

**SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN-AMERICAN MATHEMATICS STUDENTS IN
ACADEMICALLY UNACCEPTABLE HIGH SCHOOLS**

DISSERTATION

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**by
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ABSTRACT

With the era of educational accountability at its peak and endorsed by the multi-billion dollar federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, it seems apparent that inner city schools will disproportionately be subject to the repercussions of accountability systems: repercussions which include publicly identifying unacceptable schools in the media. Nonetheless, there are pillars of success in schools deemed “academically unacceptable” that are frequently overshadowed and perhaps unknown to the public; most conspicuously unnoticed are high-achieving African-American students in mathematics. Accordingly, this study sought to determine: 1) the reasons why successful mathematics students have been able to thrive in academically unacceptable schools and 2) why they have chosen to stay in these academically unacceptable schools despite having the option to leave for a better performing school?

Qualitative methods including audio-taped group interviews, individual interviews, and responses from open-ended questionnaires were used to address the research questions in this study. The participants in this study were eleven high school students, two teachers, and two principals from two academically-unacceptable high schools in Louisiana.

Results indicate that students attribute their success in mathematics to good teachers, personal character traits (ability to focus, desire to succeed, determination, curious/inquisitive nature, and overall belief in self), and parental influence. They choose not to attend better performing schools

because they feel comfortable at their current school, and have developed a degree of trust at their current school. Moreover, the participants believe that graduating from a school with problems such as those associated with academically unacceptable schools will better prepare them for the “real world:” rather than attending higher performing schools.

Finally, further study is encouraged to: 1) better understand the experience of successful mathematics students who attend academically unacceptable elementary and middle schools; 2) determine if students who exercise their right of school choice demonstrate success at the new school; and 3) determine the influence of parents on success and school choice in elementary, middle school, and high schools that are considered academically unacceptable.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

With the era of educational accountability at its peak and endorsed by the multi-billion dollar federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, it seems apparent that inner city schools will disproportionately be subject to the repercussions of accountability systems: repercussions which include publicly identifying unacceptable schools in the media. Dandridge, Edwards, and Pleasants (2000) point out that drug and alcohol abuse, high crime rates, incessant violence, and extreme poverty are just a few of the negative environmental factors that create even more challenging educational circumstances for such schools and their surrounding communities. While it is obvious that “these schools need help desperately,” preliminary evidence indicates states and districts are frequently slow to aggressively improve or overhaul failing schools (American Federation of Teachers, 1999; Brady, 2003).

Nonetheless, there are pillars of success in low-performing schools that are frequently overshadowed and perhaps unknown to the public; most conspicuously unnoticed are high-achieving students in mathematics. Few would disagree with the conjecture that mathematics has been the proverbial Achilles heel for students attending low-performing schools; therefore it seems appropriate to make the central focus of this study those students who stand out academically despite the horrendous

conditions present in their school and community. Accordingly, it is an objective of this study to contribute to the limited research associated with state-designated poor schools and high-achieving African-American mathematics students attending such schools.

Statement of the Research Problem

Being African American in the United States has been described as a major disadvantage for an individual (Bankston & Caldas, 1996). It is also a common finding that schools and school districts enrolling predominantly minority students tend to score lower on standardized educational achievement tests than those enrolling predominantly non-minority students (Sireci, Deleon, & Washington, 2002). Horn (2003) found that non-White, non-Asian students, as well as students with special needs and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, are among the groups that are adversely affected by state mandated high stakes tests. Furthermore, African Americans have been greatly underrepresented among the highest scorers on standardized tests (Horn, 2003). Townsend (2002) stated that at the heart of many standards-based school reform initiatives are disastrous academic outcomes experienced by African Americans, Hispanics, and impoverished learners as measured by standardized tests. No matter how mathematics achievement and persistence is measured, African Americans seem to lag behind (Martin, 2000). Often unnoticed in the plethora of negative research and propaganda are those students who excel in schools which are largely considered deplorable. This study

will attempt to chronicle such students' journeys by examining the following questions:

- 1.) What are the reasons why successful mathematics students have been able to thrive in academically unacceptable schools?
- 2.) Why they have chosen to stay in these academically unacceptable schools despite having the option to leave for a better performing school?

By virtue of the Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, the federal government yielded jurisdiction over public schools to individual states. This formality notwithstanding, the U.S. federal government has flexed its financial muscle over the years to dictate the manner in which states operate their public schools. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB) has become the latest federal legislation to bring drastic changes to K-12 education. This new legislation promises an important shift in efforts at all levels to improve the quality of public education (Rittner & Lucas, 2003). "It is built on four common-sense pillars: accountability for results; an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research; expanded parental options; and expanded local control and flexibility " (US Department of Education, 2002). Thompson (2002) adds that NCLB seeks to close the persistent achievement gap through a multifaceted and comprehensive approach that promises to (a) achieve excellence through high standards and accountability, (b) make literacy a priority, (c) improve teacher quality, and (d) improve science and mathematics instruction. The issue of accountability has probably been the most controversial aspect of NCLB because it requires states to publicly identify low-performing

schools. Furthermore, if schools consistently perform poorly, school districts will be required to offer students the option of attending higher performing schools through the *school choice* mandate. School choice policies were upheld by the US Supreme Court in 2002 and hailed by the US Department of Education as “perhaps the most important education decision (by the Supreme Court) since *Brown v. Board of Education*” (Thompson, 2002; US Department of Education, 2002a).

Even though the NCLB legislation requires schools nationwide to have rigorous systems of accountability, individual states do have *some* autonomy in designing and implementing such systems. One of the most acclaimed states in the country for its accountability system is Louisiana; yet the Annie Casey Foundation, which produces the annual *Kids Count* report, rated Louisiana 49th of 50 states for child well-being as measured by education, health, and economic conditions (Associated Press, 2004). Thus, it seems appropriate to investigate successful students under Louisiana’s accountability system, which has high standards for students despite the overall poor welfare of its students.

Louisiana’s Accountability System

The state of Louisiana, one of the poorest states in the nation, has been consistently ranked near the bottom on almost every national measure of academic performance (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2003). Nonetheless, it was among the first states to comply with the accountability requirements of NCLB. In fact, Louisiana has had a reform system of accountability in place since 1999 and was heralded by many education reformists and even recognized by *Education Week* as

having one of the best accountability systems in the nation. Louisiana now ranks first in the country for its efforts to improve school and student performance, and fifth for its efforts to improve teacher quality (Louisiana Department of Education, 2003). A major component of Louisiana's accountability program provides the public with School Report Cards and School Performance Scores (SPS) every two years. These documents indicate whether schools are meeting the expectations implemented by the state's reform initiative. Such reports will now be released annually as per the requirements of NCLB.

High school SPS are generated from student performance on criterion-referenced tests, norm-referenced tests, attendance, and dropout rates. The Graduate Exit Exam for the 21st century (GEE) a criterion-referenced test, makes up 60 percent of the SPS. The Iowa Test of Educational Development, a norm-referenced test, makes up 30 percent, while attendance and dropout rates account for five percent each. The GEE is considered "high stakes" because it makes up 60 percent of the SPS, and all students must pass it before receiving a state endorsed high school diploma.

If a school's SPS is below 45.0 (effective 2003, formerly 30.0) the school will be labeled an "academically unacceptable school." If the school is labeled academically unacceptable, students have the opportunity to leave the "unacceptable" school for a better performing one by virtue of NCLB. In essence, the students will then have the option of exercising their school choice right. The US Department of Education affirms, "the beneficiaries of school choice are overwhelmingly minority, typically Black students" (US Department of Education, 2002b).

Accountability also affects students individually. Each student in Louisiana receives a report from the high stakes tests which labels their performance as Advanced, Mastery (formerly Proficient), Basic, Approaching Basic, or Unsatisfactory (this is in contrast to the pass/fail distinctions given to students who took the graduate proficiency exams of the 1990's). A student receiving an Unsatisfactory score on the GEE must retake the test until it is passed. If the student does not reach a passing score he/she will not receive a state endorsed high school diploma. Some students, possibly frustrated with the test, choose to take vocational courses on a non-diploma seeking track, rather than take the GEE multiple times to earn the diploma. Horn (2003) cited Haney's 2000 study which found that the Texas exit exam was associated with an increase in dropout rates especially among African Americans and Hispanics. This led to Horn's (2003) assumption that high stakes testing may increase the number of students leaving high school without a diploma.

Although Louisiana students have shown steady improvements in meeting the higher state standards, they still are considered behind their national counterparts. Even the Louisiana Department of Education (2003) admits that "despite the efforts of many conscientious educators, Louisiana's students rank near the bottom as compared to students in other states by nearly every measure of academic performance. These include test scores, dropout rates, college remediation rates, and ultimately, employability." Moreover, sixty-five schools statewide have been labeled academically unacceptable for the second consecutive cycle, which makes their students eligible for school choice. Ironically, even at these schools, which are primarily inner-city schools in large urban school districts with majority African

American population, there are some students who have been academically successful in mathematics.

Research Questions

Two primary research questions will direct this investigation: (1) what are the reasons why successful math students have been able to succeed in academically unacceptable schools; (2) why they have chosen to stay in these academically unacceptable schools despite having the option to leave for a better performing school? Sub-questions related to the research revolve around school culture and include:

- 1.) Is the negative school designation, academically unacceptable, an appropriate description of the schools in this study?
- 2.) What is the role of the teacher in the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools?
- 3.) What is the role of the school-based leader (principal) in the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools?
- 4.) To what extent do peers affect the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools?

Significance of the Study

Milner (2002) suggests that African-American high-achieving students face several challenges, including under-funded schools with meager resources, emotional and psychological distress as brought upon by peers and societal perceptions,

exclusion and isolation, and powerlessness. Furthermore, those African-American high achievers from low income families must also endure the cumulative effects of exposure to community violence, poverty, racism, oppression and other forms of abuse (Jipguep & Sanders-Phillips, 2003). Prior research has addressed the question of how high-achieving students overcome these obstacles, but the emergence of accountability systems which make “unacceptable schools” known to the public, provides a strong incentive to revisit the issue. Moreover, it is assumed that the greatest benefactors of a national accountability movement will be children from low income and ethnic minority backgrounds (Townsend, 2002). Therefore, the purpose of the study is to provide insight on why some African-American mathematics students are successful despite the perceived obstacles embedded in academically-unacceptable schools and why they choose to stay at these schools when they have the option to attend higher performing schools. Moody (2000) stated, “much can be learned from those African-American students who have been successful with school mathematics. Listening to success stories has the potential to create dialogue among mathematics educators about particular factors and schooling practices that contribute to the success of African-American mathematics students. [These success stories] can help us explore ways to improve the mathematics education and ultimately the mathematical experiences of African-American students.”

Furthermore, this study has the potential to yield both theoretical and practical applications to education. Theoretically, the subsequent results from this study may logically lead to hypotheses related to: (1) the influence of accountability systems on high achievers in mathematics at the elementary or middle school levels; (2) the

influence of accountability systems on high-achieving students in mathematics from ethnic backgrounds other than African American, and/or (3) the influence of accountability systems on high achievers in subjects other than mathematics.

Practically, it is likely to: (1) inspire African-American students in impoverished, low-performing schools to persevere and excel in mathematics; (2) motivate teachers in low-performing urban schools to promote high achievement in mathematics; and (3) assist inner-city school administrators in promoting a school culture that embraces high achievement in mathematics regardless of stigmas that may be associated with a low-performing school label.

Finally, over a century ago there existed considerable disparities in nearly every aspect of education from achievement to facilities. Similarly, the 2004 profile of educational opportunity for a significant segment of African-American children mirrors that of the early 20th century; predominantly Black and minority schools are most often housed in crumbling facilities, suffer from starved budgets and lack essential resources (Sullivan, 2004). W.E.B. Dubois, an early 20th century philosopher, proposed that academically elite students ought to be central figures in overcoming such obstacles; he often referred to this group as the *Talented Tenth*. Dubois (1903) stated “The *Talented Tenth* must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work... [This society] is going to be saved by its exceptional men.” DuBois’ conjecture provides a noteworthy justification for this study to focus on successful mathematics students who are conceivably among today’s *Talented Tenth*; and thus, are likely to contribute

to solving some of the enigmas associated with African-American students' deficiencies in mathematics.

Assumptions

It is assumed that Louisiana's GEE criterion-referenced test is an accurate measure of mathematics success. Since all Louisiana public school students must pass the test before receiving a state-recognized diploma, the researcher assumes it is a more appropriate measure of success than other forms of scholastic measurement such as grade point average (GPA), for example, which may be subject to partiality.

Limitations

Generalization is not the primary goal of qualitative research. This study uses a small, non probability, purposeful sample. It is limited to African-American Louisiana high school students who have: a) scored Advanced or Mastery on the math portion of the GEE Test, b) attend a high school that is labeled academically unacceptable by the Louisiana Department of Education, and c) decided to stay at the school despite having the option to leave the school for a better performing school. However, it should be noted that the number of students meeting the above criteria is relatively low; in 2003 seventeen high schools in the state of Louisiana enrolled students who met this set of conditions.

This study included audio-tape recorded interviews in a group setting. This type of interview may interfere with individual expression, may have one dominant speaker, or make it difficult to research sensitive topics. However, the group audio-

taped interview is a viable option for both qualitative and quantitative research and its advantages include that it is data rich, flexible, stimulating to respondents, recall aiding, and cumulative and elaborative (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

In addition, although the researcher did make an attempt to include parents of successful students in this study, none were actually interviewed nor did any parents contribute in any other way to this study.

Definitions of Terms

Graziano (2000) emphasizes that a variable can be operationally defined in different ways depending on the particular questions being asked in the research. For the sake of this study, each of the terms below will be operationally defined as follows:

1. **Successful Student** — a student who scored at the advanced or Mastery achievement level on the math segment of Louisiana's GEE test.
2. **Advanced Achievement Level** — label assigned to a student who has demonstrated superior performance beyond the level of mastery on the GEE test (Louisiana Department of Education, 2003).
3. **Mastery Achievement Level** — label assigned to a student who has demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter and is well prepared for the next level of schooling (Louisiana Department of Education, 2003).

4. **Academically Unacceptable School** — a school that has performed unsatisfactorily according to the state of Louisiana School Performance Score Formula.
5. **School Performance Score (SPS)** — score given to Louisiana public schools based on a formula which includes student performance on criterion-referenced tests, norm-referenced tests, attendance, and dropout rates.
6. **School Choice** — the option given to students to decide to attend a higher performing school (according to SPS) because of the consistent low performance of their current school. School districts provide students with a list of higher performing schools they may choose to attend.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The intention of this paper is to determine how successful math students have strived in academically-unacceptable schools and why they have chosen to stay in these low-performing schools despite having the option to leave. This portion of the paper is dedicated to the relevant literature associated with high-achieving African Americans and the culture of the urban schools which they often attend. For the sake of the literature review, the terms *successful*, *high achieving*, and *gifted* will be assumed to be synonymous, and thus, interchangeable.

High Achieving African-American Students

Martin's (2000) work contributed to the limited research literature related to the temperament of successful African American mathematics students with his investigation entitled, *Mathematics Success and Failure Among African American Youth: The Roles of Socio-historical Context, Community Forces, School Influence, and Individual Agency*. He investigated the persistence of African-American high-achieving math students in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades at an urban junior high school in Oakland, California. After observing students for several months in

their mathematics classrooms, in the context of school events, and going to and coming from class, Martin selected thirty-five students (of a possible 600) to be the centerpiece of his investigation. The primary sources of data collection involved qualitative methods which included audio-taped interviews. He also interviewed community members, teachers, and parents of student participants.

Martin attempted to provide the reader with a clear idea of the setting in which the research took place by including observations of the school structure; the results were typical of schools in large urban settings. “The physical environment at the school, inside and out, can be best described as old and in need of work and many of the school’s classrooms suffered the effects of aging, student abuse and neglect (Martin, 2000).”

Martin’s research yielded several factors that helped motivate students including family and teacher support, sports, goals of making a lot of money, and the need to help others through community service. Additionally, success was inspired by motivational as well as dispositional factors. As a result of his study, Martin characterized high achieving mathematics students (in the study) in the following manner:

- 1.) Students attributed their success to their own efforts and strong identities as well as to teacher and parental influences.
- 2.) Students believed that their goals could be achieved through education.
- 3.) Students had confidence in their mathematical abilities and recognize math as a necessary ingredient to their educational success.

- 4.) Students portrayed their teachers in a positive light, showed appreciation for their efforts, believed they were interested in helping students learn, and thought they were helpful.

Martin described one “disheartening” fact of the study: each student was subject to some form of differential treatment from his/her peers. Generally, research has indicated that high achieving African American students try to avoid such treatment by disguising their success. Martin found that this set of students demonstrated bold defiance of the negative influences that surrounded them. These students not only resisted the dominant underachieving norms that existed among peers, but also the negative elements in the community that are thought of as inescapable or ensuring failure (Martin, 2000).

Martin utilized interviews as a primary source of data for this study. The following are selected quotes from students Martin interviewed which perhaps exemplify the experiences of successful African American math students:

“I want to be somebody. Not just drop out of school, get pregnant, be on welfare. I want to depend on myself have a job, a family. I know if I don’t go to school, whatever I plan will not come true. If you don’t go to school, you won’t achieve what you want to be in the future. That’s the reason I want to be someone important, very important. I want to be a teacher” (Martin, 2000).

“I love school. I care about my education now more than anything. So I love school...because without education, you will live in poverty. You’ll really have nothing. You can’t really get nowhere being unintelligent. (If I got all F’s in my classes) my self esteem would be low. I’d feel that I couldn’t go any further. But it would also make me try harder. I really want to be a psychiatrist. I really want to deal with the human mind to see how people react in their behavior and I want to help people” (Martin, 2000).

“It distracts me because it hurts that my own race of people are putting me down. I might be one of the people that prevail among all people yet they don’t want me to be successful. I’m successful in school and hockey but nobody gives me credit for it. It’s a no win situation. It’s no way to win” (Martin, 2000).

Even though Martin did indicate that only 13 percent of the students in the school during the time of the study maintained GPA of 3.0 or above, his definition of success may lend itself to some criticism in view of the fact that it is based primarily on classroom grades and his own observations. One might contest the legitimacy of the grades being that the school is considered to be low performing. It is a common finding that high grades at low-performing schools tend to endure more scrutiny and suspicion of “grade inflation” than do higher performing schools.

Similar to Martin’s study, Maton, Hrabowski, and Grief (1998) set out to contribute to the limited knowledge of high-achieving African Americans by publishing, *“Preparing the Way: A Qualitative Study of High Achieving African American Males and the Role of the Family.”* The authors stated that studies have disproportionately focused on factors related to school dropout and underachievement rather than those related to high levels of academic achievement.

The aim of Maton, Hrabowski, and Grief’s study was to supply knowledge about factors that lead to the outstanding academic achievement among African-American males. The participants in the study were sixty African-American males and their parents. Each of the males was enrolled in a supplemental education program geared to students with an interest in obtaining careers in science, engineering, or mathematics. The group had a mean GPA of 3.5, math SAT mean of 643 and mean SAT verbal of 546 which placed them in the top three percent and four percent, respectively, of Black Students nationwide (Maton et al., 1998).

The authors employed qualitative methods to examine the role of the family in the academic success of the participants (Maton et al., 1998). Qualitative

methodology allows in-depth exploration of family and contextual factors potentially related to achievement, and also allows the voices of those studied to be heard (Maton et al., 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

The participants (referred to as “sons”) and their parents were interviewed. The interviews were in a group setting, but not focus groups; each individual within the group took turns addressing each interview question. The interview sessions lasted between two and four hours. The interviews were recorded and later coded for inter-rater reliability.

Results of the investigation showed that high levels of determined parental academic engagement, strictness, nurturance, and community connectedness (which encompasses connections to extended family, church, influential teachers, academically, motivated peers, and extracurricular activities) collectively appeared to counteract the negative contextual influences of neighborhood, peers, schools, and society (Maton et. al, 1998). The authors also concluded that based on their research, it appeared that parents were tremendously influential in their sons’ high levels of academic achievement.

Most relevant to this study are the responses of the sons themselves. Maton et al., (1998) pointed out that different sons spontaneously indicated a variety of psychological factors which appeared critical to them: belief in self, perseverance, spirituality, larger purpose, self discipline, concern for parent’s approval, future orientation, ethnic identity, isolation from deviant peers, and connectedness to a larger purposeful community. Here are some of the actual responses from the sons:

“A white male...doesn’t have to fight society’s view of you. They’re already saying, “oh well, you can be a doctor, you can be this.” But if you’re a person of color, you have to prove {that you} can excel, can be a

doctor... It's sort of like you're assumed guilty until proven innocent" (Maton et al., 1998).

"My parents had so many difficulties growing up...they were so poor and this made them want so much more for their children. They stressed constantly the importance of doing well academically. For me to constantly hear that, I would feel like I was letting myself down to strive for less than my best" (Maton et al., 1998).

"We were the only two black students {in the high school} who wanted to take the honors classes.... {the other Black students} looked {down} upon us, "Why are you guys trying to be like that? Why are guys trying to be white" (Maton et al., 1998)?

"My parents probably worry about me every night when I go out...if he is in the elevator with that White woman, is she going to clutch her purse closer to herself?... Is he going to be shot because he is mistaken for somebody else? When you raise a Black child, you raising an endangered species...I don't have anything guaranteed to me. I have to work for it 10 times as hard" (Maton et al., 1998).

Quotes such as the preceding provide insight on the plight of African-American males in a research context, while simultaneously placing the reader inside the unique perspectives of the high achieving African-American males. Few would argue that comments such as those provided by the sons would spark a feeling of discomfort in an environment other than research.

Perhaps another noteworthy aspect of this study was in the selection of the parents of the sons. Included in the group were single parents with a high school diploma, some college, college degree, or advanced degrees and two-parent homes with varying levels of education. Parents also varied in their jobs, income, and places they chose to have their children educated (i.e. magnet public school, suburban school, private school).

The authors address some of the weaknesses of the study in their statements of limitations. One limitation cited was the retrospective nature of the study. Each of the sons were college students who reflected on past experiences and, although recalling one's family experiences can provide perspective and distance, memory can

distort the recall of events (Maton et al., 1998). Other limitations included the unknown influence of response and measurement bias (the presence of other parents or students in the group interviews), the lack of interview findings from a sample of low achieving Black males, and the generalizability of the findings (Maton et al., 1998).

Just what are the obstacles that successful or high achieving African-American students are encountering throughout their academic careers? In Milner's *Affective and Social Issues Among High Achieving African American Students: Recommendations for Teachers and Teacher Education*, he describes six characteristic domains in which high achieving African Americans endure. He depicts high achievers in terms of (a) urban schooling, (b) emotional and psychological experience, (c) exclusions and isolation, (d) powerlessness, (e) token status and (f) pigeonholing (Milner, 2002).

The focus of his article was to outline and discuss the affective and social issues and needs of high achieving African-American students (Milner, 2002). Milner (2002) stated that affective and social issues among high achieving African-American students have virtually been ignored in theoretical and empirical work.

Milner (2002) operationally defined *high achievers* as students in school settings who have been identified as intellectually above average according to test data, and or those who are well involved in leadership and service roles and or those students whose grades are above average (e.g. 3.2 GPA). Milner suggested that although these students are high achievers, they are often at the bottom of the hierarchical social structure of high schools. Many African-American students want

to be accepted by their peers and unfortunately academic success is not considered “cool” among African-American students (Milner, 2002).

In urban schools, which are largely economically disadvantaged, the learning process is often inhibited by meager resources (Milner, 2002). The author suggested that the lack of challenges which result from poor funding lead high achieving African American students to develop rebellious attitudes, become bored, disengaged, and act out disruptively (Milner, 2002). Milner also implies that in urban schools, high achieving students are disconnected from their teachers (most of whom are European Americans) and thus are incorrectly diagnosed as “troublesome” because they do not follow norms that are consistent with teachers. This often stagnates the student’s intellectual and social maturation (Milner, 2002).

Milner suggests that there are emotional and psychological realities among high achievers that also merit attention. In addition to the “acting white” and “selling out your race” slurs high achievers endure, they also find themselves working harder than white students to “prove” themselves (Milner, 2002). This notion reaffirms Ogbu’s (1989) findings which described a set of strategies used by African American students that includes: emulation of whites, cultural passing accommodation without assimilation, mentoring, attending private schools, and secretly doing one’s work at home (Martin, 2000).

These students sometimes become psychologically compulsive in their endeavors to demystify their classmates and teachers’ negative perceptions and stereotypes of them (Milner, 2002; Steele, 1999). In addition, these high achievers may have added pressure on them because they believe if they fail, they fail the entire

race (Milner, 2002). These same students who have to work harder and carry the burden of the race on their shoulders may become stressed out, defiant, and frustrated, especially when they perceive their extra output is not rewarded (Milner, 2002).

High achieving African-Americans can also feel excluded and isolated in social context. Some feel left out because there are so few of their African American peers enrolled in advanced classes and programs with them (Milner, 2002).

Moreover, many African American high achievers feel isolated, disconnected, and even inadequate in the learning context because many of their interests conflict with that of their European American classmates (Milner, 2002).

Since high achieving African Americans are usually outnumbered in their classes, they often feel powerless (Milner, 2002). They truly do not have a “say” in communal decision making because they are the numerical minority (Milner, 2002). Therefore, they may withdraw from participating in class discussions and refuse to share their opinions (Milner, 2002).

In classroom environments where there are only few African Americans, they often feel like the “token” African American (Milner, 2002; Ford, Milner, & Sims, 2001). Teachers and others operate under the misconception that they are promoting diversity by looking at these “token” students as authority on issues concerning African Americans (Milner, 2002; 2001). Students become indignant because they do not know everything about African Americans, and they are not equipped to speak on behalf of every African American person (Milner, 2002).

Pigeonholing and compartmentalizing is the final sphere Milner believes high achieving African Americans encounter. In cases of this sort, students are often

encouraged to be a representative to promote diversity (Milner, 2002). These students are often endorsed to be leaders in cultural groups as well as to be actively engaged in organizations such as the student government association (Milner, 2002). Often these students are over committed, overloaded, and ultimately feel added pressure and stress (Milner, 2002).

Milner provided a solid foundation for further research in this area. He also provided intriguing guidance for identifying high achieving students. One could argue, the overwhelming strength of this article is that Milner himself was once described as a high achieving African American, which makes this article more authentic in nature than if it were written by someone who did not live that experience. Finally, a limitation of the article is that there is little external empirical evidence to corroborate the conclusions cited.

Milner (2001) hinted that there are few high achieving African-Americans. Accordingly, how can the number of high achieving African-American students increase? Tucker, Herman, Pederson, Vogel and Reinke (2000) attempted to answer that question in their investigation entitled, "*Student-Generated Solutions to Enhance the Academic Success of African American Youth.*"

The views of African-American students, who are, perhaps, the real experts regarding problems that occur among themselves, are often excluded from theorizing and intervention planning (Tucker et al., 2000). In an effort to include these "experts," the authors submitted a twenty-two item open-ended questionnaire to twenty-two elementary and twenty-one high school students (Tucker et al., 2000). The questions were subdivided into four domains: (1) What they (African American

students) were considered problem behaviors in the school settings? (2) What causes behavior problems at school for African American children? (3) How parents and teachers could promote the academic success of African American Students? and (4) How students could promote their own academic success? (Tucker et al., 2000).

All of the students involved in the research investigation were registered in an after school program designed to enhance their academic and social skills (Tucker et al., 2000). The elementary school children ranged in age from 7 to 12 years (mean = #9.4) while high school students ranged from 12 to 17 years (mean = #14.6). Fifty - five percent of the households in the research were headed by a single parent and 41% of the students received free lunch (Tucker et al., 2000).

Using thematic analysis to summarize the results of the investigation, the authors observed: (1) academic preparation and active participation in class would enhance academic success (2) positive peer influences would be helpful in promoting academic success even during adolescent years, (3) self-empowering African-American students by teaching them self-management techniques would promote academic success, and (4) praise and encouragement by teachers and parents are needed to facilitate African-American students' active participation in class and their school work (Tucker et al., 2000).

This article contributed noteworthy findings directly from the responses of African-American students. As the authors noted, these voices are often muted, but conversely, can assist in understanding and developing interventions needed to improve the academic success among African-American students.

Perhaps a flaw in the investigation is that the authors did not describe the academic achievement levels of the students being interviewed. Perhaps the researchers expected readers to assume that the participants were successful students? In any case, data indicating achievement level seems appropriate in a study such as this, in order to establish credibility of the “experts.”

Urban School Culture

The aforementioned literature mentions identification of high achievers and even some ways to increase the success of African American students, but Bankston and Caldas (1996) suggest that where you go to school or more aptly, who attends your school, affects your chances of doing well in school. The purpose of their study was to examine whether the racial composition of schools has an influence on individual achievement, controlling for the race of individuals.

Bankston and Caldas analyzed rich student demographic data from the Louisiana Graduate Exit Exam (GEE) (this is the “old” GEE; the GEE for the 21st century replaced the old GEE in 2000) required of all Louisiana high school students. They used data from some 42,041 African American and white tenth grade students who first took the GEE exam in April 1990 (Bankston & Caldos, 1996).

The dependent variable in their analysis was student achievement on the GEE. Bankston and Caldas (1996) point out that there have been no predictive validity studies done between scores on the GEE, and any measures of future success. However, they do cite Cohn’s 1979 work which observed that though the test is not

directly linked to future success, it is closely linked to the competence associated with a high school diploma, which is highly correlated with measures of success like lifetime income (Bankston & Caldas, 1996).

The authors also described a number of other independent variables which they subdivided into two categories: (1) individual level variables (race, sex, television hours, reading hours, homework hours, organized activity hours, free/reduced lunch status, parental socio economic status), and (2) school level variables (percent of the student population that was African American).

The authors employed quantitative methods to interpret the data. Multivariate regression was used to analyze the data, with variables of interest entered in several stages in order to look first at the effect of the primary variables of interest (minority race and minority concentration) and then how those effects might be explained by factors such as behavioral differences, family economic level and parental social status (Bankston & Caldas, 1996).

The results of the investigation showed that the degree of minority concentration has a powerful negative influence on achievement test results. This influence does not appear to be explained by socioeconomic factors or other factors. Further, both whites and African-Americans are negatively affected by the degree of minority concentration in the schools (Bankston & Caldos, 1996). Additionally, Caldas and Bankston (1996) asserted that this negative influence may simply be the result of continuing social, economic, and educational handicaps imposed on minority students' dominant society. But it may also be that a history of oppression and deprivation has attached disadvantages to race over and above the socioeconomic

disadvantages, and has therefore made minority concentration in and of itself an inhibitor of academic achievement (Bankston & Caldas, 1996).

The strength of this article is that the methods used to isolate minority concentration as a predictor of academic achievement were suitable. Considering the high volume of subjects, the results of the study may merit high levels of relevancy. One could argue that Bankston & Caldas' findings are controversial especially when they aligned their findings with a term such as residential segregation, and imply that white families have increasingly fled to school districts with small African American populations (Bankston & Caldas, 1996; Rivkin, 1994; Welch et al., 1987). However, the comprehensive nature of their study and the subsequent results perhaps verifies their position.

It may be of note that Bankston and Caldas did not include the credentials and/or qualifications of the teachers as a variable in the achievement of the students. One could perceive the absence of that variable as a major shortcoming of the study.

It is not implausible for readers of Bankston and Caldos' article to deduce that the authors may also be implying that the school culture affects student achievement. Morris examined how race and culture affect the extent to which African American students are equitably represented in the field of gifted education.

Morris deemed that gifts alone do not determine placement in gifted and talented programs; the students are probably just as advantaged by class and race as they are by their giftedness (Morris, 2002; Blackburn, 1999).

Morris (2002) affirms that the literature is replete with analysis of how African American student peer culture, in particular, adversely affect African-

American students' academic school success. Some African American students even sabotage their academic careers to be accepted by their culture (Morris, 2002). The author, however, does promote the idea of giving African American students access to gifted and talented programs by placing the programs in predominately Black schools. He suggested that these programs with their enriched curricula can increase the overall access to educational opportunities beyond high school (Morris, 2002). Perhaps it can also be surmised that the gifted program may assist in allowing some of the "regular students" to assimilate to the idea of advanced academic curricula.

Finally, Morris (2002) suggested that one of the first steps toward creating a more equitable education for all gifted and talented students is to closely examine the racial and cultural assumptions upon which the field of gifted education operates. Unfortunately, race, minority status, and others variables are the primary factors which dictate and predict how schools will treat children (Morris, 2002; 1995).

Morris provides a theoretical framework for research related to educational policy, race, and culture. The scrutiny the article places on school districts and other educational institutions may eventually provide the basis for extensive empirical research on this previously voiceless topic.

The following section of the literature review attempts to typify the current research on urban school culture, particularly in reference to the general state of urban schools and the affects of high stakes testing on its population.

Goldenberg, Kunz, Hamburger, and Stevenson (2003) sought to present a generalized depiction of urban education and present a set of solutions to improve its current condition. The intent of this research, entitled *Urban Education: Connections*

between Research Propaganda and Prevailing Views, was to provide broad contextual framework for major educational and social issues and to provide a brief overview of some of the misconceptions about American Education (Goldenberg et al., 2003). The authors based their conclusions on the interpretations from related readings, deliberations from a national symposium on urban education, and discussions associated with the books, *The Manufactured Crisis* by David Berliner and James Bell, and *Setting the Record Straight* by Gerald W. Bracey.

Some of the findings seem to be typical of the urban education portrayal including:

- The US has the highest child poverty rate of any industrialized country.
- Schools with the greatest levels of poverty among their students and their families tend to be staffed with the less experienced and less well trained teachers.
- Issues related to child poverty (poor nutrition, unemployment, unequal opportunities, repressive neighborhoods, broken families) may be the most significant unalterable negative impact on childhood learning that exist.

The authors also mentioned several other points which conceivably influence the state of urban schools: a) schools have long been victims of criticism and are possibly the only social institution in America that everyone believes he has expert knowledge about; b) although childhood poverty and student mobility rates are significant issues which schools face, these factors are rarely addressed when test scores or school comparisons are made; c) most major nations spend more direct public funds for schools than does the United States; and d) industry considers skills

such as teamwork, reliability, honesty, initiative, problem solving ability, and decision making skills as highly desirable for employment, yet there is insufficient time (in schools) to focus equally on both the academic and creative thinking components of education (Goldenberg et al., 2003).

Conversely, they found several aspects of urban education which directly contradict common misconceptions including: a) schools provide more than enough basically educated candidates for a majority of the job needs today; b) the top American students are well prepared for continuing their education in college and subsequently, are equipped to fill professional jobs; c) the best American students compare equally to the best foreign students in virtually all categories and subjects and d) when parental attributes (education, income, etc) are equated, students in public schools compare equally to those in private schools (Goldenberg et al., 2003).

In order to combat some of the problems facing urban schools today, the authors suggested that a constituency comprised of community stakeholders, policy makers, university faculty, and researchers each undertake an active role in revitalizing schools. It was conjectured that community stakeholders would have a greater impact on student learning outcomes if they provided more fundamental support for students such as improving nutrition, providing family counseling, providing job training, and highlighting school successes. Policy makers were urged to address problems in a broader more systematic way that is needs-based and includes education in its urban policy and planning initiatives. Universities were recommended to have teacher training programs comprised of reality-based programs that allow teacher candidates to engage in field work early in their matriculation. The

outcomes from such approach may include a better understanding of the intuitive, sensitive, understanding and intellectual approach to the realities of urban schools and their students. Finally, it was suggested that educational researchers focus urban education research on local need, include meta-analysis of urban research as a means of accessing successful teaching strategies, and translate research into useful knowledge for the practitioner (Goldenberg et al., 2003).

Goldenberg, Kunz, Hamburger, and Stevens addressed urban education in a general context while Steele characterized urban education in the context of high stakes testing and differences in urban school culture since the *1954 Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Steele (2004) affirms that the shift toward using test scores in education decision making may have originated in the 1960's. Ultimately, results from test scores taken early in life, are the catalyst for subjecting lower scoring people and groups to less educational attention, or more of a basic skills education aimed at bringing them to minimal levels of competence; whereas higher scoring people and groups get a richer education supported by better trained teachers, more academically challenged curricula, and better opportunities.

Steele also argues that the intensifying ideology of school accountability (holding schools and their financing accountable to test scores) diverts high quality resources and teachers away from low scoring students. Moreover, the consequences from failure to meet accountability goals (specifically testing) consistently channel African Americans into lower-grade education that sustains their lower test scores, alienates many of them from their education, contributes importantly to their dropout

rates and puts their lives on a course of restricted opportunity. Further, there may exist an ability-testing paradigm that uses early low scores to steer African Americans into low-expectation education as reliably as their parents and grandparents were steered into segregated schools. This led Steele to the conclusion that two educational systems are present that are again “separate but unequal” (Steele, 2004).

Hill, Guin, and Celio (2003) reported that there are ten big school districts in the United States that educate 19% of all African Americans, and students in these urban districts are likely to be poor and to attend school with others who are poor. Steele (2004) characterized the experience African-American students who attend such schools in this manner: a) they are more likely to attend poorly funded schools in run down buildings; b) they are more likely to be taught by uncertified and poorly trained teachers; c) they often experience differential treatment even from well-intended teachers; d) they experience more corporal punishment and more frequent suspensions; e) in junior high school and high school they are more likely to encounter an especially distracting peer culture; f) they are more likely to be tracked into lower academic and special education classes than other students; and g) they are more likely to go to schools with few or no Advanced Placement courses.

Steele cited an earlier study (conducted by Steele and Aronson both of Stanford University) which found that contextual pressure, which is conceivably present during high stakes testing, is perhaps upsetting and distracting enough to undermine the performance of African Americans on the test. Using students of the same academically strong background, Steele and Aronson, simulated a high pressure environment to compare the academic performance of African Americans and

Caucasians. Results showed African Americans performed worse than Caucasians. Yet in a similar study, without the “simulated pressure,” the performance of both groups were statistically matched (Steele, 2004).

In conclusion, Steele (2004) suggested that lawyers, judges, scientists and educators all come together to get rid of the discrepancy in test achievement among African Americans and other groups. Specifically, it was recommended that an emphasis be placed on high expectations for lower scoring students; pathways be established for lower skilled students to re-enter advanced curricula; and multiple, low stakes, cumulative based assessments be developed rather than current high stakes testing, which Kohn (2004) refers to as “that annual do-or-die testing.”

All of the above research literature provides a concrete foundation for more concentrated investigations of high achieving, successful African Americans math students in the context of urban schools and its intricate culture. It is an objective of this study to add to the scholarship already addressed, yet approach the topic from a timely perspective that thus far has not been examined.

Summary

The literature analyzed in Chapter II exemplified the experience of high-achieving African-American students. Generally, the research concluded the following:

- There exist a relatively small percentage of high-achieving African-American students as measured by standardized test scores, specifically in mathematics or the sciences.
- High achieving African-American students suffer indifferent treatment during their schooling which includes peer ridicule, isolation, and exclusion.
- Often these high achievers attend urban schools with insufficient resources, shabby buildings, and a distracting peer culture. Such schools are often located in deprived areas inundated with poverty, crime, and lawlessness.

Despite the presence of an ominous set of troubling conditions, the research shows that high achievers find ways to rise above the aforementioned adversities. This is often accomplished through support from teachers, parental academic engagement, self-discipline, self efficacy, and positive peer influence.

It was also evident that some students considered school to be a safe haven from the ill-wills of the community and a catalyst in escaping the dismal circumstances plaguing the neighborhood.

However, in today's era of accountability, those same schools may be publicly degraded with ratings such as "*academically unacceptable*." In essence, schools are being openly tainted with undesirable stigmas usually reserved for impoverished crime-ridden neighborhoods.

How will this affect students? The current research literature is deficient in studying the influence of the accountability movement on students; particularly in regards to how high achieving African Americans overcome the additional public "indignity" of attending a school with a deleterious accountability rating such as "*academically unacceptable*." It is the intention of this study to add scholarship to this topic. In addition, the study will address why these students have decided to stay at these unacceptable schools, when the *school choice* mandate (embedded in accountability programs) gives them option to attend a better performing school.

Finally, the research in Chapter II helped to frame the guiding questions in this study as well as provide a collective blueprint for how to approach the study methodologically. However, it is apparent that the research literature on the subject is limited. Noticeably absent from the journals are investigations that focus on success rather than failure among African-American mathematics students. Consequently, this study will attempt to fill a void present in mathematics education research by examining success among African-American mathematics students.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to provide insight on why successful African-American students prevail despite attending an academically unacceptable school and why they choose to continue their matriculation at such a school. Qualitative methods were used to investigate this issue. Qualitative studies seek to discover and understand phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Merriam, 1998).

Design of the Study

Given that this investigation attempts to: (a) provide “information rich” insight from the perspective of successful math students in academically unacceptable schools and (b) gain a descriptive understanding of how the participants triumph over the perceived obstacles embedded in their unacceptable schools, a qualitative approach is appropriate.

Wolcott (1990) cites John Van Maanen’s speech which perhaps typifies one of the goals of qualitative methodology: “The ethnographer’s intention in the impressionist mode is not to tell readers what to think of an experience but to show

them the experience from beginning to end and thus draw them immediately into the story to work out the problems and puzzles as they unfold.”

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) regard the task of a qualitative researcher as coming to understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them. What's more, qualitative researchers avoid simplifying social phenomena and instead explore the range of behavior and expand their understandings of the resulting interactions (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Selection of the Participants

Merriam (1998) wrote, in qualitative research, the most appropriate sampling strategy is non-probability. This study will incorporate a unique purposeful sample which is a subcategory of non-probability sampling (Merriam, 1998).

First, a criterion was established to select the participating schools. The Louisiana Department of Education annually releases School Performance Scores (SPS) and performance labels for each public school in the state. High school SPS is based on student performance on the criterion referenced tests (60 percent), norm-referenced tests (30 percent), attendance (5 percent) and dropout rate (5 percent). Once the SPS (an index score) is calculated, each school is assigned a performance label (see Table 1).

Schools that are labeled “*Academically Unacceptable*” are required by state and federal law to provide school choice for their students. In Fall 2003, sixty-five schools in the state of Louisiana were deemed “*Academically Unacceptable*” and were required to provide students the right to attend other schools (Louisiana

Department of Education, 2003). Accordingly, status as an academically unacceptable school was the first criterion in selecting schools for this study.

Table 1
Louisiana School Performance Achievement Levels Prior to Nov. 2003

Achievement Label	School Performance Score
<i>School of Academic Excellence</i>	150.0 or above
<i>School of Academic Distinction</i>	125.0-149.9
<i>School of Academic Achievement</i>	100.0-124.9
<i>Academically Above the State Average</i>	75.9-99.9
<i>Academically Below the State Average</i>	45.0-75.8
<i>Academically Unacceptable School</i>	44.9 or below

Source: Louisiana Department of Education, 2003.

The other primary factor in selecting the schools was determined by the “success” (a student who reaches the advanced or mastery level on a criterion referenced test) of individual students on criterion referenced tests (see Table 2). What’s more the successful students must commit to continue attending the academically unacceptable school (thus revoking their school choice right). In one large school district in Louisiana only ten percent of the students eligible for school choice exercised that alternative and thus switched schools (Lussier, 2003).

Table 2
Louisiana GEE/LEAP Test- Individual Achievement Scoring Labels

Achievement Levels	Eighth Grade LEAP Scores	Tenth Grade GEE Scores
<i>Advanced</i>	398-500 (~85-100%)	377-500 (~85-100%)
<i>Mastery</i>	376-397 (~70-84%)	346-376 (~70-84%)
<i>Basic</i>	321-375 (~50-69%)	305-345 (~45-69%)
<i>Approaching Basic</i> <i>(Minimum passing standard)</i>	296-320 (~40-49%)	286-304 (~35-44%)
<i>Unsatisfactory</i> <i>(failing score)</i>	100-295 (39% and below)	100-285 (~34% and below)

Source: Louisiana Department of Education, 2003.

The researcher selected two high schools that met the above criteria – Lake High School and River High School. Both schools are located in the Urban Independent School District (UISD). These two schools were ideal schools among those eligible in UISD because they were acknowledged by the Louisiana Department of Education for showing significant improvement in the SPS score from the 2002-03 school year to the 2003-04 school year. Ironically, even though the schools are considered academically unacceptable overall, the state has commended them for their efforts to improve by bestowing upon them the “*Recognized Academic Growth*” label.

It was the intention of the researcher to select one high school from UISD, the largest metropolitan area in the state, and one high school from Oak Independent School District (OISD), the second largest metro area in Louisiana. However, the release of the Fall 2004 academically unacceptable schools list by the Louisiana

Department of Education included only one high school from OISD. Moreover, that particular high school only produced two successful mathematics students.

Therefore, both schools in this study were located in UISD.

Fifty-four of the seventy-five academically unacceptable schools (included in the Fall 2004 list) are located in UISD. In the 2002-03 school year, UISD had a student population of over 70,000 students; ninety-three percent of whom were African American (Louisiana Department of Education, 2003).

A total of sixteen students were invited to participate in the study. Seven males and three females were eligible from Lake High School, while three males and three females were eligible from River High School. Of those sixteen students eleven students returned the required participant assent forms – seven males and four females (see Table 3). Those who did not return the form ostensibly were not interested in participating in the study.

Table 3

Student Participants Demographics

Gender Breakdown	Average GPA	Number Receiving Free/Reduced Lunch	Number of Participants in Two Parent Homes
7 Males 4 Females	3.17	8	8

Thus eleven students, two teachers, and two principals from the selected schools were included in the study (see Table 4). In 2003, the seventeen academically unacceptable high schools in Louisiana averaged five successful mathematics students per school; thus involving eleven students in this study is appropriate (Louisiana State Department of Education, 2003).

Table 4
Methodology Summary

Participants	Number	Sites	Methodology
Students	11	2	Group Interviews & Written Survey
Teachers	2	2	Individual Interviews
Principals	2	2	Individual Interviews

Since the students take the mathematics portion of the GEE in the spring of their sophomore year, the researcher sought to include mathematics teachers from students' past and present (students were at least juniors at the time of the study); thereby allowing teacher participants to provide a more complete description of students' academic performance during their high school years, and concurrently, offering guidance to teachers who may want to emulate their classroom practices (Dance, Wingfield, & Davidson, 2000). However, problems of teacher attrition at both high schools caused the researcher to focus only on the mathematics teacher(s) students and principals identified as the most influential. The problems of teacher attrition at Lake High and River High mirror a national trend which indicates a large number of teachers transfer out of the most difficult urban schools to seek employment elsewhere in the district or in suburban school districts (Jorissen, 2003).

As mentioned above, this study also included principals in spite of current trends in research which have excluded them. Dandridge et al., (2000) indicated that

the principal's voice is often marginalized and noticeably absent in studies of urban schooling. However, the experiences of principals who orchestrate noteworthy improvements in low-performing schools may be significant. Halverson (2004) argues that the construction of a knowledge base for school leadership will not be complete unless it includes access to the practical wisdom of successful school leaders and they also need specific examples of how techniques and theories are used in the schools.

The Setting

According to US Census Bureau, the state of Louisiana has a population of nearly 4.5 million (2001) and median household income of \$32,500 (1999). Nearly twenty percent of its population lives below the poverty level.

Although the state has a 64 percent Caucasian and 32 percent African-American population distribution, of the 54,000 students who took the GEE test in Spring 2003, 26,000 were African American, and 25,000 were Caucasians. Thirty-three percent of Caucasians taking the math portion of the GEE test scored at the *advanced* or *mastery* level, while 6 percent of African -Americans reached that landmark. Forty-nine percent of the African- Americans who took the math portion of the GEE failed to pass the exam.

In Louisiana, ten percent of its high schools were labeled academically unacceptable by the state's own standards, while only one percent of its high schools received its highest rating in Fall 2003 (see Table 5).

Table 5.**Louisiana Schools' Academic Performance (Labels Adjusted November 2003)**

Performance Label	SPS Scoring Range	Percentage of High Schools
<i>Five Stars</i> *****	140.0- and above	1.5%
<i>Four Stars</i> ****	120.0-139.9	1.0%
<i>Three Stars</i> ***	100.0 -119.9	17.9%
<i>Two Stars</i> **	80.0-99.9	26.4%
<i>One Star</i> *	60.0-79.9	31.3%
<i>Academic Warning</i>	45.0-59.9	11.9%
<i>Academically Unacceptable</i>	Below 45.0	10.0%

Procedure for Data Collection

The researcher used a three-fold approach to obtain multiple perspectives from the participants. All three sets of participants (students, teachers, and principals) were subjected to tape-recorded interviews. One of the benefits of tape-recorded interviews is that the researcher has the original data and he can preserve the words of the respondents (Seidman, 1998).

Each of the eleven students in the study completed a ten item open-ended survey related to the research questions. The survey also included demographic data. The students then participated in one-hour taped group interview sessions as a follow-up to the survey results. Because of conflicting class schedules of the students, the group interviews were divided based on the participants' availability. At Lake High there were two group interviews (on the same day). One included three males and one female, while the other interview included two males. At River High, there were also two separate group interviews (on the same day). One included one female and one male, and the other included two females and one male. In both of the above

situations the group interviews took place within a week of the participants completing the open-ended questionnaire.

The researcher also conducted separate one hour semi-structured audio- taped interviews with the principals and the math teachers of the students in the study. Math teachers were interviewed individually in their classrooms during their planning periods for one hour each and principals were interviewed individually in their offices for one hour each. To this extent, the study attempted to incorporate data triangulation, which is the use of a variety of data sources in a study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). A study in which more than one data gathering method is used can greatly strengthen the study's usefulness for other settings (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

All interview questions were guided by Merriam's (1998) guidelines for interview questions designed to stimulate responses. These questions include: (1) hypothetical questions (what would the respondent do in a particular situation); (2) devil's advocate questions (asks the respondent to consider an opposing view); and (3) ideal position questions (asks the respondent to describe an ideal situation).

Finally, the researcher had the data from the interviews professionally transcribed. The original tape recordings are in the possession of the researcher and are securely locked away. The researcher will continue to keep the transcripts and audio tapes securely locked for use in a possible follow-up study.

Data Analysis

Results from the interviews are presented in the following chapters in a format similar to what Merriam describes as a narrative analysis in that first person accounts

are given. These also share the characteristics of what Seidman (1998) labels a profile of the participants. The profile allows one to present the participant in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time, all central components of qualitative analysis (Seidman, 1998). In both the profile and narrative analysis, the reader is allowed his own interpretation, whether contrary or in confirmation of the researcher's conclusions. Additionally, all data from interviews and responses from questionnaires given to students were analyzed for possible congruent themes.

Further, the researcher submitted transcripts from the interviews to the adult participants for their review and/or editing, in a process sometimes referred to as member checking. This is intended to increase the authenticity of the results as well as to enhance its validity. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) found that obtaining reactions from respondents may: (1) verify that you have reflected the insider's perspectives; (2) inform you of sections that could be problematic for personal or political reasons; and (3) help you to develop new ideas and interpretations. "Ultimately, qualitative analysis of data means searching for patterns or themes among the words collected; researchers sort, chunk, and categorize the words, perspectives, and behaviors of the research participants" (McKnight, Magid, Murphy, & McKnight, 2000).

Trustworthiness

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest replacing the traditional positivist criteria of internal and external validity in favor of the terms trustworthiness and authenticity

for qualitative research. Trustworthiness encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Authenticity has four spheres *ontological* (enlarges personal constructions), *educative* (leads to improved understanding of constructions of others), *catalytic* (stimulates to action), and *tactical* (empowers action) (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

The researcher adhered to Wolcott's (1990) suggestion to "satisfy the implicit challenge of validity (in the traditional sense)." They include: (a) talk little, listen a lot; (b) record accurately; (c) begin writing early; (d) let readers "see" for themselves; (e) report fully; (f) be candid; (g) seek feedback; (h) try to achieve balance; and (i) write accurately.

In an effort to limit researcher bias and subjectivity, the researcher took heed to the advice of Marshall and Rossmann (1990) who suggest the following plan of action:

- Check and recheck the data for possible rival hypothesis.
- Practice value-free note taking and include two sets of notes.
- Test analyses and ask questions of the data.
- Follow the guidance of previous researchers to control for data quality.

As mentioned earlier, the researcher attempted to use data triangulation to assist in verifying the results of the study. Triangulation is the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear a single point; it can corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research in question and can enhance a study's generalizability (Marshall & Rossmann, 1995).

It is hoped that the above research methods provide the reader with a clear understanding of the experiences of the participants while simultaneously allowing the researcher to adequately address the research questions that framed this study.

Authenticity

As stated in Chapter I the goal of qualitative research is not generalization, thus this particular study and qualitative studies in general perhaps have an implicit limitation. This study in particular used purposeful sampling from two high schools in an urban school district in Louisiana with successful mathematics students. The use of purposeful sampling itself may lead some readers to assert that the results of this study are only applicable to the above setting. Patton (1986) indicated that a great deal can be learned from a few exemplars of the phenomenon in question and such studies become particularly useful when one needs to understand a particular problem or situation in greater depth.

Nonetheless, the results of this study may be applicable to other settings, particularly in light of the fact that nationwide state education agencies, local school boards, and school leaders will be faced with challenges analogous to those described in this study. All fifty-states have organized accountability systems that identify low performing schools and offer students school choice as an option to students attending such schools. What's more, thirty-three states have instituted restructuring consequences for consistently low performing schools which include:

- closing low performing schools and reopening the schools as public charter schools;
- replacing all or most of the school staff, which may include the principal;
- entering into a contract with an entity, such as a private management company with a demonstrated record of effectiveness, to operate the school as a public school and/or
- turning the operation of the school over to the state education agency, if permitted under state law and agreed to by the state (Ziebarth, 2004).

Further, although this study only provided rich descriptions of students from two low performing schools, it also captured and perhaps reflected larger issues associated with low performing schools, high achieving mathematics students, and school choice. In the aggregate the above issues in fact represent the building of theory related to “unacceptable” low performing schools and African-American high achievers (Yin, 1989).

Moreover, the findings from this study have the potential to be the basis for hypotheses in larger scale empirical research which may lend itself to a higher degree of traditional external validity.

CHAPTER IV

PILOT STUDY

Pilot studies allow researchers to focus on particular areas that may have been unclear previously. In addition, pilot interviews may be used to test certain questions; and to allow the researcher to practice effective use of communication patterns (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Seidman (1998) suggests qualitative researchers use pilot studies to combat possible unexpected pitfalls: “although it may not seem ahead of time that the world of interviewing research takes one along strange paths or through dangerous places, the unanticipated twists and turns of the interviewing process and the complexities of the interviewing relationship deserve exploration before researchers plunge headlong into the thick of their projects” (p. 32).

For these reasons, the present investigation conducted a pilot study in the Fall of 2003. The justification for this pilot study was to simulate the entire process of conducting a qualitative research study. The intention was to identify problematic areas in the context of the study, as well as to investigate the likely tribulations associated with undergoing research in complex public school settings. Consequently, the researcher’s experiences during the pilot study have helped to formulate the framework for this study.

Design of the Pilot Study

Qualitative methods were used in the pilot study. In October 2003, the researcher interviewed eight high school students who scored at the *Advanced or Mastery* level on Louisiana’s GEE test. These students were also enrolled in an “*academically unacceptable*” school at the time of the study. They also chose to remain enrolled in the school despite having the option to attend a better performing school.

The participants were interviewed once in a group setting and a second time individually. Although the researcher did engage in informal conversations with the principal and school counselor, neither was a part of the pilot study. In fact the pilot study only included the responses of the student participants.

Pilot Study Participants

All eight participants attended school in the East Baton Rouge Parish School System and took the GEE test for the first time in Spring 2003. All were of African American descent and scored at the *mastery* level on the GEE. There were six males and two females; five students come from single-parent homes; and four were receiving free or reduced lunch (see Table 6).

Table 6

Demographic Summary (Pilot Study)

Gender Breakdown	Average GPA	Number Receiving Free/Reduced Lunch	Number of Participants in Two Parent Homes
6 Males 2 Females	3.36	4	3

Pilot Study Procedure for Data Collection

In order to collect the necessary data, audio tape-recorded interviews were used. The researcher initially planned to conduct two one-hour semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. In addition, each participant was given a list of the predetermined open-ended questions to answer in written form in an effort to address validity and reliability concerns. However, there were a few unexpected obstacles that adjusted the format of the interview sessions.

First, the researcher had to obtain permission from the local school district, school principal, and parents of the participants. The researcher crafted three consent forms for each of the required approvals. The school district's approval took more than six weeks, despite several attempts to expedite the process, including a reinforcement letter by the university professor overseeing this research project. Moreover, most of the documents required for the school district's approval were hand-delivered to the school district.

The researcher then notified two of the eligible high schools of the intended research. One of the high schools never responded. The other high school, City School, was fully cooperative. The researcher and the principal met on two occasions prior to the actual interview. The first meeting was designed for the researcher to inform the principal of the research problem being pursued. Following that meeting the principal signed the consent form and introduced the researcher to the school counselor. The school counselor and the principal then rescheduled a second meeting so that they would be able to identify the preferred students for this investigation. At the second meeting the researcher also had the opportunity to meet the students. The

students were given a brief overview of the study as well as consent forms to be completed by their parents. They were also given a sample of the questions to be posed.

Nine students were identified by the counselor. However, one of the students, a female, was absent on the day the consent forms were distributed. She was not included in the study. All other students returned their consent forms to the researcher prior to the interview.

City School operates on a block schedule. Therefore, the principal suggested the interviews take place during a 90-minute interval normally reserved for an elective class. The 90-minute interviews were set to be arranged on a Thursday and the following Monday.

At the first interview, each student was given an open-ended set of questions which were asked during the tape-recorded sessions. They were encouraged to write their responses to the questions, whether they answered verbally or not. They were also given extra time after the tape-recorded sessions to revisit their written responses for clarity. These interviews were conducted in a group setting with only the researcher and the participants present in the school library. Just as in Maton, Hrabowski, and Grief's (1998) study, this was not a focus group session; each student had the opportunity to answer each question, albeit in a group environment.

Pilot Study Data Analysis

Results from the interviews were presented in a format similar to what Merriam describes as a narrative analysis in that first person accounts are given. It also shares the characteristics of what Seidman (1998) labels a profile of the participants. The profile allows one to present the participant in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time, all central components of qualitative analysis (Seidman, 1998). In both the profile and narrative analysis, the reader is allowed his own interpretation whether contrary or in confirmation of the researcher's conclusions.

Pilot Study Participant Profiles

Names, as well as general characteristics, have been altered to protect the identity of the participants. Each of the eight participants uniquely described his experiences at City School. The following is a summation of their interview responses.

Adam. Adam scored mastery on the GEE. He lives in a single parent household and does not receive free/reduced lunch. During the group interview session, Adam was not hesitant at all in responding to each of the questions. In fact, he was the first to respond to most of the questions. However, he did not elaborate as much on the written questionnaire as he did verbally. Adam also learned he would be absent for the second scheduled interview because of a disciplinary suspension. Since the second interview was pre-empted by a school wide assembly, he was able to attend the rescheduled session.

Our school being academically unacceptable is just a label and an opinion. Our principal talked about what we did and we actually improved a lot this year in our points. We were not the worse school. This school is a challenge. Every year there is about three teachers who can really challenge you more than any other school in the (district). Me, myself think that we have one of the best technology programs in the state. I have never seen a school come as close to it as us. It can't be the teachers. There are teachers here who can teach you everything you need to know and still make it a fun

learning process. You can't judge a school based on attendance because very rarely somebody in school makes you leave school. That's your own choice. Some people don't have the maturity to go through school so they drop out.

I chose not to leave this school because I was part of my school and my school was part of us. One of the reasons I have been a successful math student is the teacher in my ninth grade year here at City School. This teacher was the first teacher that I ever knew who sat down and showed us things that we can do to make it easier and things we can relate to and deal with in our everyday life. Some teachers at other schools teach you the long drawn out way of doing math; but our teachers first teach the easiest way to do it so you can remember, get through, and get it right; then they teach you the long drawn out way. My peers feel my success is normal. My parent expected success from me or demanded it. Both my parent and teachers were not surprised I did well on the test. Every (one) at City School is smart, but different people use their intelligence. It's not unusual to be smart.

I would tell students from other academically unacceptable schools that most opinions don't mean anything if the person doesn't have good supporting facts.

If I were the principal of this school I would give students more rewards to improve the academic status of the school. In an ideal school all the teachers would do their best to teach the class and students would try their best to learn.

Ben. Ben scored mastery on the GEE. He lives in a single parent home and does not receive free or reduced lunch. He seemed somewhat reluctant to answer questions during the group interview session, but did express himself in the second interview (individual) session and answered the survey questions in detail.

I do all my work, but yes there are times when we clown around, but we still get our work done. If someone called my school academically unacceptable, I would tell them you haven't been here so how can you judge a book by its cover. What they say didn't affect me because people say a lot about our school but it's not all true. You have to see for yourself. I stayed at this school because I have pride in my school and I don't think that we are *that* unacceptable. I have been a successful math student because of how my teachers work with me. We really have good math teachers here at City School. Peers at City School are very helpful. They will uplift you at the times of success or failure. My parents were happy. My teachers knew my potential and didn't expect more than what I did. I always do well in whatever I do. I would tell people from other unacceptable schools to keep doing what they are doing and don't let what people are saying get to you. If I were principal of the school I would give rewards to people who are trying so that they would keep trying. I think my school is an ideal school.

Cain. Cain is a junior in high school who scored at the mastery level on the GEE. He lives in a single parent household, and receives free/reduced lunch. Cain seemed passionate about his responses to some of the questions during both the group interview session interview and the individual interview sessions. He often used hand

gestures and stood up at times to reaffirm his responses. He also indicated that he considers himself to be hyperactive.

How are you going to label a school academically unacceptable by test scores? Everybody's strong points aren't test scores. At our school the teachers teach us methods for tests, but they also teach methods for real life situations. Even though our technology program is good, there's nothing on the GEE related to technology. We still came up a lot and were only a few points under the bar; they made it seem like we was one of the lowest schools in the state and that wasn't right. The dropouts and the ones who transfer shouldn't count because they are not here anymore but they affect our school grade. They gave us a choice to transfer to schools that are only one or two points ahead of us. I choose to stay because I have pride in my school. This school has brought me a long way from what I was."

"The teachers have helped out a lot. They teach you short cuts like "plug and tug." The teachers they always tell you can do better than that even if you have an "A". They just want to push you harder, so that it will be easier for you on the next level. We have been taught several ways to do different problems. My teachers have a sense of relief because they knew I had a talent but didn't know if I was going to use it or not. Most of my peers feel I can do a lot better and I need to stop clowning around. They affect me because how they act in class will affect me. We have a few class clowns, sometimes I'm one of them. My parents feel as though I could do better if I concentrated more. It makes me work harder. They always told me be the best that you can be and don't worry about what anyone else is doing. Keep your focus on yourself and if you do that you will always exceed your limits. Calling my school academically unacceptable in the public made me want to do better and if I improve my scores then maybe someone else will improve their scores as well. Basically, if I do my best I'll have an impact on others I would tell students who are in academically unacceptable schools to not pay attention to what they are saying. Who gave them the right to judge? There is no ideal school. Every school is different.

Daniel. Daniel scored mastery on the GEE test. He lives in a two parent household and does not receive free/ reduced lunch. His demeanor seemed to be reserved, yet he consistently answered each question with details and/or examples.

If someone called my school academically unacceptable I'd tell them that a test can't determine the mental status of everyone in an entire school. Why count those that aren't here or don't care? You can't really say it's academically unacceptable. I don't even like that term (academically unacceptable). Because they are judging how most the students are doing on the test. They are not considering that teachers are getting their mission across to some of the students but all of the students may not want to here it or may just ignore it or may not even come to class or school. It's kind of stupid anyway to grade the people that aren't here. It doesn't make sense to grade people who don't even show up. Labeling my school academically unacceptable in the public didn't affect me at all because I understand that I have to do what I have to do. People were judging everybody at the school was pulling it down but they were not counting those who are doing what they were supposed to be doing; so I kept doing what I had to do. I would tell students who attend academically unacceptable schools to be the best

they can be and don't let what a test tells about your school affect what you do as an individual. I attended two other schools (prior to being here) and I felt most comfortable here that's why I chose to stay. This school holds the interest of the students that come here. I didn't think I'd be able to stay at one school for more than a year, but my school holds my interest. I haven't done anything superhuman (to be successful). It is not magic. It is not something everyone can't do. I listen. I obey elders. I do what I am told, and I do what has to be done. Successful math students aren't those that simply study; a successful math student listens and pays attention to learning. (Although) I can't stand algebra, but right now I'm in geometry and geometry is more visual.... you know drawing angles and all that kind of stuff. I'm better when I'm shown visuals. However you learn something, learn it. My peers are uplifting in a way. Most of them get higher grades than me but when I do get good grades that bring you up a little bit. We support each other in every way we can. Recently one of my peers obtained his (driver's) license, so now a group of his get together and go to the library. My parents are very supportive of my progress. They know that I am able to accomplish that which I have. They constantly tell me to do better no matter how well I do. My teachers are very sensitive about our accomplishments. When we do well, they rejoice; and when we do sorrowfully, they tend to feel our pain. My best experience has been the weird and unique variety of teachers that I've had to meet. If I were principal I would reward academic progress more. Those who aren't doing so well may become jealous and that may (spark) good performance. The ideal school to me is one that is interesting and positive in many factors like athletics, music, academics, relations and others.

Elijah. Elijah is from a single parent home and receives free or reduced lunch. He initially seemed a bit shy, but as the interviews continued, he began to speak freely.

I come to school and go to class and do my work and when I finish I either study for the next class or I will go to sleep to be energized. When people say my school is academically unacceptable it doesn't affect me. (However) I would tell them to transfer here and see that our school is just as hard as theirs. We do just as much work as they do. It's not our fault that everybody doesn't show up. What people said about our school didn't affect me because I felt like I should not change because of what other people think of me or my school. I should get doing what I do. I stayed at this school because I have a sense of pride in my school. The colors burgundy and gray mean something to me. I don't care how low the scores get, I won't leave until they tear it down. I also stayed because I wanted to see if the band would get better. I've been successful because I have stayed focused. I've also been successful because of my mom because she motivates me to do my work and I motivate my self too because I want to be the first one in my immediate family to finish college and be successful. Most people think that peers here would have a lot of people try to hold you down. However, I don't see that. When I do well or anybody else does well, I see them congratulating each other or giving them positive energy to become more successful. I (make) my life and my decisions. My mother is proud of me and she wants me to succeed. My teachers feel good about my success because they know they helped me reach that success. I think *they* feel a sense of pride. I would tell a student who attends an academically unacceptable school not to listen to the negative (things). If I were

principal, I would reward those who do the right thing and I would punish those who do wrong very severely. The ideal school would be a place where everyone gets along and learns quickly. The teachers are great Wait a minute that sounds just like City School.

Faith. Faith is from a single parent household and does not receive free or reduced lunch. She scored mastery on the math portion of the GEE. She appeared to be reserved during the group interviews, but she did completely express her responses on the questionnaire and was more open to respond during the individual interview.

I would tell a person who calls my school academically unacceptable to come to the school and see for themselves. Don't judge a book by its cover. We do have a lot of good things at this school that people don't know about. Like our technology programs and all the computers and labs we have. I actually left City School, but I decided to come back. I found out the grass is not always greener on the other side. I missed my school and my school's method's of teaching. It was a learning experience. I have been successful in math because I took algebra and geometry in middle school. That helped me a lot. It put me a step ahead of a lot of people. Most people (peers) congratulate us, but there are always a couple of 'haters.' It doesn't affect me because I just shake them off and keep working hard. My parent supports me and congratulates me on everything I do. It makes me want to do better and it keeps me going. Some teachers are proud and congratulate us and tell us to keep up the good work. Others don't make comments about us because they are mostly focused on students who aren't doing as well. I would tell students who attend academically unacceptable schools not to listen to the negative and focus on the positive. I would encourage them to do their best and keep their head up. If I were principal, I would focus on positive things more. I wouldn't put students down. I would give constructive criticism. I would reward those who are doing well. The ideal school would be fun, challenging, safe, positive, good teachers, cooperative students, willing teachers, dedicated teachers, dedicated parents and a place to look forward to being everyday.

Gabrielle. Gabrielle lives in a two parent household and receives free or reduced lunch. She scored mastery on the GEE. Gabrielle participates in extra-curricula activities that traditionally promote self discipline and high self-esteem. Those traits seemed evident in observing her during the investigation.

A typical day at my high school is cool. I just go about my day with a positive attitude. If someone called my school academically unacceptable I would tell them that I really disagree with them. I would also ask them, how would they know if they are not here? I say that they should not go by what they hear. They should get to know the people at the school because it's not everybody; some of us do what we are supposed to do. They graded us on people who don't come to school or who are dropouts. I believe they need to focus on the ones that are here and look at what we are doing. When my school was labeled academically unacceptable it didn't affect me but it made me mad because they judged us and don't really know what's going on in the school. It really made me want to accomplish more things and I try to tell my peers to do the same thing. I stayed at this school

because I like it, and I think it's a really good school. I wouldn't leave it because it's my junior year, and I wouldn't want to have to get used to another school. I don't think there's anything wrong with this school. My peers are very supportive. They don't affect my school work because I'm going to be successful anyway. Those who are not honors students are quick to say that our classes are hard and they can't do the work. They also think that they can't do the work honors students can do and I just encourage them by saying you could do it if you try. I have been successful because I have had good teachers to explain things to me in a way that I can understand. We have really good math teachers who are patient with us and make us understand things. They just don't explain things one time and go sit at their desk. If we need help they are there to help us that is why I've been successful.

Hezekiah. Hezekiah lives in a two-parent household. He does receive free or reduced lunch. He scored mastery on the GEE. He was brief and direct with his responses.

I would not worry about people who call our school academically unacceptable. I would tell the person to come and see that City School is good. This school has really helped me. When I first came here they accepted me. I have been doing great at this school and I know there are smart people at this school. Its not like what people say. The unacceptable label would not affect me because I do my work and I know my friends do their work and get good grades. I did not leave City School because I think it is the best place for me. I learn many things (here) and I (do) have a good time. I thought about it but the students were nice and it's a good school and I didn't like the other schools. I have been successful because I come to school daily, listen in class, ask questions, do my assignments, and pray to God. I also had a good foundation in math where I come from. My teachers were very proud of me and how I did on the test. My peers do feel proud of me anytime I am successful and this really encouraged me to work hard and do more.

Pilot Study Discussion

Merriam (1998) cited Coffey and Atkinson's notion that there are no formulae or recipes for the best way to analyze the stories we elicit and collect. Indeed one of the strengths of thinking about our data as narrative is that this opens up the possibilities for a variety of analytic strategies (Merriam, 1998).

However, from the researcher's perspectives there are some congruent themes among the participant responses which directly affect the purpose of this

investigation. For example, in response to the question of “what are the factors that have led you to be successful despite being in an academically unacceptable school?” all eight of the participants considered their teachers as one of the primary reasons for their success. In several instances, the participants elaborated on the manner in which their teachers strive to ensure their success. Other recurring themes related to the above question included academic focus, parental support, and a desire to attain future goals. Three male students expressed their desire to be successful in life so that future City School graduates can look at their success and realize that it is attainable.

None of the students stated that being labeled an *academically unacceptable* school negatively affected their school work; however, they all emphatically disagreed with the derogatory unacceptable tag and questioned the methods used to arrive at that conclusion. They all implied that their individual academic habits and initiative desire to excel would overcome the label bestowed upon their school. In fact, two of the students specifically stated the negative label inspires them to improve academically. It was also a consensus view of the students that City School is a “good school.” All of the students expressed that attendance at the school was the main problem in their school being labeled academically unacceptable. Seven of the eight students stated that it is unjust for the State Department of Education to attach a demoralizing description to the school without ever visiting the school.

The second research question, “why have these successful students chosen to stay in these unacceptable schools despite having the option to leave,” also yielded some dominant themes. Seven of the eight students mentioned school pride as a

major contributing factor in their decision to stay at City School. All of the students indicated that familiarity with the routines of school, teachers, and peers positively affected their choice to stay. The participants were also unanimous in affirming that overall their peers are supportive of their success. This is in direct contrast with the findings of Milner and others. Most related research reveals that peers often tease, abuse, and isolate high achievers. Ironically, both of the females in this study indicated that although peers are supportive overall, a few peers have been sporadically negative.

In addition, all of the students implied that their fellow schoolmates do not take advantage of their educational opportunities by not attending class regularly or not attending in-school tutoring sessions, and consequently, the school should not be penalized for those individual decisions. Seven of the eight students mentioned that the school should reward academic achievements more often. Six of the students mentioned the technology program at the school as an asset. Finally, the researcher also inferred (from participant responses) that overall the participants see themselves as being well prepared for future success, despite the possibility of graduating from an academically unacceptable school.

Summary

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) indicate that pilot studies allow you to explore likely problems and test many aspects of proposed research, including the research process, interview schedule, and observation techniques. Completing the abovementioned pilot study resulted in meaningful outcomes that assisted in shaping this study.

First, during the pilot study interviews the researcher recognized that administrators are less likely to allow students to participate in 60-minute individual interviews. The primary reason seems to be that constant interviews would disrupt the instructional process. However, they are willing to allow group interviews with the students. Therefore, in this study the researcher replaced the individual interviews with an open-ended questionnaire. Additionally, group interviews with the students will serve as “follow-up” to the questionnaires. To this end the researcher combined the methods of Maton et al., (1998) who used group interviews in their study of successful African-American male students and Tucker et al., (2000) who used open-ended survey questions in their study entitled, *Student Generated Solutions to Enhance the Academic Success of African-American Youth*.

The pilot study also provided the opportunity to test interview questions. The responses to pilot study interview questions resulted in (a) modifying, deleting, or adding questions to be included in the study, and (b) formulating an open-ended questionnaire to be included in the study. Perhaps even more important is that the results from the pilot study (interviews) revealed that within the complex school

culture there exists a salient sub-culture. This sub-culture, which is not detectable in school performance scores, is populated by high achievers and cultivated by competent, empathetic teachers. Moreover, even though the majority of the school's population is likely to embody a larger, more visible underachieving culture, the administration seems to value the thriving sub-culture; albeit covertly. Therefore, the researcher logically assumes that the inclusion of teachers and administrators in this study is essential.

Finally, a prevailing view among qualitative researchers is that it gives participants opportunities to be "heard." In this particular qualitative pilot study the participants were eager to voice their view of the research topic. Ironically, some of their responses mirror the conclusions made by prior quantitative and qualitative research. However, those responses that were in direct opposition to prior studies provided the researcher with unanticipated discoveries that ultimately outlined *this* study.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

This study sought to determine the reasons why successful mathematics students thrive in academically unacceptable schools and why they have chosen to stay in these academically unacceptable schools despite having the option to leave for a better performing school. The researcher selected qualitative methods including interviews and open-ended questionnaires to address the research questions.

One of the aims of this chapter is to highlight the often overlooked resilience of successful mathematics students in academically unacceptable schools (Martin, 2000). Simultaneously, this chapter will present the reader an opportunity to better understand the complex social culture present in troubled urban schools through the perspectives of those who lead, teach, and attend such schools.

Accordingly, this chapter will present the narrative profiles from the data collection phase of this study. First, the researcher will present a brief description of Lake High School based on observations of the school. Then narratives from the principal, key mathematics teacher and six student participants from Lake High School will be presented. Thereafter, a description of River High School based on observations, and narratives from the principal, key mathematics teacher, and five

student participants from River High School will be presented. Finally, a brief summary of Chapter V will be presented at the end of the chapter.

The names of the schools and participants used in this study are fictitious. The given names were selected by the researcher without respect to the characteristics or likeness of any of the participants. In some cases, quotes were edited to correct grammatical errors.

Lake High School

The physical building at Lake High School on the outside is not as dilapidated as your typical urban high school. The thirty-year-old school seems to have suffered more from the effects of weathering than purposeful destruction at the hands of unruly students. Inside the school, the front office building is separated from the main school building which houses nearly 1600 students. That design perhaps signifies a distant relationship between the students and the administration. However, during each of my visits to the school the administrators were not in their offices; they were patrolling the halls in the main school building.

While waiting to meet with the principal and student participants (during multiple visits) I was able to log several meaningful observations in the front office building. For the most part it was very peaceful with very few disturbances. The one profound incident was when an on campus city policeman escorted a student off campus for trespassing because the student was suspended from school and had not returned with his parents.

It was also evident that the school is making an effort to make students aware of the importance of standardized testing. At the main desk in the front office there is a large sign that displays the number of days before the GEE is given. This is nearly five months prior to the test! The school also has a large outdoor message board that promoted its “vacation school” program which provides additional assistance to students during the Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks in preparation for the spring GEE.

Still, Lake High is not immune to the perils associated with large urban schools. I did observe two fights between students, and several small class disturbances. Two events perhaps typify the incidences of turbulence that likely plague Lake High. First, while interviewing Mr. Egypt, a highly regarded mathematics teacher, in his vacant classroom, I noticed what seemed to be bedlam in an adjacent classroom. It seemed extraneous at first, but the magnitude of the disruption became even more evident when I reviewed the audio tapes of our interview. The other incident involved a first year teacher. A student inadvertently escorted me to this teacher’s classroom. As we tried to clarify the error, I could hear the deafening sounds of profane language coming from the classroom as soon as the teacher stepped out of the room. The majority of the disrespectful statements were geared toward the teacher and jeered by the students.

Mr. Noah, Principal, Lake High

Mr. Noah is a veteran educator in the school district with twenty-six years of experience as a teacher and administrator. In observing him on the job, I noticed that

he was always on the move. He walked through the halls of the school with the mission of making sure students were where they were supposed to be. When the school bell rang to signal the change of classes, he was always out on the hall encouraging students to move to their next class at a brisk pace. He kept two communication devices with him at all times: a *Blackberry* wireless all inclusive communication device to communicate with curriculum leaders at the school and district level and a two-way radio designed to keep in contact with the school level discipline leaders. In his interview and in prior conversations, it was obvious that he has a calm presence. At no point in the interview was there an abundance of fervor toward any of the topics. Yet when addressing discipline problems with students, he seems to be forthright and boisterous. This assertion was clearly evident right after our interview. As we exchanged closing remarks, Mr. Noah was summoned to a fight between students. He immediately dashed out of his office to control the disruption; his actions were a sharp contrast from the composed demeanor he had just displayed prior to the interruption. Perhaps that episode is symbolic of the chameleon role leaders of low performing schools often have to depict.

I worked at central office for three years and the superintendent came in and decided to make some changes. At that particularly time I was moved to Lake High School. If I could do it again I would accept this job without a doubt, 125%. I like this school. I like the students and faculty. I like the work. So, I would do it over again, without a doubt.

A typical day for me is as follows: I get to work at 7:00 in the morning; I check my email and see if there is any kind of work that I might have on my desk from the previous day; I go on duty at 7:30 a.m. ; I remain on duty until about 8:30 a.m.; My students come in at 8:00 a.m. and I move students to classes until about 8:30 a.m. ; Normally at that time I have some parents who are waiting for me; I meet with parents until about 9:30 a.m.; I do observations from about 9:30 a.m. until 11:15 a.m. and then I'm on lunch duty from 11:15 until 12:00; I normally have conferences with any other parents who may be coming in after lunch, if they have issues that they want to discuss; I do that until about 1:00 p.m. and then I do observations from about 1:00 p.m. to about 2:45 p.m.; and at that time, I normally do the announcements too and then I hang out until about 4:30 -

5:00 p.m. and do paper work and have conferences with the teachers. I make instruction a priority... you have to make it a priority.

Discipline is an issue and I deal with discipline throughout the day. Once a fight or something happens on a hall, like it happened today, it ties me up and I don't do the observations until later on. I have two assistant principals and three administrative assistants, so I try to hold them responsible for dealing with a lot of this (discipline).

Our students are really not involved in extracurricular activities. Our students are just really not involved in much of anything including athletics. Even though we have over 1500 students, only about 100 or less participate in all the sports combined. Our kids have so many other issues that they deal with that the academic pursuit or the athletic pursuit is really not a big thing for them. A large number of our students have adult responsibilities. For example, some have children of their own, some take care of their younger siblings, and others are caregivers of elderly parents. Even more have jobs and other obligations. It's like 'I have a life' and the other things that are going on really do not matter if the students have to address the adult issues. So, I think you could push some of the students in that direction (extracurricular activities), I just don't think you could push all of them because they have other issues that are more important. I think our students just don't have a core belief that school is important as it was when I was in school. The other problem generally I would say is peer pressure to do the wrong thing. That's what we are basically up against.

We have a large number of students who come to school who believe school is important to them; while we have another group who thinks this school is a social phenomenon. They come to talk to friends, girls and boys, but they are not here for academics. We have half of our students that have about 2.5 GPA or above and another other half have less than a 2.5 GPA, which means that school is really not important.

One thing we do is look at the school attendance and academic data. I think that often people think leaders of academically unacceptable schools do not review data. We spend a lot of time looking at the data. We spend a lot of time trying to contact students who are headed in the wrong direction. We use this data to make informed decisions and critical decisions. We look at the data to determine where to place teachers and with what group of students. The data is the most important because it gives you a chance to make informed instructional decisions. The major thing we found is that you have to be in school. There is almost a direct correlation among our student population between attendance and passing standardized tests.

Really, the whole negative thinking about African American males is a myth our school tries to dispel: this notion that African-American males are overly aggressive and the exact replica of what is seen in rap videos. There are a large number of African-American young men at this school who are responsible young men. They do their best academically, even though they don't have all the skills to be elite. Out of 1,550 kids, I probably have 50% knuckleheads: I say knuckleheads but I use that term affectionately, kids who need help addressing their needs such as how to get along with other people. The majority of our students actually come to school regularly with very few problems outside of what normal teens have. They are not strong academic students because they don't have a foundation or a support system; but, at the same token, they are still good kids. That's probably the only myth I would try to dissuade. Every kid who walks through the gates at Lake High and comes into that building at 8:00 a.m. does not have a (criminal) record, or is a problem student – although we do have some. It's not all of the kids. Research has a tendency to paint schools like ours and its students with a broad stroke instead of a narrow stroke. They think

everybody that goes to Lake High is unacceptable. One story that comes to my mind happened last year. It is very germane to what we are talking about. There were some tourists who caught the public bus near our school. Incidentally, they were on the same bus as some of our students. Our students were so nice to them, and this is somebody from Minnesota who never even dealt much with life here. The kids were so nice to them that the tourists wrote me back with a card and a letter saying, 'I visited your city and the kids from your school were just so nice.' She said, 'The Black stereotype wasn't even there. They talked to me and there was no cursing.' It just shocked them because she thought when she was on the bus that the kids would try to beat them up and take their money. She was so moved by their actions and wrote me a long letter (she recognized the school because of the school uniforms). I keep it on file regarding what she saw. So, I think that's the norm, not the exception. We get the letters every now and then, but I think it's normal for the kids that come to this school. That was just a brief story about who I think the kids are.

I think if some people were to visit our school they might not think its academically unacceptable depending on their preconceived notion of what is academically unacceptable. But they would also see evidence that teachers are working extremely hard to keep their students caught up. So, I think they would think this school is academically unacceptable school because of where our students come from. Since 90% of our students come from low social standing and they dress in a certain manner, I would think some people may consider us unacceptable because of that. But I think they would be surprised by the climate of the school and I think that is what is kind of surprising.

My school is a work in progress. I think it is improving but not where we want to be. The one thing that we have done to improve our school status is to raise expectations. Just demand more from students. And we do our best to make sure that we convey that message to students at our school. The ones who do not go to college we make them aware of vocational schools.

I think our biggest problem is apathy. In spite of this, we continue to have expectations, high expectations. You can't lower your standards because students are at a particular level. Demand that they do better. We try to promote it. We try to demand it. We have an advanced studies program where we recognize those students. Those students who are on the borderline, we kind of push them into advanced programs to make them want to achieve. So, we identify academic excellence and we try to recognize those students as high achieving students.

I think the students of this school need a challenge, an opportunity to do well in math because that's normally the area they are weakest in. What separates high achieving math students from other students is their aptitude for math and they probably like it. I really do not believe it's just the teachers; I think it's more about the foundation in earlier grades and from their parents. However, I would like to attract and retain outstanding math teachers to work here because I think they can really make a difference in young people – especially the struggling learners.

If I were an outstanding math student, I would stay at this school because the climate of the school is conducive to learning. Not every single day, but, if I were a high achieving math student I could find the kind of support I would need from teachers and just like I told you we have computer assisted software, which is important in math instruction in Algebra I, Pre-Algebra and Algebra II. That would lend itself to being why I would stay here. I think outstanding students here would do well academically (at higher performing schools) if they will apply themselves

and work extremely hard. I don't think they would necessarily be straight "A" students but I think they would survive and do well academically. I think their future is determined to the extent by how far or how much their parents push them to do well independently. I think a lot of their future depends on parental support. Additionally, high achievers at my school overcome obstacles because they have a support system. I think number one it's their parents at home. They have parents around who really care about their education and want them to do well academically. I think they need a lot of support, though, to get where they need to be academically. That is a big part of my role, to try to give them the support they need as students at school. They have the potential. The question is does that potential translate itself into college and life in general?

Mr. Egypt, Teacher, Lake High

Mr. Egypt is a mathematics teacher who has taught for twenty years at Lake High School. While observing his classroom I noticed he celebrated high achievement. On one of his auxiliary chalkboards there was a list of students who scored 95% or above on the latest test, there were several posters with high achieving themes lacing the classroom walls, and student work was displayed throughout the classroom.

The principal of Lake High believed Mr. Egypt is the most influential mathematics teacher on his campus. All of the students in this study mentioned that his teaching either presently or in the recent past has contributed to their success in mathematics. Upon completing the interview it was obvious to me that Mr. Egypt had a vigorous zest for teaching at Lake High.

I had never gone to school one day to be a mathematics teacher. In undergraduate school I was a chemistry and math major. I later changed to business administration, but it was my math and chemistry background that caused a recruiter from a large oil company to hire me as an engineer's assistant. I worked for them as an engineer's assistant for about six months and I was promoted to engineer. I then went to school at night and got an M.B.A. from a local university. After that I was asked by one of my former professors to work on a doctorate in Utah. So I resigned. I found out I didn't like Utah, so I returned home and went to work locally. I got fired for having too much education. Then I went to a hotel chain and became the director of convention services there. I later resigned from there and I looked to my dad for guidance. My dad had a friend of his that he knew socially. I had no idea who this guy was. He was a principal at a school.

He said, 'You have the perfect personality to be a teacher.' I said, 'Me, I'll kill all the kids.' He says, 'No, bring your resume and go see my friend at school.' I was then hired and completed the certification courses in math at a local university. Twenty years later I am still teaching. I never dreamed I would enjoy teaching as much as I do.

Later I had other family members who thought I should leave Lake High School. Some people in my family had the perception that 'all Lake High students want to do is fight and they don't want to learn anything.' That made it clear to me that Lake High needed me. So, that is why I am here. I'm going to stay here because the academic level will rise. We are going to raise it, because we are going to get to these kids and let them understand why they come here, and that's to get an education.

There are some smart kids here. They are not dummies. What they need is someone to show them if they apply themselves they can do very well. Once the message sets in and once they get in a structured classroom environment to work in it's amazing what these kids can do.

The only problem I see is that our kids need to understand that nobody is better than they are. The perception is, you are at this school, so you are supposed to perform lower. No way! The idea is we have to raise their self esteem and make them feel good. That is one of the reasons why I try to teach and promote academics and social skills. Even if there is nobody raising you, you can perform well. I tell the kids point blank, I'm going to teach you what I want you to know. Come to class each day, listen, participate – I'm going to call on you. If I can show you, you are going to show me and when I send you to the board don't get mad, don't call me dirty names, just go to the board. I am going to model and display for you what I want you to do. So, when I call on you to go to the board you are going to model and display what you understand.

At our school, the high achievers are the ones who commit with a purpose, and that's to get an education. The low achievers are the ones who want to think everything is funny, and be the class clown. But in a structured environment, the teacher that is highly structured, you'll get the same performance out of those low achievers that you get out of the high achievers. If I were a high achiever in this day and age I would want to stay at this school to help raise the level of academic achievement of the ones that are not as academically talented. As a teacher, I have helped out high achievers so in turn I expect them to help the others.

In my class I expect everyone to excel. I create an atmosphere of high expectations and achievement. They know when they come in the front door what is expected - and that is their best. There is no guessing. I don't want your second best. I want your best. I tell them on the first day of school; I'm going to treat you guys like bananas. They start laughing; 'a banana,' yes. I'm going to peel you until I get to the good part, and I peel them. I do not permit students in my class to say that they didn't learn anything. I also create a winning attitude. The kids have to believe that they are all winners. They have been beaten down and told they cannot achieve, they cannot win. When they know that they can be winners, they will achieve much more success. On the other hand if you expect nothing, you get nothing. I tell them I want you to set your sights on that moon. We are going to the moon and you are going to achieve as high as you are capable of achieving and I expect you to do it. They do it! It depends on what you expect of them.

When you show students you care about them they will remember you. Recently one of the English teachers had her kids do an essay about their favorite teacher. The lady gave me stacks of paper that these kids had written about me. One student wrote, 'I never believed I could have passed

that GEE test. I took the test three times. I took it with Mr. Egypt once, and I passed it. Mr. Egypt believes in us. He does not take a day off. He feels that if he takes a day off, he is cheating us. That is why he wants to come to school everyday so he can help us each day. I can't wait to get up in the morning to get to school.' That's great because I can't wait to get here, and make them learn something.

Zeke

Zeke is a senior at Lake High School. He lives in a two-parent household and does not receive free/reduced lunch. He scored at the *mastery* level on the mathematics portion of the GEE in Spring 2003. Zeke was very responsive during the interview and did not seem intimidated by any of the questions. He often used humorous anecdotes to address some of the interview questions.

A typical day for me at Lake High School is sitting through boring lectures and traveling through the crowded halls. Well, some of my classes are boring because some teachers go over basic stuff like subject-verb agreement. Sometimes I get frustrated in those courses because I have learned all of this before. However, I have been a successful mathematics student and will continue to be successful because I do not just rely on the education I get at this school. I read books beyond the school walls. I have a great interest in doing that. I guess it is my inquisitive temperament. I guess it is the way my parents raised me and what I learned - kind of through life. I think that kind of reflects my view of education.

Also I have to give credit to my mathematics teachers because I believe that I am a success is because of their teaching and the influence of my parents. Some of my other teachers are kind of shocked because my class performance does not reflect my test performance; because school is based upon variables, such as behavior, attendance, and probably about 5% intellect.

I think the academically unacceptable label only reflects a small portion of the whole school. But if someone was to visit our school they would find proof that some parts of our school are unacceptable, because the scores that students make on tests, class work, and homework. But I also think there are a whole lot of other variables that come into play. As far as discipline goes, I do not act the way some of the other students act because of the consequences and chastisement that will likely come from my mom and dad.

Even though this school has problems I would not leave it because this is my senior year and leaving would change my environment. That would not be in my best interest. That would mean I would have to make more friends. Regardless, I think anywhere I would go to school I would be successful. I have a little quote for this, 'same strokes for different folks.' In addition, I chose to stay at this school because of the atmosphere.

My parents are not shocked at all about my academic success. To tell them that I scored mastery on GEE, they did not say wow; because with my prior success came attention and with attention came expectation. My

parents have known me all my life so I cannot tell them what I can or cannot do because they know already. My mom and dad also make me do work even when I don't feel like doing work. If I don't feel like it they still make me do work.

Some of my peers believe that if I show a great deal of knowledge, that I am arrogant. But some others also kind of expect me to do well. My advice to them is if you want to be successful don't rely on this learning environment only. School is only a portion of what is required to be a success. I encourage them to read books, watch educational programs, and use the *Google* search engine. Most importantly, believe in yourself. Believe in yourself and believe in your skills and strengths. I think I could help them in cases where they are weak, if I am strong in the area. I would help them in those areas so our school could improve. Most of the students at this school try but then they give up when it gets hard. Instead of going to try to find help, they say I can't do it. Ideally we would have each and every student with the drive to learn everything that is taught to him/her. Maybe it will be different in college. My experience at Lake High will make me see college as a wow!

Yann

Yann is a senior in high school and scored *mastery* on the mathematics portion of the GEE test in Spring 2003. He lives in a single-parent household and receives free/reduced lunch. Yann seemed very confident in his responses and often used creative analogies in his interview and survey responses.

Basically, when you come to school in the morning they check you with metal detectors. Nobody really brings anything though. This does make the morning pretty rush-rush to get to class. There are administrators standing in the halls in the morning to make sure everybody is getting to class on time. It is pretty good but the only thing is that the hallways are very crowded; it kind of takes you a while to get there sometimes. All through the day it's pretty busy during transitions from class to class. Occasionally there are fights which make it even more hectic.

Some classes are boring - they make you sit through lectures all day. I take advanced classes and sometimes I wish there were more African American students in advanced classes. Some students don't get recognized. The administrators and teachers don't recognize the potential of some students. Some students don't recognize it in themselves. There are a lot of Asians in my classes. It's not a racist thing or anything, but some of the students have more problems with subject-verb agreement because this is their second language. When we have to go over subject verb agreement class becomes boring.

My mathematics class does challenge me. Mr. Egypt is my math teacher and he goes the extra mile. He would make sure you have everything, those extra steps. He prepares for everything you need to know in the future. Sometimes I get frustrated when I am doing the same equations but when you look at how the equations work together to form bigger equations, that is when it starts getting interesting. I can't say it's

because of Mr. Egypt's class that I did so well on the GEE test because when I took the GEE test I hadn't had his class yet, but if I knew then what I know now from his class, I would have done even better. My 9th grade teacher was a good math teacher too. She really went step by step, sort of, like Mr. Egypt does. They both break down math equations step by step and then put them all together so you can see the bigger picture. I had this one science teacher who would take two subjects that you didn't think had any relationship with each other at all and find a way that they would sort of work together.

One of the keys to my success is that I am curious. 'Curiosity killed the cat,' but in my case, curiosity made the cat a genius. Like if I do not know something and I am curious about it, I am going to look it up. I think my curiosity started out when I was a kid. I used to play with Lego toys and wonder how different pieces can fit together and make something bigger. You start toying with that and everything else starts to get bigger and better. In addition, the school provided me with the tools and I used them. The teachers here take what is in the textbook and combine it with their own knowledge, and show it to you. If you have a problem understanding the teacher, you just go to the teacher, then take it step by step and they will show you how it applies to the lesson. Basically, it is all the same math. You learn the same thing; it's just how you pick it up.

I do not think our school is unacceptable but people are entitled to their own opinion. To me, our school provides tools to the students and it is up to the students to use them. Not all students know how to use them, that's the problem. A lot of our students don't know how to use the tools and some of them get frustrated and they just give up. Some of the students are really close to knowing the stuff but they just don't know how to get past that one wall. I am going to use a small metaphor. When I said some students know how to use the tools, it is like if you give someone a power drill and they go to Europe with it, they can't really plug it in because they don't have the right plug. They have to get an adapter. Some students need someone to adapt it to ways that they can understand.

One of the main reasons why I would not leave this school is because I kind of like to be the underdog. Also knowing this place...the students from this school, I personally, want to shock the world. When I tell people I come from Lake High, they don't expect me to be as smart as I am. The Lake High kids are not bad; they just have a reputation that everybody passes around.

My peers usually when they look at me, they would never guess that I could do this on the GEE because they say I'm goofy. They ask me how I do it and usually I can't give them an answer. I don't know how I do it. I guess I remember stuff well. I have not received much negative feedback from them. Some people perceive me as arrogant. I am not very arrogant. I know what I can do. If I do not score high on one test, all the students say oh what happened to 'Mr. Perfect.' It makes me work hard because people expect it from me. So, I don't want to let anybody down. It's sort of like in that NBA All-star game when Michael Jordan was going up for a slam dunk: he was the only person on that side of the court and he missed the dunk. Everybody was like, awe man (disappointed). You know Jordan had to feel really bad.

On the other hand I sometimes need help from my peers because not everybody is good in every subject. Like, I am not very good at history. So, I always find someone that is good in history to help me with the history. Then, I help them out in mathematics. It is better for people to do it that way instead of going on their own

My parents don't expect anything less and will not accept anything less. Now that I showed them what I can do, I can't go back now. Both my mom and dad encourage me. My dad is a police officer: so, I have a certain respect for authority that sort of plays into it. You sort of listen to what they have to say in different ways and it has that influence. My mom, she raised me in church school for most of my elementary school years and then she put me in home school for 7th and 8th grade. So, I have attended a vast array of schools.

I have to admit my family does contribute a lot because I know my brother got into trouble when he was my age and they needed to show me what not to do. They talk to me about stuff. They rode me. They said don't do this and you know what's going to happen if you do this. They make sure I'm using my common sense. You know you can do it, why not do it if you know you can? At least try. It's better to try and fail than to not try at all.

Overall, from my experiences here at Lake High, I know what not to do. I understand right from wrong. When I go to college, I know I can't go to every party: sometimes I should just stop and study. If I could do anything to change the status of the school I would hire more teachers that would break stuff down like Mr. Egypt does and encourage teachers to talk to their students one on one.

Xana

Xana is classified as a junior in high school and scored *mastery* on the GEE in Spring 2004. She lives in two-parent household and does not receive free or reduced lunch. She did not seem overly enthusiastic about answering every question, but she was passionate about the questions she did answer.

I do not think the school itself is academically unacceptable. It is not that bad here. Some students just do not care about school. If you look at the students as a whole, we might be academically unacceptable: but that does not mean that everybody here is not smart. Even though our school is considered academically unacceptable, that does not mean that I am not as smart as students who attend better (performing) schools.

The main reason why I have been a successful mathematics student is because of Mr. Egypt. He helped me better understand the major concepts in math. This made it easier for me to understand how to do the math problems. I think all of my teachers are proud of my success because it makes them feel as though they are doing something right. I rely a lot on my teachers and what I learn in classes because I don't study a lot. I think I also have good test-taking skills and the stuff I know ... I really know it.

My friends are happy for me and they usually congratulate me. I really think that they are proud of my achievements. Every now and then they joke about it but they don't seem to be serious about it. They may say things like, 'she thinks she's smart' or 'she must have cheated.' It's nothing that we take seriously. It does not affect my school work negatively either. On the other hand, if my classmates or other friends need help in class I help them. If I see they are having problems I ask them if they need help. If they

become better students I think I will become a better student as well because it will almost be a like a competition.

Even though this school has some discipline problems and is considered academically unacceptable, I am able to succeed because I focus on doing the right thing and not worrying about what other people are doing. I try to hang out with positive people, so we don't get into trouble. They are trying to do their best. That's why they come to school everyday. If I was getting involved with somebody who was doing badly, that ends up bringing me down with them.

One reason I decided to stay at this school is that it does not matter what I school go to I can still get a good education if I stay focused and listen to my teachers. I also feel very comfortable here at Lake High. I want to also prove people wrong who would say it's not a good school. I really feel that I will be more successful graduating from here because I am dealing with situations that occur in the real world and that will help prepare me for real life. My parents are really proud of how much I have accomplished thus far and I think they will be proud of me graduating from Lake High.

Warren

Warren is a junior at Lake High and scored *mastery* on the mathematics portion of the GEE in Spring 2004. He lives in a two-parent household and does not receive free or reduced lunch. During the interview, I observed that he was not an impulsive responder; in fact he seemed to be very methodical when responding. Even when other participants would become eager to respond, his demeanor did not change. Below is his perspective on the research topic.

On a typical day I come to school early and tune out before class. Then once a get to first period it is all about my work. During classes, if the teacher is teaching I try to take notes no matter what. Once I finish my work I talk quietly to my friends if they complete their work. I do this in all my classes. At lunch, I like to stay in the building to keep myself in a working mode.

My school is not, never was, and never will be a bad school. I don't think in any way that our school is that bad. I know that there are students who come to this school that are not high caliber students but there are also a lot of smart people that attend school here. There are a select group of students here that I know will really be somebody. I think they consider us bad because they really just look at the number of low scoring students we have; they don't look at certain people (high achievers) that go here. You can't really judge the whole unless you have seen the whole.

Success for me has come because of my strong background early on in life. My teachers stuck with me even when it seemed impossible. When you show a teacher that you can learn, they stop at nothing to teach you. Being successful now, has made my teachers proud because they have instilled in me a great ambition to be the best.

My parents love to see me succeed. They are very proud of my accomplishments. I think whenever I do well, it's always, 'Do your best, keep trying,' I think its recognition that makes you feel your best. In a way it's almost like you are rewarding them for how they raised you. It's good for all of us when I do well in mathematics because math is my favorite subject.

My peers support my success because it represents them. But I know some sarcastic people that are kind of mad because they can't do the same thing or not as successful. It burns a fire in me to do better. But I do try to surround myself with good people. I think your close friends are always going to be behind you.

I decided to stay at this school because I feel comfortable here. A part of learning is opening your mind. You can't accomplish that by feeling uncomfortable. I think that I would probably will come out as a better student than somebody who came out of a better (performing) school, just because I had extra problems to deal with and if we made the same score, and I went through a little bit more than you, it will make me a better person overall. I don't know if we will be remembered, for our accomplishments, but I feel good. I remember when it felt like to be successful at Lake High and that's enough for me.

Vernon

Vernon scored *mastery* on the mathematics portion of the GEE in Spring 2004. He lives in a single-parent household and receives free/reduced lunch. During the interview he described himself as pessimistic. He also mentioned that his relationship with family members at home is tumultuous.

On an average day it's a pretty good learning environment. However, on the occasions that you come late to school, they don't try to make it seem like it's still an educational experience. They try to humiliate you and have you stand outside for 30 minutes. We call it lockdown.

Although they try hard this school is very poor and it is not very safe at this school. I know our principal tries but it's not very safe and that may be a major problem. I feel like the school has made a big change from last year because last year was so horrible. Last year they made promises that the school was going to be better and that was really the main reason why I decided to stay at this school. In some aspects the school is worse and some aspects the school is better. It has made a big change, and the teachers are trying but they still have a couple of teachers that are not performing. They don't seem like they care about your education. Even some of our advanced studies classes are bad. Last year, I had two mathematics teachers. I had one teacher that liked me and I had one teacher that didn't like me. When I told the teacher who liked me that I did well on the GEE, she gave me encouragement and told me to keep up the good work; but when I told the other teacher that didn't like me, she was mad. It could have been the way I told her. However, I do think we have more teachers that care about your education and more teachers that want to see you learn than teachers that don't try.

The thing that made me successful is that I have never shied away from being focused on my education. I think when I first realized I was coming to high school, I told myself that I was going to high school and I was going to get an education, but, I don't think it really had anything to do with the teachers. When I came to high school I had the right mind frame that I wanted to learn and I just stuck to it, because, I didn't really have a good teacher last year. If I would have had a good teacher like, Mr. Egypt, who teaches me this year, I would have had a better score on the GEE last year.

My success also comes from me wanting to prove somebody wrong because when I get home I get called 'stupid.' I tell them that I am not stupid and I am going to be better than you. Well, it really makes me want to try harder because I know I am going to be better than them and that's going to be the final word on it. Well, to be honest, when I go home and I talk about my success I guess they get tired of me talking about it, so I really get criticized for achieving. Even when I show them work I've done they do not get excited. So, I have to do well because my home is so horrible. I really want to do something better with my life.

Ulysses

Ulysses scored *mastery* on the mathematics portion of the GEE in Spring 2004. He lives in a two-parent household and receives free/reduced lunch. His demeanor seems to be introverted and thus he did not speak as much as the other participants. Although he answered each question, he did not seem to elaborate on any topic. Yet when he did speak, his thoughts seemed to be independent of the responses of the other participants.

A typical day at this school includes a lot of noise in the hallways between classes. In the classes there is a lot of work in all of my classes. At the same time the teachers try to encourage us to make 'A's' and try to make us stay at a high level.

I do not think our school is academically unacceptable. I would like some of those people to come here and see for themselves what our school is really like. I think they just look at the students who are not doing very well. It sort of makes the good students suffer for the bad ones. I think we have a lot of smart students at this school, but people just look at the whole at do not look at certain people who are doing pretty well.

One of the reason I have been a successful mathematics student is that I study hard and keep trying to get better. I do not like being second or third best, so I definitely try hard to be the best. It's a competitive thing. The teachers help me out a lot and just try to study as much as I can to understand what they teach me. At first in Mr. Egypt's class I did not understand the way he taught, but as time went on he really begin to break the topics down to where I could understand them.

One difference between me and students who are considered low achievers, is that I don't think they try as hard as I do. I don't think that I am that much smarter than them I just think they give up easily. Maybe if all of our teachers would motivate and interact with the students and not allow them to play around they might want to learn. What also helps me is that I try to hang around with good people. Hanging around with people will sometimes make you want to do the wrong thing; hanging around good people will make you want to the right thing.

My parents have a big influence on me. My mom likes to brag to her friends and family about how well I'm doing. That inspires me to try harder. She also expects a lot from me. If I make all 'A's' and one 'B,' she will say why did you make the 'B'? She says 'A's' are what I am supposed to make. When I do well I think I am doing it for both my parents. For me I like doing well in math because its my favorite subject.

I would not leave this school because I enjoy attending it. I am comfortable. I know most of the people here and I think I'll learn the same material. I think generally every school basically learns the same thing. Calculus and English is the same here as it is everywhere else. Just because people around me are not achieving does not mean that I have to go to another school. I think my experiences here give me a taste of the real world. Its preparing me for things that may happen in the future, right now. So when I get older I will know how to deal with those situations.

River High School

River High School is less than thirty-five years old. The school houses nearly thirteen hundred students in grades 7-12. It has been labeled academically unacceptable for two consecutive years, despite being considered a marquee school in its first two decades of existence.

In observing the school, perhaps most striking was the presence of city police at the school. During my first visit I noticed that three marked city police cars were in the school's parking lot. I later noticed that there were three armed uniformed police officers on campus and one undercover armed police officer. I saw these same officers on each of my visits. On two separate visits, I witnessed students whisked away in handcuffs.

In one of my extended waits in the front office, I overheard an interesting set of circumstances. A new student from out of state was disturbed by the fact that she had to be scanned by a metal detector on her first day of school. For the school, scanning with metal detectors is routine; for the student it seemed to be traumatizing. The student was so saddened, she wept in the front office until she could be consoled by her mother who eventually came to school to comfort the student.

At each visit, it became evident to me that River High School personifies what most people consider the norm for urban high schools. The physical structure of the building seems neglected; grass grows on the outdoor concrete basketball courts which also host rusty basketball rims. With the exception of the library, it seems everything I observed at River High was indeed typical of how research characterizes inner city schools.

Mr. Moses, Principal, River High

Mr. Moses has been in the field of education for more than thirty years as teacher and administrator. He seems to be a natural talker as he seemed very comfortable discussing the topic for this study. Although in the discussion it seems that he is passionate about his job, on each of my visits to the school, he had his office door closed for more than 30 minutes, while the aftermath of chaos filtered into the front office. I never observed Mr. Moses walking the halls or correcting students; however I did observe him collaborating with his assistant administrators on ways to combat recurring problems.

Before I came to River High I was a principal at another high school in the city, and I felt that I needed to come back to River High because I was born and reared in the community where River High is located and had

worked in this community for a long period of time. I felt that my energies and my knowledge that I had obtained over the years could be more utilized as a leader here, and so when this position became open I applied and interviewed for it and was accepted as the principal of this school.

I think that this school is more like a situation of what life is really all about. If you can understand what I mean, it's like life. We have some real good kids here that are top of the line, but then the majority of a significant number of our kids are just average everyday kids who are just as mischievous as other high school kids. Then we have a few kids who we haven't reached their potential yet, who are at that bottom level and that's like life. You have people who in life who are at the lower part of this society, either because of a criminal act or because of situations that they find themselves in, but the majority of us are people who are struggling everyday to make it. Some of us are making it a little bit better than others, but we are all living. Then you have those people who are at the top, the politicians and the rich people.

So, our school presents what urban education and life is all about. The culture of our school is what it is to live as lower-middle class Afro-Americans. That is our culture. Most of our kids are average kids who haven't developed and blossomed as of yet, and they will because that has happened to us. Many of our kids come back after they leave River High and talk about the successes that they have had. But, our culture is like the real society, like a real world. We do not have too many kids who come from public housing, but we don't have any who come from rich neighborhoods either. Most of them, we find, they are community people, their parents have been here for over a decade. And strangely you will find that most of these young people attend churches in the community and have a religious background.

Yet we do have problems at this school; problems of growing up, and the peer pressure that society brings. Right now we battle everyday with the peer pressure that children have in this violent world. Even kids that we know are being reared properly by their parents, who attend the churches, who are really basically good kids, when they are pressured to do negative things; more times than not, they do these negative things. We have a sub-culture in which most urban Afro-American kids have ingrained in them, through the society, these role models that they have, such as rap stars, that you must have this so-called respect. These kids will literally die if they think you are disrespecting them or you are 'handling' them. You can find the nicest kids here and know them real well, but if they feel that you disrespected them in the front of their peers, then you have a problem. That is one of the biggest situations that we have, along with anger management. A lot of our kids get angry and they do and say things in a three to five minute span that they are really sorry for afterwards. We have been battling with that, talking about how three minutes of anger has had people incarcerated and they talk about how, if they could go back and just change that little angry moment, they would not have done the things that they did to have them be punished by society of this world.

I don't believe in labels that much because there are too many variables that may affect the resulting labels. If you judge us by state testing standards, and they say that our scores are low I have to accept whatever they say - unacceptable because of test scores. We accept that and will be striving to improve. Some people like to say we are not on a level playing field, but life is not a level playing field.

On the other hand, as a high school student, as an elementary student, we didn't have all the labels. I like to use the example that we didn't have special education when I went to elementary school that long, long time ago. Many of those kids who I sat in elementary classrooms with, that sat on the row with the non-readers, they blossomed later on and many of them are now very, very successful. If they had lived in today's age they would be special education children and it would be more strenuous for them to be as successful as they are now. So, I don't believe too much in the labels: I just don't believe it should be in our profession, in the teaching profession. We are all judged by whether or not we can pass a national teacher's exam to get a teaching certificate. There are many, many, very, very good teachers who have been trained well and they just cannot pass the test and they are not considered highly qualified or certified teachers. On the other hand, there are many teachers who score well on these tests and cannot manage a class, cannot teach kids and are just not successful teachers. So, when you start talking about labeling, I don't totally agree with it, but I must live by it because that is the size of standards, but I do look at what people have within themselves. But, if you show me that you are just unacceptable then I will label you unacceptable. But if I see that you are trying and you have not blossomed yet, I do not think you should have that label. That is just my personal feelings about that.

One good thing is that the unacceptable label does not inhibit students from being successful, as long as they see that we are comparable to other high schools. You know, if all other high schools were acceptable and they had one or two that was unacceptable, then I would think that it might affect us more; but by mire fact that nearly all the high schools in this city, are deemed unacceptable, then I think that the kids feel like they fit right . That is so unfair. But, I think if people would come in and visit our school, they are likely to use an old adage, 'we are not *that* bad.' There must be some other ways to do this without labeling schools and kids. I think there has to be other alternative solutions. If some of these kids are not performing at this time, they need to be placed in other settings; perhaps the student-teacher ratio should be lowered with more teachers. I know all of this is economics and other states and other counties are doing it. However, I don't think we utilize the moneys that we have to make this thing better.

Unfortunately at our school, it is still not popular all the way to be smart among the students. So, most of the kids who are high achievers, realize that it is okay to be smart, and we try to teach that. I also think personal intelligence, background, parental help at home all contribute to students becoming high achievers at this school. We have this thing in the classroom where kids who have the intestinal fortitude to exhibit their intelligence skills. If I had the option to leave and I was a high-achiever in math student, I guess I would stay simply because I would be the top of the line. I would be one of the top students here, and if I had this in my heart I could help my fellow students. I could certainly excel and be a big fish in little waters as opposed to going to a situation where everybody excels and might just be one in the line. So, if I were a high-achieving math student, I would want to stay, first, because I had this ingrained thing in my heart that I would like to help my classmates. Secondly, I would be that big stick in little waters over here.

To promote high achievement we do the conventional things. We do our awards and rewards programs. We certainly try to educate these young people and let them know the value of being the best that they can possibly be. We do educational excursions, we bring in the speakers and we do those conventional things. But we now belong to what we call a *High Schools That Work*, where we separate our school in the small learning

communities where these individual students picks a course of study and it is just another way to prepare them for life after high school. With *High Schools That Work*, the major goal is to prepare kids for a job right after high school or prepare them to go on to college. Sadly, these things are unknown to the public. Lots of times for public schools, they only make the local news or newspaper if something bad happens or if it relates to athletics. It is not news if it's something good academically. For example, we have our National Honor Society, but they don't play in the Superdome for a state championship. We have advanced classes and we have kids who excel academically but they do not get the publicity that our star athletes get. Athletics get all the publicity in this city. In our arts society we have drama club, we have all kinds of things here that helps move kids to be successful and viable citizens of this community, but for the most part that is not considered to be newsworthy by the media.

Mr. Greece, Teacher, River High

Mr. Greece has taught for thirty-two years at River High School. The school itself is nearly thirty-five years old. He has seen the school's population move from predominantly white in the 1970's to predominantly Black today. He also recalls when River High School was among the best in the State in the 1970's. In the following passage he speaks about his experiences as a teacher a River High School, now deemed academically unacceptable.

Well, I always liked math. I started out majoring in math. Teaching was sort of like a secondary occupation for me. As time progressed I just took a greater interest in what was going on in the black community at that time. There were several movements in the early 1970's that encouraged giving back to the community. So, I got on that bandwagon giving back as a teacher trying to make a difference. I was chosen to come to River High. The schools were adjusting to integration so the school district was trying to maintain the ratio of Black to white teachers in the public schools. A position for a Black teacher opened at this school and I accepted the offer to teach here.

Today, this is a regular urban public school which means you are not getting the crème de la crème students that private schools and magnet schools get. But students can get a good education here at this school. It wouldn't be necessary for them to leave, but it would be other environmental reasons that may make parents want to pull him out. They may not want them to mix with all of the various kinds of students that he would come in contact in normal public schools. Parents would have to have a big hand in determining whether students leave this school. Parents may not wan their children to mix with all of the various kinds of students that attend normal public schools. Sometimes those students call the high achievers names but I really don't see that as being abnormal. It's not a

justifiable reason to change schools and it does not seem to affect the students I teach.

If the child is rooted at home and has values and the parents have ingrained in him the importance of an education, all I am doing is coming back cleaning and buffing it up. My work is not as laborious with that particular student as it would be with someone who did not have that type of upbringing. I don't have to convince that student that he is capable of doing. He knows that he can do.

If resources could have been yanked out of high performing schools and put in the other schools, the kids at the lower performing school could take advantage of that. That's what your high performing schools have; they have advantages that the lower performing schools will never get. It's just hard. People want to try to change things and, you're not going to get those teachers at the best schools to leave and go work at the worst schools. They are not going to do it, because what they have to overcome over at low performing schools is more than just the teaching. So, people have to realize that there is more to it than just that.

One thing we have to overcome is the stigma of being in a disadvantaged school. Just because a school has a label doesn't mean that every kid in that school is low performing, so, they have to believe that and not accept the title. The second thing, the teacher has to accept that you are not a low performing teacher because you have low performing students. You have to teach even harder because you teach at one of those types of schools. There is a lot that goes into it, and then it is a buy in. You try to get the kids to buy in, first of all. Then after you get them to believe that they can do, then you have to show them that they can succeed.

One of the biggest challenges in these disadvantaged schools or low performing schools right now is the discipline issue. You cannot teach if you cannot maintain order. They have to give us a hand in handling order. I'm just wondering in the course of giving everybody a chance are we doing a greater disservice than a service. Are we creating a weaker black student than a stronger Black student because we are making allowances for them? Yes, they are coming to the table with all kinds of baggage that our counterparts may not have, but how long are we going to stand back and say that that is an excuse and that we need to accept that. When are we going to say okay, we understand this, let's step over this now? When are we going to make that leap to step over and quit making excuses for them on every hand?

The difference between a high achiever at this school and a low achiever is their background. The low achiever student hasn't had many experiences of success in his high school or school career. That is the crux of the whole matter. We are getting students at the tenth grade level and the child may have experienced nine years of terrible teaching or nine years of non-success and now we are telling him in year ten that he has to now succeed. That is a hard pill for somebody to swallow when you have been indoctrinated for nine solid years of what you cannot do. And, now I'm coming as a classroom teacher saying what you can do. Who do you think the child will believe the teacher he only met for one year or the nine that he has met for nine years?

If someone were to come to my school and visit my classroom I think they would not leave thinking we are unacceptable. I always tell my kids if there is any teaching at River High going on, you can be assured of one thing, teaching is going on in my room. If there is any learning going on, you can be assured of one thing; there is some learning going on in my room. They would not have that opinion that all the kids here are disadvantaged because they would see kids on task, they would see kids

asking questions, they would see kids who are trying to better themselves and that is all I can ask my kids to do. First you have to demand that they do. There are other teachers around here like that, too. Everybody has their own style and their own way of doing things, but, yes, I do believe that if they would come in here, yes, I think that they would leave with a different idea about River High School.

Titus

Titus is a senior at River High and scored *mastery* on the mathematics portion of the GEE in Spring 2003. He lives in a two-parent household and receives free/reduced lunch. One of his parents is a native of Haiti. He admits that he has been far less than an ideal student in the past, but credits a former teacher with helping him turn into a high-achieving student. Even though he scored among the top six percent of African Americans in the state of Louisiana on the mathematics GEE, his overall GPA still hovers around 2.3.

Our school is not that bad, but we do have some bad students. Especially when they come from lunch, they are loud and you can't really hear anything when the teacher is talking. Sometimes it affects me but other times it is just easier for me to just by myself, do the work and ignore the noise. I'm still doing my work when they are talking loud. Some of them just don't care about the noise or other problems, so if the teachers don't care, students don't care either.

I think we have some good teachers here too. I take advantage of that. Some kids do not. Like when I had Ms. Leavy, I would stop the class and make them be quiet. Ms. Leavy used to talk to me about how I am doing in class, so then I started to paying attention and participating in class. She tried to make it fun for me and I started catching on a little at a time. Basically, she did all of that and that's why I have a lot of respect for her. She doesn't teach here any more, but every time I see her I always speak to her and tell her how good she made me be right now. Without her, I would probably have dropped out right now. Now math is my favorite subject. I'm successful because I had people like Ms Leavy who were forcing me to learn. That made me want to learn and I had want to do well in my classes. I reached a point when I felt I was ready to learn different things and that turned into success.

Sometimes I tell my friends how I turned around but they won't really listen, those dudes I hang with. They don't really care, like, some of them do but some of them don't really. So, I can just talk to them but I can't make them change. I used to be bad. I was being a follower, following other students doing badly, so, I was doing the same thing they were doing. When you are doing good things, it might not work out that way. I never wanted to be an A student because I didn't want anybody to come at in the wrong way because I can get A's. Here's a guy really paying attention and when

somebody gets something, they don't like it. They can't get it. They would be jealous and I do not want anybody coming at me in that way. So I avoid all of that. I just pass my classes. I am making C's and B's. I could be an A student if I wanted to, but I don't want to be an A student because I don't want nobody to come at me like that. If I wanted to I could be an A student, but I don't want to be an A student. I just do what I have to do to pass my classes.

My mama, she really is happy because I used to be bad. All my reports used to be mostly F's. From last year to this year, she has very proud. She didn't think I was going to go that far. Now I am going to be graduating and going to the military after that.

I only have two math teachers who are still here that taught me. If they see me in the hall going to class, they say 'you don't cut class anymore?' All I used to do all day is cut class. So, when they see me going to class they are happy. I return my appreciation to the teacher for encouraging me like that.

For other students who were bad like me I would tell them to go to school and don't ever give up. At first, when I started doing well, I would improve to get D's. I thought, if I was an F student then I could go higher than that. Now I am a C student really and if I really wanted to I could be higher than that, and if I worked up to my ability I could get a B or an A or something like that. I would tell them to just try their best. Do their best and see what happens. I would also tell them to find those teachers that are going to help you with it. Just talk to one of the teachers that care about you. That's what I did. I would tell them to find a teacher or go to a counselor or something like that, just talk to them and they will help you. They won't ever tell you anything wrong. They are going to help you.

Finally when you are in class, try to have fun with the work. Most students go to class and they don't really care, but if they are having fun and learning at the same time, it would be great.

Through all my problems and the problems of the school I never thought about leaving. The school stuck with me, so I stick with them. I like this school and I like what the teachers have done for me. I want to graduate from this school. I mean I started from kindergarten and got up to ninth grade and started thinking 'I don't believe I really need school.' Ms. Leavy changed my attitude about that. I do not think I could go to another school after they helped me like that and plus I didn't really want to go to another school and meet new kids and start new friends.

Sara

Sara is a senior at River High School and scored *mastery* on the mathematics portion of the GEE. She receives free lunch and lives in a single-parent household. Initially, she was reluctant to participate in the study because she was misquoted in an earlier article which appeared in a major national newspaper. However, during her interview she was outspoken and provided complete responses to the interview questions.

A typical day at my school is busy and noisy. You come to school, go through the metal detectors, go to class and it is mostly noisy in between classes. It's busy like any normal high school.

During classes, what goes on in the classroom depends on the teachers. Some teachers tolerate things and some teachers do not tolerate anything. Some teachers let you do whatever you want, and some teachers really teach. The kids don't listen to teachers who just sit down and let them do what they want. In most of my classes, my teachers teach and control the classroom, but I have been in some where it is chaos. Even the chaos doesn't affect me at all because regardless, I still get my work done. Like, sometimes it will be at the end of the class period and I'm the only one that has my work done. So, it doesn't affect me all because I always get my work done.

Still, I do not think my school is unacceptable. They may label it like that, but it's not a bad school, it's just the kids. The school itself is not bad. They have good teachers here and good administrators. It's the environment. It's not the school. I want to say that considering our school being academically unacceptable, is not a true statement. There may be some of the students that don't want to do anything, but it's not academically unacceptable, because there are teachers here that help you out a lot. It is not the school, it's probably some of the kids who just don't want to do anything, but, it is not a bad school. The label does not affect my ability to learn and should not affect any of the other students here.

Regardless of what is said about the school, I chose to stay at the school because I have done too well and come too far to leave. I felt that I came too far to leave. The GPA I had from the ninth grade, and tenth grade was acceptable, I think my highest was like a 3.2. Since then I have improved a lot. I put too much work into it to just leave I feel I came too far to just leave. In addition I chose to stay because it is like family now at the school. I have been here for so long, I have a good reputation here. It's good and the teachers help you out a lot, especially if they know that you want to do something. It's not like they don't care, its family and this is where I want to graduate.

The fact that I am considered a successful mathematics student has a lot to do with my math teacher, Mr. Greece because math is my worse subject. He has helped me out a lot. There were times when I would want to just give up, maybe it's just not for me, but he told me 'don't give up, it's not hard, you can do it.' From there it was all me. I began studying harder. I began to get on top of everything. When I am determined to do something, I will do it and I was determined to succeed in math. I became even more serious about my work. Plus I am motivated to graduate. It's like my biggest thing that I have is that I want to graduate. That's my real motivation, graduation. I have been too good and I want to graduate and get a chance to explore the real world.

My mom, she's happy about it every time I come home with something good. She tells me to keep up the good work - like I'm in elementary school. She states 'you're doing well, you have almost four or five months, you have a little bit of time left, just keep on trucking up the hill.'

In my opinion, I think, to be honest, I think some of my peers are jealous because most of sometimes if I'm getting awarded for something they are act like little kids and roll their eyes. My close friends, sometimes they want me to help them out sometimes, but as for my peers in general they are just jealous. Fortunately their opinion does not affect how good I want to be. Me, I'm a person, I don't care what they think or say negative about me, they are not going to stop my success. If I am an A student and they're jealous of it, I say 'you can strive to be an A student, too.' Their

attitude does not affect my ability.' That's why most of the time I stay to myself. I have friends but I usually stay to myself. That helps me avoid trouble and stay focused. I speak to people and I have some friends, but for the most part I stay to myself. That's the best thing to do here because you never know what you could get into.

Ruth

Ruth is a senior at River High School who scored *mastery* on the mathematics portion of the GEE. She lives in a two-parent household and receives free/reduced lunch. She was very candid about the problems associated with River High and what she perceives as barriers to the overall success of the school.

I would first like to mention to you the discipline actions of the administration and teachers. They let students get away with anything. There is a bunch of chaos, just everybody walking the halls and not being in class. Since we have middle school students here, it is even more chaos; there are a lot of little kids walking and playing around. Really, it depends on how you motivate yourself. If you see the chaos you don't want to go to class, you are going to stay out there with the chaos. You are going to do what you want to do, no matter what. No one can tell you what to do. I choose to go to class no matter what is going on. Another problem is sanitation, it is very nasty. It is so bad you have to cover your nose as you walk through the halls.

In a way I agree with the unacceptable label because the children here do not care about their education. The main reason they don't care is because they do not know much about the real world and do not realize that what they do at school will reflect on them in the future. Some people just don't care and want things to come to them but they don't want to work for it. Even though we are academically unacceptable, our teachers try their best. It's just our students don't want to get the information.

I decided to stay at this school because I am athlete and I am a part of several extracurricular organizations at the school. If I were to leave, I would have let down my teammates. I also did not want to start all over again as far as getting to know a new school and new people. In a way since people feel this is a bad school I wanted to let them know that I can do something good here. There are some people at this school that can do good things. However, I do know some people will think that I cannot do much because I attended River High, and think other students can do more because they attended better schools.

I think I am a successful mathematics student because I study really hard to do well in math. I do not like math very much but I know that is a requirement and a part of life. I also wanted to make my mom proud because at one point everybody thought that I wouldn't make it, but I'm doing something with myself and I'm going to show everybody I'm going to make it.

I also pay attention to my teachers. Our teachers do what they have to do for the most part so that we can understand, and if we don't understand the teachers here will help you when you need help. At anytime after

school, before school, during school or whenever you need help, especially the math teachers, they really help you.

My friends, they tell me they are happy for me, but they crack a lot of jokes about me doing so well. Some say that they are motivated by my success. I wish that they all could be motivated to do well in school because that is what Black people need now. White people are more motivated in their schools, while we are motivated to do well in sports.

Pandora

Pandora scored *mastery* on the mathematics portion of the GEE and is a senior at River High School. She lives in a two-parent home and receives free lunch. She is a fast talker, but is also very brief in her responses unless probed.

A typical day at my high school involves learning but we have fun at the same time. There are children that do go to class and do what they have to do. If you go around to all the classes, a lot of teachers teach their classes, but some students don't pay attention. It's not really the teachers' fault; most of the students don't want to learn. The teachers give them the knowledge they need.

I do not agree with the academically unacceptable because we have some students here that try their best. A lot of people that graduated before from this school are very successful because of the school. But we can pick out certain students that make the school seem academically unacceptable. Nobody cares about the people who are doing well, they only focus on the bad things that happen.

I chose to stay River High because it taught me a lot about life and taught me a lot academically. I have been going here since my seventh grade year and now I feel like I know a lot so I never would have considered leaving. Plus a lot of teachers basically look out for us. They really do. Even with our financial difficulties they have helped. If we don't have the money for stuff like senior supplies they really try to help you out. If you need somebody to talk to you can talk to any teacher, any counselor, and any administrator. They will be there to help you.

The reason why I am a strong student in math is because the teachers that I had taught me well. I listened and paid attention in class because I did not think I was that good in math at one time. I took part in all of the programs we had before we took the GEE test. We had the summer school program, Saturday school, and after school programs. All the programs helped me be successful.

My parents were extremely proud of my success because I am the oldest of four children. They like the fact that I am setting a good example for my younger siblings. It shows my little sisters and brother that you have to take care of school in order to get where you want to be in life.

My teachers have also been supportive of my success. They often compliment me on doing well. It could be because they really take time with me. Anything I don't understand they always explained it to me, step by step. They keep going over it with me. Everything that has to do with me being a better student they offer it to me. So I think they want the best for me.

Most of the people I hang around with are a little older than me. They tease me a little bit about doing well but I just laugh. It makes me feel good anyway to know I am doing better than them. I wish that they would go to tutoring or to some of the teachers so that they can do well too. It would be nice if they would listen to their teachers and show everybody that just because the school is poor academically does not mean that everybody here are poor students. No matter what, you should do what you have to do to succeed.

Omar

Omar is a senior at River High who scored *mastery* on the mathematics portion of the GEE in Spring 2003. He receives free lunch and lives in a single-parent household. During his interview, he seemed eager to make it a point for me to understand that his school is not as bad as it seems.

A typical day at my school is crazy. There is a lot going on at the school. There are too many students in this school. Since they added the middle school it's a like a daycare around here sometimes. However, I do not think my school is academically unacceptable. We just have a couple of unacceptable students here. Our school is divided into half: they have the half that wants to learn; and the other half doesn't want to learn. If you go in any class, the one half is sitting in class, paying attention to the teacher and doing all their work. But then the rest are playing around and doing whatever they want. They don't do their work or participate in class. They just come to school for the wrong reasons. But I still do not think it is right for people to judge something they don't really know about.

I have done well at this school in mathematics because I love math. It is my strongest subject. There is something about math that I understand, and it comes to me naturally. Another reason why is since my ninth grade year, I have had good teachers in math. A good teacher knows how to teach and make you understand the work and that is basically it. It also helps that I get rewards from my mother every time I bring home good grades or something good that has to do with school. I think she is very proud of me.

My teachers are proud of me because I am a reflection of them. If I'm doing well that means they are doing something good. A lot of these teachers now are about helping us and preparing us for the future so we can be future leaders of the world.

My peers know I am doing well but they don't have too much to say about it because most of the people I hang out with, they are doing well also. So, you don't say anything about it. One of things I like about my friends is that we try to stay far away from all those bad problems at school. If I could give advice to any of my fellow students it would be to not let your surroundings change what you want to in life. Take advantage of what the school has to offer to help you do well, and eventually go to college and be a success in life. If I was the principal I would try to relate to my students more, talk to them more and see what is going on with them. It

might help them with their academic troubles and other things. I hope it would make them see the importance of education.

No matter what the problems are at River High I would not leave it for anything in the world. I love my school. I wanted to get attend this school since I was in elementary school. I have always lived down the street from the school. When I was going to elementary school, I would look from through the window from the bus at River High and say ‘one day I am going there.’ When the opportunity came to choose another school, I said ‘forget it, I am where I want to be.’

Summary

The above accounts were based on audio-taped group interviews, individual interviews, and responses from open-ended questionnaires. They were presented in the narrative form to provide the reader a better idea of the social context, school culture, and other influences that are endured by high achieving mathematics students who attend the two academically unacceptable schools in this study. Additionally, the researcher attempted to give voice to those students who were able to excel in mathematics and to those influential teachers and leaders who may have directly or indirectly impacted the students’ success.

Although each participant expressed his story independently, an examination of the narratives yielded several themes that are germane to the research questions that frame this study. The connectedness of their experiences and its relationship to the essence of this research study will be discussed in Chapter VI.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

This research study is intended to contribute to the scant research related to high achieving African-American mathematics students who attend pitiable schools. The major research questions which directed this study were: 1) what are the reasons why successful math students have been able to thrive in academically unacceptable schools and 2) why they have chosen to stay in these academically unacceptable schools despite having the option to leave for a better performing school?

The participants in this study were eleven successful African-American high school mathematics students, two mathematics teachers of successful students, and the two principals of the two participating schools. At the time of the investigation, both schools were designated as academically unacceptable by the Louisiana Department of Education. Their responses have been transcribed and analyzed. One of the cornerstones of presenting the narrative profile (as in Chapter V) is that it allows the reader to freely interpret stories. Nonetheless, the bulk of Chapter VI will focus on how such responses relate to the two major research questions and the four related sub-questions. The remainder of the chapter will discuss research implications from the results of this study.

Research Question #1

The first major research question in this study sought to *determine the reasons why successful mathematics students have been able to thrive in academically unacceptable schools.*

Student participants in this study primarily attribute their success to their mathematics teachers, and their own personal traits. The participants mentioned that teachers' ability to separate mathematics into comprehensible chunks ultimately allowed them to flourish in mathematics. This approach to teaching led to an increase in student confidence in mathematics, an apparent decrease in mathematics anxiety, and an overall change in attitude towards school among the student participants.

The second most prevalent reason the participants feel they are successful is because of personal traits they possess. The participants mentioned a range of personal traits which include the ability to focus, desire to succeed, determination, and curious/inquisitive nature. Collectively, it is also evident that these students have a strong belief in self. Each of the students circuitously or directly pointed out that believing they could succeed ultimately contributed to their success in mathematics. Bauman (1998) pointed out that African Americans who take a role in their own advancement invest more time in their education and thus seek greater economic opportunities as a result of their personal commitment to education.

One of the student participants had a peculiar set of circumstances. He explained that he had poor mathematics teachers and a tumultuous, dismal home life.

He attributes his success to a determination to be the best he can be and “be better than my family.” His case is even more intriguing because it implies that his personal tenacity and self-confidence offset the oppressive state of affairs present in his home and school life.

Although parents and early school background were mentioned by the student participants, those responses were not pervasive. Three of the students mentioned that their parents were indeed contributors to their success. They mentioned that parental discipline, encouragement, and general rearing were the main things parents have done to ensure their academic development. This, however, was not a major thread in the interviews.

Conversely, the adult participants (two teachers and two principals) felt that student achievement was a direct result of parental influence, prior educational foundation, and personal character traits. None of the adult participants considered high school mathematics teachers as the primary factors for student success. However, one of the teachers did mention that his work is less laborious if he has a student who has a good parental support system and solid academic foundation; on the other hand the same teacher also said that if he encounters a student who has had multiple years of inept teaching, reversing those affects is a monumental task and perhaps unalterable. The task becomes even more problematic with the added pressure of having the student prepared for standardized high stakes test instead of focusing on the mathematical skills the student may lack.

In reference to personal traits, the principals and teachers seem to agree that strong personal traits do increase the chances of being a successful mathematics

student. Aptitude, fortitude, and purposeful commitment were among the desirable traits mentioned. One teacher mentioned that discipline was a major problem in urban schools; thus insinuating that a cadre of self-disciplined students would lead to more instructional time for teachers, which would likely lead to higher achievement.

Research Question #2

The second major research question in this study asks, *why have successful mathematics students chosen to stay in academically unacceptable schools despite having the option to leave for a better performing school?*

All of the student participants in this study firmly believed that remaining at their present school was the best choice for them. The reasons cited all revolve around the comfortable feeling they have with their schools (see Table 7). Students' familiarity with school rules, friends, teachers, and atmosphere in general convinced them to continue attending the academically unacceptable schools. Some even mentioned that their schools have developed a family atmosphere. They also mentioned that a change would not be worth building new relationships with teachers, students, and a new school culture. It is safe to assume that these students trust their respective schools. Goodard et al., (2001) found that trust makes schools better places for students to learn: the greater the trust the greater the student achievement.

Table 7

Student Responses to Research Questions 1 and 2*

Student Participants, High School, Classification	Research Question #1 Reasons for Success	Research Question #2 Why staying at current school
Zeke, Lake High, Senior	Inquisitive; Parents, Math Teachers; Independent Learner	Senior Year; School Atmosphere; Prefers not to change environment
Yann, Lake High Senior	Teachers; Curiosity; Parents	Favors Underdog Role; Assist in dealing with “real life” problems
Xana, Lake High, Junior	Teachers; Good test taking skills; Personal Focus	Comfortable; Prove People Wrong; Assist in dealing with “real life” problems
Warren, Lake High, Junior	Teachers; Academic Background	Comfortable; Assist in dealing with “real life” problems
Vernon, Lake High, Junior	Personal Focus; Prove Family Wrong	“Promises were made to improve the school.”
Ulysses, Lake High, Junior	Study Hard, Desire to Improve; Teachers; Parents	Comfortable; Would learn same material elsewhere
Titus River High, Senior	Teacher, Personal Focus, Academic Maturity	Bonded with school, Never wanted to leave, wants to graduate from school
Sara, River High, Senior	Teachers, Motivation to graduate, Personal Determination	Family Atmosphere; Good Reputation; Come too far to leave
Ruth, River High, Senior	Study Hard, Teachers	Member of Athletic Teams; Did Not Want to Make New Friends, etc.
Pandora, River High, Senior	Teachers, Study Habits, Attend School Enrichment Programs	Taught Life Lessons as well as Academics
Omar, River High, Senior	Math Comes Naturally; teachers, Love for math	Love the school; Yearned to attend for years

***Research Question 1: What are the reasons why successful mathematics students have been able to thrive in academically unacceptable schools?**

Research Question 2: Why have successful mathematics students chosen to stay in academically unacceptable schools despite having the option to leave for a better performing school?

Adult participants believed that students should stay at their present school because: a) the school does provide them with a good education; b) they could take on the role of humanitarians – helping the other students in the school to improve; c) they could stand out academically; and d) they could continue to receive adequate support from teachers (see Table 8). Only one adult participant mentioned that

parents would have any impact on a student switching schools and none of the student participants did so. Perhaps since the student participants are in high school they are given more liberty to make decisions regarding their future.

Table 8
Adult Responses to Research Questions 1 and 2*

Participant, Title School	Research Question #1 Reasons for Success	Research Question #2, Why Stay at current school
Mr. Noah, Principal Lake High	Academic Foundation, Parental Influence, Aptitude	School Climate, Teacher Support
Mr. Egypt, Teacher, Lake High	Purposeful Commitment	Assist Underachieving Peers
Mr. Moses, Principal, River High	Personal Intelligence, Academic Background, Parents, Instestinal Fortitude	Maintain Status as Top Academic Students; Assist Underachieving Peers
Mr. Greece, Teacher River High	Parental Influence, Academic Background	Good Education; Parental Influence

***Research Question 1: What are the reasons why successful mathematics students have been able to thrive in academically unacceptable schools?**

Research Question 2: Why have successful mathematics students chosen to stay in academically unacceptable schools despite having the option to leave for a better performing school?

Conceivably the most stunning revelation from major research question number two is the predominant view that graduating from either academically unacceptable school would translate into future success, as a person. The student and adult participants felt if all variables were the same students would fare better in life if they graduated from their present school rather than a higher performing school. The participants believe that their experiences at Lake High and River High mirror those that are common in the “real world.” Thus it is assumed by the participants in this study, that attending these socially challenging schools will make them better equipped for life’s ups and downs. This is of particular importance in light of

Bonner's (1997) study which found that African-American students emerge into the adult world confused about their identity, and have problems relating to Black and non-Black populations. This particular group of students may not have such problems because they may have observed or endured similar life lessons in high school.

Sub-question #1

The four sub-questions in this study were investigated to give the reader a better understanding of the cultures present in the two schools being studied and how such culture influences student achievement. The first sub-question asks: Is the negative school designation, academically unacceptable, appropriate for your school?

In response to this question students indicated that having the school being labeled academically unacceptable does not have a negative impact on their school work. In fact, some students indicated that the label drives them to succeed because they want to prove people wrong. Yet they do realize that their effort may be offset by the abundance of underachievement present at the school.

Only two of the students in the study agree with the unacceptable label. Most students concede that their school needs improvement because of the lackadaisical attitude rampant among its fellow students. However, they also feel that their success is overshadowed and disregarded by those who assign the unacceptable labels.

The adult participants indicated that a visit to the schools by anyone considering the school academically unacceptable would likely leave them with a different impression of the school — different from the unacceptable label bestowed

upon them. One principal mentioned they would see hard working teachers. Teachers said that visitors/evaluators would see teaching and learning. On the other hand both student and adult participants admitted that evidence of undesirable school conditions would also be present.

Perhaps the most disheartening result from the question is one principal's postulation that overall students are okay with being labeled academically unacceptable because most of the other schools in the district share the unfavorable label. That same principal also declared that such wholesale mediocrity is not fair to his students or any of the students who attend academically unacceptable schools.

Sub-question #2

The second sub-question relates to teachers. Interestingly, students were eager to discuss the influence of their teachers prior to even being prompted by this particular question. The second sub-question asks: What is the role of the teacher in the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools?

As mentioned earlier, students have a strong belief in their teachers' ability to advance their academic status. Even the one student who had a poor teacher last year, mentioned that if he had the teacher who is teaching him math this year his standardized test scores would be even higher. Students mentioned the fact that they believe teachers go above and beyond their job to take care of students' academic needs and in some isolated cases non-academic needs (see Table 9). Brown (2000) indicated that African-American teachers, take on many roles including surrogate mothers and fathers, supporter, counselor, and encourager. When teachers address

the social and emotional developmental needs of children it not only fosters the skills needed for life-long success but also helps children become better learners (Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Seigle, 2004).

Table 9
Student Responses to Sub-questions 1 and 2*

Student Participants, High School, Classification	Sub-question #1 Appropriate Label	Sub-question #2, Teacher Influence
Zeke, Lake High, Senior	No, but some proof of unacceptable label; Other variables come in to play	Help students a great deal
Yann, Lake High Senior	No, but people are entitled to their opinion.	Provide tools to succeed; Step by step approach to teaching
Xana, Lake High, Junior	No, but some students are underachieving	Proud; Student success reflects their teaching
Warren, Lake High, Junior	No. Some students are underachieving, but others are outstanding	Proud; Help students a great deal
Vernon, Lake High, Junior	Yes, but some effort to improve	Some poor teachers, but more good than bad
Ulysses, Lake High, Junior	No. people just look at the whole and not certain people who are doing pretty good.”	Motivate, Interact with students
Titus River High, Senior	No Response	Encouraging. Will stick by you if you need help.
Sara, River High, Senior	No, students are not applying themselves	Helpful, Encouraging
Ruth, River High, Senior	Yes, students do not care about education	Try their best; Helpful at all times
Pandora, River High, Senior	No, students try their best; past graduates were successful	Help students a great deal in and out of classroom
Omar, River High, Senior	No, but there are a few bad students.	Proud; recognize if Students do well, means they are doing well.

* **Research Sub-question 1: Is the negative school designation, academically unacceptable, an appropriate description of the schools in this study?**

Research Sub-question 2: What is the role of the teacher in the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools?

When this question was addressed by the teachers they both expressed the need to convey high expectations to the students. They reiterated that the message of high expectations must be insistent and consistent largely because most of the students have been subjected to substandard experiences prior to reaching high school (see Table 10). They mentioned that the challenge lies in getting all the students to believe in the message of high expectations; those who believe have a tendency to achieve. Lee (2003) indicated that cultures of quality and high expectations are the basis of the most successful urban schools.

The two principals both recognized the work of their teachers. They both agreed that their teachers are hard workers and try to bring out the best in all students. Overall, they believe that the teachers have a genuine concern for the well-being of the students and would like to make a difference in the lives of every student they encounter.

Table 10

Adult Responses to Sub-questions 1 and 2*

Participant, Title School	Sub-Question #1 Appropriate Label	Sub-Question #2, Teacher Influence
Mr. Noah, Principal Lake High	No, because teachers work hard, school climate	Work Hard, Make a Difference, Embrace Challenge
Mr. Egypt, Teacher, Lake High	No, Students at the school are capable of performing well	Promote High Achievement, Enable Success, Improve Student Self Esteem
Mr. Moses, Principal, River High	No. Disagree with labels in general	Low student teacher ratio would help
Mr. Greece, Teacher River High	No, Especially as it pertains to my instructional practices	Teach Harder; Overcome other obstacles

* **Research Sub-question 1: Is the negative school designation, academically unacceptable, an appropriate description of the schools in this study?**

Research Sub-question 2: What is the role of the teacher in the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools?

Sub-question #3

The third sub-question relates to the influences of principals. The question asks: What is the role of the school-based leader (principal) in the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools? The students and teachers were asked to answer this question as if they were in the role of principal.

The students did not indicate that the principal had a residual effect on their achievement. Yet, when asked what they would do if they were the principal of the school, students indicated that if they were principal they would hire more good teachers, purchase more updated books and materials, provide tutorial services for academically challenged students, and implement a testing policy to gauge student achievement levels upon entering the schools. Students also mentioned that they would motivate students and have opportunities to talk to students one on one. Similarly, Beyer and Ruhl-Smith (1998) cited research and literature suggest that the school leader be one who empowers others and encourages creativity and flexibility in an effort to develop trust throughout the school setting, and thus provide a foundation for successful restructuring and reform.

The teacher participants in this study felt that an effective principal should have high expectations for students and have a firm grasp on discipline in the schools. Both teachers consider the above to be key contributors to the success of students and the school as a whole. Richardson, Lane, and Flanigan (1996) indicated that it is important that the principal understand the teachers' expectations of him, so that he

can fulfill the expectations of the role; ultimately those expectations that influence teacher behavior, which in turn affects student achievement.

The principals themselves pointed that their role includes promoting high achievement and offering the type of curriculum that promotes high achievement for those who have the ability. In some instances they encourage average students to take advanced courses in order to maximize their potential. They also spoke of providing students with a school support system that is conducive to learning. One principal wanted to make it clear that he uses test data to improve the instruction and achievement at his school; he says his use of the data is contrary to what most people think of principals of academically unacceptable schools.

Sub-question #4

The final sub-question is, “To what extent peers affect the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools?” Prior research studies show that high achieving students are subject to widespread ridicule from their peers. Moreover, inner city schools are plagued by an abundance of negative factors which have the possibility of affecting high achievers.

However, in this study student participants believe that peers do not negatively affect them academically, primarily because they associate themselves with “good students” (see Table 11). They did acknowledge that some students may refer to them as arrogant, subject them to exceptionally high expectations, seem jealous or even mock them. However, the students consider such actions as harmless

jokes. Overall, students indicated that such treatment is not excessive and sometimes is used as a motivator to continue to succeed.

Table 11
Student Responses to Sub-questions 3 and 4*

Student Participants, High School, Classification	Sub-question #3, Principal Influence	Sub-question #4 Peer Influence
Zeke, Lake High, Senior	I would probably raise more money to update books, and hire more teachers that make learning interesting	Considered arrogant; Expect to do well; Assist one another
Yann, Lake High Senior	Hire more teachers. I would encourage teachers to talk to their students one on one	Considered arrogant; Assist one another;
Xana, Lake High, Junior	Test students to determine progress and offer tutoring	Associate with positive peers; Harmless jokes
Warren, Lake High, Junior	Test students to determine if they need assistance	Success represents them; Burns a fire to succeed
Vernon, Lake High, Junior	Give students more access to instructional materials i.e. computers	Associate with good and bad with no negative effects
Ulysses, Lake High, Junior	Study sessions after school and during lunch for students	Associate with good people
Titus River High, Senior	Have more tutoring, or after school programs	Affects maximum potential; Early negative influence
Sara, River High, Senior	Get more books, because they use the same books, add more subjects	Does not affect schoolwork, Jealous
Ruth, River High, Senior	I would motivate my students	Harmless jokes; "Motivated by my success"
Pandora, River High, Senior	Have more tutoring programs, walk around the classrooms and check on my students. I would try talking to them.	Harmless jokes
Omar, River High, Senior	I would relate to my students more, talk to them more	Peers are doing just as well academically

***Research Sub-question 3: What is the role of the school-based leader (principal) in the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools?**
Research Sub-question 4: To what extent do peers affect the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools?

One student, Titus, from River High, seems to have been profoundly influenced by the negative peer culture. He admits that he has had academic and behavior problems in the past and those problems were likely due to his peer

associates. Now that he has dramatically improved academically, he admitted not doing his best because of the possible uproar from rambunctious peers.

Another interesting finding from the students' perspective is that they would like to see their peers become high achievers in mathematics as well. In some cases, participants mentioned that they worked collectively to help other students do well in mathematics and other subjects.

The adult participants in this study indicated that there is an overall negative atmosphere created by the peer culture of their schools. This creates peer pressure to do the wrong thing that is nearly legendary in its influence on adolescents. The participants indicated that students who overcome the temptation of peer pressure are those who have had a proper upbringing and continue to receive parental support. They also indicated that peers present an apathetic attitude, and consider academic achievement to be unpopular (see Table 12).

Table 12

Adult Responses to Sub-questions 3 and 4*

Participant, Title School	Sub-question #3 Principal Influence	Sub-question # 4 Peer Influence
Mr. Noah, Principal Lake High	High expectations; Support system; Advanced curricula; Data driven instruction	Peer pressure, Apathy
Mr. Egypt, Teacher, Lake High	High expectations	Peers should assist one another
Mr. Moses, Principal, River High	Promote high achievement, support system	Negative; Peer pressure; unpopular to achieve
Mr. Greece, Teacher River High	Control discipline issues; Get parents involved	Overall negative environment

***Research Sub-question 3: What is the role of the school-based leader (principal) in the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools?**

Research Sub-question 4: To what extent do peers affect the achievement of successful math students in state-recognized poor schools?

Implications

It is unlikely that the designers of accountability systems can fathom the heinous conditions present in academically unacceptable schools. Participants in this study mentioned an array of problems from apathy and restlessness to anger management and violence. For the average student, the above problems are insurmountable and subsequently inhibit their ability to achieve academically; especially in a challenging subject area like mathematics.

Fortunately, the students in this study are among a cadre of exceptional students who are able to persevere in spite of being placed in undesirable conditions. They exhibit an uncanny resilience that seems to immunize them from the perils associated with academically-unacceptable schools. Moreover, they collectively have a staunch commitment to the school that cannot even be altered by the enticement of a perceived better school. This study gave them the opportunity to share the tenets of their success, which turn out to be insightful and relatively reasonable. They do not attribute their success to mystical wizardry: they simply attribute it to good teachers and a sense of efficacy toward themselves and mathematics.

Educators and those who aspire to improve low-performing schools must take heed of the advice of those who have experienced success under the duress of attending an unacceptable school. Although it may seem a cliché, unacceptable schools need good mathematics teachers: yet it will take a monumental shift in educational policy to attract good mathematics teachers to poor performing schools. Moreover, such transformation calls for a redistribution of funds that would provide

worthwhile incentives for teachers to work in low-performing schools, and provide meaningful professional development (from universities, local/national consultants etc.) to help teachers engage in instructional practices that lead to high achievement and increased efficacy among inner-city high school students. Are policy makers, universities, businesses, and the community at large willing to make radical changes to the way we respond to academically unacceptable schools, or will we continue to rely on superficial solutions to an alarming problem? If we continue to be unresponsive, we can expect only to exacerbate the problem, not solve it.

Further, school principals, teachers, and leaders must make a more concentrated effort to exalt students who are high-achievers. In light of what successful students have mentioned in this study, esteem is a function of success. Therefore, efforts to increase esteem and subsequently increase achievement should be of the utmost priority. Hence, stars of the mathematics classroom should be higher on the proverbial totem pole, than stars of the basketball court. Changes in school culture of this kind can only be effectively initiated by savvy administrators who truly understand that in the age of accountability it is the academicians who are the crown jewels of the school, and not the athletes.

Metaphorically, remedies such as the above would require an “act of congress.” Unfortunately, if you consider Congress’ recent track record on educational reform that may not even be a wise decision. As a result of the Congressionally-approved *No Child Left Behind Act*, low-performing schools are bemoaned with defamatory labels and thus have further stigmatized their students. Judiciously, the act offers students the chance to switch schools and attend a better

performing school. Even though the concept seems meritorious, preliminary results show that large numbers of students have an unwavering commitment to their schools. Furthermore, high schools have evolved into social phenomena that promote school pride: that same school pride evokes a sense of school citizenship that is unlikely to succumb to the lure of a better performing school – which in many ways negates the concept of school choice.

If current trends in accountability systems continue, inner city schools will bare the brunt of the ramifications for not meeting academic standards. Most often mathematics ineptness is the major culprit for not meeting such standards. Solutions to this problem run the gamut, but it seems that assigning wretched labels is not the answer. Who can possibly benefit from such designation? The label may raise the possibility of crippling the fiduciary relationship between the community and its schools. However, the issue of labeling schools may be perplexing: on one hand participants in this study indicated that the derogatory label actually has proven to be a motivating factor; on the other hand that same derogatory label is perhaps viewed as demoralizing, particularly for underachievers (although not confirmed by the results of this study). Conceivably, the labels may have been designed to jumpstart listless administrators, teachers, and students. Unfortunately, early outcomes indicate that once schools are tagged with low performing labels, they have a tendency to maintain that undesirable status — which may imply that the listless remain listless.

Nonetheless, very few solutions include the suggestions of students who actually succeed while enduring troubling circumstances. If input from successful mathematics students is consistently ignored, it is likely that the current achievement

gap will persist. Consequently, a generation of underserved African Americans from inner-city schools may become disenfranchised — with no high school diploma and limited means to fulfill the American Dream.

Further study is encouraged to: 1) better understand the experience of successful mathematics students who attend academically-unacceptable elementary and middle schools; 2) determine if students who exercise their right of school choice demonstrate success at the new school; and 3) determine the influence of parents on success and school choice in elementary, middle schools, and high schools that are considered academically unacceptable. Additionally, the interpretations of the collected data were those solely of the researcher: nonetheless an invitation is extended to those who have opposing or supporting views, particularly if their interpretations provide a basis for empirical studies related to the theme of this study.

In conclusion, the findings from this study should not be interpreted as anecdotal. In fact, this study may have a more than adequate level of authenticity (external validity) in view of the fact that all fifty states now rate schools based on standardized test scores and provide parents with yearly report cards which indicate the progress of the schools. States also have the option of notifying the public (via the media) of schools in need of improvement, but must do so prior to the beginning of the school year (US Department of Education, 2004). Nationwide, 11,008 schools have been identified as needing improvement in 2004-2005 (Education Week, 2005). Additionally, NCLB requires that all fifty states provide students with the choice of attending at least two better performing schools, if their present school does not meet state academic achievement standards (US Department of Education, 2004).

With billions of dollars of federal funding at stake, states have scurried to comply with NCLB and thus the end result will likely be a bevy of circumstances similar to those discussed in this study. As policymakers and educators view the data from the lowest performing schools, it is hoped that they look beyond the statistical mean of each school when searching for solutions. The outcomes of this study show that it may also be wise for educators and policymakers to consult high-achievers in low performing schools who outperform school means. These exceptional students have the propensity to provide valuable input in creating practical blueprints to improve the status of underachieving schools. This approach is perhaps more viable than exclusively encouraging a mass exodus from schools which were once the nucleus of communities.

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Appendix A
Consent Forms

October 8, 2004

Dr. A Sample, Superintendent
Large City School District
1234 School Board Ave.
Metro, LA 56789

Dear Dr. Sample,

The objective of this letter is to request your kind assistance in conducting educational research at two of your schools.

I am currently a doctoral candidate at Southern University-Baton Rouge in the Department of Science/Mathematics Education, conducting my research under the direction of Dr. Ernest Zebrowski of the Department of Science/Mathematics Education. Your school district provides an appropriate research setting for my dissertation entitled: *Successful African-American Students in Academically Unacceptable Schools: A Study of Resiliency and Commitment*.

My research will explore how “low-performing schools” manage, in spite of this negative label, to actually produce some high-achieving students.

Qualitative methods including interviews are required for this study. Data collection for the study will include: a) individual audio-taped interviews with two principals, b) group audio-taped interviews with six mathematics teachers, and c) group audio-taped interviews with ten high-achieving mathematics students. The student participants will also be asked to complete a ten item open-ended questionnaire.

It is hoped that several aspects of this study will be published in scholarly journals. Accordingly, I will ensure the confidentiality of each of the participants. Procedures designed to ensure confidentiality include: 1) creating pseudonyms for each of the individuals involved in the study and 2) creating fictitious names for the school, city, and school system involved in the study. Moreover, the manner in which I conduct this research will be highly principled, ethical, and respectable. It should also be of note that I have obtained approval from Southern University’s Institutional Review Board (see attached).

As a benefit to the student participants in this study, I will provide each student with a twenty dollar stipend for his/her involvement. In addition, I foresee no possible risks or discomforts in anyone’s participation in this research. However, if at any point a participant decides to discontinue his/her participation in the study, I will honor his/her request accordingly without consequence. Conversely, in the event any of the participants demonstrate discontent to the point of unruliness, I reserve the right to terminate their participation in this study.

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this research you can contact me, Peter A. Sheppard, IV at 1234 Candidate Dr. Baton Rouge, LA 70800 or via email pshepp@someemail.com or via phone at (225)-123-4567 or (225) 987-6543.

If you have questions or concerns about the rights of participants in this research study or to report a research-related injury contact:
Jimmy D. Lindsey, Ph.D., Chairperson, Institutional Research Oversight Committee,
P. O. Box 11241,
Southern University -Baton Rouge,
Baton Rouge, LA 70813-1241;
Voice - 225-771-3950; Facsimile – 225-7715652;
E-mail - Jimmy_Lindsey@CXS.SUBR.Edu

Finally, I intend to write a similar letter of consent to the prospective participating principals, teachers and parents. I have attached those letters and a more detailed summary of my study for your review. Additionally, you are entitled to copies of any other applicable consent forms associated with this study.

Your kind cooperation and timely response will be very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Peter A. Sheppard, IV
Southern University Doctoral Student

I hereby grant permission to Peter A. Sheppard, IV to conduct educational research in my school district, based on the above conditions.

Signature

October 16, 2004

Dear Mr. Principal,

The objective of this letter is to request your kind assistance in conducting educational research your school.

I am currently a doctoral candidate at Southern University-Baton Rouge in the Department of Science/Mathematics Education, conducting my research under the direction of Dr. Ernest Zebrowski of the Department of Science/Mathematics Education . Your school provides an appropriate research setting for my dissertation entitled: ***Successful African-American Students in Academically Unacceptable Schools: A Study of Resiliency and Commitment.***

My research will explore how “low-performing schools” manage, in spite of this negative label, to actually produce some high-achieving students.

Qualitative methods including interviews are required for this study. Data collection for the this study will include: a) individual audio-taped interviews with you (the principal), b) group audio-taped interviews with three mathematics teachers and c) group audio-taped interviews with at least five mathematics students. The student participants will also be asked to complete a ten item open-ended questionnaire.

It is hoped that several aspects of this study will be published in scholarly journals. Accordingly, I will ensure the confidentiality of each of the participants. Procedures designed to ensure confidentiality include 1) creating pseudonyms for each of the individuals involved in the study and 2) creating fictitious names for the school, city, and school system involved in the study. Moreover, the manner in which I conduct this research will be highly principled, ethical, and respectable. It should also be of note that I have obtained approval from Southern University’s Institutional Review Board (see attached).

As a benefit to the student participants in this study, I will provide each student with a twenty dollar stipend for his/her involvement. In addition, I foresee no possible risks or discomforts in anyone’s participation in this research. However, if at any point a participant decides to discontinue his/her participation in the study, I will honor that request accordingly without consequence. Conversely, in the event any of the participants demonstrate discontent to the point of unruliness, I reserve the right to terminate their participation in this study.

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this research you can contact me, Peter A. Sheppard, IV at 1234 Candidate Dr. Baton Rouge, LA 70800 or via email pshepp@someemail.com or via phone at (225)-123-4567 or (225) 987-6543

If you have questions or concerns about the rights of participants in this research study or to report a research-related injury contact:
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Southern University -Baton Rouge,
Baton Rouge, LA 70813-1241;
Voice - 225-771-3950; Facsimile – 225-7715652;
E-mail - Jimmy_Lindsey@CXS.SUBR.Edu

Finally, I intend to write a similar letter of consent to the prospective participating teachers and parents. I have attached those letters and a more detailed summary of my study for your review. Additionally, you are entitled to copies of any other applicable consent forms associated with this study.

Your kind cooperation and timely response will be very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Peter A. Sheppard, IV
Southern University Doctoral Candidate

I hereby grant permission to Peter A. Sheppard, IV to conduct educational research at my school, based on the above conditions.

Signature

November 16, 2004

Dear Parent,

The objective of this letter is to request your kind assistance in conducting educational research involving your high-achieving child.

I am currently a doctoral candidate at Southern University-Baton Rouge in the Department of Science/Mathematics Education, conducting my research under the direction of Dr. Ernest Zebrowski of the Department of Science/Mathematics Education. Your child is an ideal candidate for participation in my dissertation entitled: *Successful African- American Students in Academically Unacceptable Schools: A Study of Resiliency and Commitment.*

My research will explore how “low-performing schools” manage, in spite of this negative label, to actually produce some high-achieving students.

Qualitative methods including interviews are required for this study. Your child will be asked to complete a ten item open-ended questionnaire and participate in a group audio-taped with least four other mathematics students.

It is hoped that several aspects of this study will be published in scholarly journals. Accordingly, I will ensure the confidentiality of your child. Procedures designed to ensure confidentiality include 1) creating pseudonyms for each of the individuals involved in the study and 2) creating fictitious names for the school, city, and school system involved in the study. Moreover, the manner in which I conduct this research will be highly principled, ethical, and respectable. It should also be of note that I have obtained approval from Southern University’s Institutional Review Board (see attached), the school district, and the principal of your child’s school.

As a benefit to all the student participants in this study, I will provide each student with a twenty dollar stipend for his/her involvement. In addition, I foresee no possible risks or discomforts in anyone’s participation in this research. However, if at any point your child (or you) decides to discontinue his/her participation in the study, I will honor that request accordingly without consequence. Conversely, in the event any of the participants demonstrate discontent to the point of unruliness, I reserve the right to terminate their participation in this study.

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this research you can contact me, Peter A. Sheppard, IV at 1234 Candidate Dr. Baton Rouge, LA 70800 or via email pshepp@someemail.com or via phone at (225)-123-4567 or (225) 987-6543

If you have questions or concerns about the rights of participants in this research study or to report a research-related injury contact:

Jimmy D. Lindsey, Ph.D., Chairperson, Institutional Research Oversight Committee,
P. O. Box 11241,
Southern University -Baton Rouge,
Baton Rouge, LA 70813-1241;
Voice - 225-771-3950; Facsimile – 225-7715652;
E-mail - Jimmy_Lindsey@CXS.SUBR.Edu

Finally, I have attached a more detailed summary of my study for your review. As a parent, if you feel compelled to take part in this study please indicate below (**parent participation is not required for student participation**). Additionally, you are entitled to copies of any other applicable consent forms associated with this study

Your kind cooperation and timely response will be very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Peter A. Sheppard, IV
Southern University Doctoral Student

By signing below you are granting permission to Peter A. Sheppard, IV to conduct educational research involving your child, based on the above conditions.

Signature

Student's Name

I would like to participate in this study to express my views on this topic from a parent's perspective. Please Circle YES or NO

YES

NO

November 16, 2004

Dear Teacher,

The objective of this letter is to request your kind assistance and participation in an educational research study at your school.

I am currently a doctoral candidate at Southern University-Baton Rouge in the Department of Science/Mathematics Education, conducting my research under the direction of Dr. Ernest Zebrowski of the Department of Science/Mathematics Education.. Your school provides an appropriate setting for my dissertation entitled: ***Successful African- American Students in Academically Unacceptable Schools: A Study of Resiliency and Commitment.***

My research will explore how “low-performing schools” manage, in spite of this negative label, to actually produce some high-achieving students.

Qualitative methods including interviews are required for this study. In an effort to make this study more valid, I would like to include your perspective as a teacher of successful mathematics students. You will be asked to participate in an audio-taped group interview with at least two of your mathematics colleagues.

It is hoped that several aspects of this study will be published in scholarly journals. Accordingly, I will ensure the confidentiality of you and each of the other participants. Procedures designed to ensure confidentiality include 1) creating pseudonyms for each of the individuals involved in the study and 2) creating fictitious names for the school, city, and school system involved in the study. Moreover, the manner in which I conduct this research will be highly principled, ethical, and respectable. It should also be of note that I have obtained approval from the Southern University’s Institutional Review Board (see attached), your school district and your principal.

In addition, I foresee no possible risks or discomforts in anyone’s participation in this study. However, if at any point you decide to discontinue your participation in the study, I will honor your request accordingly without consequence. Conversely, in the event any of the participants demonstrate discontent to the point of unruliness, I reserve the right to terminate their participation in this study.

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this research you can contact me, Peter A. Sheppard, IV at 1234 Candidate Dr. Baton Rouge, LA 70800 or via email pshepp@someemail.com or via phone at (225)-123-4567 or (225) 987-6543.

If you have questions or concerns about the rights of participants in this research study or to report a research-related injury contact:
Jimmy D. Lindsey, Ph.D., Chairperson, Institutional Research Oversight Committee,

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Voice - 225-771-3950; Facsimile – 225-7715652;
E-mail - Jimmy_Lindsey@CXS.SUBR.Edu

Finally, I have attached a more detailed summary of my study for your review and have obtained the approval of your school district and principal. Additionally, you are entitled to copies of this and any other applicable consent forms associated with this study.

Your kind cooperation and timely response will be very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Peter A. Sheppard, IV
Southern University Doctoral Student

I hereby grant permission to Peter A. Sheppard, IV to include me as a participant in this study, based on the above conditions.

Signature

Participant Assent Form

I. Researcher and Purpose of the Research

My name is Peter A. Sheppard, IV and I am graduate student at Southern University in Baton Rouge. I am doing a study to learn more about high-achieving African –American mathematics students.

II. Number of Children Participating and Research Protocols/Procedures

There will be nine other children like you who will be in this study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire and participate in a group interview session with other students.

III. Risks and Benefits

What you will be asked to do in this study should not hurt you or make you feel uncomfortable.

If you participate in this study, you will receive a cash award of twenty dollars. Additionally your participation will contribute to the understanding of high- achieving African-American mathematics students. This can also help to develop other students' potential in mathematics no matter what school they attend.

IV. Questions about the Research

You can ask questions any time you want to about the study. You can ask them now or ask later. You can talk to your parents about the study and your participation.

V. Voluntary Participation

You do not have to be in the study – it is your choice. No one will penalize you if you do not want to do this. If you do not want to be in the study, you just have to tell the researcher(s) or your parents. You can say,

“Yes” now and change your mind later. If you change your mind later, no one will be angry with you and you will not be penalized.

VI. Anonymity and Confidentiality

If you participate in this study, your real name will not be used; instead another name will be used to protect your identity. This study may be published in magazines, journals, or used in presentations, so it important that your right to privacy is protected.

VII. Signatures

Signature of Child	Age	Date
--------------------	-----	------

Signature of Witness	Date
----------------------	------

Signature of Person Administering Informed Assent	Date
---	------

Appendix B
Interview/Survey Questions

Student Questionnaire

Gender

Grade Point Average

Number of Parents in Household

Free/Reduced Lunch _____

GEE Scoring Label _____

1. Explain to me a typical day at your high school, as if I knew nothing about it.
2. What would you say to someone who called your school academically unacceptable or a bad school?
3. You had the option of leaving the school because of its academic status, why did you choose to stay?
4. Describe the reasons why you have been a successful math student in a school that the state recognizes as academically unacceptable.
5. In your opinion how do your peers feel about your success?
6. How do your parents feel about your success?
7. What advice would you give to students who are in schools that are considered academically unacceptable?
8. How do your teachers feel about your success?
9. Suppose you were the principal of the school. What would you do to improve the academic status of your school?
10. Explain to me what you think the ideal school would be like.

Teacher Interview Questions

Gender _____

Grade Level Taught _____

Years of Experience _____

Degrees Earned _____

1. How did you end up becoming a math teacher?
2. Knowing what you know now about this school, would you have still considered employment here?
3. If you were a high achieving math student, what would compel you to stay at this school if you had the option to leave?
4. Suppose you were teaching at a high performing school, what would you say about an academically unacceptable school?
5. From your perspective, what do you see as the major problems associated with this school?
6. What problems specifically, you think high achievers endure at this school?
7. What separates high achievers in this school from the low achievers?
8. If you were in position to make all the necessary changes to improve the unacceptable status at this school, what would you do?
9. Explain to me a typical day in your mathematics class.
10. What is it about your class that allows students to excel?

Interview Questions Principal

Gender _____

Years of Experience _____

Years at School _____

Degrees Earned _____

1. What circumstances led to you accepting your position as leader of this school?
2. Explain to me a typical day at your school as if I knew nothing about it.
3. If you were an outstanding math teacher why would you work at this school?
4. If you were a high achieving math student why would you stay at this school if you had the option to leave?
5. Research typifies your school culture in a largely negative manner. How would you typify your school's culture?
6. What problems generally are encountered by your students?
7. How has label academically unacceptable affected the morale of your school?
8. What separates a high achieving math student at your school from a low performing student?
9. If you were the principal of a high performing school what would you think of a school labeled academically unacceptable?
10. What is done at your school to embrace or promote high achievement?