12-1-2017

The Pernicious Prophecy of Diminished Academic Expectations

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THE PERNICIOUS PROPHECY OF DIMINISHED ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

by

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A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction

Department of Curriculum & Instruction
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University
December 2017
DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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Stephen C. Foggatt

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum & Instruction

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF:

Stephen C. Foggatt, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Curriculum and Instruction, presented on November 3, 2017, at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois.

TITLE: The Pernicious Prophecy of Diminished Academic Expectations

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. D. John McIntyre

This study examines the relationship between academic expectations and achievement, particularly as it concerns minority students. I have often been troubled by the narrative surrounding the academic potential of minority students in America, and my research is intended to broaden the discussion of this issue by presenting a chronicle of thoughts collected from individuals who have actually lived this experience and achieved tremendous academic success.

To that end, I gathered qualitative data from six minority undergraduate students at Yale University. Through a series of questions administered via surveys, interviews, and group discussions, I accumulated a large amount of in-depth background information on the participants related to their lifelong learning experiences. These students identified the factors most responsible for their remarkable academic performance, along with the stumbling blocks encountered along the way, offering profound insight relative to the impact of racial dynamics on academia and our overall society.

Based on a thorough categorization and analysis of the prevalent themes that emerged throughout the research process, I am offering numerous recommendations that I feel will be useful to students, teachers, and parents as part of an ongoing effort to maximize the effectiveness of the learning process for students of all ethnicities in classrooms across America. It is my sincere hope that by sharing these compelling stories, the prevailing perspective on this matter might be altered to some degree, helping to establish an impetus for real change to our country’s educational system.
This composition is dedicated to my beloved Johnny, who deserved a much better fate. When I think of my time in Carbondale, I will always think of him and remember his uniquely special qualities. Buddy, I’m sorry I let you down, and I look forward to seeing you again.

-SCF
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this project has been a challenging, yet extremely rewarding experience, in large part because I never really expected to be doing this in the first place. Graduate school was not something I had ever contemplated, and to have come this far after all that has transpired over the last several years is slightly astounding.

Nobody understands that more than my amazing wife, who was with me every single step of the way and never doubted that I would succeed in glorious fashion. To be fair, I often reminded her of my considerable talents, but there is no question that her unwavering support made a difficult task much more bearable than it would have been otherwise. Baby, thanks so much for putting in all of that time at Schnuck’s while I was going to class or writing yet another paper or doing all of the endless things that had to be done to get to this point – You are the best!

Heartfelt thanks also to the incomparable Dr. John McIntyre, who provided expert guidance at every turn despite being “the busiest retired guy I’ve ever known.” Doc, you are the man, and I can never fully express how much admiration I have for your depth of knowledge and the humility with which you carry yourself. It has been a tremendous honor associating with you both personally and professionally, and everything I plan to achieve throughout the remainder of my academic career is a direct byproduct of your surpassing influence.

I am grateful to my parents, and especially my Dad, who was always there when I needed him to be and always believed in me, despite my countless irrational decisions over the years. Finally, major props to my incredible daughter, who has demonstrated every single day for as long as I can remember that external factors have no bearing on a person’s ability to achieve remarkable success in every sense of the word. Your refusal to ever settle for anything less makes me more proud than I can possibly say. You are the living proof of my thesis.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

July 1995, Phoenix, Arizona. A baby girl is born. She is one of roughly 150 babies born in the greater Phoenix area, or nearly 240 babies born in the state of Arizona, or approximately 12,000 babies born throughout the entirety of the United States of America on this particular day. Every baby has a unique story for one reason or another, and this little girl is no exception. Her mother is of Jamaican descent, meaning she is extremely dark-skinned, and her father is of German-Irish descent, meaning he is extremely light-skinned. Therefore, due to the wonders of genetics, this baby’s skin color falls somewhere in between the two extremes represented by her parents. In other words, she is biracial, or half-black, if you prefer. Of course, she is most definitely not aware of this at the time of her birth, nor will she be conscious of this for a number of years. Even if she could somehow grasp this fact right now, right at this very moment, it is doubtful that she would attach any significance to it or that it would matter to her in the slightest. Taken a step further, it is an absolute certainty that she cannot possibly fathom just how much it will matter to so many others in her future.

This study will focus on the relationship between academic expectations and achievement, particularly as it concerns minority students. Specifically, my primary research question is as follows: What are the learning experiences of high-achieving minority undergraduate college students? This question has enormous personal relevance for me based on my history of raising a biracial daughter and working as a professional educator in diverse settings for nearly two decades. Throughout this period, and especially during my time in higher education as both a graduate student and a faculty member, I have been troubled by the narrative
surrounding the academic potential of minority students in America, and through my research I seek to broaden the discussion of this issue by presenting a chronicle of thoughts collected from individuals who have actually lived this experience and achieved tremendous academic success.

To be sure, we live in an increasingly diverse society, and this ongoing trend can definitely be seen when examining the composition of our nation’s students. Figure 1 below presents a complete demographic breakdown of America’s students based on data obtained from school districts nationwide in 2016:

Figure 1. 2016 nationwide student demographics (accessed via the public domain; see Appendix K for more details).

While the United States has a long history of diversity that is rightfully celebrated as part of our rich history and unique identity, my contention is that the pendulum of political
correctness has swung so far in recent years that common sense and logic are often sacrificed in a misguided effort that promotes diversity at all costs by insisting on a widespread ethnic categorization throughout every aspect of our society, instead of focusing on the collective good. America’s educational system has been dramatically affected by this ongoing development, and that has led to the creation of learning environments that, in my estimation, are not well suited to actual learning.

This disturbing pattern has disproportionately affected minority students, who are often the recipient of dispiriting rhetoric delivered by the very people who should be encouraging them the most. As a result, paranoia and negativity have infected many of our nation’s schools, often creating unnecessary fear and doubt in the minds of minority students who stand to benefit the most from a quality education. In response to repeated discouragement from their teachers, these students are significantly more inclined to develop a sense of “academic futility” which places them at a distinct disadvantage throughout the learning process (D’hondt et al., 2016). The intent of this academic study is to closely examine this complex situation and its underlying factors in an effort to determine the best course of action moving forward.

**Statement of the Problem**

Far too often in classrooms across America, students of color encounter obstacles that make academic achievement more difficult than it should be. Based on my firsthand experiences over two decades as a teacher and a parent, I have observed the evidence of this dilemma over and over again. Essentially, due to a wide variety of factors that will be introduced in this study and explored throughout the accompanying research, minority students in this country frequently receive mixed messages from influential figures in their lives (i.e., teachers and parents) who lead them to believe that they are predisposed to underachieve in the classroom. Over time, this
negative messaging creates a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby reduced expectations lead to increased frustration and a lack of consistent effort, ultimately resulting in academic failure (Wagner & Brahm, 2017).

There are a great many minority students in this country, my daughter among them, who grew up in environments where they were not exposed to the constant drumbeat of diminished expectations that is all too often the result of perceived grievances related to America’s history of strained race relations. These young people were told that the only limitations to their potential would be limitations of their own making, that their academic – and life – accomplishments would be determined solely by factors such as their work ethic and perseverance, not by the unseen societal forces that construct barriers to learning and make academic success possible only for the privileged elite.

As a result, unburdened by the defeatist mentality that is so frequently propagated in our schools, they have accomplished remarkable things. Dweck (2006) explains this phenomenon in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, describing a “growth mindset” that exists in high achieving students. “The implications of this mindset are profound – students with a growth mindset work and learn more effectively, displaying a desire for challenge and resilience in the face of failure” (Boaler, 2013, p.143).

During my daughter’s formative years, our house was always full of children representing every conceivable ethnicity. Blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, and all possible “mixtures” of those races were present, and yet it never even remotely occurred to my daughter or any of her friends that they were “different” from each other in any way. They valued and respected each other as friends based on their shared interests, and skin color had ZERO relevance.
That was the environment in our home, and that was also the environment in my classroom throughout many years as a high school teacher, all of which were spent in an extremely diverse setting consisting of students representing every possible creed and color. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if that were the prevailing environment characterizing our entire American society? I have seen it, and it can be done. Bottom line, it doesn’t have to be about race. In my opinion, only when our educational system begins to focus less on categorizing students according to ethnicity and socioeconomic status and more on promoting excellence regardless of any demographic characteristics will we be able to regain our footing and have a chance at truly helping America’s youth achieve their vast academic potential.

Clearly my bias is well-established due to my personal life experience, but I understand my obligation as a qualitative researcher to approach this project from an inquisitive, open-minded point-of-view as opposed to simply attempting to confirm my existing opinion on the issue. From the onset, I fully realized that others, including the students serving as participants in my study, might have a completely different outlook on this complex matter. My goal was not to prejudice their responses in any way, but merely to faithfully record their testimony and then analyze the emerging themes with the overriding emphasis being an accurate accounting of the collective life and learning experiences of these amazing young people.

I have witnessed firsthand what it takes for minority students to succeed at the highest levels of academia in this country, and I understand more than most that these stories deserve to be told. It is my honor to tell them, and it is a privilege that I do not take lightly. In the process, it is my fondest hope that the predominant perspective as it relates to minority students and academia will be altered for the betterment of all concerned, and most particularly for the benefit of the students themselves.
The crux of the problem is summarized nicely by Harper and Davis III (2012): “Some teachers have unsubstantiated, unquestioned, and inaccurate thoughts about minority students; put simply, these thoughts can be harmful and quite detrimental” (p.103). An unmistakable theme of demotivation lies at the heart of this complex issue, and the contributing factors deserve further scrutiny. To that end, I will be posing the following research questions in order to illuminate the learning experiences of minority students with a consistent track record of extraordinary achievement in the classroom:

Research Questions

- **Research Question #1**: What influences/factors are most responsible for shaping the attitudes of high achieving minority students towards learning and school?
- **Research Question #2**: What role do students believe their ethnicity and/or their family’s socioeconomic status played in their ability to succeed in the classroom up to this point?
- **Research Question #3**: What advice would high achieving minority students give to others seeking academic and overall life success?
- **Research Question #4**: What obstacles, if any, have high achieving minority students encountered in their pursuit of academic success?

I believe these questions are appropriate for my study because they address and expand upon common assumptions and theories that have been established through previous research confirming a significant relationship between academic expectations and achievement as it pertains to minority students (Bromberg & Theokas, 2013; Koon, Petchser & Foorman, 2014). At the same time, I believe these questions will open the door to a new perspective through demonstrating that minority students can in fact succeed at the highest levels of academia when freed from the constraints of low expectations. In addition, the fact that these questions are
designed to explore a topic that I consider extremely compelling is of no small consequence. This is an important prerequisite according to Gliner, Morgan & Leech (2011): “It is desirable, especially for graduate students, to choose a problem that is of vital interest so that the researcher can sustain the motivation to finish the study” (p. 24).

Based on my personal experience and preliminary inquiries, I anticipated that the data would reflect an abundance of positive influences in the lives of these students (most notably parents and teachers) who instilled a belief that anything was possible and laid the foundation for sustained academic success. Regardless, I have tremendous confidence that the heartfelt commentary of these young people will stand on its own as a testament to what can be accomplished given the proper disposition. No matter the final outcome or the consensus opinion in response to my research, I hope to at least slightly alter the overall perspective on this complex issue through my discussion and analysis of the collected data.

When the little girl is four years old, her mother leaves. She asks her father, “Where’s Mommy?” He is not sure how he can possibly explain this to her, so he simply answers, “Mommy doesn’t want to be part of the family anymore. It’s just you and Daddy now.” It kills him to say this of course, but he tries to say it with a reassuring smile, because really, what else can he do? There are so many things that he would like to say, so much that he desperately wants to tell her, but she is only four, and that is a conversation that will have to wait for the time being. They live in Massachusetts now, and the little girl will be starting school soon. The father, facing a future he never planned on, starts thinking about moving closer to his extended family in Indiana. He has never been especially close to them, but he knows he will need some help, and isn’t that what family is for? Looking for a new job seems like an impossible task
considering that he’s struggling just to get out of bed in the morning, but he starts looking anyway. There are too many bad memories in Massachusetts now, and Indiana seems like the logical place to go.

---

**Definitions**

For the purpose of this study, I have developed numerous conceptual definitions based on my previous field experience and preliminary research into this topic. This section contains a brief description of each in order to provide context that will enhance the reader’s understanding of these terms when they are encountered throughout the text. The first key foundational term, **expectation level**, is defined as the students’ anticipated degree of success in the classroom based on their self-perceived academic abilities and potential as communicated by authority figures who exert a strong influence over their educational pursuits (i.e., parents and teachers).

When a student expects to struggle with academic tasks and experience a low degree of overall academic success due to negative or demotivating messages received from influential adults, then a **low expectation level** is established. Conversely, when a student expects to master academic tasks and experience a high degree of overall academic success due to positive or inspiring messages from these same adults, then a **high expectation level** is established.

**Academic achievement** is defined as a student’s cumulative performance over the course of a period of years in the classroom. This study is intended to determine whether or not there is a direct correlation between expectation level and academic performance. The working hypothesis is that a low expectation level based on communications from authority figures will predominantly result in lower academic performance, whereas a high expectation level will predominantly result in higher academic performance.
As referred to in this study, **low academic achievement** generally refers to a student’s underperformance in the classroom, up to and including dropping out of high school. On the opposite end of the spectrum, **high academic achievement** will be signified by a student’s matriculation to the Ivy League, which is no small feat to be sure. Historical admission rates for Ivy schools are typically no higher than 5%, meaning that the vast majority of applicants are turned away. For instance, Table 1 below illustrates just how difficult it is to gain admission to Yale University, the institution where I recruited the participants for my research:

Table 1

*Yale University Historical Admission Rates*

![Yale University Historical Admission Rates](chart.png)

**Note.** 2014-2021 historical admission statistics for Yale University (accessed via the public domain, see *Appendix K* for more details).

**Assumptions**

It is assumed that the participants have responded to the questions that were posed to them honestly, and that the collected data provides an accurate assessment of the problem being
examined. The grade level and functional literacy of the participants are appropriate for participation in the study, and the instruments (interviews, surveys, etc.) to be used for assessing the variables are deemed to be reliable and valid through the course of prior empirical analysis and preliminary research. The criteria for participating in the study assures that all participants were exposed to similar academic experiences during the comparative period measuring the association between expectations and achievement, and the participants do not have any underlying motives or incentives for participating in the study as it was conducted naturally as part of the ongoing academic progress.

Limitations

There may be unknown conditions or factors relative to the school or community environment that could serve to bias the results of the study, but these extraneous variables will be accounted for as part of the data analysis. Attrition should be negligible due to the relatively short duration of the study, and the number of remaining participants should be sufficient in order to adequately draw conclusions. The convenience sampling method may result in a group of participants that is less than ideally representative of the target population, although the students involved will fit the stated criteria (i.e., minority students attending an Ivy League school), and this should not be a significant concern. Due to the age and maturity level of the participants, fluctuations due to natural growth and development may influence the data to some small degree, although it is not anticipated that this will materially impact the study.

Delimitations

It should be noted that this study is meant to examine the association between expectation level and academic achievement only. This study is NOT intended to measure the impact of other variables that may affect academic performance, such as the content of the curriculum or the quality of instruction. In fact, these variables are purposefully being excluded from the study
in an effort to demonstrate that there is a direct association between expectation level and academic performance regardless of all other factors that may be present in the learning environment. In other words, the operating theory is that by developing a student’s confidence level through instilling a fervent belief that excellence is imminently attainable regardless of one’s personal characteristics or circumstances, a host of deterring factors related to our modern-day educational system and overall society can be overcome on the road to academic success.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of the proposed study is derived primarily from the fact that it examines the relationship between academic expectations and achievement from a vastly different mindset than much of the existing literature. While there is no shortage of studies that link these two variables and recognize a clear association, especially in the case of minority students (Bates & Anderson, 2009; Hooley, Tyselling & Ray, 2013), I would describe a substantial amount of the previous research as fairly innocuous in that it fails to move beyond the fundamental association in order to address the root causes and recommend viable solutions. Although some authors suggest possible remedies, notably in the form of increased parental involvement (Landsman, 2004; Rogers, 2006), I believe the true underlying premise is not fully explored, thus stopping short of arriving at more productive strategies.

Another body of literature primarily blames the underachievement of minority students on a discriminatory society that has produced an academic “culture of power” (Delpit, 1988) which conspires to prevent these students from achieving their true potential. Many researchers have embraced this theory, and scores of articles and books have been written dedicated to combatting this “culture of power” through exposing America’s “legacy of structural racism”
(Dixson, 2016, p. 192) and admitting that “education is not a separate sphere from the ‘racial contract’” (Leonardo, 2015, p. 94).

Other articles in a similar vein point to white privilege and racism as the primary factors that prohibit “educational equity” (Blanchett, 2006; Levine-Rasky, 2000; Vossoughi, Hooper, & Escudé, 2016). Statements such as the following reflect a commonly held view that racist attitudes, particularly those harbored by white teachers, are primarily responsible for the poor academic performance of minority students in America: “Unfortunately…many of these teachers with their unexamined and intact white privilege and racism eventually end up teaching African Americans and other students of color” (Blanchett, p. 27). In short, many researchers blame the underachievement of minority students almost exclusively on the innate racist tendencies of white educators.

While research of this nature does frequently acknowledge the negative impact of low expectations, these expectations are often rationalized and in fact even justified through claims of widespread discrimination. I find the implication that white teachers are incapable of facilitating the achievement of minority students due to inherent racism to be quite distressing – and, quite frankly, insulting. This has certainly not been my experience as a long-time high school teacher in extremely diverse atmospheres. During that time, I led classrooms of students representing every possible ethnicity, and never once did race – let alone, racism – play even the slightest role in the daily teaching and learning process. Some may categorize that as extreme naiveté, but I have witnessed this type of environment and its dramatic benefits both as a teacher and as a father, and the results are impossible to deny.

In stark contrast to this kind of uplifting climate, large numbers of minority students in this country are repeatedly given signals that the deck is stacked against them, and more time is
spent telling these students what they CANNOT do rather than what they CAN do. When any endeavor, educational or otherwise, is begun by spelling out all of the insurmountable obstacles – with no regard whatsoever as to whether or not these obstacles are real or imagined – that must be overcome in order for the objective to be reached, then the battle is largely lost before the first shot is even fired.

Tragically, millions of students of color all across America are exposed to this mentality in their schools (and in their homes) on a day-in, day-out basis, and the lasting impression that they are facing insurmountable odds leaves them predisposed to drastic underperformance. All too often, the messages communicated to minority students by teachers, administrators, and parents affect their academic success and often serve as barriers to a positive educational experience (Purkey & Strahan, 1995).

This self-defeating approach is not tolerated in different environments, such as the world of sports or in corporate America, but it is all too prevalent in our country’s schools, where minority students are routinely bombarded by a relentless narrative suggesting that all non-white citizens are systematically victimized by an educational system/overall society inherently predisposed to discriminate against them.

I have witnessed this firsthand over and over again during my career as a teacher, and this mentality is unmistakably reflected throughout the related research to date, whether it be tacit or manifest. To clarify, the primary "barrier" I am attempting to examine – and, quite frankly, expose – through my study is the false narrative propagated by misguided educators who constantly warn minority students that the deck is overwhelmingly stacked against them due to inherent societal prejudice.
To be sure, there will always be a small percentage of teachers (and individuals in society overall) who harbor racist tendencies, but I absolutely reject the widespread belief in some sort of systemic racism that conspires against the academic achievement of minority students in America. My argument is that too many students fall prey to this false narrative, essentially giving up and resigning themselves to academic failure (i.e., a negative self-fulfilling prophecy). Taking it a step further, I am suggesting a solution whereby this false narrative is replaced by an alternate message in which race is deemed an irrelevancy and students are told that the only barriers to their success are those they place on themselves.

In other words, what minority students need to "overcome" is the psychological barrier created as a result of demotivating signals they are constantly receiving from teachers and other influential figures (not to mention society at large) who insist on viewing education through the prism of race. As stated previously, I do not believe that America's educational system is subject to widespread systemic racism. However, I absolutely do believe in the existence of a “false racism” or “racial straw man,” if you will, that is manufactured by those who are inclined to categorize students by ethnicity. The implication is often subtle, but it exists nonetheless, and this tragic mindset only serves to perpetuate the self-fulfilling prophecy that inevitably leads to academic failure. It doesn’t have to be that way, and my study is intended to illuminate an alternative perspective that is desperately needed in order to remedy this dilemma.

The father does eventually find a new job, and he and the little girl move to Indiana. He is confident that he is doing the right thing, because he wants his daughter to grow up around more people who can provide love and encouragement as she starts school and grows into adolescence. He knows he is not fully equipped with all of the skills he will need to properly guide her on his own, and a family support system will go a long way towards easing the
responsibility he shoulders. At first, all is well, and the little girl seems to be thriving around her grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Kindergarten is starting in a month or two, and she is so excited to begin school!

But the father starts to notice that something is not quite as it should be, that some family members are asking odd questions about his daughter, things like, “How do you think she will fit in at her new school?” and “Have you explained to her that she is different from the other kids?” This catches him by surprise, because her ethnicity has been a complete non-factor up to this point in her life, and he stopped thinking about it himself long ago. She was simply his daughter, and that was the only thing that mattered, and he didn’t really understand why it had to be any more complicated than that. His little girl was happy, and she didn’t care, so why should he? So he more or less ignores these slightly awkward questions and goes about his business, because he has enough on his mind already.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

As long as a culture of low expectations is communicated from teachers to their students, either subtly or overtly, the full academic potential of these students will not be sufficiently realized in the classroom. Deconstructing attitudinal forces that are difficult to address because of their abstract nature is an important first step towards eliminating a counter-productive environment for student attainment of academic excellence (Hooley, Tysseling & Ray, 2013; Landsman, 2004; Mistry, White, Benner & Huynh, 2009). In other words, the messages that students receive on a daily basis do have an impact on performance.

This assessment, as paraphrased from a review of existing studies, provides a fairly accurate reflection of the overriding issue, as most researchers examining this subject have concluded that students operating in environments where low expectations are the norm are more likely to experience a significant lack of both short-term and long-term success in the classroom (Bromberg & Theokas, 2013; Landsman, 2004; Lawrence, 2015; Workman, 2012). In addition, research suggests that students encountering this variable early in their academic careers are much less likely to move on to college and experience a comparatively greater high school dropout rate (Bates & Anderson, 2014; Geitz & Mcintosh, 2014; Koon, Petscher & Foorman, 2014; Levi et al., 2014).

Exacerbating this problem is the stigma that exists in the minds of many when it comes to assessing the academic potential of minority students in low-income demographic areas. There is often an assumption that these students lack the capacity to achieve at a high level, and a wealth of the research conducted to date underscores the powerful and enduring influence of
adults’ educational expectations on low-income youth’s academic pursuits and accomplishments (Bates & Anderson, 2014; Mistry et al., 2009; Walkey et al., 2013).

Furthermore, it has been largely established that individual attitudes and characteristics within groups play key roles in shaping academic achievement outcomes (Chang, 2011; Koon et al., 2014; Walkey et al., 2013). A preponderance of evidence indicates that many of America’s students attending schools in disadvantaged socioeconomic areas are sent negative signals from an early age leading them to believe that they are predisposed to perform poorly, and that unfortunate expectation often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Chang, 2011; Levi et al., 2014; Rogers, 2006).

Overall, the general consensus on the crux of the issue can be summed up in the following statement: Students with high expectations experience greater academic success and a higher probability of post-secondary enrollment than students with low expectations (Bates & Anderson, 2014; Hooley et al., 2013; Landsman, 2004). Notwithstanding the identification of the problem, there seems to be a lack of cohesive recommendations in terms of how to go about addressing this widespread issue.

A majority of similarly focused studies point to a variety of systemic factors that create an educational environment lacking equal opportunity (Bromberg & Theokas, 2013; Lawrence, 2015; Lewis & Kim, 2008), citing a need for more sensitive approaches to education and a greater focus on “leveling the playing field.” Still, there are precious few suggestions of how to bring this about, and a complete dearth of studies that question the legitimacy of this widespread assumption in the first place.

Many parents and guardians of school-age children, especially those in minority families, have created daily rituals designed to motivate their children by instilling in them a
belief that they are capable of accomplishing great things in the classroom and in life, despite the contrasting messages they are frequently receiving from their teachers (Hooley et al., 2013; Landsman, 2004; Walkey et al., 2013). While these examples are encouraging and suggest an alternative approach to this issue, it seems to me that the existing literature fails to fully explore the power of high expectations as a viable solution to the problem at hand, thus creating additional opportunity for further research into the subject.

As long as low expectations between students and teachers are maintained, the full range of students’ academic skills will not be sufficiently addressed in the classroom, and these studies often highlight the dynamic and enduring influence of adults’ educational expectations on low-income and minority youths’ academic pursuits and accomplishments (Mistry et al., 2009; Lawrence, 2015; Rogers, 2006).

On the whole, research points to a pattern of diminished expectations leading to widespread discouragement and an overall negative attitude towards academics (Hooley et al., 2013; Koon et al., 2014; Segedin, 2012; Walkey et al., 2013), with the inevitable result of students who are exposed primarily to high expectations experiencing significantly higher probabilities of sustained academic achievement than students exposed primarily to low expectations (Bates & Anderson, 2014; Chang, 2011; Lewis & Kim, 2008; Winterton & Irwin, 2012).

This negative influence can sometimes be negated within the home environment, as mentioned previously, and increasing numbers of parents are increasingly taking matters into their own hands in an effort to offset the discouraging messages their children often receive throughout the day at school. Having long since given up on there being any uplifting influence in the typical learning environment, parents such as the devoted father described in the case
The father registers his little girl for kindergarten (she’s five now), meets the teacher and the principal, and feels really good about the whole situation. She is even more excited now with school starting any day, and it seems as though things are coming together for the two of them. Then he receives a phone call from the principal, explaining that his daughter has been transferred to a different class with a different teacher. Just an administrative matter, nothing to worry about, according to the principal. Still, something in the principal’s voice betrays this explanation, so the father presses him for the real reason. Reluctantly, the man informs the father that one of his relatives requested this transfer because she didn’t want her son, who is also starting kindergarten, to be “distracted” by having a family member in the same classroom.

He hangs up the phone, not really sure how to respond to that, feeling shocked and saddened, and then, increasingly angry, as he turns it all over in his mind. All of the odd questions and slightly awkward conversations come back to him now, and a sickening realization starts to take hold. The next day, he picks up the phone and calls a friend and former co-worker in Arizona, asking about the possibility of returning to his previous employer. Although he’s not fully capable of processing all of the underlying reasons right at this moment, he knows deep down that for the sake of his daughter, he has to get away from this place, and that they must move again.

A Social Justice Battleground

Some educators, such as Delpit (1988) and Blanchett (2006), focus on racial injustice as the primary culprit responsible for the widespread underachievement of minority students in
America, blaming the failings of our educational system almost entirely on America’s unchecked “culture of power” and “white privilege” which have created a toxic environment where minority students are placed at an unrecoverable disadvantage. Proponents of this school of thought typically view America’s classrooms as sociological laboratories whose paramount purpose should be to bring about “social justice” (Brown, 2015; Troya & Williams, 2012; Adams & Bell, 2016), and statements like this are very much commonplace in the literature: “The educational system should be at the forefront of the battle to combat racial inequality” (Troya & Williams, p. 3).

In a similar vein, Gillborn (2008) points out “how deeply rooted ‘Whiteness’ is throughout academia” (p. 9) as part of his larger argument that “educational policy is designed to sustain race inequality” (p. 44). There are countless journal articles advocating for critical race theory (CRT) to be the operative philosophy as part of a transformative effort to completely overhaul education as we know it (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002; Bergerson, 2003). Never mind the fact that CRT is considered by many to be a radical concept borne of an extremely subjective, highly flawed ideological perspective.

According to a bevy of progressive educational “experts,” CRT is our only hope at reforming this nation’s schools. Unfortunately, I have witnessed this radical perspective in action during my various stops throughout the academic world. Scores of well-intended teachers are willfully compromising the learning process in favor of political correctness, and they feel validated by the large amount of propaganda masquerading as legitimate research that enthusiastically endorses these misplaced priorities.

In my view, the extensive collection of literature that concentrates on racial injustice as the single factor most responsible for the failure of America’s minority students to reach their
full academic potential is extremely harmful and counterproductive. Unfortunately, research of this nature is emphatically embraced by “progressive” educators who are prone to viewing our nation’s classrooms – and overall society – through a racial lens that prevents them from seeing students as individuals.

Instead, these self-described “social justice warriors” go out of their way to categorize students according to ethnicity and warn them of the “oppressive society” that will assuredly make their path to success much more difficult than it would have been otherwise. In doing so, they emphasize all of the obstacles that these students of color may encounter, as opposed to focusing on strategies designed to promote academic success for students of all ethnicities.

Many progressive educators see this as their noble duty to combat “racial inequality.”

From my perspective, this philosophy is woefully misguided, and speaks to an urgent need to re-prioritize our educational objectives. What about the battle to combat illiteracy and a general lack of preparedness for the future? Shouldn’t fundamental concerns such as effective teaching and learning surpass social justice on the urgency scale? The answer to this question seems painfully self-evident, but the “crusaders for educational equity” clearly have a different agenda in mind.

Statements describing America’s educational system as “…systemically mediated by institutionalized racism (i.e., structures and processes), and guided by ideologies of white supremacy that justify the superiority of a dominant group (whites) over people of color” (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015, p. 297) are found throughout the literature. It is truly shocking that inflammatory assertions like this are so rarely challenged in the current environment; however, in an atmosphere where political correctness rules supreme, opposing viewpoints are often stifled through fear of being labeled “racist” or “intolerant.”
Essentially, a great many progressive researchers are convinced that a racist conspiracy runs through the heart of America’s educational system, and by extension, American society overall. According to this philosophy, there is not a single segment of society that is immune from this permeating influence. Figure 2 below presents a fairly accurate representation of how this group views our modern culture, with racism infecting every aspect of our daily lives:

![Racism as a System](image)

*Figure 2. The progressive view of racism’s impact on society (adapted in accordance with the fair use provision; see Appendix K for more details).*

**The Achievement Gap**

There is a semi-related collection of literature discussing the so-called “Achievement Gap” that exists between white students and students of color in America, with this disparity often being attributed to various discriminatory factors present in both our educational system
and society overall (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Shapiro et al., 2013). A great many studies have been conducted in an effort to provide evidence that minority students typically achieve less desirable results than their white counterparts (please see Table 2 below for an example), and the widespread acknowledgement and acceptance of this “achievement gap” is frequently pointed to as an ever-present and unavoidable phenomenon that relegates large numbers of minorities to significant underperformance in the classroom. The most disturbing aspect of this factor it that it is often viewed as an inevitable byproduct of our racist society, and thus more time is spent rationalizing its existence instead of seeking to eliminate it altogether. This mentality also plays into the self-defeating narrative that undermines the motivation of minority students and renders academic success less attainable in many cases.

Table 2

The Achievement Gap

Note. Historical educational achievement statistics according to ethnicity and geographical regions (accessed via the public domain; see Appendix K for more details).
Strangely enough, despite this disparity being almost universally acclaimed, it appears there is a dearth of research delving into the underlying reasons for this gulf. Statements such as “Further research in this area should examine a broader range of outcomes and the potential mechanisms by which these effect might occur (Egalite et al., 2015, p. 51) abound in the literature, but there are precious few studies that go the extra mile in order to determine what specific factors may actually be responsible for this widely acknowledged disparity and why some students are able to overcome these barriers.

It is abundantly clear that the achievement gap represents one of the major concerns of urban educators and has receive an inordinate amount of attention (Henfield et al., 2008; Moore & Flowers, 2005), and the existence of this phenomenon is readily recognized through a variety of different euphemisms such as the “opportunity gap,” the “resource gap,” and the “expectation gap,” all of which suggest the lack of a level playing field when it comes to the schooling of minority students, particularly African-American children, in America (Ford & Moore, 2013).

Statements like the following can be found frequently throughout the assorted collection of literature: “The persisting achievement gap between African-American and white students provokes important questions about political representation and racial inequality” (Hartney & Flavin, 2014, p. 7). The constantly recurring motif of “racial inequality” hearkens back to the previously discussed body of research compiled by those individuals primarily concerned with bringing about social justice by making radical changes to our nation’s education system.

Per usual, this “racial inequality” theme is more or less accepted as an indisputable fact, and the resulting “achievement gap” is therefore an inevitable byproduct for which there exists no viable solution outside of coming to grips with the ever-present racism infecting academia. By once again making race the focus instead of concentrating on the underlying reasons
contributing to academic underachievement *regardless* of ethnicity, we fail to address the root of the problem, and possible remedies are relegated to the back burner.

In fact, there are some articles that frankly admit an absence of definitive proof linking race to scholastic achievement, such as this revealing statement from Voight et al (2015): “No research of which we are aware has directly examined the relationship between racial disparities in both school climate experiences and achievement in a school” (p. 3). Even so, researchers appear quite eager to subscribe the achievement gap almost exclusively to inherent racism, and there is an accompanying tone of resignation, tacitly implying that this phenomenon is a necessary evil which must be tolerated given our unjust world. Regardless of the tone of the existing research, I believe the focus must be on resolution rather than origin.

There are a small number of educational theorists who seem to be willing to move beyond the initial diagnosis in order to seek possible solutions, such as increasing the enrollment of minority students in private schools. Jeynes (2012) asserts that “If society at large viewed American education as a single entity designed to help children, it would support the sending of more children of color to private schools as a means of reducing the achievement gap” (p. 164). This refreshing statement is corroborated by researchers such as Peterson (2006), who maintains that American society should embrace options such as private schools for their strengths and seek to use these advantages to help America’s minority students accomplish more in education than they might otherwise.

They do move again, the second move within the span of just a few months, this time back to Arizona. Nobody understands why, least of all the little girl, and the father is devastated to have to take her away from the family that she’s just getting to know, once again unable to explain the true circumstances beyond what is happening to her. He feels slightly overwhelmed,
facing the challenges of another new city and another new job, all the while dealing with a
growing sense of resentment and frustration. Still, he presses on, doing what must be done to
establish a suitable home for his little girl, and he resolves that he will no longer rely on others in
any way, shape, or form when it comes to raising his daughter. Whatever happens from this
point forward, he is going to make sure that it is in her best interests, and he alone will take
whatever steps are necessary in order to make this a reality. The daughter finally starts school in
Arizona, the father goes to work and takes one day at a time, and ever so slowly, they begin to
settle in, making a home and a life in Phoenix, just the two of them.

Unfortunately, those academic voices seeking to address the achievement gap by
exploring different strategies are dwarfed by the large contingent of researchers who are prone to
wringing their hands and blaming virtually all of America’s educational ills on rampant racial
inequality, resigning minority children to widespread underperformance with no cure in sight.
Even if one does happen to agree with the prevailing perspective and the attendant underlying
sentiments, I fail to see how this particular mindset does anything whatsoever to assist the
students who are most affected. It seems that many have become so fixated on pointing out the
problem that they have almost completely neglected to offer any proactive remedies that might
serve to lift up these children with encouraging voices rather than continually exposing them to
self-defeating negative messaging.

The Pygmalion Effect

On the other end of the spectrum, one body of research that I do find particularly
encouraging is connected to a principle known as the “Pygmalion Effect.” The Pygmalion
Effect, coined by educational researchers Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson in the course of
their groundbreaking Oak School experiment (1968), is “…a phenomenon whereby one person’s
expectation for another person’s behavior comes to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Rosenthal, 2003, p. 151). From an educational perspective, the Pygmalion Effect dictates that students perform better or worse than their peers based on the way their teacher expects them to perform. Stated another way, “When we expect certain behaviors of others, we are likely to act in ways that make the expected behavior more likely to occur” (Rosenthal & Babad, 1985, p. 36). The basic underlying premise is that if you think something will happen, you may unconsciously make it happen through your own actions or inactions.

This effect is named after George Bernard Shaw’s play, Pygmalion (1913), in which a phonetics professor is successful in making a bet that he can teach a poor flower girl to act like an upper-class lady (later adapted as the Broadway musical My Fair Lady). The play’s namesake is Pygmalion, the king of Cyprus, who became overly enamored with a beautiful statue of his own creation. According to Greek legend, Pygmalion’s obsessive fantasizing over the statue eventually willed the inanimate object to life, and he promptly made her his bride.

In psychology, the Pygmalion Effect, as proposed by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), applies the ideas of Merton’s self-fulfilling prophecy (1948) to education, stipulating that a teacher can essentially “will” a student to academic success through the power of high expectations. In other words, if a teacher believes that a student can achieve excellence and consistently communicates this belief to the student, the student is more likely to “live up” to the teacher’s expectations.

Conversely, when a teacher’s expectations are lowered or even non-existent (as is often the case with minority students), the student is likely to “live down” to those expectations and experience a high degree of failure in the classroom. A visual representation of Merton’s hypothesis is presented in Figure 3 below:
In the nearly half-century since its origination and publication, this phenomenon has been confirmed over and over again by academic researchers and psychologists worldwide. Wilder (2014) and Stull (2013) pointed to the importance of positive expectations on the part of both teachers and parents when it comes to instilling the belief necessary to achieve sustained academic success. Hartley & Sutton (2013), along with Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran & Borman (2014), discussed how the power of positive expectations can overcome negative stereotyping associated with ethnicity and/or socioeconomic status.

Many articles referencing the Pygmalion Effect delve into the world of sports, citing examples of athletes performing at unprecedented levels as a result of incessant positive messages delivered from their respective coaches (Weaver, Filson-Moses, & Snyder, 2016; Rosenthal & Babad, 1985). Similarly, Chadha & Narula (2016) and Money (2014) emphasized the power of the Pygmalion effect in terms of fostering strong performance (both academic and otherwise) through repeated positive reinforcement (a premise that would no doubt please B.F. Skinner), while other authors focus on the crucial nature of strong leaders in the Pygmalion

As expressed by Wang & Lin (2014), everyone has an innate psychological need to be recognized favorably by society and praised by other people, and students especially tend to form self-judgment via others’ responses. “The Pygmalion Effect directly enhances students’ confidence as a byproduct of encouragement provided by the teacher, increasing motivation and a desire to acquire more knowledge; once full of confidence, students will take more initiative and learn more actively” (p. 20). Figure 4 below provides a graphic illustration of the Pygmalion Effect’s self-fulfilling nature:

![Figure 4. The interrelated components of the Pygmalion Effect (adapted in accordance with the fair use provision; see Appendix K for more details).](image)

Finally, Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Sibley & Rosenthal (2015) along with Jussim & Stevens (2016) articulated the profound impact of teacher expectations as a means of overcoming pre-existing bias in the classroom, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that allows students to ignore societal factors and achieve excellence almost exclusively as a result of the instructor’s steadfast
belief in their abilities. Given the preponderance of supporting evidence, it seems readily apparent that the methodology of constant encouragement and positive reinforcement encapsulated by the Pygmalion Effect is a tool of tremendous strength capable of offsetting a wide variety of factors that are often blamed for poor academic performance.

With that in mind, I believe teachers across America should stop classifying their students racially and adopting the inherent assumptions; rather, they should view ethnicity as a complete non-factor and concentrate on developing the true learning potential of every child through the proven power of high expectations. It has long been my contention that if you lower the bar, students will find a way to crawl under it, but if you raise the bar, they will inevitably find a way over it. Sadly, often times the most obvious course of action is the one we fail to choose, and the problem persists indefinitely as a result.

In summation, it is abundantly clear from the existing literature that there is a distinct correlation between academic expectations and achievement, and that minority students are most affected by this issue. Unfortunately, although this phenomenon is widely acknowledged, the reasons behind it are not fully examined, as most studies stop short of diagnosing the true origin and suggesting productive alternatives. Furthermore, the underperformance of minority children in America’s schools is blamed by many on systemic racism, which in my estimation is a faulty analysis. In any event, it seems to me that the much of the current body of research is overly concerned with extraneous issues that tend to mask the real source of the problem and prevent any progress towards a viable solution, which must remain the paramount focus.

This school of thought dovetails with the rationalization of a “racial achievement gap” in our nation’s schools serves as a further detriment to scholastic success, justifying mediocre academic performance instead of taking more productive steps to improve the overall quality of
learning. When academic failure is viewed as an inevitable byproduct of a vast conspiracy perpetrated by an educational system beholden to “white privilege,” then uplifting options such as the Pygmalion Effect are rendered irrelevant, despite the fact that research has consistently proven that the power of positive expectations produces tangible results. With that in mind, I plan to suggest a new and more effective way of resolving this complex issue by collecting and presenting data that will demonstrate an alternative mindset throughout the course of my proposed study.

The little girl comes home from first grade one day with a question. She wonders why she and her good friend Bethany are “not the same.” The father asks what she means by that, and she says that Bethany (who happens to be white) made a comment about the two of them “having different colors.” He thinks carefully before answering; this is the first time she has ever asked about her skin color, and he wants to make sure he handles it properly. He pauses for a moment or two, and then says, “Honey, your daddy is white, and your mommy is black. That makes you brown. Do you understand?” She looks at him with a big smile and responds, “Yes I do, daddy – I am brown!” “Exactly!” he says, and that is the last time they ever discuss the subject. He could have said more, so much more, but really, what purpose would it have served?
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

My research agenda was predominantly qualitative, although it does exhibit some of the characteristics of a sequential exploratory design given my intent to collect a large amount of data through qualitative measures with the potential for more widespread application (possibly in the form of a self-report instrument) in the future. According to Creswell (2009), “…the sequential exploratory strategy is often discussed as the procedure of choice when a researcher needs to develop an instrument because existing instruments are inadequate or not available” (p. 212). Considering that some of the central terms (e.g., expectations and achievement) attendant to my research plan are only conceptually defined at present and could benefit from further clarification in the future, I believe this was an effective strategy from the standpoint that “It is useful to a researcher who wants to explore a phenomenon but also wants to expand on the qualitative findings” (p. 212).

Notwithstanding the possible mixed-methods implications, I do consider my approach to be almost exclusively qualitative in nature, as the initial and enduring focus has been placed entirely on semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The end result, as evidenced by this manuscript, is publication in the form of a narrative inquiry, exhibiting characteristics typical of an ethnography with definite anthropological features. Lichtman (2012) summed up the rationale for my intended strategy nicely in the following passage: “In some cases, researchers conduct studies that are ethnographic in nature but do not involve extensive interactions or immersion. The ethnographic approach, long a mainstay of anthropologists, has been widely used in education, especially since the 1980s” (p.73). I would suggest that readers consider this work to be a kind of “quasi-ethnography” that records the lived experiences of the participants.
based on weeks or months of interaction/data collection as opposed to the lengthier time period often associated with full-blown ethnographic studies.

The participants’ responses are presented in vivid detail and analyzed according to prevalent themes. Through this approach, I hope to provide readers with a direct window into the lives and histories of these remarkable young people. On that subject, it should be said that I have endeavored to produce a quality piece of literature in its own right in addition to an illuminating research study. My philosophy as a teacher has always been that it is possible – in fact, I believe it is essential – to entertain as well as to inform the audience.

I recently read an ethnography entitled *addicted.pregnant.poor* (Knight, 2015) detailing the traumatic life experiences of young women struggling to survive in San Francisco’s mission district. This book is an excellent example of meticulous research and compelling literature in a single publication, and although my chosen subject matter is not nearly as provocative, I would be proud to contribute a similar publication through my efforts related to this project. As our society continues to become more and more diverse, it stands to reason that a great many young people will relate to and draw inspiration from the stories that I have collected, and my mission is to provide them with an enduring, well-written composition that is worthy of its audience.

The source of my data collection was minority (African American and Hispanic American) undergraduate students at Yale University. The participant group of six students (in the interest of full disclosure, comprised of a convenience sample through university connections facilitated by my daughter), agreed to undergo a series of comprehensive interviews and observations culminating in a focus group attended by all student-participants allowing a full exchange of ideas. When discussing an appropriate sample size for a qualitative exercise largely dependent on interviewing, Lichtman (2012) stated that “…a sample of 10 might be seen as
adequate…it is quite common to see studies with fewer than 10 respondents” (p. 193). I also discovered numerous examples of case studies/ethnographies that utilized a similar sample size. For instance, the methodology of a qualitative study conducted by Marshall (1996) where data was gathered primarily through interviewing a pool of prominent doctors is described as follows: “…an anthropological technique…including a small sample of national figures within the profession” (p. 524).

My paradigmatic approach consisted of both interpretive and pragmatic components, as I don’t believe the two are mutually exclusive. Goldkuhl (2012) writes that “Pragmatism is concerned with action and change and the interplay between knowledge and action. This makes it appropriate as a basis for research approaches intervening into the world” (p. 136). This apt statement is part of his larger argument in which he makes the case that pragmatism is in fact an acceptable alternative to interpretivism, and that the two can indeed co-exist as part of an overall qualitative strategy. I concur, and this is the exact approach that I attempted to follow throughout the course of conducting my research.

While the emphasis will be on bringing the academic experiences of high-achieving minority students to light, I am also cognizant of the positive impact these findings may have on our present educational system, and I will not shy away from saying that I would love for my study to provide at least some small impetus for change in academia. From that perspective, there is a social constructivist objective to my study as well.

Reliance for the initial qualitative phase of my study was placed on surveys and interviews as a means of assessing student attitudes towards the learning process, and there is clear precedence for this research approach in the existing literature. Qualitative studies conducted by Lewis & Kim (2008), Rogers (2006), and Winteron & Irvin (2012) all provide
examples of similar methodology utilized in an educational setting, with a combination of semi-structured interviews and observations serving as the focal point of data collection.

One particular study carried out by Segedin (2012) at a prep school in Toronto provides an especially effective template for collecting a wide range of data related to student academic expectations and then analyzing the data according to seminal themes. I have detected a noticeable gap in the literature, as much of the prior investigation has centered on elementary and high school age subjects (Gietz & McIntosh, 2014; Walkey, McClure, Meyer & Weir, 2013). There seems to be a dearth of qualitative studies focused on college students, and this is an area I have addressed in-depth through my research agenda.

The little girl is eight years old now (and not quite so little anymore), and the father finds her intently flipping through the pages of a rather large book one afternoon. This is not anything unusual in and of itself, as she has been a ravenous reader for years now, but in this particular instance, she happens to be looking at the *Almanac of American Colleges and Universities*. He had forgotten that he even owned such a book. He asks her why she’s interested in it, and she says, “These places are really cool, and I need to decide which one I’m going to someday.” He notices that she has a pencil and a notebook beside her, and she is making a list of the schools she likes best. He sees names like Harvard and Stanford on the list. He thinks about telling her that college is so far away and that she has plenty of time to worry about things like that, but instead he just says, “That’s right, Honey,” and leaves her to it.

My qualitative plan of inquiry was divided into three stages: An initial or “baseline” stage in which I gathered foundational data through a series of semi-structured interviews or surveys administered via email marked the beginning of my research process. The data collected
during this stage was then enhanced and refined by a secondary or “investigative” stage during which survey responses were supplemented by in-depth follow-up questions designed to shed light on the participants’ educational histories and daily routines, particularly as they relate to interacting with their peers and meeting the rigorous academic demands typical of an elite university. Finally, a third “discussion” stage consisting of a focus group/collaborative session was intended to allow for an open exchange of ideas and help to solidify emerging themes through the collective opinions shared within the group. For a more detailed overview of my research strategy and data gathering procedures, please refer to the attached Appendix C.

The timeline of my project was predicated on various checkpoints for the purpose of gauging my progress. Phase I (the “baseline” stage) of my research was carried out during the latter part of the Fall 2016 semester, with initial interviews conducted via email or phone conversations according to a prepared script of specific questions that are closely aligned with the central research questions previously stipulated (please refer to Appendix D for a list of sample questions). Early in the Spring 2017 semester, I transitioned to Phase II (the “investigative” stage) of my project, which entailed a more in-depth probing in the form of follow-up questions intended to clarify, supplement, and refine the data gathered during the previous stage through expanding upon previous responses in an effort to illuminate the lifelong learning experiences of my participants. Again, the research attendant to this stage of the project was completed via email and phone conversations.

Lastly, a focus group session (Phase III, or the “discussion” stage) involving all of the students was conducted, primarily via Skype for practicality purposes, but also supplemented by “live” conversations with the participants during my visit to New Haven in May of this year. This collaborative effort facilitated participant interaction and the sharing of ideas for the
purpose of solidifying major themes that emerged throughout the research to that point. Over the past 2-3 months, I have followed-up on my research protocol by sorting through and classifying the collected data, organizing this information into primary themes, and incorporating the most revealing findings into the body of my dissertation, which of course I have been working on all along.

All procedures in all phases of my research and the questions asked therein were designed to illuminate the lifelong academic experiences of these students, starting from their earliest memories of school and learning all the way up to their admission to the Ivy League. As mentioned previously, my publication of this study is comprised more or less in the format of a narrative inquiry, with the participants’ responses presented and analyzed according to seminal themes. For purposes of categorizing the data and identifying recurring motifs which serve as the focal point of my analysis, I relied primarily on In Vivo coding. According to Saldaña (2015), “In Vivo coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data, and studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 74). This description dovetails perfectly with my experience level and research agenda, and thus presents a practical strategy for me to follow.

I refined my coding/data evaluation process over time as I collected more data and became better versed in my overall methodology; initially, I leaned heavily on my practiced communication skills and natural rapport with the participants to carry the day despite my status as a fledgling researcher in the qualitative world. I was able to effectively evaluate and interpret this raw data by adhering to what Lichtman (2012) refers to as “the three Cs” of qualitative analysis: coding, categorizing, and concepts. In order to accomplish this task, Lichtman recommended “…a six-step process: (1) initial coding, (2) revisiting initial coding, (3)
developing an initial list of categories or central ideas, (4) modifying your initial list based on additional rereading, (5) revisiting categories and subcategories, and (6) moving from categories to concepts” (p. 265). This proved to be an excellent blueprint, guiding my excursion into previously uncharted qualitative waters.

Ultimately, there was no shortage of clear patterns that become evident throughout the course of my interviews and observations, and it has been incumbent upon me to organize the content into prominent themes in a way that presents the extraordinary experiences of these young people in a compelling narrative. All the while, I have made every effort to maintain a vigilant focus on preserving the authentic voice of my participants, allowing the readers to draw their own conclusions based on the merits of the collected data and corresponding analysis.

I am hopeful that my final product will be received as a comprehensive, relatively seamless narrative contrasting the current literature and prevailing thoughts on this matter to the empirical evidence derived from my research. I believe that the remarkable stories shared by the participants in my study have been authentically preserved, and that the conclusions drawn from careful scrutiny of this valuable testimony will be deemed worthy of inclusion in the ongoing academic discussion. In summary, I am confident that the full body of data and the accompanying analysis presented in this work, combined with the corresponding knowledge that I have acquired throughout the entire research process, will serve me well as I defend my completed dissertation prior to the end of the Fall 2017 semester.

The daughter is twelve now and getting ready to begin middle school. It is clear that she is an exceptional student – to date, she has never received anything other than an “A” – with a bright future ahead of her, and the father realizes that it’s time to begin seriously thinking about
her educational objectives. He is a high school English teacher now, and he spends several hours each day around students who lack motivation and a clear plan for their future. Many of them receive little to no guidance or encouragement from their parents. He resolves that his daughter will never be one of those students, and he starts to form a plan in his mind. One afternoon, as they’re driving home, he asks her, “Honey, do you have still have that list of colleges you want to go to someday?” She does. “Are you sure that you’re willing to do the things you’ll need to do in order for one of those schools to accept you?” She is. “Well then, after dinner, let’s sit down and create a list of every single thing that needs to happen between now and then to make absolutely certain that you have the best possible chance.” She likes that idea a lot.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The data that will be discussed in this chapter was obtained in accordance with the methodological procedures outlined previously. In order to shed more light on exactly how the research process played out, I will devote some time here to a brief recap. As alluded to previously, the participant group consisted of six Yale undergraduate minority students. Their respective demographic characteristics are as follows: Two black males from the class of 2018, two biracial (half-black/half-white) females from the class of 2017, one biracial male from the class of 2018, and one Hispanic female from the class of 2017. Please see Appendix B for further specifics on the participants.

Phase I of my research was conducted through the use of a survey/questionnaire (see Appendix D attached) provided to the participants via email. This mechanism was intended to establish a “baseline” of key concepts that would broadly define the parameters of the dialogue between the researcher and participants, in addition to generating compelling follow-up questions designed to illuminate the root factors primary responsible for the collective academic success of these individuals. This phase was carried out in February and March of this year.

During late March and April, I began examining this data in earnest in an effort to gain a basic understanding of the participants’ learning experiences to data. Needless to say, this was an eye-opening exercise given the remarkable insights that these students so willingly shared. While there were definite commonalities connecting all of these stories to some degree (much more on this to follow), every story was unique in its own way, and I found certain details in each that were deserving of further exploration.
With that in mind, I developed personalized follow-up or “investigative” questions for each one of the participants with the goal of digging a little deeper into their individual histories and making an effort to more fully comprehend the underlying ingredients contributing to their initial responses. These questions were asked and answered via a combination of email exchanges and phone conversations (Phase II) throughout late April and early May.

Finally, Phase III (the “discussion” phase) of the research process took place in mid-late May, both during my visit to New Haven for my daughter’s graduation and via Skype sessions conducted during the last week of the month. I was able to meet the participants face-to-face for the first time and engage them in group discussions designed to complement the previously gathered data by observing their interaction with each other and gauging their responses to my preliminary assessment of the research to date. My role in these sessions was primarily just to get the ball rolling, then sit back and enjoy the conversation.

Given the unique bond all of them share, there was a high degree of compatibility, and it was truly an honor to be a part of these exclusive meetings. The willingness of these young people to divulge such highly personal and to some extent, sacred information, to me is not something I take lightly by any means, and I hope that my presentation of this data can do justice to the sincerity in which it was offered.

When I began sifting through the large amount of data collected from the six participants in my research project, my first order of business was to identify prevalent themes or patterns that would serve as the basis for organizing this portion of my dissertation into digestible sections. Ultimately, I was able to pinpoint three primary motifs that are deeply ingrained throughout the full range of responses from all of the contributing students, and I have attempted to simplify the forthcoming analysis by referring to each one of these themes according to a
Each of these three themes is deserving of its own section in this chapter, and we will delve into the participants’ responses corresponding to these critical components shortly. However, I believe that the best place to start is by taking a look at the educational landscape and the obstacles that the participants were required to navigate on their respective journeys to the elite level of academia. Although this data corresponds most closely to Research Question #4, it is highly instructive and will serve to properly set the tone and establish the necessary context in which to appreciate the subsequent data that follows later in the chapter.

**Attitudes/Expectations**

While the participants emphatically reject any connection between race and learning (more details on this forthcoming), there is abundant evidence in their responses showing that influential figures (teachers, counselors, etc.) in their lives most definitely viewed the educational process through a prism of race. The students frequently cited their feelings of resentment at being treated differently than their white counterparts, particularly in terms of implied lower expectations. Throughout all phases of the research, and primarily in Phase II, the students recalled instances where they felt as though they were singled out based on the color of their skin. Following are some particularly salient examples:

*I remember the guidance counselors at my high school making a big deal about me highlighting my race when completing my college applications, and I remember one counselor telling me that I could technically score a little lower on the entrance exam and still be admitted. I felt like a lot of their advice was predicated on me being a student of color, and instead of them telling me to simply knock it out of the park on the PSAT, or do other obvious things to...*
supplement my application, they focused way too much on my skin color. It obviously ended up working out, because Yale was my first choice, but I remember feeling sort of weird and a tad discouraged at the time.

I think that people generally expect less of me academically because of my race, but I have trained myself to hold myself to my own standards and not worry about what other people think of me.

Race isn’t an obstacle to learning, but a negative mentality is, and a negative mentality is created when teachers treat race as an obstacle. Someone’s race is always something to be proud of, but in the classroom, race shouldn’t play a role.

I think that my most successful and enriching learning experiences have involved teachers and professors who made no changes to their teaching strategy based on my race. I think if a student is ESL or if there are certain cultural or religious factors are play, it may be necessary for a teacher to take these things into account, but I don’t think there’s any inherent different between a white student and a black student.

I don’t know why teachers would ever see a student’s skin color as an “obstacle.” Doing so would just mean that said teacher is ascribing to racial stereotypes, and to coddle certain students based SOLEY on skin color (and not on demonstrated learning ability or other factors that might call for additional attention) seems like a bad way to encourage minority students in the classroom.

The data indicates that these students felt they were receiving negative messages, albeit often implicitly, that served no real purpose other than to create artificial obstacles to success. The signals being sent were frequently subtle and covert, but make no mistake, transmission was received loud and clear:
No one says directly, “Hey you’re black so I’m not going to teach you math.” What they do, and what has happened to me, has been things like excluding you from honors classes on subjective basis rather than testing or GPA basis. For example, in the 7th grade, though I was eligible to take the honors class as I was in the top 10 percent of my class in math, my teacher excluded me for subjective reasons such as “I just think it would be too hard for you,” or “aren’t you more interested in the humanities?” I did not understand at the time, though my parents did, that this was a proxy for “you are black and we think you performed well as a fluke but won’t be able to keep it up.”

I guess I just didn’t appreciate that when I came to these counselors for help, the first thing they did was focus on my physical attributes (my blackness) rather than the fact that I was a straight-A student and the leader of several organizations at school. They were constantly assessing me and my Ivy League chances through the lens of advising a black student, and I felt like they were encouraging me to aim for a pretty good score on the PSAT (which would get me the National Achievement Scholarship) rather than a GREAT score (which would get me the National Merit Scholarship).

I wasn’t encouraged to do my best – I was encouraged to meet certain parameters, which is never the way that a student of any color should be advised. Being black obviously helped me get into good schools, and it would have been stupid of the guidance office to ignore the existence of affirmative action policy. But to base their entire advisory system on affirmative action policy was wrong, and in my opinion, not very productive.

The data also provides numerous examples of negative stereotyping perpetuated by authority figures who insist on viewing the classroom through a racial lens:
Some students (and teachers) seem to attach a sort of “stigma” to black students who are high achievers, implying that they are somehow “not black enough” by virtue of being good students. Shouldn’t everyone just be part of the same learning community, regardless of race?

The major problems I had involved my teachers labeling me as a troublemaker and sending me out of the classroom, even though I was no more talkative or disruptive than the white children in the class. This affected my ability to learn because it was discouraging, and because I was spending so much time outside of the classroom rather than inside, learning.

I wish my teachers had given me equal treatment to the other kids in the class, instead of being so quick to discipline me simply because I was the only minority. I experienced many feelings of embarrassment and isolation from being sent out of class, which I think could have been avoided.

In summary, the cumulative data presents substantial evidence of a pattern of negative messages transmitted from teachers to students, with some messages being more subtle and others being quite explicit in nature. While the intentions of these educators may indeed be noble, the responses from my participants clearly demonstrate that these messages are unwelcome and unappreciated, and that they serve no purpose other than to construct artificial obstacles to academic achievement that need not exist at all.

Given that these obstacles do in fact exist, how were the participants in my study able to overcome these barriers – and the myriad other challenges associated with achieving academic excellence – on their way to the Ivy League? As stated previously, belief, effort, and focus were cited as the critical factors leading to the attainment of educational excellence, and these three components are discussed separately at length in the sections to follow.
Belief

It is abundantly clear from the data that all of these remarkable students credit their academic success in large part to a steadfast belief that this success was indeed possible, a belief they unanimously held at an early age. Without exception, all of them cited early influences – primarily parents, and in some cases, teachers – who instilled in them a confidence that great things could be achieved through hard work in the classroom. Throughout all phases of the research process, the participants emphasized and reinforced over and over again that none of the success they have achieved would have been possible without a strong foundation of belief. Following are some of the most salient responses serving as evidence of this, interspersed with clarifying commentary in order to provide additional context as necessary:

*My dad encouraged me the most. He encouraged me to push myself even when I felt I’d failed, and saw potential in me even when my teachers didn’t.*

The word “encourage,” in all its various forms (e.g., encouragement, encouraging, etc.), was utilized by the respondents at a greater rate of frequency than almost any other throughout the entire data gathering process. Without exception, these young people attribute their belief that they could succeed academically at an early age to some form of encouragement.

*My father always encouraged me the most when it came to education and achieving in school. He made it clear from a very young age that I could go to a school like Yale, so long as I was willing to put in the hard work and time to get there. Even when other family members expressed doubts about my high goals, he was constantly there to reassure me that I could do whatever I wanted to.*

Encouragement in the face of doubt was often cited as an important factor in the students’ consistent belief that they could indeed accomplish great things. Despite a multitude of negative
factors (more on this to come) and a variety of dissenting voices, the participants consistently relied on encouragement from those they trusted the most to weather the storm and maintain a steadfast confidence in their ability to succeed.

*I think both parents encouraged me equally, but if I had to pick one I would say my mom, because she was a stay-at-home parent and spent the most actual time getting me to do workbooks over the summer, teaching me to read, and making sure my homework was done. The biggest thing she did to encourage me was help me pursue any academic interest I wanted from an early age. When I wanted to be a paleontologist in elementary school, she bought me books and those Scholastic brand geology kits so that I could indulge that interest; when I expressed an interest in writing when I got older, she encouraged me to write articles for the local newspaper and submit my creative work to competitions.*

*Here we see an example of “active encouragement” offered by parents as a means of inspiring their children to achieve. Instead of just offering some sort of motivating platitude (“You can do it!”), this mother enabled her child to explore different possibilities as a means of satisfying intellectual curiosity and stimulating creativity. This “active encouragement” was expressed in many forms – encouragement to read, encouragement to write, encouragement to try new things – and was mentioned frequently throughout the research process.*

*I think the person who I felt most encouraged by was my seventh grade Math teacher. She was tough as nails and expected the most of her students. I think she saw that I was bright and eager to learn, and she expected a lot of me because of it.*

*Here we see the word “expected,” a derivative of “expectation,” which has obviously been a pivotal concept underlying the entire premise of my research. The experiences related by*
these students most definitely demonstrate a clear correlation between positive expectations and achievement, i.e., the self-fulfilling prophecy so often mentioned throughout this composition.

My brother definitely impacted me the most in terms of encouraging learning. I always had a very competitive relationship with him growing up so I thank him for motivating me and pushing me because I always had room for improvement when I compared myself to him.

“Motivating” and “pushing” are the key words here, providing evidence of the competitive nature of these students’ academic pursuits. Instead of shying away from competition and comparisons to their classmates, they embraced the challenge as a means of producing the extraordinary motivation necessary to achieve at an elite level.

My mom definitely encouraged me to make the most of every educational opportunity that I had. Whether it was sitting down with me to go over my homework and explain how to complete the exercises or correcting and improving my writing, she was always willing to help.

In summary, it is evident that steadfast encouragement from those closest to them instilled a supreme belief that anything was possible, leading these students to pursue their ambitious academic objectives with full confidence that considerable rewards would be within their grasp. Without a foundation of believe upon which to build, they seem to be saying, nothing of significance can be attained.

The key words tied to the concept of belief are: Encouragement, Expectation, Motivation, Potential, and Competition.

Effort

Secondly, it is equally clear that these students consider a willingness to put forth the necessary effort as a crucial factor in achieving academic success. In similar fashion to belief,
all of the participants pointed to effort as a necessary ingredient in the educational equation. This was most evident when I asked them what advice they would give to other students who may be struggling, or to their own kids in the future. Following are a few examples:

_I will make them learn Math. I will also try to engender in them a love of learning outside of the classroom so that they will be inspired to put in the time and effort._

_Hard work. I’d tell them to focus on the schoolwork and the goal at hand, rather than on outside factors. Plenty of students at Yale are poor, and a good portion of them come from minority races and nontraditional backgrounds. I feel like my background has actually enabled me to do really great things (for instance, I take nothing for granted, and I work incredibly hard because I always had to and was always told to), and I hope my kids feel the same way._

The concept of old-fashioned “hard work,” while perceived by many to be a tired cliché, came up over and over again throughout the data collections process. As with most things in life, the students unanimously testify that there are no shortcuts to success, and that there is no substitute to doing the work that is required, day after day, with no exceptions. More examples of this follow:

_I would tell my kids that if they’re doing well in school it’s because they worked hard and they deserve whatever awards they get._

_You have to work hard and put your best effort out there and take advantage of the opportunities in front of you – nobody is going to hand you anything._

_I have worked extremely hard to reach where I am today. I made education a priority, and worked to achieve my goals. By teaching kids to become accustomed to reading and allowing them to find genuine enjoyment in learning, I think it becomes a lot easier for them to_
succeed in the long-run. I would also say that being competitive and disciplined is very important, so signing kids up to compete in sports at an early age would be beneficial as well.

In summary, it is evident that the initial component of belief must be accompanied by an equally strong effort in order for academic success to be fully realized. The cumulative data spells this out in definitive terms, and there can be no other objective assessment after viewing the collective responses of the student-participants.

The key words tied to the concept of effort are: Work, Achieve, Goals, Opportunity, Discipline.

Over time, the plan begins to take shape, materializing step-by-step as the not-so-little girl progresses through her high school years. Both father and daughter are conscious of what needs to be accomplished, according to the list they constructed a while back, and all of the items on that list are eventually checked off, one-by-one. The list is never explicitly referred to, but it guides her daily routine, and its influence is ever-present in all that she does. Of course, her grades remain perfect, keeping her on track to be one of the top, if not the top, student in her entire class at one of the largest high schools in Arizona. She is enrolled in the most difficult, honors-level and AP courses that are offered, as she has been since starting high school. From an extracurricular standpoint, she is President of the Honor Society and Vice President of the Student Council, among other things, and it seems there is no award or accolade that she does not receive. It is seldom spoken between the two, but both father and daughter see what is happening, and neither one of them doubts where all of this is leading.
Focus

Finally, every one of the participants cited the critical importance of maintaining a singular focus on the task at hand, despite the myriad obstacles and distractions that will inevitably arise along the way. While belief and effort are vital, the ability to withstand external factors that mitigate focus is also central to academic success. Time and time again, the students pointed to focus as a key ingredient sustaining them throughout their respective journeys to the highest levels of academia. Following are a few prime examples:

*Focus on doing the very best you can do at everything you do. You can’t be distracted because of your circumstances, whatever they may be.*

Overcoming potential distractions was cited repeatedly as a required piece of the puzzle. All of the students pointed to the importance of a “resilient” attitude in the face of the inevitable stumbling blocks encountered along the way.

*Perseverance is the single biggest factor when it comes to academic success. Inevitably, you will be rejected from professional opportunities even if you meet the qualifications, but being able to bounce back from failure, be resilient, and continue to put yourself out there is what really makes a difference. If you are smart, yet you cannot recover from failure, you will not be happy in life.*

*The biggest factor that ultimately determines a person’s degree of success is the ability to be a self-starter and not getting discouraged by mistakes and shortcomings. These are important because there will come a point where regardless of whatever resources you have available to you, you will have to want to succeed on your own, and persevere through hardships and failures.*
“Perseverance” ranks near “encouragement” on the list of single words cited most frequently throughout the research process. Perseverance is a big part of every student’s success story, and they all spoke of its importance time and time again, especially when asked to provide advice to others seeking to achieve a similar level of excellence.

Diligence is the key to sustained success. Even if someone isn’t born a genius (and few are, let’s face it), they can make up for it by working hard. This is a trait that’s generally instilled in someone by their parents, so there’s a degree of “mentorship” in this equation as well. But generally, regardless of how one comes by this trait, I think a diligent person will almost always succeed, regardless of what they put their mind to, and regardless of race.

“Diligence,” a word synonymous with perseverance is also a word that surfaced quite frequently. The timeless adage, “If at first you don’t succeed…” is in full evidence when reviewing the students’ testimony. As a final example, I especially like the response from this particular student:

Success is determined primarily by a person’s true grit, pure and simple. Someone’s ability to fail but then pick themselves up again and give it another go is incredibly important. My parents taught me long ago that the only type of failure is not trying, and I believe that is the case without exception.

In summary, it is evident that large measures of belief and effort, fortified by a heaping helping of focus, combined to propel these students to academic greatness. Focus in particular appears to be singularly important; without laser-like perseverance in pursuit of excellence in the classroom, the students’ testimony reveals that other positive attributes are rendered moot.

The key words tied to the concept of focus are: Perseverance, Failure, Distraction, Hardship, Resilience.
Connection to Race

Now that the key ingredients to academic success (belief, effort, and focus) have been identified and explained through an examination of the collected data, let’s take a look at the participants’ responses related to the connection between race and academic success. It is indisputable based on the previous review of existing literature pertaining to this issue that many educators feel strongly that a person’s ability to learn is directly connected to racial and cultural factors. When the participants were asked whether they believed in that same premise, the responses were quite enlightening:

I do not believe in a direct connection between race and learning. However, there is an indirect connection arising from how many teachers deal with minority students.

Of course not. If my parents had told me that I had no chance of succeeding in school simply because I was half-black, that probably would have turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

No, race and learning ability aren’t connected. But I do think that racial and cultural factors can set up barriers that funnel them into certain buckets. I think that the general attitudes of minority students with regards to education are determined by what their role models have done or what their opinions are.

I have worked hard to reach where I am today, and I thank my parents for always making education my first priority. Race isn’t an obstacle to learning, but a negative mentality is, and a negative mentality is created when teachers treat race as an obstacle.

In summary, the six minority students who participated in my study adamantly reject the hypothesis that a person’s ability to learn is in any way predicated on that person’s ethnicity. To the contrary, they all exhibited a healthy disdain when detailing the harmful effect of teachers who insisted on approaching the educational process from that perspective.
The prevailing view expressed by the participants seems to be something along the lines of, “We’re not worried about our race, so why are you?” It is extremely ironic that the individuals least concerned about race are the students themselves; yet they are often subjected to an environment where race is the focal point for no apparent reason. I believe this point is especially instructive, and I will delve into this peculiar dichotomy in the next chapter. To close this section, some of the most succinct and unequivocal takes on the matter are presented below:

*I don’t think there’s any inherent difference between a white student and a black student.*

-----

*Race and ethnicity aren’t connected to learning ability at all.*

-----

*I do not believe in a direct connection between race and learning.*

-----

*I don’t think that being black made any difference in my ability to learn – that’s ridiculous.*

-----

*I don’t derive my ability to succeed from my ethnicity at all.*

-----

*I identify as an American, first and foremost.*

**Data Correlated to Research Questions**

As a supplement to the previous breakdown of participant responses, it makes sense at this point to correlate the cumulative data directly to the research questions posed back in Chapter 1. In the following section, I have presented a recap of these questions along with a condensed summary of the participants’ answers in relation to each:
• **Research Question #1**: What influences/factors are most responsible for shaping the attitudes of high achieving minority students towards learning and school?

An analysis of the data shows that the participants believe attitudes towards learning and school are influenced primarily by the existence of belief, effort, and focus as part of a consistent pattern of excellence. The data unanimously bears out that the crucial importance of these components was instilled in them at an early age, primarily by parents who told them that anything was possible through hard work.

• **Research Question #2**: What role do students believe their ethnicity and/or their family’s socioeconomic status played in their ability to succeed in the classroom up to this point?

Simply put, the participants in my study do not attach any significance whatsoever to their ethnicity or family socioeconomic status relative to their academic success. The cumulative data overwhelmingly indicates that these students believe external factors to be totally irrelevant when it comes to achievement in the classroom; furthermore, many of them expressed resentment when asked questions implying a connection between race and a person’s ability to learn, directly contradicting the widely-held liberal perspective on this matter.

• **Research Question #3**: What advice would high achieving minority students give to others seeking academic and overall life success?

Not surprisingly, given their responses to the previous questions, the participants’ advice to other students essentially boils down to this: Believe in yourself, work hard, and stay focused on your goals at all times. It is a simple message, completely absent all of the extraneous factors that are so often associated with academia and our modern society, and I think that is exactly the point. In a world where everything has become so
complicated, these students are a testament to good old-fashioned common sense and work ethic.

- **Research Question #4**: What obstacles, if any, have high achieving minority students encountered in their pursuit of academic success?

  The answer to this question is highly ironic, and equally tragic. As thoroughly detailed earlier in this chapter (and explored further in Chapter 5), the only impediments of significance encountered by these remarkable students along their journey to academic success were the “artificial obstacles” frequently placed in their way by teachers who insisted on approaching the educational process through a racial lens. While their intentions may have been worthy, the demotivating messages transmitted by these individuals actually had the opposite effect of what was originally intended. Abundant examples of this have already been provided, and it saddens me to say that the testimony of my research participants only serves to confirm my own experience as a teacher/administrator at various high schools and universities across this country.

**Overall Synopsis**

Viewing the collective data objectively, there are several revealing takeaways. The primary finding is that all of the participants consider belief, effort, and focus to be the key ingredients necessary for academic success. These components were cited over and over again throughout the entire research process, as evidenced by the responses presented throughout this chapter. Secondly, the participants overwhelmingly reject any connection between a person’s race and that person’s ability to succeed in the classroom, again evidenced by a large number of emphatic responses.
Finally, the students pointed to frequent instances of teachers expressing lowered expectations and displaying demotivating attitudes due to their insistence on treating these students differently on the base of race. The participants unanimously disdain this approach, seeing this negative messaging as an unnecessary and artificial obstacle. In the following chapter, I will discuss the results of this compelling data more at length and attempt to draw some conclusions, as well as issue some recommendations on how this data can be put to use.

Despite the girl’s remarkable success, many people remain skeptical of her future prospects. She is often told to “think realistically,” and cautioned against “getting your hopes too high,” ostensibly by those who have her best interests in mind. Some teachers, counselors, and even family members, advise her to consider more “reasonable options” for her college education, such as Arizona State University or even a community college. The girl simply smiles and nods, knowing they don’t understand. When she and her father discuss these conversations later, it serves as motivation, strengthening her resolve for what lies ahead. The dream has become a prophecy, and they both know that she has come too far now to fall short of fulfilling her destiny. She diligently prepares for the college entrance exam, and then withstands the pressure to record one of the highest overall scores in the nation for that particular year. She is now a National Merit Scholar, and the dream is fully within her grasp. Others continue to doubt, but she knows it is only a matter of time.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the entirety of the data presented in Chapter 4, it is apparent that the participating students attribute their academic success primarily to three key components: belief, effort, and focus. Additionally, they all adamantly rejected the notion that the ability to achieve a high level of academic success is in any way linked to race; in fact, whenever asked a question along those lines, the resentment was readily evident. Furthermore, the respondents all expressed significant frustration at being treated differently because of their respective ethnicities, citing a large number of experiences in which they felt they were done a disservice by educators who supposedly had their best interests at heart, but in reality were only making the task more difficult. With all of this in mind, I have condensed the cumulative data collected from the participating students into three salient points, or critical discoveries, as detailed below:

Three Critical Discoveries

1) Academic success is a byproduct of belief, effort and focus.
2) Academic success (or lack thereof) is not inherently connected to a person’s race.
3) Educators who view the learning process through a prism of race create unnecessary obstacles for minority students.

These findings directly contradict the race-oriented approach to education as detailed in Chapter 2. Instead, they conclusively validate the premise of positive expectations producing positive results, lending credence to proponents of the Pygmalion Effect and similar philosophies that prioritize what students CAN do versus what they CANNOT do. In addition, these findings absolutely support my overriding contention that race should be considered an irrelevancy rather than an obstacle when it comes to the pursuit of educational goals.
For the purpose of developing a thorough analysis of this data and then drawing some conclusions, I would first like to take a closer look at each of the three critical discoveries as described above. In the following section, these key points will be examined separately in relation to the existing literature already summarized as well as some additional research intended to supplement and clarify the primary takeaways from my study. Following this analysis, I will apply the alternative mindset I am advocating to our current educational system and offer several recommendations before concluding with some final thoughts.

**Belief, Effort, and Focus**

The results of this research bear out that all of these ingredients must be present in order for a person to achieve his or her academic potential; furthermore, all three components are, to a significant degree, inextricably linked as part of a complex sociological equation where the sum is truly greater than the individual parts. For starters, it is evident from the data that the importance of a belief in one’s ability to succeed is paramount to sustained academic achievement. The urgent role that this type of belief played in the remarkable success stories of all these students is clearly aligned with the body of literature discussed in Chapter 2 that supports a direct correlation between academic expectations and academic achievement. Without exception, every participant cited a strong belief and the power of positive expectations as a critical contributing factor to high achievement.

Belief fuels the motivation for effort, also considered by the research participants to be an integral part of academic success. The vital importance of effort is underscored by a wealth of research linking above-average performance (both academic and otherwise) to motivation, and motivation to belief. The inner conviction that hard work will lead to success is instrumental to sustained academic excellence (Smith & Skrbiš, 2017). Furthermore, motivation piques interest
level, and research has consistently shown that high levels of interest have positive effects on grades, study habits, and reading comprehension (Silvia, 2012). In my mind, belief and effort are very much intertwined, and this connection is illustrated by examining countless examples such as those highlighted in studies confirming the positive impact of the Pygmalion Effect, as detailed previously in this narrative.

Unfortunately, despite these positive indicators, it is impossible to ignore the prevailing atmosphere so heavily influenced by race-driven theory, and one cannot escape the tragic conclusion that the ability to focus is severely compromised by the repetitive nature of negative messaging. These artificial obstacles, as it were, necessitate strategies designed to overcome the negativity, and thus we see the crucial importance of perseverance.

Without exception, the student participants spoke of focus/perseverance as a necessary ingredient in the academic success equation. According to them, it is inevitable that obstacles will be encountered, and that failure will be experienced, along one’s journey to the highest levels of American academia. Given that, success depends on an individual’s ability to be resilient and find a way to overcome these roadblocks, many of which are needlessly constructed due to the misguided ideology that consumes many educators. The testimony provided in the previous chapter speaks to the crucial nature of this quality, and it is clearly evident that this quality is a vital part of these students’ remarkable success stories.

**Race and Achievement**

Sadly, as we have already discussed at length, many educators persist in habitually viewing students and their academic capabilities through the prism of race. Assumptions are made based on skin color and little else, and teachers all too frequently allow these assumptions to impact their expectation levels in the case of minority students. As detailed previously and
proven by extensive research, a lack of positive expectations invariably leads to a lack of positive results, and thus the vicious cycle continues.

For instance, take the disturbing data obtained from a recent National Center for Education Statistics longitudinal study (2013), which asked tenth-grade teachers to predict which students would graduate from college and then tracked the results from 2002-2012. The sample of tenth-grade students was randomly chosen and nationally representative of U.S. student populations. The study found that teachers considered African American students to be 47 percent less likely to graduate, and Hispanic students 42 percent less likely to graduate, compared to their white counterparts in the research group. The report concluded that teacher expectations often perpetuate self-fulfilling prophecies that make students more likely to either succeed or fail, and most disturbingly, that teachers often expect the least from students (i.e., minority students) who could benefit the most from higher expectations (Segal, 2014).

The crucial importance of this issue is not limited only to academic achievement in the classroom; the magnitude increases further when one considers the future ramifications stemming from a quality education, or the lack thereof. Educational attainment in the United States is highly valued not only in terms of access to good jobs and higher income but also culturally as the primary avenue for achieving success. Unfortunately, our educational institutions, which function as the primary dispensers of the knowledge and tools needed for the workforce, have become increasingly influenced and shaped by broader, more racially charged, societal contexts that have led to a skewing of priorities in the name of political correctness. Ultimately, the troubling implication of these results is that teachers’ evaluations remain susceptible to racial stereotypes that disadvantage black and Hispanic students, especially in relation to white and Asian students (McGrady, 2013, p.15).
Specifically, research has shown that teachers often equate whiteness with greater academic potential and perceive black students as uninvolved and not serious about school (Morris 2005; Staiger 2004; Tyson 2003). This is often perceived as a “generational” problem stemming from a lack of educational guidance provided by the parents of minority students in America. Table 3 below contrasts the percentage of black parents with college degrees against white parents with college degrees, and the numbers bear out a consistent disparity dating back over a thirty-year period:

Table 3

*Percentage of Black and White Parents with College Degrees*

![Graph showing percentage of black and white parents with college degrees over time](image)

*Note.* Historical rate of parental degrees compared by ethnicity (accessed via the public domain; see *Appendix K* for more details).

Notwithstanding analytics of this nature, I would argue that the educational attainment of the parent is not necessarily indicative of the student’s potential. In fact, many minority students across the country (including some in the participant group of my study) point to a lack of previous academic success in their respective families as motivation for their own desire to succeed at a high level. There is no shortage of statistical data indicating that minority groups (blacks in particular), have made remarkable strides in terms of attaining various levels of
college degrees, especially in relation to previous generation. Table 4 below provides graphic evidence of this, especially when noting the dramatic percentage increase of black students earning degrees in recent years compared to a decade ago.

Table 4

College Degree Trends by Ethnicity (2004-2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of degree and academic year</th>
<th>Total 1</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>American Indian/Alaska Native</th>
<th>Two or More races</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certificates 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>710,873</td>
<td>415,670</td>
<td>133,601</td>
<td>114,089</td>
<td>32,783</td>
<td>8,150</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent change from 2013-14 to 2014-15</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Historical statistics comparing college degree levels and percentages by ethnicity (accessed via the public domain; see Appendix K for more details).

In a similar vein, Table 5 below portrays a favorable comparison between the high school graduation rates of white students vs. minority students over a decade-long period. While the overall graduation percentage still favors whites, minority students have a slightly larger
percentage increase over the measured interval, once again indicating that ethnicity need not be indicative of a student’s academic potential.

Table 5

*Graduation Rates by Ethnicity (2003-2013)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>URM Graduation Rate</th>
<th>White Graduation Rate</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td>58.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
<td>50.1%</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Historical high school graduation rates comparing white students to underrepresented minority students over a ten-year period (accessed via the public domain; see *Appendix K* for more details).

**The Harmful Effects of the Racial Prism**

From my perspective, any educational agenda focused on race in any way, shape, or form is woefully misguided, and it is imperative that we re-prioritize our academic objectives in order to maintain a laser focus on unlocking the learning potential of every student, regardless of ethnicity. When a teacher walks into a classroom for the first time, the external characteristics of the students should be a complete non-factor. Only when that mentality takes hold and becomes
commonplace in schools across America will all students experience a “level playing field” without artificial limitations that cause them to question themselves based on factors beyond their control. In short, it is paramount that we create a universally equal learning environment where our students are told that there are no limits to academic success other than those they choose to place on themselves.

One particularly glaring example of researchers correlating ethnicity to achievement in a dispiriting way is *The Bell Curve* (Hernstein & Murray, 1994), a highly controversial book suggesting that there is a genetic link between race and intelligence. This absurd premise invoked widespread criticism (and rightfully so); ironically, the underlying sentiment continues to be reflected in modern-day academia, through more subtle publications, and, as discussed at length throughout this composition, in the form of demotivating messages communicated from teachers to students. We need to remain alert for examples of this fallacious mentality in all its various manifestations, whether they be overt or more nuanced.

I look forward to a day when charts and graphs comparing and contrasting students’ academic performance according to race are viewed as obsolete relics of a bygone era. I am all in favor of tracking the educational achievement of America’s students on the basis of age or grade level, geographical location, or even in relation to the performance of students in other countries. All of these measurements foster a healthy level of competition and provide real data with real applications. On the other hand, measuring academic achievement primarily as a function of race serves no purpose other than to unnecessarily confuse matters by skewing priorities and causing students to doubt themselves due to external characteristics beyond their control that have no relevance to their true learning potential.
It is now the fall semester of her senior year in high school, and the girl applies to only one college – Yale University. The application process is extensive, with countless forms, multiple essays, and even an interview process, first via Skype and then face-to-face with a Yale alum who is now a practicing doctor in the Phoenix area. She is told by the doubters that she needs to apply to a large number of schools in order to “increase her chances” and be sure of “having a spot somewhere,” but she is done listening to them now. She wants Yale, and that is her only focus. Yale’s historical acceptance rate is less than 5%, but that is of no consequence. The prophecy must be fulfilled, and she is so close now that she can taste it. She completes the application process, and now the wait begins.

An Alternative Mindset

It should be abundantly clear by now that, through this study, I am calling into dispute the dominant paradigm that pre-supposes a discriminatory educational environment/society conspiring to prevent minority students from achieving academic excellence. Instead, I am advocating an alternative mindset where race is viewed more as an irrelevancy than an obstacle, and where the emphasis is placed on the positive impact of high expectations vs. the negative impact of low expectations. This counter view is almost completely ignored in the existing literature, and that is what I consider to be the most glaring deficiency.

Since beginning my career as an educator, I have been employed in a variety of venues populated by students of every possible persuasion. Whether at Corona del Sol High School in urban Phoenix, teaching English to a highly diverse population including a significant number of ELL students; at Southern Illinois University, helping first generation African American students from Chicago acclimate to a rural campus setting; at New Mexico State University, where I
focused on assisting Hispanic and Native American students with their writing and language skills; or at Virginia Military Institute, where I am supporting our dedicated cadets in a uniquely challenging college environment, my career as an educator has been devoted to building the academic confidence of those who need it the most. Not once during all of those years did I dwell for even a moment on the particular ethnicity of any of the students I was fortunate enough to work with; why so many of my colleagues insist on doing exactly that frankly baffles me.

Considering the undisputed evidence that minority children are disproportionately affected by lowered academic expectations, along with decades of studies acknowledging the power of positive reinforcement, the prescribed remedy seems incredibly obvious. Tragically, this common sense strategy is almost universally discarded as a result of baseless propaganda derived from an endless litany of racial grievances and conspiracy theories. It’s a classic example of not seeing the forest for the trees, as rampant political correctness has compelled many educators to complicate matters to such a degree that a relatively simple puzzle appears unsolvable. Overall, while the research surrounding this topic is ample, my contention is that it lacks the necessary thoroughness due to the fact that the underlying premise guiding the majority of these studies is faulty; therefore, the overriding problem has not been effectively addressed to date, and suggested measures have not gotten to the root of the problem as I see it.

What Can Be Learned?

Given the hyper-politically correct environment that currently rules academia, some critics may misinterpret my opinions and label me as a closed-minded individual who is failing to champion diversity. On the contrary – I believe America has always been defined and enhanced by its diversity. I also believe that America was able to attain a level of greatness never before achieved by any other nation due to the ability and willingness of our diverse
citizens to come together and embrace a shared American culture. The beauty of America was in people of vastly different origins living and working together according to a shared set of principles, creating a distinctly unique American spirit that resulted in our country becoming the envy of the world, a “shining city on the hill,” as President Reagan used to say.

As I related previously, during the course of raising my daughter and teaching at the high school level for the past decade, I have developed very strong opinions about the role that ethnicity plays both in academia and society in general. Simply put, I believe the all-too-frequent claim that minorities are constantly victimized by an inherently racist educational system is a complete fallacy, and serves only to perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophecy that inevitably leads to drastic underachievement and a lack of future success. Furthermore, even if this point-of-view is deemed valid to some degree, the focus is too often on counterproductive rhetoric that fails to explore possible avenues for academic success. Through this study, I hope to expose the misguided nature of this widespread perspective and suggest an alternative mindset that will ultimately prove to be much more productive.

For example, the uplifting dynamic represented by the Pygmalion Effect, as discussed at length in the literary review, should serve as a collective wake-up call to teachers across America. In addition to the large body of research that has repeatedly confirmed the dramatic impact of positive expectations on student performance, the testimony collected from the participants in my study wholeheartedly reinforces this phenomenon.

Through instilling an unshakeable belief in students that they are in fact capable of accomplishing great things, educators can play a crucial role in unlocking the dormant academic potential that lies within every individual. I have experienced this myself in Arizona, Illinois, New Mexico, and Virginia, and I am utterly convinced that our educational system is in need of
a fairly radical transformation whereby the power of positive expectations is elevated to the highest priority level in our nation’s classrooms.

This philosophy is unquestionably supported by the research participants; over and over again, these amazing students cited belief, encouragement, and positive expectations from influential figures in their lives as the earliest and most important motivating factors vital to their sustained academic success. Figure 5 below effectively summarizes the relationship between expectations and achievement, providing a clear visualization of how a teacher’s approach can dramatically alter students’ level of success, both academically and in life overall. I would like to see a poster of this image mounted conspicuously on the wall of every high school classroom in America:

Figure 5. The power of positive expectations via the Pygmalion Effect (adapted in accordance with the fair use provision; see Appendix K for more details).

The effectiveness of this approach was substantiated throughout every phase of my research process, which allowed for a free-flowing, open-ended expression of personal observations from individuals who have actually experienced the phenomenon, successfully
navigating the world of academia as a minority. As such, they were able to provide real-life insights as to the various factors (both positive and negative) that have led them to this point in their educational pursuits.

I know from firsthand experience raising my daughter and spending time with similarly motivated minority students throughout my career as an educator that the participants in my study are not alone when it comes to a belief in the power of positive expectations. Race was not a factor in their success stories, and I am hopeful that those reading their stories will find some compelling reasons to view the educational process in a whole new light, abandoning the flawed premise that so often undermines student performance.

Undoubtedly, the majority of readers will have realized by now that the sub-narrative of my dissertation (The Story of a Little Girl) is in fact the story of my own daughter. I must admit that it has been quite heartening to confirm through my research that other high-achieving students of color have obtained similar results by relying on a similar philosophy. Admittedly, this is a relatively small sample size, but I am convinced that subsequent research in this mold will almost certainly yield comparable results. I am also convinced that my working hypothesis will be reinforced as more and more stories of remarkable minority students are told, as there is little doubt in my mind that the life experiences of these future students will bear an uncanny resemblance to the participants in my study, as well as to my daughter, who has always been the inspiration for my own academic endeavors and most certainly is the driving force behind my zeal to implement this study’s recommendations.

As described throughout the sub-text, she demonstrated a strong academic aptitude (especially in terms of reading and writing) at an early age, and I did everything I could to encourage her ambition and position her for future success. I constantly stressed to her that all of
our unique circumstances (the absence of her mother, strained relations with our extended family, limited finances, her biracial identity, etc.) should in no way adversely impact her ability to accomplish great things. To her enduring credit, she somehow turned all of these variables into motivating factors that fueled her drive to excel. Because of that, she is now a graduate of one of the finest universities in the entire world with an incredibly promising future ahead of her, and I could not possibly be more proud of what she has accomplished.

The evidence presented in this study clearly shows that the other high-achieving minority students who participated in my study adopted a like-minded strategy at an early age, rejecting the conventional wisdom associated with all of the so-called obstacles conspiring against their success. Their responses reflect an abundance of positive influences in the lives of these students (most notably parents and teachers) who instilled a belief that anything was possible and laid the foundation for sustained academic success. As I have said many times, if you lower the bar, kids will go under it, but if you raise the bar, they will find a way over it.

I fully stand behind the rigor and trustworthiness of this research. My genuine interest in the life stories of the participants was evident in my interactions with them, and I have a high degree of confidence in the resulting veracity of their accounts. The data I obtained was treated with extreme reverence and analyzed with great thoroughness in an effort to preserve complete authenticity at all times, and it is my hope that this final product reflects both a passion and a precision befitting the subject matter.

There is no doubt that my subjective views when it comes to this cultural phenomenon will be readily apparent to the reader, and I have no intention of denying this or apologizing for it, now or in the future. In today’s politically correct environment, we are constantly exposed to a narrative proclaiming that all non-white citizens are systematically victimized by an
educational system (and an overall society) inherently predisposed to discriminate against them. My experience as both a student and a faculty member in higher education (sadly, SIU is no exception) has emphasized this fallacious point-of-view ad nauseam, and it’s truly a shame that this pernicious paradigm is so widely disseminated.

I believe America has always been shaped and strengthened by its diversity. I also believe that America was able to attain a level of greatness never before achieved by any other nation due to the ability and willingness of our diverse citizens to come together and embrace a shared American culture. In that spirit, isn’t it well past time to focus on the internal characteristics that we all have in common rather than the external characteristics that may be used to divide us? Can’t we just turn the page and channel our resources towards more authentic issues? The answer to these questions is abundantly self-evident to me, and I hope that my research can contribute in some small way towards paving the way to a new perspective that will better academia and our society as a whole.

December 2012. The father and daughter are sitting in his classroom one day after school, and the anticipation is palpable. She has just received an email message with a link to a site that will inform her whether or not she has been accepted as an early entrant to Yale. All of the years, all of the preparation, all of the perseverance despite the constant discouragement from so many others – it has all come down to this. Her academic future, and by extension, the trajectory of the rest of her life, will be revealed with a single click of the mouse.

They both stare at the screen, realizing this is a landmark event they will always remember, one of life’s singularly defining moments. She taps her finger ever so slightly, and the screen goes black. It remains black for no more than two or three seconds, but somehow
time seems suspended as they stare at the monitor, almost afraid to look, but more afraid to look away. Finally, after what feels like an eternity, a large image of Handsome Dan, Yale’s iconic bulldog mascot, fills the screen. Before they can even fully absorb this development, Dan bursts into a full-throated version of Yale’s century-old fight song, “Bulldog! Bulldog!” As Dan finishes the rousing chorus, a banner is unfurled, eventually scrolling from top-to-bottom and covering the entire screen: Welcome to the Yale Class of 2017!

Recommendations for Applying This Philosophy in America’s Classrooms

We live in a society that has become increasingly dependent on rationalization and excuse making. It often seems that the concept of hard work leading to accomplishment has been discarded in favor of a climate that excuses, or even champions, mediocrity. Unfortunately, the insistence of many academics to view the learning process through a racial prism only serves to exacerbate the problem by concentrating more on assigning blame instead of improving the quality of instruction for the benefit of all students, regardless of ethnicity.

This grossly distorted perspective greatly concerns me as a professional educator, because I have always believed that nothing should compromise our efforts to do whatever is necessary in order to maximize the effectiveness of the learning process at all times. I sincerely hope that, by turning away from the race-tinged nonsense that so often dominates the academic conversation, we can pivot back to a focus on what is really important – making sure that America’s students learn. Throughout this section, I will identify specific areas in need of improvement and then provide a detailed strategy explaining how this improvement can be achieved from the perspective of a teacher or administrator. In order to establish a foundation
for the ideas to follow, I will begin with a clear explanation of my personal philosophy concerning excellence in teaching.

Based on my academic and field experience as a professional educator, I have developed an equation that I believe accurately measures a teacher’s effectiveness: \( E + R + C = G \). The “E” stands for expertise in one’s subject matter, which I consider an obvious prerequisite for any teacher. The “R” represents relatability, by which I mean the ability of a teacher to explain the material in such a way so that the students can relate to and fully comprehend the essence of the topic. “C” is for connectivity, related to the teacher’s ability to inspire and motivate students on an individual basis so that learning is applied to productivity. In my opinion, all three of these components must be present in order for tangible student growth (“G”) to occur (please see Appendix I for a more detailed explanation of this formula).

With all of that in mind, I would like to more fully describe my platform of instructional excellence. I believe it is of paramount importance to establish a high level of consistency amongst the teaching staff, especially in the vital areas of attendance, grading, and discipline. In many of our nation’s schools today, there is an alarming lack of consistency that has resulted in mixed messages being sent to the students (including the racially-tinged propaganda discussed at length throughout this manuscript), ultimately undermining the learning process by failing to emphasize the two principles that I feel are most important to future success: self-reliance and accountability.

I assert that these two “old school” components should be at the cornerstone of an effective learning environment, which is why I strongly believe teachers must require that students adhere to these tenets and hold them accountable when they fail to do so. Alas, it seems that more and more I am part of a distinct minority, as teachers are increasingly tolerant of
behavioral lapses that would have been considered quite egregious in a different era. I have walked into classrooms during instruction time and observed students texting, sleeping, chatting, and generally engaging in a large variety of curious behaviors, none of which have even the slightest thing to do with learning. The saddest part is that a growing number of teachers have become oblivious to this blatant lack of respect on the part of the students and do little or nothing to change the disturbing pattern.

In order to break this trend and get back on the track to real learning, I advocate the immediate implementation of a new strategy based on the all-important concepts of self-reliance and accountability, with the end result being a greatly increased level of consistency in our nation’s schools. Without that, it is impossible for any school to truly operate at the consistently high level of effectiveness that is necessary to maximize learning. An ambitious objective such as this one requires an equally ambitious action plan in order to make this concept a reality. A highly detailed, comprehensive school improvement plan is crucial, and the principal (or chancellor) will of course be the driving force behind this plan from its inception, promoting and shepherding the inherent message every step of the way.

One of an administrator’s chief responsibilities is to create and steward a vision designed to increase the school’s overall effectiveness. As previously stated, the two hallmarks of my vision are initiative and personal responsibility, concepts that are completely independent from students’ ethnicity or any other external factor. In the absence of these two tenets, nothing of substance can be accomplished in the long run, and that is why it is absolutely essential to instill these components firmly in the minds of the school’s faculty.

The ultimate hope is that the faculty will promote these values on a daily basis in their respective classrooms, thus setting a proper example for their students to emulate. Of course,
this is easier said than done considering the current state of our society. “Family beliefs, attitudes, and values towards learning have a direct and significant impact on student achievement” (Lumsden, 1997), and when these values run counter to old-fashioned tenets like initiative and accountability, drastic underperformance is a virtual certainty. Clearly, this is a daunting task, but as educators we must accept the challenge and rise above.

Benjamin Franklin is one of the most prominent Founding Fathers of America. He is well known as an inventor, scientist, publisher and political theorist. His life is rightfully regarded as the quintessential model of innovation, productivity, and excellence, and there can be no better prototype for those who are attempting to create a vision that will lead to sustained success. Franklin was keenly aware of the immense value of initiative and personal responsibility, and he built a personal philosophy based on this foundation. Every single day he asked himself the same question upon waking: “What good shall I do today?” He kept a journal in which he recorded his daily actions, all designed to keep him mindful of this simple but powerful question.

In the spirit of Franklin, it is crucial for teachers to remember that a new mindset of striving for academic excellence cannot be achieved without a daily dedication to setting the proper example. As a professional educator, I strive to embody the key characteristics of initiative and personal responsibility in all that I do on a daily basis in order to provide a model for the students I interact with, and I believe it is imperative that all teachers and administrators working at every high school and college in America do the same. We cannot expect today’s youth to commit to this all-important philosophy if we are not fully committed ourselves, and therein lies the critical importance of a daily focus on the task at hand.
I strongly believe that, over time, as the students begin to realize that their teachers/professors/advisors/administrators are following this approach and remaining steadfastly dedicated to the cause, a “trickle-down” effect will ensue, ultimately resulting in students adopting this daily approach for themselves and achieving the desired level of excellence as a result. I plan to do everything in my power to cultivate unwavering commitment and exemplary professionalism in the faculty and student affairs personnel that I am fortunate enough to work with, and I am confident that we can collaborate to make this vision a reality and eventually build a better system of schools across our nation.

I realize there will be naysayers insistent in their opinion that teachers cannot rise above all of the many deterring factors in the modern world and essentially “will” their students to achieve. However, extensive research has proven repeatedly that teacher expectations and inferences about present and future academic achievement tends to be self-sustaining, affecting both teacher perception and interpretation of student actions in such a way that dramatically improves student performance (Bamburg, 2000). The Pygmalion Effect detailed at length in previous chapters is prime evidence of this, and we must not lose sight of the powerful impact of positive expectations. Finally, the modeling aspect is an integral component of this approach – teachers certainly cannot expect students to be accountable for their performance without holding themselves to the same high standards.

For an approach such as the one I am advocating to be successful over the long term, students must understand that strict guidelines will be enforced across the board with no exceptions, as any deviation to a newly installed school improvement plan will undermine the foundation of the new philosophy and eventually result in a lack of real and substantial improvement (Yaccino, 2008). In short, schools subscribing to this approach must be prepared
to go “all in” and remain committed to the process every step of the way, being careful to avoid
distractions emanating from politically correct initiatives that only serve to undermine the
effectiveness of the learning process.

There is no question that today’s professional educators face a landscape fraught with
obstacles that their academic predecessors could never have imagined. Students living in this
modern world are bombarded with a myriad of distractions that distort their ability to properly
prioritize, and the continuing assault on traditional values also serves to push the importance of
academic achievement further and further into the background.

In order to combat these negative forces, teachers must be prepared to espouse ideals that
will often be viewed as “old-fashioned” or even “radical” in certain circles, and that will most
likely require an exceptional measure of determination and resolve. I am convinced that refuting
this approach and continuing down the current path will lead to an ingrained state of mediocrity
that will severely damage our nation’s schools and our society as a whole, and embracing a
learning philosophy predicated largely on race is most definitely inhibiting the desperately
needed transition.

**Recommendations for Teacher Education Programs**

The revised philosophy I am advocating can be directly applied to teacher education
programs at universities across this country. Considering that the college students enrolled in
these programs will soon be standing in front of their own classes full of impressionable children
representing every conceivable ethnicity, I believe this is a perfect place to start changing the
mindset. By emphasizing to these newest members of our profession that race should be
considered an irrelevancy in the learning process, we can take a big step towards ushering in a
new era of teacher education, an era where the focus is rightly returned to quality instruction and
classroom management rather than extraneous issues that have no real impact other than furthering a politically correct agenda that only undermines our children’s academic prospects.

As long as so many in our educational system are fixated on racial politics and insist on singling out students according to various ethnic categories, initiative and accountability will forever be compromised. By concentrating on objectives that emphasize these traits – as opposed to continually being sidetracked by the unproductive, politically correct talking points that only lead to a gross distortion of our educational values – I am convinced that this vision will gain momentum and eventually be thoroughly disseminated for the betterment of academia and our overall society.

I maintain that utilizing the equation I have developed (E + R + C = G) is an integral part of improving teacher performance and represents a significant first step towards departing from the mediocre status quo that currently permeates our nation’s educational system. We must reassess our priorities when it comes to teaching America’s children by emphasizing the creation of learning environments that are fueled by positive expectations and a belief that anything is possible. Over the long term, a focus on this philosophy will result in the widespread advocacy of initiative and personal responsibility, and only through cultivating these indispensable traits in our teachers and students can real change be brought about.

There is simply too much at stake, and delaying the implementation of this alternative approach any longer will only serve to exacerbate the dysfunction that currently rules academia. For far too long now, we have allowed ourselves to be distracted by unseen, unsubstantiated influences that turn our attention away from paramount priorities. Under this scenario, the potential of our nation’s youth is drastically neglected, and generations of Americans are relegated to a future where their true potential is never fully realized. At some point, we must
return the focus to what really matters – maximizing the effectiveness of learning for the sake of all students, regardless of any external characteristic. Why not now?

The little girl is now very much grown up, and she sits on the lawn of Yale’s Old Campus along with her fellow graduating seniors, intently surveying the large crowd in an effort to locate her father. She can’t find him right at this moment, but she knows that he is there, just as he has always been. He was there all those years ago when her mother left, and he was there when others in the family pointed out how she was “different” from other children. He was there throughout her high school years, when so many cautioned her against getting her hopes too high and encouraged her to set her sights on “more realistic goals.”

He was there during all of the spectacular success she experienced at Yale, as she rose to become Managing Editor of the *Yale Daily News* and garnered numerous accolades for her journalistic prowess, and he was there as she endured subtle yet hurtful criticism from those questioning her “ethnic credibility” in light of her reluctance to support the litany of racially-charged, politically correct movements and angry protests that so often seemed to dominate the Yale community during her four years in New Haven. Through it all, she remained focused on the task at hand, and today is the culmination of a lifetime of perseverance.

Finally, she does spot him in the crowd – a minor miracle given the scope of the surroundings – and right there in the midst of it all, they share a private moment of reflection. They will most likely never speak of it in direct terms, but on this special day, in this special place, as the little girl prepares to walk across the stage and become a member of this most exclusive of societies (less than .2% of the U.S. population hold an Ivy League degree) with an unlimited future awaiting her, they both understand something that so many never will: If she had ever listened to any of the discouraging voices throughout her life, if she had allowed those
voices in any way to diminish the one voice that really counted – that all-powerful voice deep within herself – then none of this would ever have been possible.

---

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The analysis presented in this composition, while compelling in its own right, is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to examining this complex topic, and there are numerous possibilities for expanding upon my research in the future. For example, a comparable study focusing on gender as opposed to race would no doubt be illuminating, and perhaps yield similar data that would be instructive in creating more effective learning environments. In fact, I would consider any academic study that highlights the importance of recognizing students purely as unique individuals rather than members of a particular category to be inherently valuable.

Another obvious opportunity for subsequent research exists in the form of a follow-up study conducted on a much broader scale. While my project encompassed a relatively small sample from one particular university, a researcher (or research team) armed with increased financial resources and a lengthier time period in which to gather data could take this same methodology to an entirely new level. Imagine a like-minded study including in-depth responses from 100 students across the Ivy League, or 1,000 students from a variety of universities across the country – the possibilities are endless, and a research effort of this magnitude would undoubtedly produce a veritable treasure trove of academic success stories to inspire future generations. I sincerely hope that my humble endeavor will serve as a prototype spawning additional academic work that celebrates the remarkable accomplishments of young people such as the individuals I was fortunate to rely on for my study. There are many more like them, and their amazing stories deserve to be told.
Final Thoughts

The ongoing movement to label and categorize virtually every student at every level of our country’s educational system, instead of just treating them all as Americans, pure and simple, has resulted in an insane skewing of priorities. Having taught at a high school in urban Phoenix for many years, interacting every single day with students representing every conceivable ethnic background, how patently absurd would it have been for me to deliberately point out the racial differences between the kids in my classroom, taking great care to impress upon them the importance of constantly looking out for the systematic oppression that would assuredly be visited upon so many of them? The mere thought of it is laughable, but this ridiculous agenda is exactly what far too many individuals and organizations are devoted to advancing through whatever means necessary by wielding their considerable power so destructively.

The notion of teachers acting as advocates for various cultural groups makes no sense to me. Teachers should act as advocates for learning, and that applies to children of ALL ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Of course, this common sense approach assumes that schools are operating according to a shared set of values and a common academic mindset that prioritizes effective learning for every student. Once that mindset is compromised by hidden agendas, then Pandora’s Box is open, and our attention is directed away from the quality of learning in favor of railing against unseen conspiratorial forces.

Instead of categorizing our students according to skin color, shouldn’t we be celebrating a shared American culture by promoting an environment that is welcoming to any and all students, regardless of ethnicity, religion or any other external factor? It is supremely ironic to me that by insisting on grouping our students into separate categories, the “tolerance” and “inclusiveness” always lauded as noble objectives by the progressive crowd are directly contradicted. It’s a
The views expressed throughout this narrative may inspire detractors to label me as an insensitive bigot who is somehow against a diverse society. On the contrary: I believe America has always been defined and enhanced by its diversity. As stated previously, I also believe that America was able to attain a level of greatness never before achieved by any other nation due to the ability and willingness of our diverse citizens to come together and embrace a shared American culture. The beauty of America was in people of vastly different origins living and working together according to a shared set of principles, creating a distinctly unique American spirit that resulted in our country becoming the envy of the world, a “shining city on the hill,” as President Reagan used to say.

Simply put, I strongly advocate an educational platform that treats all students as Americans, with no caveats attached. We can certainly discuss race and ethnicity in the classroom, and the histories, cultures, and languages of countries other than America should most definitely be part of this discussion, but we should not do so at the expense of quality learning. In my opinion, by bending over backwards to accommodate political correctness and race-based academic theory, we have done irreparable damage not only to our educational system, but also to our sense of national identity. In fact, I believe the specious views driving this racially-charged agenda serve no purpose other than to perpetuate a fraudulent school of thought that drastically undermines the efforts of the same individuals it claims to champion.

I have a wealth of experience working with diverse students, and I have been incredibly successful in relating to them and helping them learn precisely because I refuse to dwell on their so-called differences. Nowhere has this philosophy been more readily apparent than in my
approach to raising my own daughter. Her skin color never entered the conversation during her adolescent years, as I raised her to believe that her only limitations were those she placed on herself. Suffice to say that if I had bought into the prevailing culture of victimization that so many liberal politicians and educators espouse and allowed my daughter to use that as a crutch, she would not be a graduate of Yale today with an incredibly promising future awaiting her.

Many other extraordinary young people across this great land – the participants in my study are shining examples – have similar inspirational stories to share, and I look forward to an increasing number of those personal accounts being presented as part of an ongoing effort to restore some degree of sanity to the national conversation revolving around race and academia. As I have stated frequently throughout the course of this paper, only when our country starts concentrating more on how we are alike instead of how we are different will we be able to regain our footing and have a chance at fulfilling America’s vast potential.

I am convinced that the best extracurricular activities are those where students from every conceivable background work together to accomplish something exceptional. I have been involved with many of those productions, and I cannot remember the ethnicity, religion, sexuality, etc. of any of the participating students ever playing even the slightest role in any of those efforts at any time. In all cases, it was simply a group of young Americans working in concert to build something the entire group could take pride in. Isn’t that really the way it should be, instead of going to such great lengths to divide ourselves in the name of diversity?

At the end of the day, we should remember that diversity is only a strength when it serves to bring us closer together. America understood that once upon a time, but she has since lost her way. As educators, we are in a unique position to restore that mentality, and if we are successful in doing so, it will go a long way towards repairing our fractured educational system. The only
“culture of power” mentioned in America’s schools should be in reference to the power of knowledge, and that power is available to any student who invests the necessary time and effort to pursue it.

As a case in point, many faculty members at the high school where I began my teaching careers were quite vocal in expressing their view that the required standardized tests were “culturally biased.” However, it was my experience as a secondary teacher in Arizona and Ohio over the course of a decade that all students, regardless of ethnicity or background, who were adequately prepared by an educator demanding a thorough, diligent approach to education (i.e., they were pushed to master fundamental skills and then progressively build upon them), actually found these “high-stakes” tests to be easily manageable. During my tenure at Corona del Sol High School in urban Phoenix, over 95% of my students passed the AIMS Reading Test on the first attempt, and the majority of those students achieved the highest possible rating. These were not honors students, and it was an extremely diverse student population, including many of the minority groups that are supposedly discriminated against as a result of this “biased” testing mandate.

I believe this happened primarily because I presented the relevant material in a precise manner and held the students accountable for mastering the content at every step along the way. I refused to buy-in to the propaganda surrounding the tests (as stated previously, many of my colleagues did, and their test results were not coincidentally much less impressive), and therefore did not validate the litany of excuses that so many fall back upon as a means of covering up the fact that our educational system, in an effort to toe the line of political correctness and vindicate unacceptable results through a reliance on race-based academic theory, has allowed far too many students to pass from one grade level to the next without ever being held accountable. Self-
motivated students are able to overcome this laissez-faire approach to education, but many are content to coast through their classes, safe and secure that they will never really be challenged, and that their academic shortcomings will be rationalized as a byproduct of the “unfair system.” Only when these excuses are replaced with real accountability will the problem be solved.

The collective responses from the participants in this study provide authentic testimony to what I have always believed, and more importantly, provide us with a blueprint for plotting a better future for America’s educational system, a future where kids of all races and creeds are not viewed through a politically correct lens that seeks to categorize – and ultimately, marginalize – them, but instead rightfully places the emphasis on doing whatever is necessary to unlock the vast potential that lies within them all as individuals, pure and simple.

While belief, effort, and focus are of paramount importance, skin color should have absolutely no bearing whatsoever on the academic equation. My research stands as compelling evidence in support of this statement, but the sad truth is that the fruits of this approach will never be realized on a large-scale basis as long as those who control America’s educational system insist on making it all about race. Children do not think of their ethnicity as a hindrance until they are told to do so. Maybe, just maybe, we should stop going out of our way to tell them.

In conclusion, I fully realize that my opinions may not be shared, and in fact, may be vociferously disputed, by proponents of alternative views associated with this complex subject. I am similarly aware that some of my more blunt assertions, such as “race should be irrelevant” when it comes to academic pursuits, will be construed as a direct affront to those on the “other side” of the issue, much as I reject the imperious claim that an inherently racist society has conspired to prevent minority students from reaching their full potential. As with all
controversial topics, the actual truth lies somewhere in between. At the end of the day, if I can contribute to the ongoing discussion and cause readers to examine this issue from a perspective not previously considered, if I can elicit some modicum of respect even from those who are passionately committed to a diametrically opposed position on the matter, then I will have succeeded in my task.
REFERENCES


Teacher Expectations Student Achievement (2017). *Addressing the needs of high poverty kids*.


APPENDICES
Appendix A: Research Consent Form

Dear Potential Participant,

I am a graduate student at Southern Illinois University conducting research for my doctoral dissertation. Please consider the following information carefully before deciding whether or not to participate in this research project.

Purpose of the research: To examine the lifelong learning experiences of high-achieving minority students. As such, participation will be limited to minority undergraduate students at Yale University.

What you will do in this research: If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to participate in a research project consisting of (a) answering questions about your lifelong learning experiences in the form of a written survey, and (b) answering a series of follow-up questions in the form of a telephone or Skype interview. All questions throughout the process will be related to your learning experiences as a minority student up to and including your college matriculation.

Time required: Total time required to participate in this research project should not exceed four-five hours.

Risks: No risks, either physical or mental, are anticipated as a result of your participation.

Benefits: This is an opportunity for you to tell the unique story of your lifelong learning experiences.

Confidentiality: Your responses to all questions will be kept strictly confidential. At no time will your actual identity be revealed. You will be assigned a random numerical code, known only by me, which will be used in the transcription of your responses. This transcription, without your name, along with the key linking your name to your number, will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office, and no one else will have access to it. Both of these items will be destroyed as soon as the research is complete.

The data collected from your responses will be incorporated as part of the narrative/analysis associated with my doctoral dissertation, and may be used as the partial basis for articles or presentations at some point in the future. Please be assured that I won’t use your name or any information that would identify you in any of these publications or presentations. All reasonable steps will be taken to ensure that confidentiality is maintained.

Participation and withdrawal: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty whatsoever. You may withdraw by informing the experimenter that you no longer wish to participate (no questions will be asked). You may skip any question(s) during the interview, but continue to participate in the rest of the study if you so choose.

To contact the researcher: If you have questions or concerns about this research, please contact: Stephen Foggatt, P.O. Box 1116, Lexington, VA 24450, (505) 287-0818, foggatt@siu.edu. You may also contact the faculty member supervising this work: Dr. John McIntyre, Professor Emeritus, Southern Illinois University, (618) 536-2441, johnm@siu.edu.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail siuhsc@siu.edu.

Agreement: The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalty.

Signature: _______________________________ Date: __________________

Name (print): ____________________________

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Appendix B: Participant Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>2018</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Biracial (half-black/half-white)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Biracial (half-black/half-white)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Biracial (half-black/half-white)</td>
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## Appendix C: Data Triangulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Questions Addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Baseline (Phase I) | Interviews/Initial Questioning | Do students believe there is a direct relationship between academic expectations and academic achievement, and does this issue disproportionately concern minority students? If so, why?  
What influences/factors are most responsible for shaping student attitudes towards learning, and does the responsibility for educational success lie more with schools, families, or society?  
What role do students believe that their ethnicity and/or their family’s socioeconomic status has played in their ability to succeed in the classroom up to this point?  
Do students believe that racial and cultural factors are directly connected to a person’s ability to learn? And if so, what specific factors do the participants think most influence the general attitudes of minority students when it comes to education?  
What factors do students believe ultimately determine an individual’s degree of success in terms of both educational pursuits and life in general? Stated another way, what would their advice be to others seeking academic and overall life success? |
| Investigative (Phase II) | Interviews/Follow-up Questioning | What influences/factors are most responsible for shaping student attitudes towards learning, and does the responsibility for addressing this issue lie more with schools, families, or society?  
What role do students believe that their ethnicity and/or their family’s socioeconomic status has played in their ability to succeed in the classroom up to this point?  
Do students believe that racial and cultural factors are directly connected to a person’s ability to learn? And if so, what specific factors do the participants think most influence the general attitudes of minority students when it comes to education?  
What factors do students believe ultimately determine an individual’s degree of success in terms of both educational pursuits and life in general? Stated another way, what would their advice be to others seeking academic and overall life success? |
| Discussion (Phase III) | Focus Group/Collaborative Questioning | What influences/factors are most responsible for shaping student attitudes towards learning, and does the responsibility for educational success lie more with schools, families, or society?  
What role do students believe that their ethnicity and/or their family’s socioeconomic status has played in their ability to succeed in the classroom up to this point?  
Do students believe that racial and cultural factors are directly connected to a person’s ability to learn? And if so, what specific factors do the participants think most influence the general attitudes of minority students when it comes to education?  
What factors do students believe ultimately determine an individual’s degree of success in terms of both educational pursuits and life in general? Stated another way, what would their advice be to others seeking academic and overall life success? |
Appendix D: Survey Questions (Phase I)

What is your earliest memory related to school or the learning process?

Looking back over your academic experiences to date, is there one single person that **encouraged** you the most in relation to the learning process? If so, how specifically did this person encourage you?

Is there one single person that **discouraged** you the most in relation to the learning process? If so, how specifically did this person discourage you?

How do you identify racially?

What role do you believe your ethnicity has played in your ability to succeed (or not to succeed) in the classroom up to this point?

What role do you believe that your family’s socioeconomic status played in your ability to succeed (or not to succeed) in the classroom?

Do you believe that racial and cultural factors are directly connected to a person’s ability to learn? Why or why not?

What do you think influences the general attitudes of minority students when it comes to education?

In your opinion, what is the single biggest factor that ultimately determines an individual’s degree of success in terms of both educational pursuits and life in general? Please specify this factor and describe why it is so important.

If you have children at some point in the future (or if you were speaking to current students or parent parents), what would your overriding advice be to them in terms of how to approach school and the learning process in general?
Appendix E: Major Themes

Belief

- Encouragement
- Expectation
- Motivation
- Potential
- Competition.

Effort

- Work
- Achieve
- Goals
- Opportunity
- Discipline

Focus

- Perseverance
- Failure
- Distraction
- Hardship
- Resilience
Appendix F: Guiding Questions (used as framework for literature review)

Is it generally acknowledged that there is a significant problem worthy of attention?

Is there a direct relationship between academic expectations and academic achievement?

Does this issue disproportionately concern minority students, and if so, why is this the case?

What kind of research has typically been conducted in relation to this problem?

Are there common phrases or a unique terminology associated with this issue?

What age/grade level has typically been examined in previous research?

What are the primary causes/origins of this problem according to existing research?

Are there common assumptions or “accepted truths” related to this problem?

What strategies does existing research recommend in order to address this problem?

What influences/factors are most responsible for shaping student attitudes?

Does the responsibility for addressing this problem lie more with schools or families?

Is there a self-fulfilling prophecy (i.e., a “Pygmalion effect” or “golem effect”) associated with this issue?

Are parents or teachers more responsible for shaping student attitudes towards learning?

Is this more of an academic or societal problem?
Appendix G: Sample Interview (from pilot study prior to actual research)

Hello Bob (pseudonym), my name is Steve. As you know, I’m working on a project for my graduate program, and I really appreciate you taking the time to answer these questions for me today.

No problem. I’m glad to help.

Great. Let’s go ahead and get started with the first question. What is your earliest memory related to school or the learning process?

My earliest memory is learning the alphabet from separate books for each letter in the advanced preschool class that I attended since my parents decided to wait another year before putting me into kindergarten. “X” was my favorite book because there were glasses you used to see hidden messages on the page that was meant to signify an x-ray.

Okay, thanks, that’s a pretty vivid memory! Next question: Looking back over your academic experiences to date, is there one single person that encouraged you the most in relation to the learning process? If so, how specifically did this person encourage you?

My mom encouraged me the most by providing the most support in setting up a framework for the learning process. She read books with me every night and helped me study for all of my spelling tests every Friday. She also stayed very involved in making sure that I was doing my work and would read the weekly newsletter with what was due and make sure that I did it as soon as possible.

She must be very proud of you now!

That’s for sure!

Moving on to the next question: Is there one single person that discouraged you the most in relation to the learning process? If so, how specifically did this person discourage you?

My father discouraged me the most as he would always say that I worked too hard and that nothing that I learned while in school would be applicable to the real world. In particular, he started doing this after elementary school and into high school when my mom left me to set my own standards for doing my own work.

That must have made for an interesting dynamic in your house!

Yeah, it was definitely a little frustrating at times.

I bet. Just for the record, how do you identify racially?

I’m Hispanic.

Okay, next question: What role do you believe your ethnicity has played in your ability to succeed (or not to succeed) in the classroom up to this point?
Through high school, I attended schools with predominantly Hispanic students, so an individual bias wasn’t particularly prevalent. That being said, I have seen that the resources available at the schools I attended were fewer than at other schools with more Caucasian or Asian ethnic and racial makeups. This was apparent in the attention paid to my school by the district including representation it got on the school board, physical resources such as computers and libraries, and information materials and preparation for when we started applying to different colleges.

Alright, very interesting. What role do you believe that your family’s socioeconomic status played in your ability to succeed (or not to succeed) in the classroom?

My family’s socioeconomic status limited me the most in the resources that were available to me. Whenever I struggled in a subject or needed additional help, like with tutoring or standardized testing prep, I had to use the resources available at my schools which were often unsatisfactory and that meant I had to figure it out myself or get a majority of my help from teachers who were willing to help or my peers.

That must have been quite difficult at times.

I guess you do what you have to do. In the end, I think it made me more assertive, so it turned out to be a positive thing overall.

Okay, this is good stuff so far. Just a few more questions. Next one: Do you believe that racial and cultural factors are directly connected to a person’s ability to learn? Why or why not?

I don’t believe that racial and cultural factors are connected to an individual’s inherent ability to learn, as there are so many other variables that are more important in ultimately determining a person’s success in school and life in general. I do think that racial and cultural factors are directly connected to a person’s availability to learn, however.

What do you mean exactly by “availability to learn?”

Just that certain groups may not be exposed to the same resources or have the same advantages.

Okay, thanks for clarifying. What do you think influences the general attitudes of minority students when it comes to education?

I think a lot of the general attitudes of minority students depend on their families’ emphasis on education. My grandparents have placed a large emphasis on us getting an education that they didn’t have the opportunity to and is the reason that they emigrated from Mexico. However, at my high school there definitely existed a stereotype that Mexican students, especially those from families that recently emigrated, are less motivated due partially to the fact that their parents don’t have the resources or knowledge of the schooling system to provide the foundation for their success.

Hmmm…interesting. In your opinion, what is the single biggest factor that ultimately determines an individual’s degree of success in terms of both educational pursuits and life in general? Please specify this factor and describe why it is so important.
To me the single biggest factor is how hard someone is willing to work. I think that we all possess a base amount of intelligence, but it’s all how it’s cultivated and if there are the necessary resources and time.

If you have children at some point in the future (or if you were speaking to current students or parents), what would your overriding advice be to them in terms of how to approach school and the learning process in general?

My advice would be to set an example early of what a successful education will take in terms of the skills necessary. If children experience early success in their education careers, they will be more motivated to do well in the rest of their time in school as well. I would also advise them to create a framework for when they don’t do well so that they don’t give up.

Okay, Bob, that was the last question. Once again, I really appreciate your help with this. Good luck with the rest of the semester at Yale!

My pleasure. I enjoyed our conversation. Good luck with your project!
Appendix H: Literary Synthesis Index

| Literary Synthesis | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z |
| Goal: Synthesizing | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Literature choices | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Methodology & | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Results & discussion | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Conclusions & | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Implications & | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Recommendations | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

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Appendix I: Instructional Proficiency Checklist

Striving for Excellence (E + R + C = G)

I. Teacher demonstrates Expertise
   a) Teacher displays mastery of the subject matter as reflected in a precise lesson plan
      Distinguished ___  Proficient ___  Competent ___  Deficient ___  Inadequate ___
   b) Teacher utilizes proper instruction techniques and maintains firm control of the class
      Distinguished ___  Proficient ___  Competent ___  Deficient ___  Inadequate ___
   c) Teacher is articulate and professional at all times regardless of circumstances
      Distinguished ___  Proficient ___  Competent ___  Deficient ___  Inadequate ___
   Comments:

II. Teacher demonstrates Relatability
   a) Teacher creates a positive rapport among students
      Distinguished ___  Proficient ___  Competent ___  Deficient ___  Inadequate ___
   b) Teacher incorporates relevant examples that draw students into the lesson
      Distinguished ___  Proficient ___  Competent ___  Deficient ___  Inadequate ___
   c) Teacher tailors instruction, improvising as necessary to enhance comprehension
      Distinguished ___  Proficient ___  Competent ___  Deficient ___  Inadequate ___
   Comments:

III. Teacher demonstrates Connectivity
   a) Teacher inspires students to learn through making a personal connection
      Distinguished ___  Proficient ___  Competent ___  Deficient ___  Inadequate ___
   b) Teacher explains why the material is important and impactful to their lives
      Distinguished ___  Proficient ___  Competent ___  Deficient ___  Inadequate ___
   c) Teacher motivates students by appealing to immediate and future repercussions
      Distinguished ___  Proficient ___  Competent ___  Deficient ___  Inadequate ___
   Comments:
Appendix J: Research Synopsis (Presented March 29, 2016, SIU-Carbondale)

Expectations and Achievement
A Proposed Qualitative Study by Stephen C. Foggatt

Research Problem
Over the course of a decade teaching at the high school level, I have become aware of a phenomenon that I typically refer to as “the self-fulfilling prophecy of low expectations.” Students, particularly those belonging to certain minority groups, are repeatedly given signals that the deck is stacked against them, and more time is spent telling these students what they CAN’T do rather than what they CAN do. As a result, the bar of academic achievement is lowered through various accommodations and a willingness to compromise more rigorous expectations, and a large percentage of these students fall woefully short of their true potential in the classroom.

Research Questions
What are the learning experiences of high-achieving minority undergraduate college students?

- What role do you believe your ethnicity has played in your ability to succeed (or not to succeed) in the classroom up to this point?
- Do you believe that racial and cultural factors are directly connected to a person’s ability to learn? Why or why not?
- What do you think influences the general attitudes of minority students when it comes to education?
- In your opinion, what is the single biggest factor that ultimately determines an individual’s degree of success in terms of both educational pursuits and life in general?

Participants
Six-eight minority (African American and Hispanic American) undergraduate students at Yale University

Methodology
Semi-structured interviews as the basis of a narrative inquiry detailing the extraordinary stories of these students rising to the highest levels of academia

Existing Literature
According to the body of research on this subject, it is generally accepted that there is a direct correlation between diminished academic expectations and underperformance in the classroom (Chang, 2011; Garces-Ozanne & Sullivan, 2014; Levi, Einav, Ziv, Raskind & Margalit, 2014). Secondly, it is almost universally recognized that this correlation disproportionately impacts
students in low income socioeconomic groups, most notably in the case of African American and Hispanic American children (Bromberg & Theokas, 2013; Lewis & Kim, 2008; Walkey, McClure, Meyer & Weir, 2013).

Research Void

Extensive research has been performed examining the relationship between academic expectations and academic achievement, and a large percentage of these studies have focused on minority students. However, this research almost universally fails to address what I see as the primary factors that contribute to the existence of the problem in the first place, and relies on multiple assumptions that I consider to be erroneous. In other words, I believe that the underlying premise guiding these studies is flawed, and that research into this issue approached from a different point-of-view is sorely needed.

Purpose of Proposed Study

I intend to expose the fallacy of the prevailing perspective related to the academic potential of minority students in America. Clearly, I have strongly held opinions on this matter based on my own personal experiences. However, I pledge to present the data authentically in order to let the readers render their own judgments on the subject. Ultimately, I hope to open the door to a new paradigm whereby race is not seen as an obstacle to academic achievement, but rather as an irrelevancy.

References


Appendix K: Disclaimer Regarding Tables and Figures

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