensive interview, the conversation is one-sided and the researcher gently guides the participant to explain their personal experience with regard to the research topic (Charmaz, 2014, 2015). There is a delicate balance of give and take that can be achieved by a skilled interviewer, because although the interviewee is doing most of the speaking, the interviewer is also communicating in various ways. As the interviewee shares their stories, it is often an emotional journey as they reflect on their experiences, decisions, and events in front of someone else, and this emotional relationship that is shared must be a two-way exchange for participants to feel comfortable (Ezzy, 2010). The interview guide with questions is included as Appendix C.

At the theory construction phase when the theory is being scrutinized for generalizability, interviews were conducted with participants whose survey results indicated they would have a perspective that would allow me to expand on and verify the emerging model. They are intended to provide final missing pieces of the puzzle, polish data collection, complete processes of saturation, and provide any other information (Morse, 2010). Participants are given a presentation of the ongoing analysis to give their input, which may
result in additional interviews or continued data collection as the cyclical cycle of saturation is achieved. Saturation of a category is reached when the researcher continues to hear nothing new from participants (Stearns & Glennie, 2010), and the researcher is convinced that they understand the participant’s experiences which is consistent and confirmed across multiple data sources (Morse, 2010).

**Data Organization and Management**

Quantitative data are presented in tables to display commonalities in an easy-to-read format. Interviews were recorded on a main tape recorder as well as a back-up tape recorder that could be plugged directly into the laptop to transfer data into DropBox, a password-protected cloud storage program with folders that could be individually locked for additional cyber safety. The in-depth interviews were transcribed using a company specializing in transcriptions for qualitative interviewers using NVivo Transcription, a digital program through which the data can be accessed within an hour after the recording. All data, including survey data, documents, and in-depth interview data, were stored on a password-protected cloud storage program with folders that can be individually locked for additional cyber safety. The transcriptions, documents, field notes, memos and all other data were uploaded to NVivo, which is a CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) used to store, organize, manage, and assist with all of the coding phases that I used to analyze large amounts of data across multiple sources (Grbich, 2013). Saldaña (2015) described how these programs can be used to aid in the coding phases: “CAQDAS, unlike the human mind, can maintain and permit you to organize evolving and potentially complex coding systems into such formats as hierarchies and networks for ‘at a glance’ user reference” (p. 31).
query and search functions search through single or multiple documents for lines of text or for coded segments which enables the researcher to make connections, analyze text and construct theory (Saldaña, 2015). Although computer programs are helpful in assisting the researcher, they cannot do the analysis (Morse, 2010). All documentation and data were be sortable as they included titles, dates, and captions to help with data organization in order to ensure the data analysis process went smoothly. (Miles et al., 2013).

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Charmaz (2015) explained the importance of coding: “Coding provides a way of recognizing participants’ tacit knowledge, meanings, and actions to explore in further data collection” (p. 1615). The constant comparative method was used to analyze the data line by line so that I could make connections between codes for examination and analysis which I referred to as initial or open codes for the first layer of coding (Brown, 2006; Charmaz, 2015). As codes are analyzed, I asked myself the following questions as proposed by Charmaz (2015): “What is happening? What is the data a study of? What theoretical category does this datum indicate? What does the data suggest? Pronounce? From whose point of view?” (p. 1615). Memo-writing was used to fully engage with the data to explore ideas, beliefs, and assumptions, and to reflect and improve codes to discover what they meant as theory was being constructed (Charmaz, 2015). Selective or focused coding began as core concepts were constructed and the data were saturated across categories as well as properties (Brown, 2006). Additional interviews were conducted for theoretical verification purposes known as theoretical coding and during the construction of the final layer of coding which I
refer to as themes. A theory was conducted from the examination of the larger themes, how they were formed, and how it all fit together to tell the story of the data.

**Specific coding strategies.** Throughout the data collection phase, data were coded and analyzed in order to simultaneously construct meaning and make decisions about what data to collect next as theory was formed through coding empirical indicators (Draucker et al., 2007). After the initial exploration phase of data collection, the researcher moves to deepening verification where the researcher is testing the category against additional data to cultivate empirical properties to assist with emergent analytic theory development (Charmaz, 2015; Patton, 2015). The constant comparative method of analysis is used during the coding process to ensure the data is grounded in empirical evidence. Through the grounded theory framework, the theoretical assumptions are constantly tested until saturation occurs within categories and the research questions can be answered (Charmaz, 2014; Grbich 2013). The process of gathering and analyzing data is cyclical and repetitive due to the simultaneous data collection and analysis that must take place.

Charmaz (2014) suggested that the grounded theory researcher from a constructivist perspective should move beyond concretely viewing the data to make sense of analytic stories, statements, and observations to illuminate studied life (Charmaz, 2014). Through the data analysis process, documents, interview transcriptions, observation field notes, and memos were coded line by line. “Line-by-line coding helps students to make connections between codes and advance the analytic level of their emerging analyses” (Charmaz, 2015, p. 1616). Line-by-line coding forces the researcher to ensure that nothing will be missed, and it gives the researcher tools for developing an analytic frame (Holton, 2007). Codes
crystallizes what was learned from the data as active interaction occurred while I grappled with meanings in this heuristic method of discovery (Charmaz, 2014).

Initial coding is the term that used in this study, but it is also referred to as open coding and allowed me to scrutinize what was happening in the data (Charmaz, 2014). The first cycle of initial coding methods used in this study included descriptive coding, In vivo coding, process coding, initial coding, emotion coding, and values coding. Description is a foundational element for qualitative inquiry, and its primary goal is to assist the reader to see what you saw and to hear what was actually said (Miles et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2015). Descriptive codes are not meant to investigate nuances of social interaction just to describe concretely what is going on. In vivo codes are extracted from the data and used as the name of the code as exact words or phrases used by participants (Charmaz, 2014; Miles et al., 2013). According to Saldaña (2015), “The child and adolescent voices are often marginalized, and coding with their actual words enhances and deepens an adult’s understanding of their cultures and worldviews” (p. 91). Process codes use gerunds (which are “-ing” words) that focus on the interactions taking place (Saldaña, 2015). Coding with gerunds is a heuristic device used to bring the researcher into the data to delve deeper into the studied phenomenon to explicate it. Emotion codes seek to name the emotion associated with the participant’s experience, and values coding reflects the values, attitudes, and beliefs that are representative of the participant’s view of the world and their perspective on social interactions (Saldaña, 2015, p. 110). As I heard post-secondary students discuss what was important to them and how they viewed themselves, values and belief systems were
employed as they related to their experiences to fully comprehend the perspectives of participants.

The analytic transition from first cycle coding to second cycle coding happened through several code mapping iterations which involved reorganizing and reassembling the codes to develop a working model using categories which were then used to construct themes (Saldaña, 2015). Data were consolidated and re-coded as language became more concise, and codes that were marginalized or not verified by other documentation was absent from the next iteration (Saldaña, 2015). The second cycle of coding may use some strategies from the first cycle but new strategies that may be employed include focused coding and theoretical coding. The purpose of focused coding is to develop the most frequent or significant categories. As defined by Saldaña (2015), “Focused coding enables you to compare newly constructed codes during this cycle across other participants’ data to assess comparability and transferability” (p. 217). It was during this layer that a rough draft of a theory was outlined as data were simultaneously being collected and analyzed so that each process could inform the other.

Theoretical coding seeks to conceptualize possible relationships as the researcher advances the most salient points toward explaining key analytic features of phenomena through the development of a central categories (Charmaz, 2014; Stearns & Glennie, 2010). According to Saldaña (2015), the use of theoretical codes “moves the analytic story in a theoretical direction” (p. 224). Continuing the discussion regarding moving toward theory, Saldaña (2015) states, “Since a theory is a rich statement with accompanying narrative to expand on its meaning, your ultimate goal is to write one sentence, based on the totality of
your analysis, that captures insightful if-then and how/why guidance for as many relevant contexts as possible” (p. 252). The coding process supported the identification of commonalities among the documents and interviews.

**Analytic memos.** Analytic memos are written reflections pertaining to the choices made during the coding process as well as “your coding processes, and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 41). This “brain dump” is meant to assist with constructing theory, challenging your own assumptions or investigate thoughts about participants, phenomena, elements of research process, or the research as a whole (Lempert, 2010; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013; Saldaña, 2015; Stearns & Glennie, 2010).

Coding and analytic memoing are done continuously and concurrently as one informs the other. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) gave advice to researchers: “Think with what data you have” (p. 172). Memos are narrative methodological links that interpret the social world of participants and are a crucial part of the transformation process as data become theory (Lempert, 2010). Memos are more than just summarizing what may be happening during the coding analysis process; reflexivity takes place as the researcher expounds upon deeper complex meanings (Saldaña, 2015). Memos involved written analytical conversations with myself regarding my thoughts concerning my research to capture nascent ideas (Lempert, 2010). I learned to embrace uncertainty as I engaged in the messy discovery process toward developing richly nuanced grounded theories (Charmaz, 2007; Lempert, 2010). Questions I ask myself throughout the memoing process included: “What is this an example of? When
does it happen? Where is it happening? With whom? How? Under what conditions does it seem to occur? With what consequences?” (Lempert, 2010, p. 251). Embedded within memos were directions to myself, visual concept maps as well as literature in order to participate in an internal theoretical conversation (Lempert, 2010).

**Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

**Limitations**

Careful consideration was taken when explaining the research agenda so that students were aware of the goals of the study to create an atmosphere of transparency, so students felt comfortable openly sharing information. Possible limitations of the study may include the fact that students who have struggled in school may not answer questions in a detailed way since they were being asked questions by an adult. Issues of power, class, race, and gender could present themselves during the interview in the way questions were asked. I used documents, questionnaires, and in-depth interviews to ground my theory and data. Using these techniques and intently listening to their voices helped me build relationships and showed that I was worthy of their trust and that I did not have ulterior motives.

My current position as an assistant principal and the fact that I am passionate about seeing struggling students be successful could have been a researcher bias by presenting issues with being an objective interviewer during the interview process. I relied solely on the grounded theory method, which has limitations of forcing data instead of allowing it to be constructed since the researcher is the primary instrument. To practice reflexivity and fully analyze my personal thoughts and beliefs during the study, I engaged in memoing, which is a form of data. Participants selected how they wanted to be interviewed, and I was careful
about paying attention to face-to-face site selections that allowed them to be comfortable and free from distractions.

There are contradictions, irregularities, and misinformation present in our memories as they lose their intensity over time or our understanding of the memory through time changes as our viewpoints are impacted by our current realities (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002; Smith, Caruthers, & Fowler, 2019). Memories that are developed with shame in the background are often unreliable, contain errors, and may be distorted because there may be variances between our perceptions of what happened and what really happened (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002; Conway & Loveday, 2015). When retelling these memories that contain trauma or tragedy, participants may have left out significant details because of the societal silencing that may have occurred surrounding the event as described by Smith, Caruthers, and Fowler (2019). “The shout or hiss of ‘Shut up!’ is a weapon against struggles for freedom, a form of policing that is internalized” (p. xii). The internalization of being silenced could have added to giving unreliable answers to questions asked or mis-remembering pertinent details when telling their stories.

Validity and Reliability

There has been an ongoing debate concerning the validity of qualitative data and the role it should play in academic research. The debate can be summed up by describing the variance in paradigms, according to Patton (2015):

In its simplest and most strident formulation, this debate has centered on the relative value of two different and competing inquiry paradigms: (1) using quantitative and experimental methods to generate and test hypothetical-deductive generalizations versus (2) using qualitative and naturalistic approaches to inductively and holistically understand human experience in context-specific settings. (p. 89)
The differing views center around the description and definitions of what constitutes data and how it is analyzed. In qualitative data, the researcher’s values and beliefs are embedded in the study but strategies to mitigate the impact that bias may have should be used so that it does not interfere with the validity of the study and the best results can be obtained (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2007; Patton, 2015). Other methods such as using a critical friend and ensuring that all interview question were clear assisted with ensuring that data collected was valid and reliable.

With regard to qualitative research, reliability can be described as “synonymous with the terms ‘dependability, stability, consistency, predictability, and accuracy’” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 292). Data is reliable when it measures what it is intended to measure, and the researcher has to ensure that the data that is collected fits. Lincoln and Guba (1985) helped to resolve the issue of reliability with the claim that, “Since there can be no validity without reliability (and thus no credibility without dependability), a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter” (p. 316). Reliable data accurately describes the experiences of the participants. Internal validity was established by using the comparative method for analysis and conducting additional interviews for theoretical testing. External validity was minimized through the use of varied and multiple data sets as well as the intensive interview process. During an interview, participants may act differently in front of the researcher depending on the role they may have. There may also be information sifting as described by Brayboy and Deyhle (2000): “Sometimes researchers are ‘blocked’ by participants who decide they are unworthy or not to be trusted with local ‘insider’ information” (p. 163). The
amount of time I spent talking with these post-secondary students and sharing my experiences with shame contributed to breaking their silence and developing trust.

**Crystallization**

Through multiple forms of inquiry, the truths regarding the nature of student struggling surfaced through using various strategies and modes by which to understand the phenomena. Ellington (2014) offered a conceptual view of crystallization: “Crystallization offers a framework for conducting qualitative and mixed-method researchers to examine relational topics using multiple lenses and a variety of genres” (p. 442). Viewing my data as an insider as well as an outsider helped to crystallize my findings during the data analysis phase. Crystallization is a two-fold metaphor with integrated and dendritic crystallization. Ellington (2009) stated, “Integrated crystallization involves producing a written and/or visual text consisting of multiple genres that reflect (and straddle) multiple points on the qualitative continuum” (p. 97). Memos and descriptive field notes provided me the reflective point of view as my own thoughts were analyzed. “Dendritic crystallization is characterized by a more ‘dispersed’ representation of ideologies across multiple texts that represent different genres” (Vik & Bute, 2009, p. 341). Surveys, documents, interviews transcripts, memos, and field notes allowed me to analyze multiple data and the interrelatedness of the various data points.

**Ethical Considerations**

As the primary researcher working on this study, it was my ethical responsibility to ensure that the rights of my participants were protected and that the degree of risk and discomfort was minimal. The bill of rights for research participants was given to them to as
well as all informed consent forms (see Appendix B). Permission to conduct this research was obtained from the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is the governing body within UMKC that operates in compliance with all U.S. regulatory requirements related to the protections of human research participants. The fundamental responsibility of the IRB is to ensure that all ethical issues have been fully addressed in the protection of human research subjects who volunteer to participate in research studies. Prior to being granted permission to conduct the study, researchers must take the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), which is a web-based training program ensuring all measures will be taken to protect all participants from any harm. Any researcher conducting a research study must first abide by a classical principle of humane conduct which ensures that no harm will befall any of the participants in the study. Once the IRB ensured that I had qualifications and expertise to appreciate the complexities involved in my study, I was granted permissions to ethically carry out my research. I then obtain written consent from all participants and throughout the course of the study. Participants were reminded that participation was strictly voluntary, and should they change their minds about participating, they were assured that contact about the study would cease.

The Belmont Report explains the unifying ethical principles that form the basis for the regulations that must be adhered to when using any human subjects for research. The Belmont Report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) establishes three fundamental principles which serve as criteria all research with human subjects must meet:
• Respect for persons: Individuals should be treated as autonomous agents who can make informed decisions regarding their participation in research projects. Special provisions may need to be made when comprehension is severely limited.

• Beneficence: Persons are treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm but by maximizing benefits while minimizing potential harms.

• Justice: The selection of participants was scrutinized in order to make sure individuals were being systematically selected because of their easy availability. Individuals that would most likely benefit from the research should bear the burden of any associated risks involved in the research.

The purpose of the study and reciprocity were discussed with all participants prior to obtaining consent. Privacy and confidentiality was considered, and in-depth interview participants either chose their pseudonym or allowed me to select one for them. Pseudonyms were used on all documentation including a master list for the researcher’s file. I ensured that participants remained anonymous and met the standard of non-identifiability, as identifiable details were omitted from the final report (Miles et al., 2013). The files for this study were kept on a password-protected computer and once the study is completed and defended with my committee it will be kept in the office of the principal investigator for seven years.

My evolving viewpoints could have been a limitation. Previously, I believed that compartmentalization existed and that it was possible to section off the self in ways that allowed an individual to have more control over their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. The process of preparing my proposal for the study caused me to view this idea differently as the
concept of shame is integrated, not remaining in a pre-developed compartment. Empirically proven research I have encountered has allowed me to affect change in many areas of my life professionally, personally, and publicly. I find myself studying environments around me watching interactions between people which has allowed me to see the research in action helping me prepare to become a grounded theory researcher. “Through immersion in the data, a grounded theorist develops a deep understanding of the patterns, relationships, and nuances in the phenomena under study” (Van Vliet, 2008, p. 236). I currently have 1,004 articles saved on my computer and almost all of them are printed, catalogued, and coded in a binder system for easy retrieval. Reading and studying my topic supported my knowledge of existing theories and concepts about the construct of shame and the ways it may show up in learning environments. The next section discusses the findings of the study.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

As I described in Chapter 1, every 26 seconds, a student disengages and gives up on their education in the United States, which is about 7,000 students a day, equating to 1.2 million students dropping out each year (Miller, 2011). Some drop out before earning a high school diploma, which is often a behavioral manifestation of the cessation of the cumulative social-psychological disengagement process that typically originates in earlier grades (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012; Davis & Banks, 2019, Finn, 1989; Gray, 2017; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Lessard et al., 2008; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Others may remain in school but become totally disengaged from the academic and social aspects of schooling. I portrayed disengagement in this study as having the following qualities: active withdrawal from activities within the learning environment; passively compliant; unmotivated to rise above adversity or to face challenges during the acquisition of knowledge; apathetic and unwilling to participate regardless of ability; and/or disconnected from the social realm of the school community (Archambault et al., 2009; Dean & Jolly, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004; King et al., 2015).

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to generate theory, grounded in data, to explore how and in what ways shame may affect students in the learning environment. I began this study with the hypothesis, grounded in the qualitative paradigm, that shame may be attributed to academic disengagement in school. One central question and three sub-questions were posed to construct theories related to my hypothesis, rather than test
the hypothesis with quantitative instrumentation. Central question: How and in what ways might shame be reflected in students’ learning environments?

a) In what ways might memories of shame during childhood be related to students’ experiences in school?

b) What are common triggers of shame for students?

c) How do students recover from shaming experiences?

The study relied on the constructivist grounded theory paradigm advanced by Charmaz (2000) with the foundation of grounded theory tenets originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory has been described as a constellation of methods, but the nine elements that Charmaz (2014) contended must be present:

1. Conduct data collection and analysis simultaneously in an iterative process
2. Analyze actions and processes rather than themes and structure
3. Use comparative methods
4. Draw on data (e.g., narratives and descriptions) in service of developing new conceptual categories
5. Develop inductive abstract analytic categories through systematic data analysis
6. Emphasize theory construction rather than description or application of current theories
7. Engage in theoretical sampling
8. Pursue developing a category rather than covering a specific empirical topic (p. 15)

Using a systematic methodological process to perform rigorous multi-layered comparative analysis early in the process supported theoretical sampling and helped to clarify relationships between categories for a theory to be constructed to inform policy and practice (Charmaz, 2014).

Critical arts-based inquiry was also infused into the processes as a way to view the frequently researched topic of dropout and disengagement through a new lens to deepen the
ongoing conversation (Barone & Eisner, 1997). Evocative language was carefully integrated during focus category development and throughout the creation of the theory to make it accessible to not only the academic community but to the general public. The framework for generating theory incorporated a cross-disciplinary approach that consisted of the arts, humanities, and the social sciences. By intersecting film and screenwriting studies, popular movie sequences, figurative language devices, with traditional qualitative research practices, my goal was to inspire social transformation from the standpoint of the researcher as an educational activist (Finley, 2018). Apple (2014) expressed my position as an educational activist. He stated:

The world is politically complicated . . . the very idea that we should separate our political lives from our actions as researchers is part of the problem, not part of the solution. It too does damage to educators, to students, to those we too often refer to as “research subjects.” (p. x)

As I theorized, I kept these words in mind, careful not to separate my life from the lives of the participants who volunteered to pursue issues of shame with me.

I made use of tables and figures and designed the format of the findings to create visual constructions for readers in order to stimulate the imagination of the audience as they construct their own meaning from the research. As a constructivist, I expect that each reader will bring their own experiences to the reading of the text, making interpretations along the way. This chapter presents the final stage of my research—the theory generated—culminating in three acts with the voices of the 15 participants supporting theoretical sampling for advancing the theory (Morse, 2010; Stearns & Glennie, 2010). I describe the participants, present reflections regarding my research actions, discuss the process for generating shame theory, and connect the theory to participants’ data. In reporting on the
findings, I created research art by blending grounded theory with critical arts-based inquiry. Through bringing in art, I hope to allow my audience to “participate vicariously in a situation” (Eisner, 2008, p. 6)—in this instance theorizing related to shame. Research questions are answered in Chapter 5, followed by implications of findings, future research, and final reflections.

**Participants**

Participants were recruited through social media, electronic communication such as e-mail or text messages, and word of mouth. All volunteers meeting the following criteria were invited to participate in the study: (a) be able to discuss emotions experienced while in high school and (b) minimum age of 18 years but not over the maximum age of 30. Of the 34 participants that completed the survey, 15 of 22 participants volunteered to complete phase two of the study, which involved in-depth interviews. Table 1 describes the demographics of the 15 participants.

Seven of the interview participants ranged in ages from 18 to 21, three, 22 to 25, and five ranged from 26 to 30. Most of the interviewees were female (N=10) and African American (N=12). Of the 15 participants, four were African American males and one was a White male. Five of the participants had high school diplomas with no equivalent certificate, four had some college, four had Bachelor’s degrees, and two had Master’s degrees. The larger sample consisted of 22 females and 12 males.
### Table 1

**Sample Demographics of Interview Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Gender identification</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest level of education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patrick Lawrence</td>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esi Sirrah</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle Union</td>
<td>22-25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate Patterson</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>22-25</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will Tostenson</td>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob George</td>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Hatt</td>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shay Smith</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Some college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizza Rhey</td>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Some college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Eyre</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Smith</td>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Some college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia McDade</td>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Some college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>22-25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tammy Smith</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reflections: Research Actions**

As noted, there were two phases of the study, the survey and the in-depth interviews.

The mixed survey (see Appendix C) consisted of 20 questions with a quantitative section that included five demographic questions (1–5) and a qualitative section with 14 questions (6–19) covering information about involvement and engagement during high school. The last question asked if they would agree to participate in the in-depth interviews. Findings from the quantitative section of the mixed survey are presented in Tables 2 and 3.
### Table 2

*Demographics of the Larger Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question/Answers</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 1: Please indicate your age range.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 – 21</td>
<td>32.35%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 – 25</td>
<td>14.71%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 – 30</td>
<td>52.94%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2: What is your gender identification?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>64.71%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35.29%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3: What is your race?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islander</td>
<td>47.06%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2.94%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>2.94%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4: What is the highest level of education you have attained so far?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Diploma or Equivalent</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>23.53%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Degree</td>
<td>2.94%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>26.47%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>26.47%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate or Professional Degree</td>
<td>2.94%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 34*
The largest number of participants reported ages 26–30, most were female, and none of the participants identified as non-binary. The race of the group was fairly even, with Black or African American slightly higher than White participants; only one reported mixed race, two or more races. While approximately 40% of the group finished high school and had some college, about 60% reported educational backgrounds that ranged from Associate to doctoral degrees. One participant reported an Associate degree and one a doctoral degree. The others were evenly distributed among Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees.

Table 3

*Question 5: Think about Your Experience in High School and Please Answer “Yes” or “No” to Indicate Your Response.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was involved in extracurricular events such as sports, clubs, or activities.</td>
<td>91.18%</td>
<td>8.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were times when I felt that class was boring or that I was unmotivated to do the work.</td>
<td>97.06%</td>
<td>2.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt that the teachers or school needed to be aware of problems outside of school that affected me as a student.</td>
<td>52.94%</td>
<td>47.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were times when I felt I struggled in school.</td>
<td>64.71%</td>
<td>35.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I graduated from a public, charter or private high school with my original cohort (4 years after you entered as a freshmen).)</td>
<td>97.06%</td>
<td>2.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I graduated from an alternative high school, an on-line program, with a GED or MO Options or with another diploma equivalent.</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As indicated in Tables 2 and 3 regarding experiences in high school, most graduated from a public, charter or private high school with their original cohort, none graduated from an alternative school or programs with GED or other diploma equivalency, and most participated in extracurricular activities during high school. Participation in extracurricular activities is likely to increase students’ sense of engagement or emotional attachment to their schools, which may ultimately decrease the likelihood of school failure and dropping out (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Stearns & Glennie, 2010). Participation can also reduce use of alcohol and drugs and provide opportunities for development of youth through interactions with peers and adults (Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005). However, an especially high number of students, 33 of 34, expressed boredom with school and the work expected of them, which reduced their engagement.

While the focus of this study was to determine the extent to which disengagement is connected to shame, which influences affective engagement related to emotions, other concepts of engagement such as cognitive and behavioral (discussed in the literature review) play a definite role in the learning process. Cognitive engagement involves mental efforts, such as meaningful processing, strategy use, concentration, and metacognition (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Much of this mental effort takes place when voices of all students are reflected in the curriculum through culturally relevant pedagogy and opportunities to question and engage in critical inquiry. According to Ladson-Billings and Brown (2008), “curricula are not static, neutral documents of fact but rather are dynamic, ideological, cultural artifacts that do something” (p. 153).
Almost half of the students perceived that teachers were not aware of their problems outside of school and approximately 65% of the students expressed that they struggle in school. Positive relationships in schools contribute to building an overall positive school culture, as stated by Hyslop (2006): “Schools remain one of the best opportunities for connecting youth and adults in positive ways, giving students the sense that they are valued and cared for, and reinforcing the message that whether they succeed or fail actually matters to someone” (p. 34).

The last 14 questions of the survey were open-ended, designed to explore how participants perceived themselves and others; delve into the nature of struggling in school; and determine what academic achievement-related emotions are associated with learning. These qualitative findings were integrated with the in-depth interviews and are discussed in the section, Connecting to the Theory: Themes Identified in the Data.

In all, the 34 participants completed the survey in an average of 20 minutes, 22 people provided their contact information stating they were willing to be interviewed, and 15 participants were selected to participate in the in-depth interview phase. The average interview lasted 45 minutes. As the surveys were completed, potential participants were contacted by e-mail and text to schedule an in-depth interview using Acuity scheduling software which allowed me to set up an availability calendar so that participants could schedule their own time. Time slots were blocked off in one hour and fifteen-minute increments, with a fifteen-minute buffer between interviews. Participants had the option of doing an interview using Zoom video conferencing through the computer using Wi-Fi, which
also had a dial-in number, or to do a phone interview. However, several participants preferred to do in-person interviews.

All interviews took place over an eight-day period. Some of the participants were nervous so as I introduced myself, I stated that my goal was to help them understand my reasoning for choosing shame associated with struggle. I really wanted to find solutions to help not just myself but other educators because I think school could be a better place for young people. With that explanation, participants seemed to relax, and I used a conversational tone when asking my questions to keep the conversation flowing. When asking follow-up questions, I tried to use the words of my participants to get them to expand or go deeper with a line of thought. If I was making a connection, I reminded them of a previous story they had told before asking the question to prevent any misunderstanding.

At the end of the interview, I thanked them and let them know I was turning off the recording. After turning off the recording, I asked if they had any last questions, or we discussed their thoughts about my topic or the interview. The longest interview (after reviewing the consent form and answering any questions before beginning the recording) was 1 hour and 15 minutes, and the shortest was 32 minutes.

**Validity and reliability.** As I pondered about issues of validity and reliability, attention was given to member checking through sending transcripts to participants to review and inviting them to become engaged with an on-line focus group to discuss findings related to the theory. All participants were sent their individual transcripts in an e-mail with various methods to contact me if they wanted to add anything or if they wanted to add any further clarification. I agreed to send a copy of the final dissertation to each of the participants so
they could review it at their leisure after it was submitted. At the time of the interview, most of the participants requested not to participate in the discussion of findings in the on-line focus group but said that if I needed anything I could follow-up with them or if they had anything to add, they would contact me.

My initial hypothesis was that shame may be connected to indicators of disengagement as an outward demonstration of affect driving behavior. Wong and Tsai (2007) proposed that participants in societies such as the United States, where the collectivistic model is guilt, can place shame within an emotional generating context or an event even though they may not actually use the word shame (Wong & Tsai, 2007). The qualitative questions in the survey and the in-depth interviews followed a specific sequence of initial open-ended questions to situate the participants in a specific frame of mind regarding issues of shame, followed by intermediating questions in relation to the topic and ending with questions that allowed the participants to share their personal expertise or wisdom (Agee, 2009; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002). This was also done to make sure that if distress had been caused by the more involved questions, it would have time to dissipate before shifting the focus to giving advice to high school educators or a student who is struggling in high school. These actions also contributed to the validity of findings.

**Abstracting analytic categories.** Careful attention was given to the nine elements of Charmaz’s (2014) ground theory approach, and I kept in mind the use of an iterative approach, conducting data collection and analysis simultaneously while working with participants. Initially, survey results that revealed significant indicators of struggle, disengagement, a low perception of self or others in the school environment, and academic
achievement emotions such as frustration and stress were prioritized for immediate follow-up, as these elements were linked to my unit of analysis. Using the advice of Charmaz, I attended to what might be missing. After the first two interviews, it was apparent that a question about what triggers shame was missing, so I added that question to my interview guide. The next four participants (interviewees three through six) heard about my study from a friend or family member, and although their surveys did not have any significant indicators of struggle, their stories displayed an emotional rollercoaster from shame to striving.

With each interview, my follow-up questions became more articulate as I attempted to discover overall perceptions of participants who did not struggle in school and discern patterns and meanings in the stories of those who struggled through abstracting analytic categories. I updated my communication on social media and electronic communication to include that I was looking for individuals who could provide insight about their high school experience because I believed school needed to be better for all students. No priority was given to any particular participant characteristics, and I interviewed all who were willing to be interviewed. The next five interviews (7 to 11) were examined and compared with the previous four interviews to identify similarities and differences in the meanings conveyed. In general, the interviews were extremely emotional, and I often felt emotionally drained after them. After coding several interviews, I again maintained the process relayed by Charmaz (2014) by elevating a few intermediate or second level codes to focus codes and began to draft a visual representation of what I thought I was hearing.

Consulting the survey results once again, I contacted four of the participants (interviewees 12 to 15) who I thought would help me gain deeper insight into the patterns in
the data and the identification of focus codes. After interview 12 with Esi Sirrah (pseudonym), I went back to the data to look for not just how my participants told the story but the pattern of the story. I re-coded as I simultaneously re-drafted my theory, researched screenwriting terms, and labeled pattern using the of language of movies. In the last three interviews, I targeted my follow-up questions to figure out the thought processes linked to experiences of shame, how individuals learned to move through situations of shame, and what it means to be on the other side of shame.

**Generating theory.** As I listened to participants recount stories from their elementary, middle, and high school experiences with vivid details, extracting new meanings in response to my questions and reflecting on the ways in which events of shame changed them, I was deeply moved and honored by their bravery. In vivo codes were used as much as possible to honor the voices of my participants along with process codes expressed as actions using words, descriptive codes, and emotions as stated by my participants, which yielded 345 codes from the survey and in-depth interviews in the initial or open coding phase (Saldaña, 2015). After finishing an emotionally charged interview in which Rob George recounted a recent event in which he was still struggling through shame, I reflected on his answers. When I asked about how he recovered from a previous experience, he responded that he had not recovered. “They’re really scars honestly. And sometimes they reopen and sometimes they close.” In previous interviews, participants were able to describe techniques, strategies, or steps they needed to take to move forward out of the shame space; but in this particular interview, it seemed the participant was stuck in a quasi-Groundhog Day experience where he was re-traumatized with each new event that confirmed the shame story he kept reliving.
In direct contrast was Esi Sirrah, who moved through shame quickly. When I asked about her process, she stated, “You know, I think my framing is important for me. Struggle doesn’t mean it’s over. I mean you have to go through some things in order to get to a desired result or a better result.” The idea of framing stuck with me, and as I was flipping through the TV channels, I landed on Wonder Woman, one of my favorite superheroes. I thought back to a memory from elementary school when I told a boy in the class that I was going to be a superhero one day. He frowned up his face and said, “You can’t be a superhero because you’re a girl.” I looked at him, got close to his face, and said, “I can be whatever I want to be, and nobody gets to tell me what I can’t do.” He backed up and said, “Fine, be a hero if you want.”

My mind shifted from this memory to a more recent one of the first day after I moved into my apartment as I was waiting for the divorce to be finalized. As I unpacked boxes, it struck me that not only was I alone, but everyone would know I failed at marriage because once the paperwork went through, my name would legally change back to my maiden name, and I would have to let my job know. As I (re)hashed this event, in my mind I felt like I was reliving the moment, and it was difficult to distinguish between my present and past. I wanted to shut down the memory, but it was as if I could not locate the “off” button for the memory, so it kept playing. I am a private person when it comes to my personal life, but I remembered the instant I realized that co-workers, colleagues, students in the school, parents, district personnel, and everybody that I e-mailed would know. I would become just another divorce statistic. Shame instantly took over and I began to (re)hearse and (re)connect all of my other failures. I felt sick to my stomach and short of breath and I cried so deeply I
crumpled to the ground in physical, emotional, and mental anguish. Trying to calm myself down, I climbed into bed in the fetal position to watch television and drown out the shaming messages that consumed my thoughts. I have always loved superheroes and the fact that somehow good finds a way to win in the end. Watching Spiderman through blurry eyes as tears clouded my vision, out of the blue I yelled, “I get it, I’m a freaking superhero!” With this realization, I dried my eyes. I realized that I was at the beginning of the story when the hero’s whole world is crashing down, but like every superhero story, this horrible experience could be an opportunity to discover my powers and become the superhero I was always meant to be. I instantly felt better, created a personal growth plan, and called my parents to reassure them that I was going to be okay.

Understanding the frame allowed Esi Sirrah to move through shame, because she knew there was a general order to her experiences. I went back through my data and realized there were patterns in the process that participants used to move through times of struggle that allowed them to come out on the other side a better version of themselves. In the next few interviews, I listened to their stories and could almost see which act they were engaged in within their life’s movie. When I asked my survey participants, “Is ‘struggle’ ever a good thing?” 13 out of 15 of my interview participants responded “yes,” but some had some caveats such as “as long as it doesn’t last too long” or “only if you’re going to get something out of it.” Analyzing Marvel’s Black Panther (Feige, 2018), Wonder Woman (Roven, Snyder, Snyder, & Suckle, 2017), The Amazing Spiderman (Ebert, 2012), and Batman: The Dark Knight Rises (Thomas, Nolan, & Roven, 2012) for research purposes, I discovered that just like there were similar scenes that were present in each of the movies, there were certain
elements present in the stories my participants told. Their position within the three-act sequence depended on where they were in the process of moving from struggling to striving to be a more enlightened version of themselves. Before continuing to pursue this line of thinking, I had to have my own reality check and asked myself, “So what?” As a former English teacher, I always taught my students that if you could not answer that question before beginning any paper, then it was not worth writing.

I thought about all the students I have been blessed enough to cross paths with who have shared their stories with me and how helpless I felt telling them simply to have faith that things would get better. What would have been more helpful was if I had given them a systematic frame for deriving meaning from their experiences to use these as opportunities for growth and empowerment. With ideas of about elements of life within their control to act upon to create movement in their lives, students could shift from shame to liberation. As an educational activist, I create circumstances or look for moments in which equitable learning shifts can occur for those furthest from privilege in any given area. Understanding the ebb and flow of the journey from the shame space to liberation may take some of the sting out of the experience or lessen the time it takes to move from the (re)awakening phase to the (re)mix. Providing skills, strategies, and shifts that could be made may fill some of the gaps that exist for students who may be struggling to find a way through shame so they are able to more fully engage in their studies, the social environment, and self-development while in school.
The Process for Generating Shame Theory

Overview of the Strugglish Superhero Storyline

The theory I constructed from this process is termed Strugglish Superhero Storyline, and it is situated in a three-act sequence on the strugglish superhero storyboard, which is a conceptual framework for self-awareness working toward self-empowerment while moving through shame. The use of language in the created theory is intentional; in the constructed definition of strugglish superhero, the use of the word superhero is non-gendered as a way to reclaim power (Freire, 2000). bell hooks (1989) questioned the dominant ideology present in language and contended that words are in itself a place of struggle:

We are wedded in language, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. Dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same voice? Dare I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of domination—a language that will not bind you, fence you in, or hold you. Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle (p. 16)

Disrupting the thought pattern that a female version of a hero must be a heroine, I hold the first part of the definition that a hero is any person admired for courage and nobility, but reject the assertion that it is especially a man. A few lines down in my favorite dictionary, Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus, authored by Agnes and Laird (2002), right under the word heroine, the definition is missing the part about being admired for courage and nobility, which is an example of the gendered perceptions and expectations that exist in society due to limits of language (p. 298). The following terms are significant to generating theory related to shame:

- Strugglish Superhero: extraordinary person with the will to fight the evil institutional or “norm list” constraints to be free for the sake of humanity.
• *Strugglish Superhero Storyline:* the theory that plots the tensions and transformations of Strugglish Superheroes as they forcefully fight against an opponent (may be the inner self) to achieve a greater sense of purpose.

• *Strugglish Superhero Storyboard:* sequence of scenes that take place to move the *Strugglish Superhero* from the shame space of the inciting incident to the (Re)mix

Holding the viewpoint that art is useful as a tool to help us make meaning of our lives through various mediums, I incorporate poetic literary devices such as rhyming to communicate theory (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Leavy, 2017). The use of artistic elements allowed me to be attentive to affect and sensory impacts, so visuals were created to extend the comprehension of the abstract elements to a more concrete visual form (Leavy, 2015, 2017; McNiff, 1998; Rolling Haywood, 2011). I consider myself to be an artist using words to paint pictures or show beauty. Alliteration, the use of repetition of the initial sound in two or more words, is one of my favorite devices as I have found that it pushes me to be creative, and there are instances of elements such as this throughout the study. Art is not reserved to be used by those with galleries; everyone is capable of creating art, and this is why I used film techniques to explain the data in storyboard form. Foucault (1984) analyzes the place that art holds in our societal spectrum:

> What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized, or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life? (p. 350)

Participants allowed me to have an insider’s view into scenes that created their life’s movie, which I am honored to roll out the red carpet to present. I was able to explore their inner values and shame triggers that often violate the “norm list”—how individuals are expected to respond based on societal expectations that often communicate hidden shame and
silence. For many, this means to never let others see your vulnerability. The *strugglish superhero* Storyboard comprises a number of scenes that move the *strugglish superhero* from the shame space of the inciting incident to the *(Re)mix*, described in Figure 1.

**Inner Value**

*When inner value is at risk, you either lose or gain— You do not remain the same.*

The issue of inner value became the key to triggering the shame response for participants because it only occurred surrounding elements of their identity they cared about. One descriptive code, “in the shadow,” was identified in various responses of inciting incidents in which several of the participants spoke about being in school with an older sibling. They had many of the same teachers, who criticized them for not being as academically gifted as their older sibling. This only triggered a shame response for one of the participants, because they valued being their own person and hated the comments because they made them feel devalued rather than being recognized by the teachers for their individual gifts. When the inner value was threatened then the individual’s personal world was in danger; there was a loss or a win, or as the popular saying goes, you get bitter or you get better. Staying the same before the interaction did not seem to be an option because the individual became aware of the gap between how they thought they were perceived and how they were actually perceived and the ways they were not meeting expectations in the eyes of others, which impacted how they viewed themselves (Graham & Taylor, 2014; Oades-Sese et al., 2014). Shame triggers often kept them from staying the same and could ignite memories, which were dependent upon inner value systems.
Shame Triggers

And because we care about violating the “norm list”

We give space and opportunity for shame to exist.

Thomas Scheff (2003) posited that shame is the “premier social emotion.” When an individual is experiencing shame, shifts within their perception take place, altering how they feel they are viewed by others (Gilbert & Andrews, 1998; Lewis, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Shame triggers that attacked the inner value systems that were described by participants included:

- “failed relationships”
- “when people don’t see my worth”
- “not living up to somebody else’s expectations”
- “people leave you or people make you feel like you did something wrong when really you didn’t”
- “when I was bullied, and people would say things like you’re ugly or like stuff like that”
- “getting caught plagiarizing was shameful for me cause like all these administrators think I am such a good student which I mean I am, but I messed up”
- “the struggle of fitting in or trying to was a big issue for me because of the people I was around made it difficult because I wasn’t as outspoken so I didn’t really speak up for myself”
- “anytime I think of failures”
• “the stereotypes for people of color”
• “the idea that I have hurt or disappointed someone”
• “when your self standards were not met like when I had to drop out of that class, I felt shame”
• “I would say every time I’m reminded of not being in college or every time I reminded of like a point in my life where I thought I would be at but then I’m not. And I’m grateful for where I am now but it’s comparing it to what all those people are doing to what I want to be doing”

The “norm list” represents the types of societal expectations individuals were expected to meet including cultural, economic, educational, familial, historical, personal, and professional. All of these norms tinted the lens of perception that individuals used to view their personal situations. Awareness of this gap influenced the participants’ reality, and they were no longer free to be all elements of their identity, which caused the personal world to become unbalanced, thus creating the shame space. Transformation reflects our ways of being in the world including the biological, psychological, neurological, and social changes that occur in our bodies and how we relate to other people, space, and time. Shame transforms our worldview and may elicit physical and emotional responses:

Being who we do not want to be, we shrink in relation to our previous image of ourselves and we are exposed before the other. As we shrink, a single characteristic or action seems to define the whole of who we are; we are worthless; and our view of the world may shrink to one small detail. (Lindsay-Hartz et al., 1995, p. 278)

Figure 1 serves as the prequel to the strugglish superhero storyboard. The theory of The Strugglish Superhero Storyline suggests that when the inner values of individuals are a risk, they turn to the “norm list,” which communicates expectations from the larger society
regarding how they think they should respond. The “norm list” of the storyline that often guide behaviors of individuals includes cultural expectations and phenomena from the culture, economic precepts that guide our lives, and messages from educational institutions that often communicate dominant ideology and knowledge. Shame occurs when we care about violating the list, which gives space for shame to not only consume our bodies but create separation between ourselves and others.

Figure 1. The theory of the Strugglish Superhero Storyline.
When shame alters our perceptions based on “norm list” expectations, our reality is no longer real; therefore, we are no longer free to be the real version of ourselves. When individuals are secure in their identities and realities, they check messages received about perceptions and expectations and remain in balance despite the minor rises and falls they experience emotionally, mentally, physically, socially and spiritually (Dunlop & Walker, 2013; Fairecloth, 2012; George, 2014; Klem & Connell, 2004; Siegel, 2015). hooks (1994) reminded us of the power of language. “Like desire, language disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries. It speaks itself against our will, in words and thoughts that intrude, even violate the most private spaces of mind and body” (p. 167).

I have extrapolated a frame for theorizing regarding moving from shame to success, which often requires individuals to redefine the values they place in the norm list. The following section brings the voices of 15 participants to engage in theoretical sampling “for developing a formal theory [that] involved obtaining data from new participants, previously conducted interviews, additional contacts with participants, observations of participants, and the literature” (Draucker et al., 2007, p. 1138). Telling the story in a three-act sequence, I hope to bring to life the story of real-life superheroes.

**Overview of the Strugglish Superhero Storyboard**

While doing the interviews, in answer to a question about what I needed to know to understand the student experience better, Lizza Rhey said something about acknowledging that there are diverse experiences even to a similar situation. When I asked her to elaborate, she expounded upon the point she was making:

Every student is different. Even in the same situation, every student is different. For example, if there was a kid that went through like the exact same life, literally the
exact same life as I live, they would still have a different outcome of who they are today. Like they will experience it differently, they’ll feel differently, like we all had different perspectives. We may both be looking at the same picture but if I asked you what you see versus what I see, nine times out of ten we’re gonna say something different.

It’s the same thing with their educational experience. You may just see it as a Math problem, but they see it as if I don’t get this, I can’t get Math, I won’t get life and then I’m gonna be poor and live on the street.

I thought about the fact that every story I heard was indeed unique and nuanced with variations dependent on the individual’s personality, life experiences, lessons, and limitations, but I realized that what the participants share were the same needs that researcher storyteller Brené Brown summarized as love and belonging:

A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don’t function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick. (Brown, 2010, p. 40)

Paying more attention to the flow of the stories, I tracked the actions that participants took when they were struggling, how they climbed out of the shame space, what kept them grounded, and what lessons they were grateful they learned. Patrick Lawrence’s answer about what he does to make himself feel better after a shaming incident provided a clue into things that can be replicated by others for moving through shame:

But it’s like you just reflect on yourself and it’s like yeah, this happened to you. Sure. One hundred percent, but what can you do to move on? Like what are you gaining from just sitting down in a chair and being ashamed. That’s what I think about, like there’s no point you just sitting and just like being down on yourself because everybody else is moving you’re just still there. Everybody’s working and you’re sitting, because of a feeling.

He began by acknowledging his pain and then created an action plan to move forward. I went back through the data looking for other clues that were not specific to an individual but could
be generalized to provide strategies and a way out of the shame space. Success is something that everyone wants to experience, but some just need actionable steps to get to where they want to go. When Patrick described how he thought about success, he lit up and was excited, waving his hands while he spoke:

I like success. Success is a great feeling for me. So, I always want to get there. So, I’ll do whatever I can. Success is like, you know, that little animation with the light bulb turning on. It’s a little smiley face. That’s how I feel. I’m like, ‘Yes! I did that.’ And it’s just like, a great feeling. It’s like tingling. It just feels so good, like surreal. I really did that, and I did a good job, like “Oh yeah!” And like people like around me are like proud, this is awesome. It is just a great feeling. Like positive vibes around. It’s just like, your whole body is tingling. That’s awesome.

That is the feeling that I want all of my students to experience. It is something I want for everyone, including myself. The strugglish superhero storyboard is a sequence in scenes that take place to move the strugglish superhero from the shame space of the inciting incident to the successful (Re)Mixed version of themselves (see Figure 2). It describes a heroic journey from the shame space to success; from hurting to healing; from limitations to liberation; from the (Re)Awakening to the (Re)Mix. Quiet on the set. And…Action.

**Connecting to the Theory: Themes Identified in the Data**

Four overarching themes were illuminated during the coding process while studying the phenomenon of struggle. The strugglish superhero storyboard proposes that there are three main acts that people move through as they are working through shame and the strategies, they employ to keep their personal world balanced that made up the four themes. Themes one and two comprise Act I. These are **Behind the Scenes; Act I: (Re)Awakening; Act II: (Re)Discovery;** and **Act III: (Re)Mix.** The participants all adopted pseudonyms in
place of their names, using names of stars like Gabrielle Union or historical figures like Jane Eyre.

Figure 2. The Strugglish Superhero Storyboard.

Behind the Scenes

The movie begins and the audience is privy to an insider’s glimpse into the character’s life before they become a superhero. There are examples of how the societal “norm list” expectations impact the character’s world as they interact at home, their place of work or school, while in relationship with family, friends, or significant others, and when they are alone. The character’s flaws, failures, and favorable outcomes are on display. There
is a **Behind the Scenes** look at the elements that create their personal world balance and the potential pitfalls that could put their personal world in danger. The codes that form this section include *balance buffers, personal pressures,* and *unscripted uncontrollables.* Personal world balance is the ideal goal where the rises and falls do not disrupt or overload any particular area mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally, or socially. *Balance buffers* represent the elements that keep the superhero from coming into contact with the shame space. Kate Patterson found the cross-country team and her IB cohort group that moved through classes together to be a *balance buffer* during high school because of the support they provided:

> I loved my high school experience. I feel like high school is really where I was able to find my niches. I did cross country and I did the summer running stuff before school started so I got to know like the team really well. The team was really close, so I found my niche there and then band was a really a big part of my life. The IB program [International Baccalaureate] itself, like my [cohort] class had 40 kids. So, it’s like that became a good family group that moved throughout my high school experience. I really enjoyed high school.

Before even beginning high school, Kate knew other students, which allowed her not to feel as lost as students entering school for the first time the first day of school. Finding her niche and a group of people that felt like a family in high school created a sense of belonging for Kate. Overall, the *balance buffers* that she put in place caused Kate to have a positive high school experience. Mia McDade was also involved in activities that helped her feel a part of the high school community:

> I loved high school high school. It was so much fun. There are so many things that I could get involved in, especially as a freshman. It is so much fun going to the football games and like going to the school dances and all that. So yeah, I think I think it was a good transition and then there is support from the teachers and all that stuff your freshman year.
Mia immediately started getting involved and went to events to support the team which ended up also being a support for her as she made connections with other students. Patrick Lawrence had a difficult time thinking of any negative experiences while in high school, so I asked him his thoughts about why that was. He discussed his mindset:

Well, for me I think the reason why I had more positive experiences rather than negative ones is because I always looked at things through more of an optimistic and positive lens. And I always could see the brighter side. Like if there really was and that’s why I always like I just took everything. If something was negative, I just put it aside and move on nothing can really faze me. But the reason why, I think it is because I just felt like my involvement was so big and I was always busy with something. I was like productive and I made myself feel good about it. So that’s it for me personally, I think and my involvement in school led to all my positive experiences and all my positive stand out stories.

Patrick’s balance buffers were to be involved doing something that he could feel good about. He was productive and felt like he was a part of causing movement, which buffered him against the shame messages that came to try to get him off track. He created so many positive memories, he had a hard time remembering any of the negative ones. To make sure he did not become overwhelmed, Patrick had to keep his personal pressures in check so that he did not create the shame space by not meeting the expectations he placed on himself.

*Personal pressures* are a force pushing against you that you apply to yourself based on your value system. Julie’s friends put themselves under pressure to take several AP (Advance Placement) honors classes, and then they bragged to each other about how much stress they were under. There may have possibly been some outside pressures pushing against the students, but internalizing the message that stress is a status symbol to be celebrated came from the pressure they put themselves under. Jane Eyre discussed the
anxiety she experienced by putting herself under such immense pressure that she worked only to earn the grade and not for the actual learning:

In fifth grade, I started becoming more concerned with grades and whatnot because I think that was the first time, I ever got a C on one of those timed math tests or something. Overall, I was generally an anxious kid. I mean it kind of has always been something I’ve been dealing with since I was a kid. I think, just honestly kind of an overactive imagination and just keeping a lot of questions to myself and not really going for answers.

It that transition period where you stop being anxious about little kid stuff and definitely like huge questions of faith. Like worrying about, “Oh like is God real? What’s going to happen to me when I die?” and things like that. And I definitely remember like not feeling comfortable asking anybody questions.

That anxiety I had as a kid definitely translated more to school like finals when finals time came around. I would lock myself in my room and just study for three days straight and everybody knew, “Do not disturb her. She is studying right now.” Learning for me was all about trying to make sure I got the grade. I think for me as a student, I know definitely in high school, I kind of had a tendency of…I don’t know if it’s still true for kids these days but of bottling things up. Because I was one of those kids who I pressured myself, I wanted to get like those straight As...that valedictorian and thinking I had to do this otherwise I wouldn’t be successful.

Jane Eyre had goals that she wanted to meet, but she put so much emphasis on the result that she missed the point of the learning she was gaining and missed out on enjoying the process. *Personal pressures* can actually be a hindrance to achieving personal world balance because inner value is so intertwined with the outcomes that it leaves the individual more vulnerable to not meeting perceptions or expectations because they are unattainable without a high level of sacrifice. Then the “shame of should” enters the scene, as there is inner conflict about how much sacrifice is too much or how much you should be willing to do in order to reach the goal. Jane fabricated a scenario in her mind that she would not be successful in life if she did not earn all As or be the class valedictorian. *Personal pressures* do not add value or keep the
personal world balanced because it produces a win or lose scenario in the mind instead of the flexibility offered by balance buffers.

Unscripted uncontrollables are the unexpected or unmanageable elements outside of the individual’s control. In essence, it is summed up with the common saying, life happens. Any of these unforeseen events can throw the character’s world in danger in the blink of an eye. For example, I asked Rob George what he thinks schools need to know to work with students better, and he described a birthday party he attended where he found himself emotionally unbalanced due to being bipolar:

I think they should know if you’re diagnosed with something, I think that would help too. Like me and my mom, we’re both bipolar. It sucks. I can be really happy, like really happy at one point and I can just flop. Just one thought I’ll just be sad. I was at my friend’s birthday party and I kinda feel bad. I went to the birthday party because we had the same birthday and stuff. So, I was like, “You know why not.” So, I was bawling and stuff because I just thought about something. That passed and I didn’t bawl anymore but I just I just sat there the entire time and I felt bad because like the next day he was like, “Hey man, why are you like sad or whatever?” And I was like, “Oh I wasn’t sad, I was just thinking about something.” I kind of feel bad like it was his time.

The shame of dealing with the aftermath of his emotional outburst was inevitable and an unscripted uncontrollable; however, the way he shuts down the shame space is in his control. Choosing what happens with the shame scenes that repeat is also something Rob could learn to work through, although his emotions are not something he gets to choose.

Thomas Hatt’s mother stated that something he worked through with his autism was wanting to finish tasks before moving on:

That was a big thing for him. You know if you work on something, you want to finish it and you don’t want to go to the next station or the next task until he’s done what he was finished doing. He is almost obsessed with it, like it’s got to be, this is the task given and it must be completed. I can’t move on until that time.
Thomas cannot control the fact that he has this desire to finish projects that he starts.

Knowing that about Thomas will help those around him not assign him an unmanageable number of tasks so he does not develop shame around not meeting the expectation of completion. Maria ended counseling when she left her parents’ house while in high school, and she ended up having a difficult time finishing school:

   And so, I was in counseling a lot of my high school career until I left my parents’ house, so I think if I had a different mindset when I was in high school, things could’ve turned out much better.

Leaving her parents’ house may have been a factor Maria could have controlled, but ending counseling was not one of those choices she had the option of making. There was some lingering shame and regret when discussing how things turned out. Tears streamed down Maria’s face; she said that she was back in counseling which means she is taking steps to move this from an unscripted uncontrollable into a (Re)Discovery process moving towards becoming the (Re)Mix of her current self.

Esi Sirrah used her unscripted uncontrollables as motivation not to have the same experiences:

   I mean we were poor, we ended up losing our house by foreclosure but that was when I was in college, but we were in process of losing it twice when I was in high school. My parents were divorced my stepdad was living in the house. He [my dad] was still in the house and everybody was still living together. By my senior year my dad had moved out finally. My younger brother ran away, like things are bad and I really didn’t know who I could talk to. You can’t tell people these things that are going on in your life. I had a friend who had a baby and I knew I didn’t want none of that drama because my mom had had twins and I was taking care of that. I think that was a reality check. Living through all of that, I was like, ‘Nah I do not want that. I don’t want to be poor. I don’t want to be stuck.’ And so, I just use that as motivation. “And I said I don’t want a bunch of babies with different dads. I don’t want this.” And it wasn’t a judgment, it was just an acknowledgement that I don’t have to have that for my life.
Esi was able to reflect on her journey with empathy, realizing that there were the elements of silencing and personal pressures that made up her unscripted uncontrollables but instead of regret, she told stories about all of the learning experiences she was able to have and balance buffers she developed as she learned to move through the shame space. The Behind the Scenes footage is not a bonus feature; it is the normal happenings of life before Act I: (Re)Awakening.

Act I: (Re)Awakening

Act I serves as the set-up phase of the movie where everything is going along normally until all of a sudden, the character’s world is in danger and after that moment, things can no longer go back to the way they used to be (McKee, 1997). Once shame enters the scene and the perception-expectation gap has been exposed, some action must occur which the strugglish superhero storyboard refers to as (Re)Awakening (see Figure 2). For example, Mia McDade talked about an incident in middle school that she remembered vividly because she did not understand that there was a cultural expectation surrounding hair that she was supposed to have met. Mia explained that she was excited to have gotten her hair done, and she came to school in her braids expecting to be praised and accepted by the other students. “I had braids in my hair and this girl she came up to me and she was like, ‘Is that horsehair?’ And she was like making fun of my braids or whatever.” I asked her why that story stuck out to her and she replied:

Because she’s also African American so just like I didn’t understand why she was coming at me that way. It was like you’re also African American so like you understand these kinds of the things. Like she had the straight hair and I had like you know the traditional African American hairstyle and she was also lighter, and I am darker or whatever. I don’t know it just stuck with me because it’s just crazy that we still have the thing with the colors. We had one class together. I really kind of avoided
my conflict of anyone in middle school because I’m not really an instigator but more of a peacemaker. So, I kind of avoided stuff like that.

The moment that the other student asked, “Is that horsehair?” Mia was exposed to the perception-expectation gap because she thought that everyone would compliment her for having her hair done. She did not realize that the current style for African Americans that would have met the expectation would have been to have long flowing human hair wigs or weave instead of the synthetic weave used in braids. In her mind, she attributed it to her being darker skinned and the other student being lighter skinned. Colorism became a shame message for Mia, who struggled with not feeling pretty because it was something she valued.

Colorism in the Black community is connected to slavery and documented evidence that lighter skin blacks were viewed as having more economic value and afforded more privileges than darker skin blacks. As Wilder (2010) explained,

> with the eventual abolition of slavery, lighter-skinned blacks continued to set themselves apart from their darker counterparts by socializing, marrying, and procreating with one another. Colorism emerged to solidify an internalized structure of hierarchy and division within the black community. (p. 186)

The struggle with colorism continues to pervade the black community in the post-civil rights era (Wilder, 2010) as Mia experienced the shame of her dark skin. Avoiding the other student and doing nothing was still a choice. She later regretted not speaking up for herself, but it would take her years to finally find her voice in incidents such as these. The whispers of shame seemed to keep her silenced, confirming that everyone was right in how they thought about her. These messages were always present in the environment, but Mia was “sleep” and unaware of those messages until she came in direct contact with those ideals.
During Act I, the concept of **(Re)Awakening** is characterized by alerting or rousing the consciousness from a point of “sleep” or unconsciousness to a state of being “woke” or awareness to the “norm list” gap between expectation, perception, and reality. Memories, emotions, experiences, lessons, images, or other elements that pertain to the current experience that were lying dormant are recalled. The individual may have physical symptoms similar to trauma such as an elevated heart rate, sweaty face or palms, dry mouth, shortness of breath, tears, sick feeling in the abdominal area, and other stressors (Lee, Anderson & Klimes-Dougan, 2016; Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 2010; Park et al., 2012) The codes for this section include two categories of inciting incidents which are *(re)flex* and/or *(re)ceive*, and *(re)hash (re)hear*, and/or *(re)connect.*

Inciting incidents are a term used by screenwriters that refers to the moment when the character’s world is in danger, as master screenwriting expert Robert McKee (1997) described, “The INCITING INCIDENT radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist’s life” (p. 189). He goes on to discuss the point of the inciting incident. “In most cases, the Inciting Incident is a single event that either happens directly to the protagonist or is caused by the protagonist. Consequently, he’s [she’s] immediately aware that life is out of balance for better or worse” (McKee, 1997, p. 190).

As it relates to the *strugglish superhero storyboard*, the inciting incident is the moment of impact where the hero is suddenly in the midst of an event that triggers a shame response. As participants were describing their responses to shame, there seemed to be two main categories with slight differences separating the shame response. The term and/or is used because participants’ responses may have been one or the other, but some experienced
several of these almost simultaneously. (Re)flex and/or (re)ceive involve a new messaging or discrepancies within the perception-expectation gap that perhaps one did not know existed or confirmation of some new truth that has just been revealed about acts of being judged, bullying, colorism, injustice, and unfairness. These new perceptions are depicted in Table 4 using participants’ pseudonyms.
Table 4

*Themes that Created a Shaming Experience in ACT I: (Re)Awakening Inciting Incidents: (Re)flex or (Re)ceive*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Being Judged</th>
<th>Bullying, Teasing or Classmate Conflict</th>
<th>Cheating or Plagiarism</th>
<th>Colorism</th>
<th>Injustice and Unfairness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Esi Sirrah</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gabrielle Union</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jane Eyre</td>
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<td>Julie Smith</td>
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<td>Kate Patterson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lizza Rhey</td>
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<td>Maria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mia McDade</td>
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<td>Patrick Lawrence</td>
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<td>Rob George</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shay Smith</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tammy Smith</td>
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<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>Thomas Hatt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will Tostenson</td>
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Esi Smith, Gabrielle Union, and Rob George were three of the participants who (re)ceived several of these simultaneously. Almost all of the participants (12 of 15) experienced bullying, teasing, or classmate conflict, and 10 perceived they were being judged, followed by seven exposed to inciting incidents of injustice and unfairness. Colorism was closely
associated with injustice and unfairness for five participants. Finally, five individuals experienced cheating and plagiarism.

For all individuals these were inciting incidents that provoked shame, and each responded through (re)flex, an involuntary emotional recoil that occurs after direct transmission with the source of shame. When participants spoke about this, they told stories that described an almost involuntary fight, flight, freeze, or appease response to the situation (King et al., 2015; Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 2010). (Re)ceive is the concept of taking personal possession of words, vocal inflections, facial expressions, body intimations, or other actions, whether they are directed at the recipient or not and transforming it into shame.

Rob George told a story about being bullied and how he realized he liked to run while he was in the sixth grade.

I guess I was chubby and got teased a lot when I was younger, and my mom told me I would come home crying. And I had a friend. He always like wanted to race and he kind of like helped me lose weight. My mom told me about it because I blocked it out my mind that it ever happened.

In follow-up questions I asked Rob if he knew other people thought he was chubby, and he said that he was not aware until he started getting made fun of and he did not understand why the other students did not like him. Rob took personal possession of the shame messages after realizing chubbiness was not accepted by his peers. It was something he felt bad about until he began to lose weight. Esi Sirrah also described being judged during a body shaming experience in school: “I got a mentality of being called BMW ‘body made wrong’ and like all these weird things.” She described that later on she learned to love her body, but it was a process because no one seemed to like her. She ended up getting a relaxer in her hair to take it from a curly texture to a straighter texture and but still struggled with her identity. She
internalized messages that were transformed into shame for her. Gabrielle Union was on the honors track most of her school career and oftentimes was the only Black student in a predominately White classes. She struggled with authority figures realizing her capabilities and discussed how she internalized this by shutting down:

It wasn’t that I wasn’t capable of being able to do it. It was just like every time I asked for help, I felt like I was seen as stupid or that I was being judged. And in hindsight I wish I would’ve had that mindset. But for some reason then, it was ideal for me to not be looked at that way. So, I never asked for help because of that. I always gave teachers one good chance to help me and if that first chance was poor, I would never go back.

This was an experience that kept occurring for Gabrielle, but the deeper shaming reason was that she was afraid that she would be seen as unworthy of being in honors classes.

And that kind of was my thinking because the only other Black students in the school were all in remedial classes and I was the only one on the honors track. And so, my fear was if I asked for help too much, they were going to put me on the remedial track which eventually one teacher did recommend that I take remedial English.

Gabrielle’s fears and shame are real in that many courses are structured through ability grouping that often becomes “de facto tracking by continuing to support racial, ethnic, and social-class segregation within schools, with low income students and students of color generally remaining in the lowest levels” (Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002, p. 41). With tracking inequalities, the already-advantaged students tend to enroll in high-track classes (Domina et al., 2016) leaving students like Gabrielle fearful of being overlooked and other students of color and poor students more likely to be placed in low-track classes or remedial tracks.

Lizza Rhey described cheating on a test in first grade. “My first time cheating on a test at school, I tried to cheat, and the teacher was my cousin and like she ripped my paper
up. I was like, she’s so fake. Man, this is crazy! I felt played by myself. It was so embarrassing. I was like, ‘you’re so dumb, you aren’t even good enough to get away with it.’” When the teacher first ripped up her test, she said she just sat there and looked. Other participants who also described incidents with cheating said they felt almost frozen and unable to move, which is one of the shame responses (Dean & Jolly, 2012; Pinto-Gouveia & Matos, 2011). The codes of (re)flex and/or (re)ceive represent actions that highlight the gap between perceptions and expectations about areas unbeknownst to the individual until the moment of exposure.

The next group of codes—(re)hash (re)hearse, and/or (re)connect—represent instances when the internal shame narrative coincides with the messaging involved in the current situation. (Re)hash is the recycling of previously processed shaming events to extract a perceived new truth pertaining to the current situation. All 15 participants had a minimum of two responses, and several had all three. “I don’t belong” was the script for (re)hashing (re)hearse, or (re)connect responses of 11 of the participants. (Re)hashing (re)hearse, or (re)connect (Re) through recalling and comparing experiences were the reactions of 10 individuals when they encountered inciting incidents. Eight participants comeback scripts were “made me feel lesser than.” During inciting incidents, two had reactions to all three scripts—Esi Sirrah and Julie Smith.

The key to (re)hashing is that individuals thought they had already dealt with the situation, so they were caught off guard when it happened again, similar to Rob George’s description of shame scars never healing but reopening when something new happens. (Re)hearse is the idea of repeatedly recounting previously established shaming messages in
response to a new stimulus. Using one of the previous examples about Lizza Rhey cheating in first grade, when she was caught cheating, she said that not only did she feel dumb in Math, which is why she was trying to cheat, but she also was too dumb to get away with cheating. This messaging of being dumb was something she had (re)hearsed, and this new event with cheating reinforced that messaging. The concept of (re)connect brings any
underlying traumas to the forefront because the idea is that you are uniting the current version of your identity to previous identities through patterns or prevailing traits, mindsets, actions, experiences, or beliefs. During the (re)connection, emotions encoded in the memories are reexperienced—it is similar to déjà vu but with a certainty that there is familiarity. When old familiar shame resurfaces, the individual seems to revert back to the childhood self.

The shaming messages that kept being repeated during (re)connection for participants created several descriptions in this category: I don’t belong, made me feel lesser than, and recalling and comparing other experiences. Julie Smith discussed being a part of the basketball team but still not feeling like she belonged with them because they had all played together since elementary and she joined sophomore year in high school. “I would say I was depressed at the beginning of the school year because after not fitting in with basketball because I just didn’t feel like I was part of the team.” Not fitting in had been a struggle for her in the past, and when it happened once again, she (re)hashed the message but because she did not expect it, she experienced depression.

Thomas Hatt has autism and was involved in special services, taking smaller classes with other atypical students. His mother sat with him during the interview to help him communicate, but he described an incident in which other students made him feel sad and mad. His major message was, “I am trouble.” That is what he repeated when he felt bad about himself. Feeling lesser than was a description reflected in a story that Partick Lawrence told about spending some time in English as a Second Language classes. He was born in the United States, but his mom stated they spoke another language at home even though his first
language was English. It was a misunderstanding, but they would not let him out of the class until he tested out. He said,

It’s not that I wasn’t accepted however but because I knew the skill, that made me feel lesser than just because they were automatically used to teaching people that don’t know English. I didn’t know why I was in there. So, you know that’s why it’s so weird.

When participants spoke of feeling lesser than, it triggered some previous shaming emotions or messages of other times they had the same feelings. When participants recalled and compared other experiences with their current experience or when they compared themselves to others, it prompted feelings of shame.

Jane Eyre described a time when she compared her experiences with one teacher to her experiences with other teachers. She did not think her teacher handled the situation correctly when she tried to make a joke in class. “Just embarrassment and shame really were those two big emotions. And just like, you know, just kind of not feeling accepted for just trying to goof around and be myself in the fifth-grade scenario.” Jane wanted other educators to be mindful of reinforcing shame. She stated: “You know that there are sensitive kids out there and try to make sure what their intentions are first before like broiling them in front of all the other students.” (Re)hash (re)hear se, and/or (re)connect are grouped together because each of those terms refer to the idea of reinforcing shame narratives previously established.

The function of the theme **Act I: (Re)Awakening** is to set the story in motion from the “normal” way life has been going thus far to the protagonist’s world being in danger because of inciting incidents that upset the balance of forces emotionally, mentally, physically, socially, or spiritually. After this moment, the character is **(re)awakened** to perceived truth about themselves or the world that will not allow them to continue to be
“sleep” because their inner value system has been put at risk. This is the point of no return, and the superhero has no choice but to learn some kind of lesson, on their quest to figure out how to better protect themselves. This journey gives the superhero a reason to discover their hidden powers, which is the purpose of Act II, the (Re)Discovery phase.

**Act II: (Re)Discovery**

Act II is the longest phase of any movie because it where the character is forced to confront the truth about who they really are, which causes conflict with those around them as they work through the inner war going on between who they are now and who they are becoming (Hoover, 2004). As adolescents are reckoning with their identity, they place a high value on social norms, and any violation of these norms could cause a threat to the boundaries of their identities and social images, which may bring on a shame response (Bogolyubova & Kiseleva, 2016). Screenwriters refer to this stage as confrontation, but the *strugglish superhero storyboard* titles this section (Re)Discovery, because after the shame space has been created, the only way to close the gap is to alter the way that perceptions are viewed or the value placed on the expectations from the “norm list.” The superhero must make decisions about their true identity and what it will take for them to be free to be the real version of themselves despite competing demands placed on them by others.

During the transition from middle school to high school, Will Tostenson shifted his mindset to take ownership over his experiences and outcomes. He made the following point:

At any point in high school, I felt like it was my fault if I didn’t get to work on it. Not all of the teachers or the system. I completely felt like it was on me. Even if in the moment I was like, this is not my fault. I could look back on it and say yes, it was my fault because I did not want to put the work into this, or I did not want to do this.
When I asked him what made him feel that way, he further expounded on his feelings of control.

I think in middle school I did not have a mindset that I was in control of the situation because they said we’re doing this today, and I’m like ok we’re doing this today. And I just went along with that. Sure, that’s the same structure in school today and kids were like, oh wait no, I don’t have to so I can just disassociate from the day. In high school you could do that, but they absolutely were up front about the fact that you don’t have to do this but, it’s going to affect the grade for the day. It may be formative assessment today and even though it might not matter to you, I’m going to let you know up front. There will be a summative at the end and you can do whatever you want but I would advise you not to do that. I heard that a lot. A lot of them are like, at a point it is not our job to make you do something.

Realizing that he had a choice to make, Will described moving in opposition to some of his friends who got to high school and continued the middle school immature mindset of being the victim in the situation. The feelings of control he gained during his high school experience while cycling through the (Re)Discovery phase made him view high school positively. He stated, “I would say it’s the best experience I got.” He ended up taking several honors classes, experiencing failure in several areas, but overall, the things he learned about himself allowed him to reflect on high school in a favorable light.

The Act II: (Re)Discovery phase is when the superhero gains self-awareness by uncovering hidden truths about some facet of their identity, revealing the need to reinvest time or resources to develop new ways of thinking, moving, or being in the world to obtain more favorable results. Elements creating this phase are (re)examination (re)definition, (re)design and (re)fine, and (re)education which are all explored in a reflection by Esi Sirrah, who spoke at length on what really helped her thrive in school in spite of all the negativity surrounding her. In addition to hearing body shaming comments such as being called BMW, body made wrong, Esi Sirrah was considered mixed as she is White and Black, even though
she now identifies as Black. She described dealing with feelings that she was not White
good enough to hang with the White kids, but she was in the gifted program, so she was alienated
from most of the Black students because of being placed in advanced classes. Her home life
started deteriorating as her parents were getting a divorce because of infidelity issues and her
mom was having twins while trying to figure out their living situation. She reflected on that
time: “And that really did take a toll.” There was shame and secrecy because of all that
happened, but she upheld the unwritten familial expectations of what happens at home, stays
at home.

After having a great summer school experience with her gifted program during her
sixth-grade year, she realized she was left out and she performed a (re)examination of her
situation and she (re)defined the terms of her friendships:

Everybody had hung out with each other except me. I was like oh right. Oh, so you
guys hung out at the pool. And I realized oh I really don’t have actual friends. I was
nice to everyone, but I realized, hey, I’m just kind of different cause some of them
remembered me doing acting and being on national commercials in elementary
school. We were tested into the same classes again and I was like we’re going to have
to put up with each other again and jealousy really spiked. Then, it was even fewer
Black kids in the classes that I had.”

The realization that everyone hung out and did not invite Esi, who had previous shaming
messages of not belonging especially during a time when she needed a friend the most, could
have been devastating, but she (re)examined the messages. Analyzing the situation and based
on her understanding of friendships, she discovered she did not have “actual friends.” She
then (re)defined herself by saying, “I’m just kind of different,” which previously would have
re-opened the shame space. However, in this instance, she challenged the perceptions and
expectations about her and realized that some of the students in the class may have been
jealous of the success she had by being in national commercials during elementary school.

She was able to more fully understand the reality of the situation and be nice to everyone in spite of how they treated her because she was more secure in the new (re)definition she created for herself of being different. Fully embracing this as her reality, she no longer was burdened by the perceptions or expectations of others, allowing her to feel free in her identity.

Esi went on to say that she had an older sister that she looked up to while Esi was in middle school:

I just remember that in middle school and knowing that my older sister really paved the way. She was working, was in the school band marching everything, and still had straight As and she was still being pleasant at home despite our crumbling family foundations.

Esi realized that success was something she could have on her own, which was a pivotal moment for her as she (re)designed and (re)defined her habits, mindsets, actions, reactions, and values so she could reach her goals:

I had been successful so often; I knew that that was something I could do on my own. I was like, I can still be successful, and I had opportunities to be successful and be cheered on despite failing. I wasn’t perfect at everything or much really, I was just good at a few good things and I kept doing them, so I got better. And so, with playing the flute, you know when you practice you sound better; people like that and you get cheered on. In acting you get commercials; people see that, you like that, and you do it again. So, I had all these reinforcing things to boost my self-esteem to be honest and so I think I chose reinvesting in myself over seeking it from peer approval.

Esi also expressed a sense of spirituality connected to religion that help during the (Re)Discovery phase:

I didn’t really care about the other kids that much because they weren’t really, I think as impressive as I thought. I guess I was trying to be a mean girl in third grade but I didn’t like being like that. I think I realized that other people are doing stuff, but they don’t care about what they do but I care about what I’m doing. I know we talked
previously before the interview questions about faith. I was in church you know, and I had faith. I prayed and stuff and so I had a force behind me, and I felt protected. You know, I did believe that I was chosen so I’m supposed to be doing good. But I think really, I just had had success early on.

Taking ownership for her actions, Esi *(re)designed* her life’s screenplay by making the necessary adjustments, which was illustrated with these words: “I was just good at a few good things and I kept doing them, so I got better.” Knowing that she had the ability to get to where she wanted to go by practicing was key as she *(re)designed* the experience she wanted to have. As she experienced success and accolades from others, it reinforced the positive aspects of her identity. She continued to make improvements by *(re)fining* what she was doing. “I chose reinvesting in myself over seeking it from peer approval.” Instead of spending time focusing on the fact that she did not belong as she previously did, she welcomed the rewards that came from being unique. With clarity about her reality and feeling free in her identity, Esi *(re)educated* herself by studying the world around her and leaning into her faith. Comparing herself to others, Esi had romanticized about their lives and all they had, but looking through her new lens, she saw something different. “I didn’t really care about the other kids that much because they weren’t really, I think as impressive as I thought.” Instead of the pedestal she thought separated her and her classmates, Esi realized they were not as impressive as she originally thought, which meant she no longer placed value on their thoughts about her. Allowing her faith to fortify the belief that she was chosen and expected to do well sealed the shame space, because now she valued how she spent her time.

Sub-themes from this section, captured in open coding, represented transitional elements as the superhero is gaining heightened awareness about their unique superpower.
which include: (re)examination, (re)definition, (re)design and (re)fine, and (re)education. There did not seem to be a specific order that participants used to address each of these elements, but those who spoke of developing shame resilience and more empathy (Brown, 2006) by interrogating themselves and the world around them performed actions in each of the (Re)Discovery categories. For organizational purposes, I follow the order that was common among participants that focused on their growth and development during the interviews, beginning with (re)examination. After realizing they had fallen into the shame space, participants who seemed to move through shame quickly started asking questions to reality check and process the inciting incident in a healthy way to explore possibilities; investigating anything that may be sources of the personal world becoming unbalanced. During this time, it seemed as if participants were in search of reasons why their inner value may have been at risk. Frequent ideas resonating with processing inciting incidents were exclamations of “I’m different, not average” and “I’m doing the best I can.” Inconsistencies and outliers and shifting mindsets were apparent, as demonstrated in the description of Esi’s journey to seal the shame space.

(Re)examination can take many forms, but the goal is to reality check what you want and why you want it. It took a while for Maria to get to the (re)examination phase. When discussing the impact of her decisions, she stated, “I think that’s what made my high school experience not as good as it could have been.” Maria’s family was in the military and coming back to the States was a difficult transition for her. Entering high school, she discovered that she loved theater but decided that she wanted to fit in with a different group at school. She was perceived as being a “theater kid” and wanted to be with the more popular group. To
meet the expectations of that group, she had to change, since changing groups was something she valued. In her reflection, she \( \text{(re)} \text{examined} \) the cost of fitting in and being something contradictory to her inner value:

I remember going through freshman year, I was myself and I loved the theater. And then I think seeing how other people dressed and how other girls could wear makeup and stuff like that, I think I tried to become something I wasn’t. And I made a really bad reputation for myself. And I think that’s what drove me to be more rebellious which made high school much harder than it really was. I think it was like it was like acting, but worse because you always had to be that person but then you have to switch out when you get home because you know that’s not you.

She described the experience as constantly performing and after a while, she realized the toll it had taken on her relationship with her parents, which she stated, “turned really sour.” After \( \text{(re)} \text{examining} \) who she was trying to fit in with, she realized that fitting in was one of the causes of the shame space and not feeling good about herself.

Belonging to a friend group and struggling to fit was mentioned by most of the participants. Rob George attended church with his family where the pastor was doing a series on the characteristics of real friends. \( \text{(Re)} \text{examining} \) his friends and the direction he was headed, he came to the realization that he needed to make changes:

So, I used to have like a huge group of people used to hang out with sophomore and junior year. I guess they were the popular kids but like over time I saw that they’re not really gonna go anywhere in life. They just cut up and stuff. And so I didn’t really want to be around them and so people thought I was just changing so I just lost a lot of friends junior year. Everything’s not adding up. It was kind of like the more I listened to the pastor the more I thought about it and then I was like, okay I’m actually gonna try stuff she said but none of the characteristics she said were there. I’ve been like sitting back really and just observing people and that’s why I just came to the realization that they’re not really my friends. There’s this loneliness and it’s kind of like isolating yourself or like you’re separating yourself from everybody.

During the \( \text{(re)} \text{examination} \) stage, there seemed to be a separation that occurred. Individuals seemed to need space to work through the reasons the shame space existed, and as they were
taking time to grapple with their thoughts, feelings, actions, and other emotions, the process created conflict with those around them. Feelings of loneliness, isolation, disappointment, and frustration were commonly mentioned as they were in a stage of figuring out what mattered to them. The reality checking process involved realizing truths not only about themselves but about the expectations that people they loved had for them, which launched them into \textit{(re)defining} who they wanted to become.

Determining if the boundaries that were in place are still applicable or need restructuring as labels, representations, preconceptions, or expectations prior to the inciting incident is scrutinized for relevance during the \textit{(re)definition} stage. As participants were recounting their stories, it was as if the shame space message was replaced by a new tagline or slogan. In the earlier example with Esi, “I don’t belong” was replaced by “I’m just kind of different.” Terry had an academically gifted older sibling who set a pretty high standard, but he was more athletically inclined and saw school as something he had to do so he could play sports or be involved in extracurricular activities. He described the perceptions and expectations for him because of his sister and how he \textit{(re)defined} himself:

I felt like some of them saw me more as a disappointment, like the ones who had my sister. Since she was very, very, good with her grades they probably saw me, and they probably picked me up for their class like, “Oh I’m the little brother, he should probably be a spitting image.” But then I probably disappointed them. They realized she was more academic focused, and I was there to play sports and socialize. I mean I still kept my grades up to play sports. Some of them might have actually thought, “oh he’s actually a pretty cool kid, like different than [older sister] but still like a decent kid.” And some of them were probably like, you’re nothing like your sister, which I’m totally fine with. I’m sorry to disappoint them but I’m my own version.

Terry said that when teachers did not know his older sister, they seemed to enjoy having him in class and appreciated him for who he was but when they had taught his sister, they were
disappointed because they expected something different. Some of them got to know him personally, but when their expectations got in the way, they could not see him for who he was and what he had to offer. Terry defined himself as an athlete; the personal tagline he used was, “I’m my own version.” Being his own person, having his own identity as an athlete, and being his own version were mentioned frequently in his memories from school. (Re)defining himself created a shift in his mindset so he did not fall into the shame space every time someone compared him with his sister. He determined that the boundaries that other people set for him as a little brother were too limiting and incomplete, so he reconstructed new identity thresholds that reflected his reality. (Re)designing and (re)fining the actions based on the tagline created movement towards goal fulfillment.

Creating a plan of action is a necessary step in securing the seal on the shame space so the goal is more attainable. This occurs during the (re)design process. The purpose is to analyze the draft of your life’s screenplay to decide what revisions in habits, mindsets, actions, reactions, or values are needed to put a plan in place. During (re)finement, improvements on the (re)design plan are made to explore anything preventing you from reaching your personal goal. Kate Patterson experienced this phase in high school when she was cut from the volleyball team:

Kind of like the volleyball thing, I ended up doing cheerleading instead which was not my thing, but I got encouraged to try something else and like my dad always said, “You’re not a quitter. You do things and you stick through your commitment.” I like having things to do so picking something else is what helped me get through the failure of not making the volleyball team and I found things I was good at. But then when I was getting low grades, I looked at what my sister did, and it really helped me with what kind of notes I should be taking. And she was always super organized, so I think I looked to her a lot for help with that issue.
Instead of staying in the shame space, Kate moved herself out by creating a plan to try new things. Even though she did not really enjoy cheerleading, she realized that she liked having things to do. Trying new things helped her figure out what she was good at. This was a mindset shift that allowed her to create the habit of making sure she was involved in something at school. Also, she figured out a way to work through not quitting when she did not enjoy the experience. Kate taught herself how to move through shame and failure by re-directing her focus on something else. When she was struggling with getting low grades, her plan included consulting her sister to see what kinds of notes she should be taking and what organizational habits she needed to develop. Through the seemingly negative experience of getting cut from the volleyball team, Kate \textit{(re)designed and (re)fined} the things that were not working by making the necessary adjustments and focusing on the bigger goal of having a positive high school experience.

Shay Smith was assaulted, harassed, and bullied throughout school and to make matters worse, she felt she was the troublemaker in the family, so she felt overlooked and chose to deal with her issues in silence. Now, she is proud of how she speaks up for herself:

\begin{quote}
I speak up for myself. Now, I don’t really hold back. Regardless of whether it’s family or friends like I don’t hold back. I’m one of those people will tell you the truth to your face but not in a mean way. But if someone’s basically doing something wrong or saying something wrong, I will speak up to now. Period.
\end{quote}

Shay decided that she was tired of feeling silenced and holding all these experiences inside of her without an outlet so she \textit{(re)designed and (re)fined} a plan so that she could find her voice. The only way to move forward is to confront the source of the shame space and create a plan of action to make small changes to ultimately get to a place where you have new habits, mindsets, actions, reactions, and values. To accomplish this plan, learning something new to
replace or alter the current perspective must take place. There is no way to seal the shame space without understanding new ways of thinking, moving, or being in the world which is why every participant spoke about \textit{(re)education} as a critical component to them growing into a more mature version of themselves.

In the context of education, learning is often seen as something that happens in a classroom in response to something being taught. The fallacy in that line of thinking is that learning is limited to a certain space, place, or person. Analyzing any school or bell schedule, there are scheduled times in which students are expected to learn, and the times in between are called passing, class changes, and transitions. During these times, the goal is to transition from one place to another and learning is not expected. This is a limited view of learning. I contend that although learning may not be directed, it is constantly taking place, and some of the most important lessons are learned outside of the classroom. School is a microcosm of society, so the social setting of school is vital to the adolescent development phase. In listening to the stories from participants, most of the lessons they learned about life took place outside a formal room designated for learning. The \textit{(re)education} experience has little to do with school but is about following a directed (may be self-directed) learning process to acquire more information, new or in-depth knowledge, skill, or practices to develop the characteristics necessary to become the hero one is meant to be in Act III.

One of the ending questions I asked in the interview was, “Is there something else you think I should know to understand students’ school experiences better?” Before answering the question, many of the participants would disqualify themselves as experts by saying something such as, “I’m sure you already know this but…” or “I’m not really
qualified to tell people who went to school what to do but…” or “I don’t have much to offer because I learned the hard way but….” Realizing their hesitation, I often added, “I have a lot to learn and just want to make sure we are doing everything to help all students,” and then the floodgates would open. It was almost as if we have conditioned people to discount experiential learning in favor of formalized learning experiences. After acknowledging the validity of the lessons taught from living life, participants offered valuable insight into how they acquired more knowledge through their (re)education processes, which seemed to address a need while catering to their personal preferences or learning styles.

Lizza Rhey spoke about learning that resources existed that could help her, so she learned to be more vocal:

There are resources out there to help me. I’m like way more vocal these days. So I’m able to really reach out and I know that I have people that want to see me succeed. So this is what helped me with life without a doubt.

Mia McDade failed a test that she studied for and could not figure out what she did wrong. She used to suffer in silence, but she found out that when you communicated with teachers, some of them would give you another chance, so she started asking for additional chances:

I felt like I did something wrong. I always take a look at what I did wrong. And I guess my solution to failing that test is going up to the teacher and asking, “Is there anything I can do to make up this grade?” In freshman and sophomore year where we had like big tests and I didn’t do well, I just asked if I could retake the test and prepare for it again. So then she was like, yeah you can retake it again.

Tammy Smith learned to ask questions because she decided that she was not okay with not understanding the material:

I was going to try to get as much help as I could. It wasn’t like I was just okay with not understanding and would just let it go.
Thomas Hatt’s mother discussed the notes she received from teachers who were tracking the new things he learned. Most of the new skills came as a result of other students who volunteered in the class:

So, you can see the progression through these notes kind of how he interacted and kinds of things that they did when they had some of the neurotypical kids that came in and volunteered in the class. There’s all these different instances where he participated in stuff that he wouldn’t have been able to do or that he enjoyed doing like a dancing program where they teach the kids how to dance and do different formal dances.

Jane Eyre spoke about how she views struggle now that she is adult and saw that every time she encountered a (re)education process that was self-initiated, she learned new ways of thinking:

Honestly as an adult now looking back, yeah, I would definitely say struggle is a good thing because you learn from those experiences you learn what to do better. What can I fix? What can I change? And it makes you kind of think outside the box more. If you’re struggling and you take it to somebody, you learn how to take other people’s criticism, critiques, and advice. And you learn what’s good for you and that failure is ok. Struggling is ok because it helps you learn.

(Re)education seeks to fill in the gaps of knowledge that exist to know what additional information is needed or what skills, practices, or characteristics are necessary to reach the ultimate goal. This crucial step is when the superhero learns the extent of their powers, including both the limitations and possibilities. Equipped with the truth about their identity, more knowledge, and after reinvesting time and resources to create pathways for new ways of thinking, moving, or being in the world to obtain more favorable results, the hero is able to enter the final act.
Act III: (Re)Mix

Act III is the final act of a movie in which there is some type of resolution or conclusion to the journey begun by the inciting incident (McKee, 1997). There are noticeable differences between the character in the beginning of the story and who they are in the final sequence. Now that the shame space has been sealed by replacing the former habits with improved ones, characters have new weapons for dealing with their adversaries. The question in Act III is not whether the superhero will face any evil, but when they do, will they revert back to the old ways, or will they embrace the new ways in the midst of battle. Act III: (Re)Mix is characterized by the superhero being an upgraded version of themselves evident by improved self-care rituals, emotional regulation, routine, responses, results, and a renewed sense of purpose. Sub-themes or focus codes creating this section include: (re)covery = (re)affirm + (re)build + (re)commit; (re)play or (re)match; and (re)bel and (re)sist.

The (re)covery phase is about doing the inner work to be at a place of health and wellness. It is the idea of working from the inside out to cement the new changes that make it more difficult to revert back to what may have been an ineffective but more comfortable way of doing things. The goal is to use emotions and repetition to construct neural pathways that influence thought patterns. This is described by James Zull, a biochemistry and biology professor who teaches neuroscience to educators:

The thinking part of our brain evolved through entanglement with older parts that we now know are involved in emotion and feelings. Emotion and thought are physically entangled—immensely so. This brings our body into the story because we feel our emotions in our body, and the way we feel always influences our brain. (Zull, 2004, p. 3)
(Re)covery is comprised of three elements, including (re)affirm (re)build, and (re)commit. To counterbalance the shaming messages that have been confirmed by the inciting incident, new messages are created during the (re)affirming phase, in which empowering declarations are spoken aloud regarding potential and possibilities, confirming your belief in your capacity to make the necessary changes. These statements typically begin with “I will,” “I am,” “I can,” or “I have.” For example, Terry’s tagline of “I’m my own version” could serve to (re)affirm him when someone tries to communicate disappointment that he is not his sister. (Re)build represents the intentional decisions made towards restoration of your personal blueprint while repairing the foundational structure of your identity to be free from the weight of perceptions and expectations placed upon you by others that do not coincide with your reality.

An example of this is Shay Smith deciding that she will speak up. “But if someone’s basically doing something wrong or saying something wrong, I will speak up now. Period.” She has made up in her mind that she will speak up against wrongdoing of any kind, so when it happens, she is not questioning herself on whether or not she will speak up. She made up her mind when she was (re)building and finding her voice, that she would not lose it again. Freeing herself from the thoughts and perceptions from others regarding speaking up, she stated, “Regardless of whether it’s family or friends like I don’t hold back.” Since she now values speaking up over what others think, she is free from the shame that used to surround her using her voice to express how she felt. Shay made a (re)commitment to herself that she will make sure she is getting her needs met by not bottling up her feelings when she witnesses wrongdoing. (Re)commitment involves investing in self-care and taking the
necessary steps to put additional balance buffers in place to lessen the shock of shame while moving towards shame resilience. Esi \textit{(re)committed} to doing things she cared about, and in a time of family turmoil, she leaned into her faith, which allowed her to feel protected during a vulnerable time in her life. "I was in church, you know, and I had faith. I prayed and stuff and so I had a force behind me, and I felt protected." Faith is what fulfilled something she felt was missing, and it helped her stay balanced, which is the ultimate goal of the \textit{(re)covery} stage.

Julie Smith illustrated the concept of \textit{(re)covery} when she described the inner conflict she endured when she was trying to figure out whether or not she should continue to struggle through her honors class or drop the class to take a regular class:

I didn’t want to leave the class because I’m like I’m not a quitter. It’s like you can’t fail. So, everybody in there was either barely passing or they if they did drop the class it was like they were shunned from the high school society.

In spite of knowing she would place her social status at risk by dropping the class, Julie endured the shame and decided to talk to her Biology teacher, who told her that she did not work hard enough. She described how many hours she was putting in the class and how many all-nighters she did just to get everything done. That comment hurt her feelings, but she decided to push through with dropping the class. She \textit{(re)affirmed} her belief that she was still successful in spite of the fact that success in that environment meant “suffering through.”

She said,

But for me I learned through theater, forensics, and from my teachers talking to me on a personal level that being successful is like knowing everything you did. And it’s like you shouldn’t have to suffer through high school in order to be successful.
Julie decided to *(re)build* herself by making intentional decisions to restore her personal blueprint, which involved breaking free from the definitions that stress and struggle were seen as a status symbol. She no longer let the perceptions and expectations of others define how she saw herself:

That’s why my senior year I took all easy classes. See, it was like it was so much fun for me because I didn’t put myself under unnecessary stress or let high school make me feel like it was necessary. Everyone was always complaining, ‘I’m in like five AP classes. Oh, I can’t do this. This is so much work.’ But then they still have all As and it’s like they have a battle of who can have the most stress, who has the most work, and how that makes them better because they stress the most and they still got an A.

Senior year, Julie *(re)committed* to self-care, which for her meant not enrolling in honors classes:

But for me by my senior year I was like, no, I’m not doing that now. So, like I got As, I didn’t stress and had a great year. I took the easiest like science class it was economics. I had so much fun and I learned so much I learned so much in that class.

This *(re)covery* journey changed the way that Julie viewed status symbols present in society, and now she analyzes the messages to see if they align with her value system and will help keep her in a place of health and wellness before adopting these definitions as her own. The messages in the environment were still the same, but she no longer allowed them to put her in the shame space. As with any superhero story, the villains do not go away, but when the *(re)play* or *(re)match* starts, you now have more weapons in your emotional arsenal to triumph in the end.

In the last fight scene of any superhero movie, the super villain faces the superhero in the ultimate dichotomy of good versus evil with the fate of the world—in this instance, the personal world—resting on the shoulders of the superhero. I asked Julie if she was indeed “shunned from the high school society” when she dropped the class. She responded,
When I jumped out, some of my friends, the ones who were obsessed with like struggling the most, they came and said, “Like you dropped out? Why would you do that?” And then after I explained and said, “You don’t need to struggle in high school to get where you need to go.” I’m like, “they have easy classes for a reason. If they wanted me to struggle, then I wouldn’t have been able to jump out. But I did.” And once they understood why I dropped, they’re like oh, that makes sense.

This was an opportunity for the shame space to reopen and swallow Julie as she *(re)played* the previous messages of not being good enough. *(Re)play* involves recalling a shame section from your mental recording because of a similar feeling, thought, or experience; but because of the inner work that has been done, the emotions encoded with the shaming memory are dull and do not provoke the same trauma responses. Due to the work she did in **ACT II:** *(Re)Discovery* and during the *(re)covery* phase when the shame *(re)match* came to defeat her, she was prepared. The *(re)match* is witnessing or being the target of an event similar to the original inciting incident, but because of the inner work that has been done, your response reflects your value system. Julie’s new value system of putting her mental health before environmental status symbols was evident in her explanation. She *(re)sisted* being subjected to the definitions of others and *(re)belled* against the norm of fitting in by wanting her friends to understand her point of view.

*(Re)play or (re)match* comes in many forms. Esi Sirrah described the cyclical nature of her battles every time the holiday season approaches:

And I think I it’s funny, I actually just got into a huge argument with my mom the other day. They’re mad I’m not going back home for Thanksgiving, but they already know, they only get one holiday. They bring up, “You don’t want to spend time with the family?” They always dredge up issues and I’m like, “I don’t really want to explore that. I don’t want to dig deep because it doesn’t go anywhere. If we dig deep and move forward, that’s one thing but you always want to bring stuff back up.” So, I’m thinking back, and high school probably influenced that feeling for sure. I went crazy I’m like oh freedom. This is what it is creating your own identity outside of what your family looks like.
Esi does not allow her family to push *(re)play* on the shame scene of her feeling like she is not meeting familial expectations, nor does she allow the *(re)match* of dredging up issues because of the inner work she has done that reflect her new values as her new normal. She has an identity outside of her family that she now values so the shame space cannot be exposed. Patrick Lawrence discussed the process he uses dealing with shame. He has strategies and skills to work through it so he knows the outcome and can arrive at the *(Re)Mixed* version of himself quickly:

It’s temporary for me cause I’ve learned that you can be in a sense of shame but all those are temporary for you, so you can be able to move on. So, like if I have to give a timeframe… if we’re talking about shame, let’s say my mom gets mad at me cause like I’ve failed a test, that’s gonna be like maybe like a two- or three-hour thing. And I’m like, “Ok mom, you can’t be like mad at me forever.” I feel more like this, it’s not going to make me not graduate high school. That’s not going to make me drop out of college because I didn’t do good on a test. We have to just get over it. We know in the moment everybody has to have their emotions or how they feel. It’s okay for me to be ashamed of something. It’s okay to be mad ’cause that’s all temporary, you know. That’s all gonna happen but life goes on. That’s my big thing. Mistakes are always temporary. I mean it definitely depends but if it was shame, that’s like a two- or three-hour thing if it was about academics.

Patrick allows himself time to feel the emotions, and instead of being trapped in the shame space, he seems to open a shame suitcase, unpacking only the items he chooses before repacking it when he is ready to move on. His *(re)affirmations* of “life goes on” or “mistakes are always temporary” allows Patrick to signal his brain and emotions that it is time to *(re)sist* and move forward. *(Re)sisting* means rejecting submission to the “norm list” as a determination of your inner value and worth. The act of being able to *(Re)Mix* and learn from his mistakes quickly is an act of *(re)bellion* in which he is actively disrupting and dismantling the elements of the system that was the source of shame for him.
(Re)sisting and (re)belling coincides with the core of your identity and is displayed in line with your personality traits. Gabrielle Union stated that her active (re)sistance came at a price, but her spirit of (re)belling came from watching her single mom doing things on her own:

But I think if I would’ve had a teacher that valued or validated my smartness, me belonging in those classes...I would have had an easier way of you know asking for help, but I just had to prove it to myself.

It’s probably the way I was raised. My mom is pretty much that way, you know always just doing things on her own. And so, I think that we grew up with her being a single mom for a lot of the time. And I think that was probably something that I learned from her. It was like, I knew I wasn’t stupid, and I knew that I could do it. I just didn’t have access to the resources that some other kids had. And so, I kind of wanted to prove it to myself, that I wasn’t stupid. I just did it wanting to make sure that I felt good about myself.

In spite of Gabrielle feeling like her smartness was not validated by teachers, she pushed forward to do what she needed to do to feel good about herself. Jane Eyre described a teacher praising her for (re)sisting and (re)belling against the “norm list” of what a high school girl is supposed to do.

I wasn’t one of those girls that put on makeup or whatever, [teacher name] is like, “You just stick with that for however long you want to. That is okay. You be you.” He was definitely one of the biggest influencers in high school. That made me actually enjoy going out there and exploring theater and being myself. It was nice.

(Re)sisting and (re)belling against perceptions and expectations keeps the gap from forming, and the shame space is not created. This act of moving in opposition to the “norm list” creates additional buffers, keeping the personal world balanced in the midst of rises and falls.

Once the evil villain has been defeated, in the final scene we see the superhero living life as an upgraded version of themselves with a “new normal.” Upon the conclusion of Act III: (Re)Mix, there is a greater sense of purpose for the superhero, as they have an
enlightened view of themselves and the world around them. Lizza Rhey described her transformation of becoming more affectionate:

I didn’t really grow up in like affectionate type of household. They took care of me and everything but with the whole emotional thing, we were just not that lovey dovey type.

I think I learned it more so with me and my friends. I have like a very close bond with them and I think we all kind of started realizing it as we started growing up, I would say probably like eighth and ninth grade. We start noticing stuff and like start talking about it with each other and then we just started changing it.

After that, I guess we would just learn from each other. Like we care for each other, so when we argued or something like that… all we knew how to do was argue and make jokes and stuff because we weren’t taught how to like express ourselves or we weren’t necessarily allowed to like talk about how we feel in certain situations in our homes. So, we figured it out with each other through trial and error.

She now makes a point to express her emotions and refuses to abide by any stereotype suggesting that she should not be emotional. There is a feeling of liberation as a result of living the (Re)Mixed version of the person that started in Act I: (Re)Awakening, knowing that work went into becoming who you are now as a result of reinvesting in yourself during Act II: (Re)Discovery. Becoming comfortable with your superhero identity in Act III: (Re)Mix means that you are using your superpowers to elevate and enhance the experiences of those around you, which truly means you have become the definition of the strugglish superhero—an extraordinary person with the will to fight the evil institutional or “norm list” constraints to be free for the sake of humanity.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In this chapter I review the problem, purpose and research questions for this constructivist grounded theory critical arts-based inquiry study. The research questions are answered using research literature and data from participants in the study before discussing the implications for the field of education as well as recommendations for moving schools toward building a more engaged environment. Future research based on the findings of the theory are outlined before a presentation of my reflections on my research journey and key learnings.

Disengagement in schools can take various forms, but in this study disengagement is characterized as having the following qualities: active withdrawal from activities within the learning environment; passively compliant; unmotivated to rise above adversity or to face challenges during the acquisition of knowledge; apathetic and unwilling to participate regardless of ability; and/or disconnected from the social realm of the school community (Archambault et al., 2009; Davis & Banks, 2019; Dean & Jolly, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004; King et al., 2015). The culmination of the educational disengagement process is a student dropping out before earning a high school diploma, but a deeper look into the reasons that students disengage provided insight into shame as an emotional factor impacting academic performance (Gilbert & Andrews, 1998; Lewis, 1995; Pinto-Gouveia & Matos, 2011; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Shaming experiences encode emotions along with the memory, and when these memories serve as cognitive reference points for identity formation, they become the organization system our brain uses and the lens through which to view the world.
Separating the inner value system and self-worth is imperative for students to fully engage in the learning environment, as conveyed by Brown (2012):

When our self-worth isn’t on the line, we are far more willing to be courageous and risk sharing our raw talents and gifts. From my research with families, schools, and organizations, it’s clear that shame-resilient cultures nurture folks who are much more open to soliciting, accepting, and incorporating feedback. These cultures also nurture engaged, tenacious people who expect to have to try and try again to get it right—people who are much more willing to get innovative and creative in their efforts. A sense of worthiness inspires us to be vulnerable, share openly, and persevere. Shame keeps us small, resentful, and afraid. In shame-prone cultures, where parents, leaders, and administrators consciously or unconsciously encourage people to connect their self-worth to what they produce, I see disengagement, blame, gossip, stagnation, favoritism, and a total dearth of creativity and innovation. (p. 64)

Finding a way to separate the student from what they turn in or our perceptions and expectations from the reality of the situation is a step toward a more engaged environment. Therefore, the purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to generate theory, grounded in data, to explore how and in what ways shame may affect students in the learning environment. I hypothesized that shame was inextricably connected to academic disengagement and that perhaps the terms were synonymous for one another but found in different disciplines. One central question and three sub-questions were posed to guide the study through the theory construction process. Central question: How and in what ways might shame be reflected in students’ learning environments?

a) In what ways might memories of shame during childhood be related to students’ experiences in school?

b) What are common triggers of shame for students?

c) How do students recover from shaming experiences?
In the next section, the research questions are answered using coded data from the survey and participant interviews.

**Answering Research Questions**

Schools are a microcosm of society, and the diverse environment provides a plethora of learning experiences for students; however, just as there are factions within the larger society based on commonalities, there are cliques within schools (da Silva & Alvarez-Castro, 2019; Wicaksono & Adiyanti, 2019). The self-induced sorting begins early based around appearances, ability, and activities; but then schools step in to provide a structure to the sorting that is systemic. Because they are acknowledged as knowing what is best for students, they become the authority on a student’s aptitude even though there are politics of failure poisoning the process (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Students are made to apply and then audition to find out if they are advanced. Based on the analysis of scores, they receive the school’s (and society’s) approval or not. Sometimes, the scores are not simply based on academic achievement but also on attitude toward school or those in authority. It is within this background that the **Behind the Scenes** footage is shot as students want to amplify their abilities to appease those in authority to become the anomaly, because the alternate is to become anonymous and to assimilate into being seen as average. These associations become the anchors for the affects that are displayed within the academic academy. Students are aware of the authority’s answer about who they are, which alters how they act toward one another, The school has created this idea of anti-otherness unless the student is advanced in some ability. It is against this background that the following scenes are shot that answer the research questions: **Act I: (Re)Awakening; Act II: (Re)Discovery; and Act III: (Re)Mix.**
A: In What Ways Might Memories of Shame during Childhood be Related to Students’ Experiences in School?

**Act I: (Re)Awakening** is when students are alerted or roused to a point of consciousness from a point of “sleep” or unconsciousness to a state of being “woke” or being aware of the “norm list” gaps between expectation, perception, and reality. Memories, emotions, experiences, lessons, and images that pertain to the current experience that were lying dormant are recalled. For several participants, the realization that the “norm list” existed was a shock and became a recurring central theme for their shame space story. The shame space was created when students realized there was a gap between how they were perceived by others and the ways they were not meeting the expectation that was dictated by the “norm list.” The “list” includes categories of societal assumptions and pressures pushing them to conform to being who they are expected to be: culturally, economically, educationally, family, historically, personally, and professionally. When answering the question about a negative school experience, participants could recall the experience with vivid detail, remembering their thoughts, feelings, and actions during and after the event. Although the responses to the question varied, what was consistent across participants was that the incident seemed to be connected to a recurring theme that had an embedded shame space story in the participant’s life.

As an example of the type of stories that were told that created the **(Re)Awakening** phase, Gabrielle Union’s interview answers are deconstructed for the elements that participants had in common. The shame space created around her smartness and how the school and society viewed her as a student caused her to feel silenced, and she pushed to be seen. The realization that participants were not free to embrace all elements of their identity
surprised many participants, and it seemed to happen early in elementary school and be reinforced or cemented as “truth” in middle school. Gabrielle stated that the lack of people of color in her advanced group in elementary school translated into her decision to pursue law as a career to fight the same injustice she experienced as a student. In this illustration, she described the moment she realized the perception-expectation gap existed:

And there were no people of color in that group which was always shocking to me because I knew we were all as smart if not smarter than the people who would be chosen to be in that group….People of color get overlooked. I thought that it was good I was challenged. I really liked having the ability to choose your classes. That made a difference in my education. And so, to me it pushed me and made me want to be seen but at the same time I didn’t feel like I had the authority to question.

Gabrielle recounted the bewilderment she experienced when realizing the authority the school had on determining her aptitude and the fact that she was chosen while others who looked like her were not. She realized that there were unjust systemic sorting practices. She stated, “I knew we were all as smart if not smarter than the people who would be chosen.” The fact that she was chosen and others were not was the beginning of the forming of the perception-expectation gap, and it continued to spread, creating the shame space story when she realized that she did not want to go back to join the others and that she needed to push to be seen if she was going to continue to be in the “smart group.” The source of shame was connected to her inner value system which consists of the things that were important to her: how she was seen at school.

B: What are common triggers of shame for students?

When individuals realized there was a gap between how they thought they were perceived and how they really were perceived and what expectations they were supposed to meet, it created the shame space story that became part of their identity narrative. The
societal expectations that Gabrielle felt she was supposed to check off applied pressure to her perceived reality, which triggered feelings of shame. Gabrielle explained why getting overlooked, being challenged, and being seen were so important to her:

   Education is always important to me. I always wanted to be smart. I always wanted to make sure that I kept up with my studies because I was always taught that if you keep up with your studies and make decent grades you can only open doors for yourself in the future. So that’s kind of how I kept my head wrapped around it. I wanted to make sure that I put myself in a position where, you know, financially when I was older that I’d be able to take care of myself and I’d be able to have different opportunities.

For Gabrielle, being smart and having other see that smartness was connected to opening doors for herself in the future. Building on the foundation of things she was taught, she stayed focused on putting herself in a position where she was able to take care of herself so that she had favorable opportunities. Somewhere, Gabrielle (re)ceived messages that people of color did not have favorable opportunities, and she connected that to them getting overlooked or not being smart. The “norm list” was confining Gabrielle in a shame space story in which she believed she had to be seen as smart and advanced by school authority figures in order for her to access the open doors.

   When participants spoke of their memories of school experiences, there was often a shame space story embedded as illustrated with Gabrielle; it became a theme that had triggers that could be accessed by an action, perceived action, visual or verbal representations, and memory. Shame triggers for students include feelings of unworthiness; not belonging to a friend group; negative feelings about physical attractiveness; disappointing those whose opinions they cared about or people they cared to please; being viewed as less than; and comparisons they made between themselves and others. For many participants, the shame space story served as a point of reference and could be triggered unless they embarked upon
the Act II: (Re)Discovery journey, which is described in answering the third research sub-question.

C: How Do Students Recover from Shaming Experiences?

Participants used various techniques and strategies to move out of the shame space and to not only move through the experience but to come out on the other side being an upgraded version of themselves. This was evident by improved self-care rituals, emotional regulation, routine, responses, and results, as well as a renewed sense of purpose which is the goal of Act III: (Re)Mix. To get there, participants had to learn about their superpowers and do the work in Act II: (Re)Discovery, which was to uncover hidden truths about some facet of their identity, revealing the need to reinvest time and resources to develop new ways of thinking, moving, or being in the world to obtain more favorable results. I contend that if intentional inner work is not done, then the individual does not actually move out of the shame space but that it lies dormant until triggered as if in a (Re)Awakening holding pattern.

Gabrielle discussed the shame space re-triggering process and the cyclical nature of successive inciting incidents when she discussed a teacher who confirmed one of her shame space stories by not thinking she was smart enough to be in the class:

She wanted to be nominated for some award. And so, we all had to take this test and I just didn’t really want to do it. So, I bombed it because I didn’t put much effort into it. And she pulled me aside and she said she said I don’t even know why you’re in my class, you’re just going to grow up and work at McDonald’s one day anyway. And that really pissed me off because I was just like, nobody wanted to take your test for you to be nominated for some award. And she was I really mean to me. And it wasn’t in front of a lot of people it was just like the fact that she had the nerve to say it all. She didn’t know me.

How does she have the ability to say these things to me? But it also made me think like maybe she’s saying this because that’s the stereotype that she believes. That’s the stereotype that she holds for people of color. I mean at that point I hated that teacher
and so on. And I put zero effort in her class which I don’t even remember my grade but I’m sure it was like a B or a B- or something dumb. I don’t know I just I stayed away from her as much as I could. Everything she said was in one ear and out the other like there’s no respect for her anymore.

Gabrielle did not move out of the shame space; it was as if every time she went to the class, she was re-triggered even though she tried to avoid the teacher. This incident stayed with Gabrielle, and she confronted her feelings by traversing elements within the (Re)Discovery to figure out what she needed to do. She decided to take another class from this same teacher her senior year but as the (Re)Mixed version of herself, and the outcome was completely different:

And I remember taking her class again my senior year. She had a different class offered and I got the highest grade in the class. She apologized to me. I was really glad that I ended up taking that class because I wasn’t going to, but I did. I think one because I always sought that validation, even though I didn’t need it. I just wanted to prove her wrong. And it was I think that it went a long way that she at least apologized and said something about it. And I think that the fact that she even remembered that she said it kind of showed that maybe that was out of character for her.

It was like, if I’m going to leave this school, I want to leave happy. What are some things I need to do? But it was just one of those things I think that I just wanted to prove to myself and to her. And I had nothing to lose.

Gabrielle considered her needs and even though she sought validation from others, this time, she focused on proving it to herself. She not only got her needs met; the teacher apologized which was unexpected. It caused Gabrielle to have empathy for that teacher as she thought about the fact that this may have been out of character for the teacher. Although the specific strategies, skills, and solutions that participants employed to develop their superpowers varied, there were commonalities in the methods they used to seal the shame.
space to move toward the (Re)Mix, their new normal, and assume their identity as the *strugglish superhero*.

**Central Question: How and in What Ways Might Shame be Reflected in Students’ Learning Environments?**

The Strugglish Superhero Storyline is the theory resulting from this study that contends that when inner value is at risk, the person is forced to make a decision about how they want to be perceived. When an individual is triggered, this point of no return forces a person to choose to assimilate to the “norm list” expectations or to violate the “norm list” in favor of identity validation, but this comes at a price. For many students in the learning environment, the price of rejecting the “norm list” expectations seems to be too high. The Strugglish Superhero Storyline states:

> When inner value at risk, you either lose or gain—
> You do not remain the same.

> And because we care about violating the “norm list”
> We give space and opportunity for shame to exist.

The shame space exists where “norm list” expectations and perceptions overlap, and it becomes reality for that individual which confines them to conforming into who they are expected to be because they care about how they are perceived. Gabrielle stated, “I didn’t feel like I had the authority to question” which is how the “norm list” made many participants feel. They adopted the view from the invisible authority without question and were silenced to abide by the rules governing that system. This is exemplified by the themes that were repeated for Gabrielle: “People of color got overlooked. It was good I was
challenged. It pushed me and made me want to be seen.” Inner value is woven into the themes and connected to either something the participant wanted or more often, connected to something they did not want or a misconception about their identity which caused shame and is present in all environments, especially learning environments.

Implications and Recommendations

There is evidence that shame is masking as disengagement and that there are some shame space shifts that need to happen in schools to move towards a more success-oriented environment. The data revealed several controllable confirmations of shame space stories for students that are directly within our control as educators. These elements further cement the shame affect and confirm shaming messages such as:

- low expectations (only focusing on the students who seem to want to learn; not challenging all students or offering challenging assignments/opportunities to a select few; not talking to all students about advanced classes or post-secondary options);
- disengaged authority figures (making discouraging comments to students including “I don’t care”; only pointing out mistakes and not noticing small successes; mismatching skills with the students actual ability level; not asking or answering questions; demeanor towards students is cold and uninviting);
- shaming environmental examples (metal detectors make students feel guilty upon entry; either honors or “regular” track; competitive environments where taking a risk is detrimental; using shame as a discipline method or not allowing students to take corrective action or have second chances).
When these devices are employed, then what we refer to as disengagement in education is actually the manifestation of the shame affect, and it triggers the shame space story which causes educators to witness fight, flight, freeze, or appease (Elison, Garofalo, & Velotti, 2014; Glaser, 2013).

For students of color, additional layers could be experienced. “When the indigenous and neoindigenous are silenced, they tend to respond to the denial of their voices by showcasing their culture in vivid, visceral, and transgressive ways” (Emdin, 2016, p. 12). The shame of merely existing and not fitting into the dominant culture may be experienced because of the perception of inferiority. “The reality is that we privilege people who look and act like us, and perceive those who don’t as different and frequently, inferior” (Emdin, 2016, p. 19). For “others” or those unable to meet the standard of the mainstream “norm list” because of differences outside of their control, it may seem as if the common school narrative is constantly replaying the story that they do not belong (SIRRAKOS & EMDIN, 2017). As this shame story is being confirmed, students are not only dealing with the current incident but the memories, messages, and meaning they have discovered from previous incidents. To help students work through their shame space stories, we have to challenge their beliefs because “it’s in the speaking that we find our voices” (Dillard, 2011, p. 22). As educators, we have a responsibility “to give voice to silenced spaces as an act of resistance” (Dillard, 2012, p. 19). This is what it means to be an educator activist as we help students climb out of the shame space.

Controllable challenges represent the areas under our purview that assist in sealing the shame space by liberating students from the expectations of the “norm list” within our
environments while fostering nurturing success-oriented perceptions of who we believe our students to be. These areas dismantle shame scenes and help seal the shame space to create new stories for students: connecting and communicating (adults interacting with students, being approachable or available, providing equitable access to resources or knowledge, respecting differences, being open to letting students be their authentic selves); responsive responses (natural consequences or discipline makes sense, reciprocal exchanges between student and adult, reading the signs of struggle and responding, meeting the student’s needs); engaging experiences (providing freedom to explore ideas with low-risk outcomes for failure, building positive relationships not only between the adult and students but also between students, trusting students, having values that make sense); high expectations (teachers pushing students toward their potential, challenging all students, valuing and validating all types of smartness, wanting and expecting success from all students); and providing real world learning (teaching life lessons, helping students understand wrongdoing, interconnected curriculum and problem solving like the type that really happens on a job). If we challenge the shame scripts, then the scene has to be altered, creating a new ending for the story.

To (re)story shame shapeshifters while pushing the individuals out of the shame space toward the strugglsh superhero empowerment journey from the shame space to success, the areas of communication, connections, content, and culture and climate need careful attention so each student can create several (Re)Mixes of themselves during their school career. In addition to (re)contextualizing the school community to include the larger support system of family and community, paying close attention to environmental examples of shame such as
metal detectors or display cases reflecting the history of the school that may not reflect the diversity of the current study body is necessary to make sure the environment feels welcoming to all. Communication is not simply in the words communicated. Participants spoke of the almost spiritual space of school, using words such as *vibe, sensing* or *knowing*, and *ways of being or moving* when they were describing how they knew if people in the environment cared for them or wanted them to be successful. This unspoken connection is felt, and continuing to build those through (re)storative relational frameworks further embeds these practices into the school and larger community.

Implementation of restorative practices involves each person becoming restorative by analyzing themselves and replacing systemic anti-otherness ways with equitable empowering experiences in all areas from discipline to grading practices to tracking measures. Restorative is a way of being and operating that transcends just bringing another program into the school. The goal is real change and empowering those directly involved with the problem to find or become the solution by involving them in every part of the decision making process by working “with” them instead of doing things “not,” “to,” or “for” them which impacts the culture and climate of the school (Wachtel, 2016). As previously stated, school is a microcosm of society and in the United States, we need a movement to (re)humanize, liberate, and empower all citizens. Beginning in schools, we can work with all learners in a to push each student to their potential and recognize the gifts they bring into the learning environment. Having a success-oriented school means dismantling shaming tracking systems and unjust discipline practices; celebrating risk-taking and minimizing failure for outcomes that come as a result of those failures; empowering students to vocalize their needs and be
active participants in getting those needs met; and providing opportunities for choice and real world experiences that could transform educational environments, **(Re)Mixing** not only individuals but society.

The debate of nurture versus nature may play a role in shame. Expanding upon the idea that the “norm list” is present within our home environment and reinforces our beliefs about our current reality, unbeknownst to our families, it could be possible that shame is being passed down through generations. These beliefs and how we were raised and nurtured could be more than environmental; it may be possible that memories, trauma, and experiences are transmitted in our genes.

The concept of passing trauma in genes was explored in a study involving male mice. Researchers Dias and Ressler (2014) provided evidence that memories or traits may be passed down through generations. Identifying the genes controlling specific behaviors is a nearly impossible feat due to the many genes that are involved in the process, but the smell receptor which, connects the nose and the brain, had been identified by researchers as M71. Researchers conditioned male mice to associate the smell of acetophenone, which has a similar smell to cherry blossoms, with an electric shock which eventually caused them to be fearful of the smell, even if the smell was faint (Dias & Ressler, 2014). The sperm from these mice were used to inseminate female mice. The offspring of these mice had more M71 receptors and when they were exposed to acetophenone, they were jumpier, although this did not occur with other smells. This research suggests that some information such as memory or traits may be inherited as it is encoded in our DNA. If this idea is advanced through research, it may explain concepts such as racial or cultural shame.
For example, during the time when Africans were enslaved in America, the brutality and acts done to African males to strip them of their identity and causing them to be fearful could have been passed on in more than just environmental experiences. If shame memories could be genetically transmitted to future generations, not only would it provide another explanation of the cyclical nature of some of the injustices and inequitable treatment of groups of people, it may provide a direction to explore ways to heal.

Furthering the idea about the transmission of trauma or stress, in a study involving mice, researchers found that stressful events could affect the emotional behavior or metabolism of future generations (Hackett et al., 2013). Previously, geneticists believed that genes that carried epigenetic markings could not be passed down to the next generation because they were erased, but this controversial idea was challenged by a team of researchers led by Jamie Hackett (2013) when they discovered that there are some methylated gene regions that were not erased. The idea that epigenetic inheritance may exist would mean that environmental factors such as adverse childhood experiences and trauma could be passed on to the next generation. Passing on epigenetic traits may also mean that shame could be transmitted through our DNA. If epigenetic inheritance exists and some genes do not go through the demethylation process of being reset or erased, then research looking at shame as a multi-generational concept would prove to be significant, pushing the thought processes of many fields of study. The implications of passing down trauma, memory, and experiences genetically would hopefully provide ideas on how we can find personal, familial, cultural, national, and societal healing so that our realities are not determined by unresolved shame.
Future research on the spiritual space of school and how the notion of sensing, knowing, or the vibe in the room impacts the shame space would provide further insight into what is happening Behind the Scenes as students engage in learning environments. Participants made statements such as “you know how you get this vibe from someone and you just know.” I knew exactly what they were talking about as they were telling the story, but after analyzing the data, I realized that was a new point of exploration and an opportunity to further the educational field. Also, conducting this research with elementary and middle school students as they are developing these shame space scripts and high school students as they are collecting evidence about their shame space stories would provide knowledge about altering these scripts as they are being developed. Teaching students about the Strugglish Superhero Storyline and developing a curriculum based on the strugglish superhero storyboard would give them tools to work through. Researching the outcomes of students with these self-awareness strategies could advance studies of human behavior and emotion regulation. By advancing any element of this theory and challenging the shame story, we can help students seal the shame space in favor of a success story as the credits roll on their strugglish superhero adventure and they (Re)Mix the world around them.

Research Reflections

I changed my topic a total of seven times while working through the classes for this doctoral program. In the middle of my program, life happened and knocked all of the wind out of me. I was an emotional wreck and had a total breakdown, or what Brené Brown referred to as a spiritual awakening (Brown, 2015). I showed up at a therapist’s office at my university and spent my first session talking about all the reasons I did not need to be there. I
am truly grateful that she called me on it at the end of the session. At the time, I was ticked off, but something about her telling me the truth about myself told me she was exactly what I needed. I just kept showing up, week after week, trying to figure out what skeletons in the closet I was most afraid of. While reading an empirical article about shame, I broke down in tears, realizing that I had lots of it. For a while, I did not use the actual word shame; I referred to it as “that thing,” “those horrible feelings,” or “the opposite of feeling good about yourself” as if speaking shame meant something was wrong with me. Life did not stop while I was trying to figure it out. I got divorced, moved twice, a professor told me I should just drop the doctoral program because my writing was not good enough (which triggered years of shaming memories I never knew existed), and each time I was forced to confront my own shame shapeshifters. My support system, which included my parents, my fairy academic godmother, and my younger sister, encouraged me to keep struggling forward. Trust me, the struggle was super real sometimes, but I learned the beauty of struggle—the beauty of fighting for something you think you are supposed to have in spite of the thoughts screaming, “You’re not good enough. Of all people, what makes you think you can do it. You have no clue what you’re doing so let the smart/pretty/gifted—fill in the blank—people do it!”

When I was in the middle of a life-changing battle, I noticed that every time I confronted shame head on, I became a better person. People around me started to notice the difference. It changed the consideration I gave to the ones I loved; how I worked with students and the way I viewed my job; it changed how I treated complete strangers and most importantly, I felt better. Previously I felt like I had a huge heartache, headaches, and disconnected relationships. After plotting a journey through shame and putting in the work, it
was as if I was able to use more of my heart, my head felt like it operated with clarity, and my hands found themselves serving those around me. Doing this research was a healing experience for me, and I am so grateful for the opportunity to help anyone the way that it helped me. This research was transformational for me, but it does not mean that I do not fall into struggle or the shame space; it just means that I am more confident to exert my will to be free from the evil institutional “norm list”—to be free for the sake of humanity. I am the strugglish superhero, and I invite you to put on your own strugglish superhero cape and fight alongside me. And…Action.
APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

Study Title:
SHAME SHAPESHIFTERS MASKING AS DISENGAGEMENT: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY EXAMINING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT-RELATED EMOTIONS IN HIGH SCHOOL

Authorized Study Personnel

Principal Investigator: Loyce Caruthers, Ed.D. UMKC, 816-235-1044
Secondary Investigator: Ashley Smith, Doctoral Candidate UMKC, 816-663-0847

KEY INFORMATION
You are being asked to participate in this study because you are within the 18 – 30 age range with significant insight that will be helpful to understand various high school experiences. Research studies are voluntary and only include people who choose to take part. The purpose of this study is to understand the role that academic achievement-related emotions play as students are learning new material and if educators are mislabeling or misunderstanding some of the behaviors that are seen in school. The total amount of time you would be in this study would be 15 – 20 minutes for the initial internet survey, about 1 – 1 ½ hours for interviews during the discovery phase with a possible 30 minute follow up. You are also invited to participate in the optional research phase to discuss the results in an on-line focus group, which will take approximately 1 – 1 ½ hours of your time.

There are no benefits to you for taking part in this study. You have the alternative of not taking part in this study. The potential risks of participating in this study are a breach of confidentiality and psychological discomfort in discussing uncomfortable or painful memories from high school. These risks are considered minimal (i.e., no more than what you would experience in daily life). Additionally, we will minimize these risks by removing identifying information from audio recordings and transcripts, and you have the right to skip or not answer questions that you do not want to.

Please read this consent form carefully and take your time making your decision. As the researcher(s) discusses this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. Please talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?
The purpose of this research is to discover the emotions are present in learning environments as students are trying to navigate their way through high school. You are being asked to be in
this study because you may add a perspective to this study that would assist me in figuring out the ways that our feelings help or hinder us as we are trying to learn new material. You must be between the 18 – 30 age range to participate.

**HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**
Approximately 100 people will take part in the study overall.

**WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY?**
This study will be using Zoom video conferencing software which can be accessed through an internet connection using a cell phone, computer or another electronic device. During the study, you have the option of skipping questions you do not want to answer or discontinuing your participation. Audio recordings will be used during the interviews so the interview can be typed out for data analysis. If you do not wish to be audio recorded, you may only participate in the survey portion of this study.

*Discovery Phase – Survey and Interviews*
You will be asked to complete a survey that would take about 15 minutes of your time to complete. During the on-line survey or interviews, you may skip any questions that you do not want to answer or discontinue your participation at any time. Your responses will be anonymous; there is no way for the research team to identify you or your responses to the survey unless you add your contact information to schedule individual interviews.

*Individual Interviews*
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*Follow-Up Interviews*
To assist with understanding the answers given in the interview, a follow-up phone call or Zoom video call may be scheduled for further clarification. This interview will also be audio recorded so researchers can reference the call as data collection is taking place. If there is more information that you have to add once you have had time to think about the interview, you may request a follow-up phone call to provide additional details.
Research Phase – Findings Reveal in On-line Focus Group

Once the interviews are completed and the data has been analyzed, the findings will be presented for discussion with everyone that participated in the interviews in an on-line focus group. This focus-group will be audio recorded so that it may also be transcribed, participants not wanting to be audio recorded may not participate in the on-line focus group. Participants will use the pseudonym they chose during their interview and their screen will be off. You may choose to turn your screen on if you would like but the other participants would be able to see you. Instructions to turn on your screen and setting your pseudonym will be sent along with the Zoom link. During this time questions about the research will be posed to the group to assist in advancing the direction of the data. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer, turn on/off your microphone to answer questions, turn on/off your video at any time or discontinue your participation at any time. This on-line focus group will last about 1 – 1 ½ hours.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?
The maximum amount of time you will spend in this study will be about 4 hours if you participate in all parts of the study. The approximate amounts of time for each research procedure is as follows:

- Internet survey: 30 minutes
- Discovery phase interview: 1 ½ hours
- Follow up interview: 30 minutes
- Online Focus Group: 1 ½ hours

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?
There are no physical risks associated with this study. There is, however, the potential risk of loss of confidentiality. Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential; however, this cannot be guaranteed.

Some of the questions we will ask you as part of this study may make you feel uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer any of the questions, and you may take a break at any time during the study. You may stop your participation in this study at any time.

This research presents risk of loss of confidentiality, emotional and/or psychological distress because the surveys involve sensitive questions about your high school experience.

If you experience any emotional and/or psychological distress and you would like to speak to someone, consider calling SAMHSA’s (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357) (also known as the Treatment Referral Routing Service) or TTY: 1-800-487-4889 is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service, in English and Spanish, for individuals and family members facing mental and/or substance use disorders. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations. Callers can also order free publications and other information.
ARE THERE BENEFITS TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?
Disclosing details about your high school experience may be helpful as you process those memories. However, you may not get any benefit from being in this research study.

The benefits to science and/or society may include better understanding of how to help students process the emotions associated with being in high school.

WILL MY INFORMATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?
Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. All data from this study will be kept on a password protected computer in a password protected folder. Your identity will only be known to the co-investigators and you will have the opportunity to choose a pseudonym for attributed quotations.

Immediately following the interviews and on-line focus group, audio recordings will be downloaded on a password protected computer and uploaded into NVivo transcription service which is an electronic computer-based system that will type out all of the words from our interview. Researchers will have a password-protected account and only the account owners will have access to the files uploaded and transcribed. All data using NVivo is encrypted to protect it from unauthorized disclosure or modification and researchers will destroy the recordings of the individual interviews and follow-up interviews after the on-line focus group. The on-line focus group recordings will be destroyed two weeks after the on-line focus group. After the transcription is generated, it will be once again downloaded on a password protected computer and all files and back-ups will be deleted from NVivo. Pseudonyms will be used when notating who is speaking and for saving files.

A separate file will be created that contains a key linking identifiable information to the pseudonym that was chosen. This will be stored in a separate password protected folder on the password protected computer. An additional layer of security will be used requiring a separate password to open the file which will be generated and used solely by the research team. The key will be destroyed upon the conclusion of this study after all participants are e-mailed a copy of the final dissertation.

The other data that is collected including transcriptions will be stored electronically on a password protected computer and each file will require a password to open and/or edit the files. This information will only be accessible by the research team during the study and for 7 years after the study is complete. The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.
WHAT ARE THE COSTS TO YOU?
There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

WHAT ABOUT COMPENSATION?
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU HAVE A PROBLEM DURING THIS RESEARCH STUDY?
Your well-being is a concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

WHAT ABOUT MY RIGHTS TO DECLINE PARTICIPATION OR WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?
You can choose to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you are entitled. However, if you decide to stop participating in the study, we encourage you to talk to the researcher first to make sure it is safe to do so.

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (‘withdraw’) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the researcher(s) or with the University of Missouri Kansas City.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

WHOM DO I CALL IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?
You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the researcher(s) listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, or to discuss problems, concerns or suggestions related to your participation in the research, or to obtain information about research participant’s rights, contact the UMKC Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office
  • Phone: (816) 235-5927
  • Email: umkcirb@umkc.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT
The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, risks and benefits have been explained to me. I have been allowed to ask questions, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been told whom to contact if I have questions, to discuss problems, concerns, or suggestions related to the research, or to obtain information. I have read or had read to me this consent form and agree to be in this study, with the understanding that I may
withdraw at any time. By submitting my information, I consent to be a participant in this study.
APPENDIX B

HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE SURVEY

High School Experience Survey - Doctoral Research Study (Qualtrics)

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q0
Hi, my name is Ashley Smith. I am a UMKC doctoral candidate and I am conducting a research study about emotions you experienced while you were in high school. I am currently looking for individuals between the ages of 18 to 30.

Your participation is completely voluntary and if you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a brief survey that would take about 20 minutes of your time to complete.

During the on-line survey, you may skip any questions that you do not want to answer or discontinue your participation at any time.

Your responses will be anonymous; there is no way for the research team to identify you or your responses to the survey.

At the end of the survey you will be asked if you are interested in participating in an additional interview by phone or an on-line Zoom video conference. If you choose to provide contact information such as your phone number or email address, your survey responses may no longer be anonymous to the researcher. However, no names or identifying information would be included in any publications or presentations based on these data, and your responses to this survey will remain confidential.

Below is the consent form and more detailed information about the study.
Study Title:

SHAME SHAPESHIFTERS MASKING AS DISENGAGEMENT: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY EXAMINING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT-RELATED EMOTIONS IN HIGH SCHOOL

Authorized Study Personnel

Principal Investigator: Loyce Caruthers, Ed.D. UMKC, 816-235-1044
Secondary Investigator: Ashley Smith, Doctoral Candidate UMKC, 816-663-0847

KEY INFORMATION
You are being asked to participate in this study because you are within the 18 – 30 age range with significant insight that will be helpful to understand various high school experiences. Research studies are voluntary and only include people who choose to take part. The purpose of this study is to understand the role that academic achievement-related emotions play as students are learning new material and if educators are mislabeling or misunderstanding some of the behaviors that are seen in school. The total amount of time you would be in this study would be 15 – 20 minutes for the initial internet survey, about 1 – 1 ½ hours for interviews during the discovery phase with a possible 30 minute follow up. You are also invited to participate in the optional research phase to discuss the results in an on-line focus group, which will take approximately 1 – 1 ½ hours of your time.

There are no benefits to you for taking part in this study. You have the alternative of not taking part in this study. The potential risks of participating in this study are a breach of confidentiality and psychological discomfort in discussing uncomfortable or painful memories from high school. These risks are considered minimal (i.e., no more than what you would experience in daily life). Additionally, we will minimize these risks by removing identifying information from audio recordings and transcripts, and you have the right to skip or not answer questions that you do not want to.

Please read this consent form carefully and take your time making your decision. As the researcher(s) discusses this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. Please talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?
The purpose of this research is to discover the emotions are present in learning environments as students are trying to navigate their way through high school. You are
being asked to be in this study because you may add a perspective to this study that would assist me in figuring out the ways that our feelings help or hinder us as we are trying to learn new material. You must be between the 18 – 30 age range to participate.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?
Approximately 100 people will take part in the study overall

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY?
This study will be using Zoom video conferencing software which can be accessed through an internet connection using a cell phone, computer or another electronic device. During the study, you have the option of skipping questions you do not want to answer or discontinuing your participation. Audio recordings will be used during the interviews so the interview can be typed out for data analysis. If you do not wish to be audio recorded, you may only participate in the survey portion of this study.

Discovery Phase – Survey and Interviews
You will be asked to complete a survey that would take about 15 minutes of your time to complete. During the on-line survey or interviews, you may skip any questions that you do not want to answer or discontinue your participation at any time. Your responses will be anonymous; there is no way for the research team to identify you or your responses to the survey unless you add your contact information to schedule individual interviews.

Individual Interviews
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• Internet survey: 30 minutes
• Discovery phase interview: 1 ½ hours
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Some of the questions we will ask you as part of this study may make you feel uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer any of the questions, and you may take a break at any time during the study. You may stop your participation in this study at any time.

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also order free publications and other information.

ARE THERE BENEFITS TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?
Disclosing details about your high school experience may be helpful as you process those memories. However, you may not get any benefit from being in this research study.

The benefits to science and/or society may include better understanding of how to help students process the emotions associated with being in high school.

WILL MY INFORMATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?
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WHAT ARE THE COSTS TO YOU?
There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

WHAT ABOUT COMPENSATION?
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU HAVE A PROBLEM DURING THIS RESEARCH STUDY?
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• Phone: (816) 235-5927
• Email: umkcirb@umkc.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT
The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, risks and benefits have been explained to me. I have been allowed to ask questions, and my questions have been
answered to my satisfaction. I have been told whom to contact if I have questions, to discuss problems, concerns, or suggestions related to the research, or to obtain information. I have read or had read to me this consent form and agree to be in this study, with the understanding that I may withdraw at any time. By submitting my information, I consent to be a participant in this study.

Q1 Please indicate your age range.

- 18 – 21 (1)
- 22 – 25 (2)
- 26 – 30 (3)

Q2 What is your gender identification?

- Female (1)
- Male (2)
- Non-binary (3)
Q3 What is your race?
- American Indian or Alaska Native (1)
- Asian (2)
- Black or African-American (3)
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (4)
- White (5)
- Two or more races (6)
- Prefer not to answer (7)

Q4 What is the highest level of education you have attained so far?
- High School Diploma or Equivalent (1)
- Some college (2)
- Associate’s Degree (3)
- Bachelor’s Degree (4)
- Master’s Degree (5)
- Doctorate or Professional Degree (6)
Q5 Think about your experience in high school and please answer “yes” or “no” to indicate your response.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Yes (1)</th>
<th>No (2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was involved in extracurricular events such as sports, clubs, or activities. (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were times when I felt that class was boring or that I was unmotivated to do the work. (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt that the teachers or school needed to be aware of problems outside of school that affected me as a student. (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were times when I felt I struggled in school. (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I graduated from a public, charter or private high school with my original cohort (4 years after you entered as a freshmen). (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I graduated from an alternative high school, an on-line program, with a GED or MO Options or with another diploma equivalent. (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q6 How do you think that others view you now? How is that similar or different than how you felt you were viewed in high school?

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________
Q7 When you were in high school, how did you view authority figures such as parents, teachers, principals, coaches, etc.?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Q8 Think about your high school experience, list some of the emotions that come to mind when you think of learning something new or difficult.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Q9 When you are struggling, how can other people tell? What kinds of things do you say or do?
________________________________________________________________________

Q10 Describe what a good day looked like for you when you were in high school.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Q11 What did a “not so good” day look like?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Q12 Finish the sentence: My experience in school would have been better if...
________________________________________________________________________
Q13 If your high school experience had a theme song or a quote, what would your title or quote be?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Q14 If you could go back and tell your elementary school self something, what would you say?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Q15 If you could say something to your middle school self, what would you want to say?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Q16 If you could say something to your high school self, what would you say?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Q17 Finish the sentence: One of the biggest lessons I learned in high school was...

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________
Q18 What advice would you give high school educators?
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________

Q19 What advice would you give a student that is struggling in high school?
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________

Q20 The interview phase of this research involves further participation via an on-line video conference interview or a phone interview. Selected participants can expect the interview to last approximately 60 minutes with a potential 30-minute follow-up phone call or video conference for clarification purposes which may take place up to two weeks following the initial interview. Would you be willing to participate in the interview phase?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Q20 = No

Q21 What is your name?
________________________________________________________

Q22 What is the best phone number to reach you?
________________________________________________________

Q23 What is an e-mail address that you check frequently?
________________________________________________________

End of Block: Default Question Block
APPENDIX C

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Study Title: SHAME SHAPESHIFTERS MASKING AS DISENGAGEMENT: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY EXAMINING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT-RELATED EMOTIONS IN HIGH SCHOOL

Authorized Study Personnel
- Principal Investigator: Loyce Caruthers, Ed.D. UMKC, 816-235-1044
- Secondary Investigator: Ashley Smith, Doctoral Candidate UMKC, 816-663-0847

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hello, thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview phase of this study. With your involvement, I hope to find ways to assist educators in creating learning environments that allow all students to be successful. Your role in this study will be to be honest and answer the questions with as much information as you feel comfortable sharing about your high school experience. I am seeking clear, accurate, and detailed reports of what these experiences were like for you. At this time, please refer to the consent form and let’s review that information before proceeding.

(Read through the consent form with the participant and answer any questions before continuing.)

As indicated in the consent form, in the study, a pseudonym will be used in place of your name. Please tell me what pseudonym you would like me to use for you.

Participant pseudonym:

________________________________________________________

Date: ___________________ Time: ___________ Method: Zoom or Phone

Call
Opening

Thank you for allowing me to take the time to really dig into some elements of your story. I’m interested in really understanding your perspective about your educational journey. As you talk, I will listen and make some notes and I will not interrupt you until you have finished. Please take as much time as you feel necessary and tell me all the details you remember that, in your opinion, are connected to your experiences, thoughts and feelings during school.

Initial Open-Ended Questions

1. Could you first start by describing your elementary school experience?
2. What is a story that stands out in your mind from elementary school?
3. How would you describe your middle school experience?
4. What is a story that stands out in your mind from middle school?
5. Describe your transition from middle school to high school?
6. How would you describe your high school experience?
7. What is a story that stands out in your mind from high school?

Intermediate Questions

1. When, if at all, did you first have a negative experience at school?
2. What was that like? What did you think then? Describe your feelings.
3. How did you happen to recover from that experience?
4. Think about a time that you experienced failure in school. Tell me about that experience.
5. Are there any other memories that stand out in your mind about experiences with failure?
6. Define the word “struggle.”
7. When you think about what it means to struggle in school, what emotions, images or stories come to mind?
8. Is “struggle” ever a good thing?
9. Define the word “shame.”
10. Shame has been defined as: “Shame can be defined simply as the feeling we have when we evaluate our actions, feelings, or behavior, and conclude that we have done wrong” (Lewis, 1995, p. 2) “…an extremely painful and ugly feeling that has negative impact on interpersonal behavior” (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 3) “An intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (Brown, 2006, p. 45). When you are in shame, where do you feel it in your body? What is that experience like for you?
11. How long does that feeling last for you?
12. What makes you feel better?
13. Describe what motivated you when you were in high school.
Ending Questions

1. Is there something else you think I should know to understand student’s school experiences better?

2. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Closing

I appreciate you taking the time to allow me to dig into your experiences in school. As you are thinking through some of the things we talked about today, if you feel you have anything to add or you feel you want to make something clear, please text, call or e-mail me to let me know and I will contact you to add in that information. I will also contact you for a follow-up interview to clarify any questions that I may have following the transcription of your interview. You will also have the opportunity to review the data that I get from the study in my findings reveal. I am grateful that you decided to share your story with me and once again thank you for making time in your day. Thanks again. Goodbye.
REFERENCES


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Graesser, A., Ozuru, Y., & Sullins, J. (2010). What is a good question? In M. G. McKeown & L. Kucan (Eds.), *Bringing reading research to life* (pp. 112–141). New York, NY: Guilford Press.


Pledge of Allegiance. (1954). Section 4 of the flag code. (4 USC Sec. 4).


VITA

Ashley Nicole Smith was raised in Omaha, Nebraska, where she attended public schools during the time when mandated bussing was in effect to aid in the desegregation efforts of the city to create integrated schools. She attended R.M. Marrs in South Omaha for all grades from K–8 except one year because the school did not offer third grade. Students had to get bussed to another part of the city, where Ms. Smith attended Saratoga Elementary located in North Omaha. She graduated in 2003 from Bellevue West High School before attending Creighton University, where she graduated in 2007 with her Bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education with an endorsement in English Language Learning.

She worked for one year at Morton Magnet Middle School in Omaha, Nebraska, as a fifth and sixth grade English teacher before moving to Kansas City, Missouri, where she worked at KIPP Endeavor Academy. After earning a Master of Arts degree in Education Administration PK–12 in 2013, she worked for one year as an assistant principal at the eighth and ninth grade center in the Hickman Mills School District. Moving up to the high school level, she served as assistant principal for six years at North Kansas City High School in North Kansas City, Missouri, when she began learning about restorative practices. She earned a graduate certificate from the International Institute for Restorative Practices in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 2018. Upon completion of her degree requirements for the Preparing Future Faculty Program and Ed.D. in Educational Administration PK–12, Ms. Smith plans to continue her career in education while pursuing her research interests in making school more engaging for all students.