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The Quest For Success: A Phenomenological Study Aimed At Understanding The  
Experiences Of Successful African American Females In High School

by

Vanntaccale Price

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration (UNL-UNO)

Under the Supervision of Professor Jody Isernhagen

Lincoln, Nebraska

October, 2015

The Quest For Success: A Phenomenological Study Aimed At Understanding The  
Experiences Of Successful African American Females In High School

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University of Nebraska, 2015

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This phenomenological research study was conducted to better understand the experiences of successful African American females in a high school setting and to draw implications for learning related to their perceptions of success in school. The study describes African American female students' perceptions of factors that influence their achievement in school. Participants included six African American female students attending high school in the Midwest. Data was gathered from student interviews, parent/guardian questionnaires, informal observations, and student visual displays. From the analysis of the aforementioned data several themes emerged which include the importance of the students' family and teachers to their academic success, their desire to bring honor and achieve at a level never before reached by their family, their desire to dispel the stereotypes and assumptions made about black females and not wanting to struggle in the manner noted in their current environment when they are older.

## Acknowledgements

So true are the words of Jon Gordon (2007) in that no one ever creates success alone. I've been blessed to have a positive team with supportive people rooting me on every step of the way. This dissertation was possible because they kept my dream alive.

First and foremost I am thankful to God Almighty whose love for me transcends all of my imperfections. All that I am or ever hope to be I owe it all to Him.

Thank you to my dissertation committee who extended me the opportunity to grow and develop as a researcher during this process. Thank you Dr. Jody Isernhagen, Dr. Larry Dlugosh, Dr. Del Harnisch, Dr. Karen Hays, and Dr. Mary Beth Lehmanowsky-Bakewell for your scholarly advice, patience, and wisdom in helping me achieve a lifelong goal.

Thank you Dr. Marilyn Johnson-Farr for taking me under your wings. Sitting at your feet has allowed me to see first hand what it means to be an academic scholar and pioneer for justice.

Thank you Dr. Nancy Becker for seeing what was possible for me. My skills and talents would have gone unnoticed had you not spotted them and inspired me to go forth and be courageous.

To the six young ladies who allowed me into their world to see success up close and personal, I thank you. Your lived experiences were uniquely rich and I grew immensely by unpacking your narratives. I can't wait to see how you go forth to change our world.

To my dear mother, Mary Louise Jones, thank you for having the guts to step out on faith and raise four children on your own. Watching you persevere despite the struggles provided me with the tools I needed to be successful. Your ability to instill in me the power of education fueled my determination and drive. Thank you to my wonderful grandmother, Jewel Anderson, who was one of my biggest cheerleaders. You always made sure that I knew the “home team” was rooting for me.

I am thankful for my amazing brothers, Kent, Nippsy, and Brent Jones who allowed me to find my calling at a young age as we played school in our basement. You all have been instrumental in shaping my understanding of unconditional love.

Last but certainly not least, I am thankful to the most patient man I have ever known, my friend, husband, and pastor, Edward C. Price. Your love and constant encouragement has propelled me forward yet kept me grounded.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

I've heard it said that a jewel is just a rock that figured out how to shine. I'm convinced that for me, an African American female growing up in the late 1960s and 70s, the figuring out part came from each nod, nudge, or word of encouragement that was ever spoken to me. My mother and grandmother were the two most responsible for who I have become but there were other influential voices along the way. My maternal strong pillars poured their whole selves into the igniting of my torch. By the time I entered high school in 1978, I knew I wanted to be at the top of my class.

While I know in looking back that the investment in me was much more than words, I can't help but believe that the seed was planted before I even understood how to phonetically decode words. But what makes my story different from other African American female students? Why were words so powerful for me? What determines who is inspired, who develops the resiliency, who buys into the notion that education is power? What are the factors that determine which African American females are successful?

Oprah Winfrey (2003) said it well when she reminded us "every time you suppress some part of yourself or allow others to play you small, you are in essence ignoring the owner's manual your creator gave you and destroying your design" (p. 36). The idea of "designs being destroyed" has played itself out in the form of low academic achievement for some students in America's schools (Roscigno, 1998, p. 1046). This phenomenon is

disturbing when one considers that the mission of a public school should be to prepare all students to live and work in a diverse society.

Gary Howard (2006) wrote that the assumption of rightness, as related to the achievement gap, often leads teachers to assume that the problem of school failure lies in the students and their families and not in the structure of schooling. We make assumptions about who can and cannot learn; and the more uncomfortable we are with difference, the greater the likelihood that we will relegate certain children to lower levels of expectation and academic opportunity. He later explains that we easily conclude that our professional judgments are correct and that those who don't achieve are either not sufficiently intelligent or inadequately supported by their home environment.

Steele (1992) proposed that it is in the academic environment more than anywhere else, that African American children and adolescents learn how little they are valued in society. He further posited "academic achievement links strongly with an individual's self-concept in the academic domain" (Steele, 1992, p. 72). When African American students do not see the academic domain as supporting their self-concepts, they seek outlets other than academic achievement to feel positive about themselves.

The experience of African American females in schools as differentiated by the group experience of Blacks as well as that of "females" is a subject that has received narrow attention by both scholars and researchers. Limited data has been published that examines students defined as African American females and their experience of schooling. The Black female adolescent has been underrepresented in educational, psychological, and career literature. Albeit 30 years ago, Smith (1982) described a gap in

the literature and the lack of studies conducted with Black females. Consequently, what we know about young Black females is “bits and pieces of fragmented knowledge” (Smith, 1982, p. 261). While that gap has narrowed, current educational research tends to focus on deficits in Black females (O’Connor, 2002; Reis & Diaz, 1999). “A paucity of research has focused on the achievement of female high-ability students in urban settings” (Reis & Diaz, 1999, p. 31). It is easy to conclude that few studies have examined the relationship between academic success among African American females and the factors that contributed to their achievement.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this research study was to examine the factors that foster student engagement and academic success in African American females at the high school level. This phenomenological research study examined factors that foster student engagement and success in African American students, specifically females, at the high school level. The researcher was interested in knowing who or what positively influences these young women to be successful at school and to what extent.

Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) reminded us that Black women have so much to offer our country, so many gifts to share with all of us.

And yet, as a society and as a nation, we have never quite stopped to appreciate the truth of their experience, the verity of what it feels like to be Black and female, the reality that no matter how intelligent, competent, and dazzling she may be, a Black woman in our country today still cannot count on being understood and embraced by mainstream White America. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 2)

Consequently, conducting a research study on successful Black female students is valuable to the research base and necessary to expand the understanding of what makes

their experiences unique. As Henry (1995) claimed, “there is a need for critical qualitative investigations of Black girls and schooling which are not only distinctly gender-specific, but also make participants’ lives the starting points and foci of the research” (p. 281). According to Zapf (1996) few studies have explored the challenges and concerns of Black adolescent females, fewer have examined their successes, and fewer still use their voices. I strongly agree with O’Connor (1997) who stated that insufficient attention has been given to Black students who accommodate the norms and expectations of school and experience academic success despite risk.

This research study is significant because it will broaden the knowledge base about Black female high school students in ways that are currently scarce in the research archives. First, I will describe the factors contributing to African American females success using their voices, opinions, and perspectives. Additionally, I see it as crucial to depart from the focus on deficiencies and examine factors that foster academic success. Lastly, I will examine at least three distinct factors that may affect Black females academic success including family support, teacher influence, and their involvement in extracurricular activities.

In examining the current research one must conclude that more research is necessary to establish a direction for reversing the problem of underachievement of Black girls. For Black students, both male and female, research indicated a struggle in maintaining academic achievement and positive racial identity. Fordham and Ogbu (1988) reminded us that though they may be capable learners, they often hide their

academic talents, underachieve, and push limits on acceptable school behavior as they actively resist the process of schooling.

Central research questions include:

1. What do successful African American female students report as major factors contributing to their academic success?
2. What do successful African American female students report as challenges faced in becoming successful?

Sub questions include:

3. How do African American females define and/or view their success?
4. What do African American females report as reasons for their participation in extracurricular activities?
5. What do African American females report as the role of significant others (i.e., family, teachers, friends) in helping them achieve their goals?

### **Definition Of Terms**

*Student Engagement*—Student engagement is increasingly seen as an indicator of successful classroom instruction, and is increasingly valued as an outcome of school improvement activities (Kenny, Kenny, & Dumont, 1995). This study supports the definition provided by Schlecty (1994), “students are engaged when they are attracted to their work, persist in it despite challenges and obstacles, and take visible delight in accomplishing their work” (p. 5). Student engagement also refers to a student's willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process (Bomia et al., 1997).

*Academic Success*—For purposes of this study, academic success is defined in terms of a mastery goal. It is focused on student's acquisition of skills and knowledge and the effort expended while in school. Embedded in this definition is the inclusion of students who maintain a cumulative grade point average (3.0 or higher) and may be enrolled in college preparatory classes.

*Extra-curricular Activities*—Extra-curricular activities would be defined as educational activities not falling within the scope of the regular curriculum and officially or semiofficially approved, organized student activities (as athletics) connected with school and usually carrying no academic credit (Webster, 2013).

### **Researcher Positioning/Limitations of the Study**

Creswell (2013) clearly defined the concept of reflexivity, which involved “the writer being conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a research study” (p. 216). The researcher of this project acknowledges that she brings her own experiences of growing up as a successful African American female as defined in this study. Researcher bias is inherent in most attempts at interpreting data. As the researcher works to uncover and give voice to the young women in this study she admittedly approaches this research with preconceived notions about gender, race, and adolescence.

As my experiences become your experiences the researcher may find clues to orient oneself to the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). Because experiences may be shared as potential human experiences, “phenomenological descriptions have a universal (intersubjective) character” (van Manen, 1990, p. 58). The researcher’s personal and

professional narratives growing up as an African American female in public education gives her an understanding of the lived experience, while her role as an educator inspires her to learn about the journey of these young women today.

The researcher is the product of a single mother who poured her whole life into igniting her passion to learn. Realizing that her own personal story may or may not be similar to the young women that she is interested in studying, it does impact her role in this study. The researcher's past personal experiences will need to be set aside or "bracketed" (Moustakas, 1994) so that the current voices of these young women can be heard. However, the researcher's understanding of the unique challenges encountered by African American females will bring increased empathy that can potentially lead to strengthened rapport with the research participants. It is the researcher's hope that this will likely allow participants to feel more comfortable and provide a more in-depth account of the experience and deeper understanding of their personal triumph despite barriers.

Lastly, the present study was delimited to a sample that included African American females from six Midwestern high schools. The study made little to no inferences or comparisons to male or female students of any other race. The sampling does not include rural or non-public school students.

The African American female students had a story to tell. Their successful experiences in public schools merited attention and exploration. The researcher desired to share their stories in a way that brought light to their strategies for coping with the struggles that they may have face in achieving at high levels. According to Jones and

Shorter-Gooden (2003) these young women, along with others like them, “have made the courageous decision to try to sap society’s oppression rather than live with it, to fight back rather than accommodate to it, to quell and rise above the pain rather than to accept and internalize it” (p. 92).

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Nearly five decades after Dr. King's death we are a different country where the white population will become a minority. Yet when the school bell rings or when attendance is taken, our schools remain separate and deeply unequal. We need to remember Dr. King's conclusion that "segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregated a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority." It ignores the reality, he said, that Americans "are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny" (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008, p. 3).

Resmovits (2013) contended that as students progress through the school system – as they're "pushed through" – they often drop off academically. The gap between black and white high school students, kids at the threshold of adult life, remains profound. According to Resmovits (2013), a major reason for this discrepancy was something that has long plagued America's schools: minority students are more likely to have ineffective teachers – by any measure. Federal data shows that educators are less experienced and less likely to have majored in the subject they're teaching, and generally, they have less impressive records in helping students grow their test scores. The problem, known as "equitable distribution of teacher," reflects broader arenas in which blacks lose out on resources (Resmovits, 2013, p. 4).

### **The Plight of African American Females**

Despite some gains in educational achievement and attainment, African American girls still lag behind their White counterparts at all levels of education. The U.S. Department of Education (2003) reported that the dropout rate among girls ages 16- to 24-years-old is 7.7%, whereas African American girls experienced a rate of 8.8%, followed by Asian/Pacific Islanders (6.4%), and Whites (4.5%). Hispanics girls, however, had a much higher rate of 18%. In regards to high school status completion rates among 18- to 24-year-olds, in the same period, the completion rate for girls was 90.6%, whereas it was 94.6% for Whites, 92.7 % for Asians/Pacific Islanders, 88.7% for African Americans, and 77.6% for Hispanics. In both cases, there is a notable disparity between African American girls and their White counterparts (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012, p. 199).

To further understand the plight of Black females in school one might examine the work of Damico and Scott (1988) to gain insight into the progression of the Black female's journey in their early years in school. Damico and Scott (1988) concluded that Black and White female students enter school with more similarities than differences. Both tended to play in large groups, to choose girls as best friends, and to want to do well academically. But they also noted some observable differences between the two. For example, Black females tended to be task-oriented in their interactions with teachers, while White females sought to establish personalized relationships with them. As an outgrowth of their task orientation, Black females actively promoted compliance among classmates with classroom rules. Consequently, they have more varied peer contacts than

any other race-gender group (Damico & Scott, 1988, p. 64). The literature of Damico and Scott also concluded that teachers tend to reinforce academic behavior among White females and social behavior among Black females. For instance, “teachers ask Black females to help classmates with non-academic tasks and White females to help with academic ones” (Damico & Scott, 1988, p. 64).

Perhaps most thought provoking was the findings of Damico and Scott (1988) in which teachers provided different explanations for the similar achievement of Black females and White males. The Black females were seen as achieving up to their ability whereas the White males were described as immature and thus not yet working up to potential. As a consequence of these perceptual differences, unconscious teacher behaviors may be contributing to the development of the low academic self-esteem and achievement noted among Black females (Damico & Scott, 1988).

While the focus of this study was not to dwell on these barriers it is important to note obstacles and roadblocks that exist for Black females. Essential to the discussion of their experience, and to better appreciate the magnitude of their achievement, is an analysis of the school environment in understanding the obstacles they face.

As researchers seek ways to reduce the disparity that exist between African American and White students, many have examined some of the factors that contribute to this dilemma primarily by continuing to study the experiences of African American girls who have not excelled. However, what is lacking from the knowledge base are studies of high-achieving African American high school girls, and the variables that contribute to their schooling experiences. The present study deviated from the previous research focus

on deficits associated with these students by deliberately exploring successful African American female students from six Midwestern high schools. In this chapter an exploration of current research related to factors that may influence the achievement of African American females is examined. While some researchers concentrate their efforts on the deficiencies that may be present when students don't achieve, several prominent researchers draw conclusions of the factors that appear to have the greatest promise for scholastic excellence among Black girls. This chapter will explore the current findings related to the power of the classroom teacher, the importance of a supportive home environment, and the evidence related to participation in extracurricular activities.

### **The Power of Teachers in the Lives of African American Females**

In searching for key factors that foster student engagement and academic success, specifically in African American females at the high school level, one must acknowledge and appreciate the human capital. Several researchers have concluded that influential people in the lives of African American students who achieve scholastic success have included parents and teachers. According to the current research, this holds true for the African American female student as well (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012). Several prominent researchers have studied the power of the teacher in the lives of African American students. Janice Hale (2001) talked about teachers who “care about the soul of the child” (p. 116). “When students encounter teachers who care in this manner, the child receives the support he or she needs to acquire whatever skill is being imparted” (Hale, 2001, p. 116).

The findings of Greg Wiggan (2008) shed some light on high achieving African American students, both male and female. Wiggan looked at the school context and processes that high achieving African American students identify as contributing to their academic success. Wiggan's (2008) findings revealed important school effects that students perceived as impacting their achievement.

The three main contributors to their high school success included: 1) teacher practices, engaging pedagogy; 2) participation in extracurricular activities and; 3) the state scholarship as performance incentive. According to the students, teacher practices were the most instrumental school effect impacting their school success. (Wiggan, 2008, p. 339)

In a similar study of African American high school females, Diane Archer-Banks and Linda Behar-Horenstein (2012) examined how the experiences of eight high-achieving girls discount or support Ogbu and Simons (1998) cultural-ecological theory. This study, conducted at a high school located in a southeastern school district of the United States, involved focus group interviews, journal entries, and field notes. All of the participants were enrolled in honors classes, while seven were simultaneously enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) and regular education courses. One student was enrolled in the school's magnet program, the International Baccalaureate (IB), and AP. The participants' grade point averages (GPA) ranged from 3.54 to 4.00 (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012).

Evident throughout Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein's (2012) study was the influence that caring adults had on students' academic performance. Embedded in the findings was the key role that teachers' pedagogical practices played in fostering student engagement and success. These young women described the contributions that several

teachers made to ensure that they achieved academic success. For most of the participants, this was evident by teachers' willingness to meet their individual needs both inside and outside of the school and by teachers' use of culturally relevant approaches during instruction and interactions. While expressing their appreciation, all participants suggested that caring teachers were integral to their academic success (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012).

Many of the participants believed that teachers and other school personnel held low expectations for them. They suggested that teachers' beliefs were based on how African American girls were portrayed in the media. The participants also discussed school personnel's perception that African American girls were loud. Interestingly, whereas many school personnel viewed being loud as a negative characteristic, the participants viewed this as positive (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012).

Teacher expectations exert a significant influence on student performance and motivation (Russell, 2005). Some of the participants suggested that several of the teachers' academic expectations were congruent with society's negative perceptions of African American girls. They asserted that these perceptions seemingly were conceived prior to their entering the class and were deeply entrenched in the interactions that they had with several teachers. These perceptions created estranged relationships between some teachers and some African American girls (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012). One student in this study offered the following viewpoint, which mirrored some of the thoughts expressed by other participants:

I don't think the teachers have the same expectations. I guess it's the race thing. . . . Like for years and years, many African American girls have not been motivated, and I guess they expect, . . . more out of like the White girls than us. (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012, p. 214)

In yet another study, Harvard University researcher Ronald F. Ferguson's (2002) survey of secondary school students in high-performing suburban school districts found that strong, supportive teacher-student relationships may be critical resources for motivating black and Hispanic students in particular. Such relationships, Ferguson concluded, may help black and Hispanic students seek help more readily, engage more deeply in their studies and ultimately overcome skill gaps that are due in substantial measure to disparities in family backgrounds and socioeconomic circumstances (Ferguson, 2002).

Ferguson (2002) went on to conclude that one of the most interesting findings was "the distinctive importance of teacher encouragement as a source of motivation for nonwhite students" (p. 14). Even in well-to-do suburban schools, Ferguson argued, there is a need for professional development that better prepares teachers to "inspire the trust, elicit the cooperation, stimulate the ambition and support the sustained industriousness" of students, particularly those achieving at lower levels (Ferguson, 2002, p. 14).

Of particular interest was that Ferguson (1998), in his work entitled, *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, offered evidence that the impact of a good teacher may be greater for Black than for White students. In other words, schools appear to be more influential in determining Black than White achievement.

What a great reminder of the need for teachers who can build a relationship with students from diverse backgrounds yet deliver high quality instruction that engages all

learners. The teacher continues to play a key role in the lives of the students who are entrusted into their care and current research described in this section speaks to the powerful impact of a single teacher in the life of African American students.

### **Parents as Teachers, Decision Makers and Advocates**

It appears from the research that parents hold a critical role throughout the educational process as well. Because parents serve as the first teachers in a child's life, they are considered to be the primary educators of their child. Parents can also serve as decision-makers and advocates and can collaborate with teachers in an effort to insure success in their child's educational career. Trotman (2001) reminds us that "like other ethnic groups, African American parents want their children to achieve academically" (p. 275).

Family, and particularly the parent-adolescent relationship, provides one of the most important social contexts for adolescent development. Although peers become increasingly influential during adolescence, parents continue to be important sources for adolescents' decisions about major life choices (Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens, 2007). For example, Nurmi (1991) asserted that parents play an integral role in communicating values, interests, and goals that affect how adolescents view their futures. Research findings indicated significant, positive relationships between adolescents' future academic expectations and parental educational level, perceived parental expectations for their adolescents, and the messages that parents relay to their adolescents regarding the importance of education for future success (Kerpelman et al., 2007).

In a longitudinal study addressing parental involvement and adolescent achievement and aspirations among 463 seventh through eleventh grade students, it was found that parental academic involvement showed a positive association with African American, but not European American, adolescent academic achievement (Hill et al., 2004). There were variations across parental education levels and ethnicity: Among the higher parental education group, parent academic involvement was related to fewer behavioral problems, which were related to achievement and then aspirations. For the lower parental education group, parent academic involvement was related to aspirations but not to behavior or achievement. Parent academic involvement was positively related to achievement for African Americans but not for European Americans. The authors suggested that parental involvement is particularly important for African American adolescents as a buffer against other contextual factors that hinder African American adolescent academic achievement (Hill et al., 2004).

Gutman and McLoyd (2000) found positive results of parental involvement in their study of high and low achieving Black students. All parents acknowledged the importance of school and understood their roles in facilitating success for their children. Parents of high achieving students, however, were more specific and involved in their children's education as they initiated contact with the school, encouraged homework completion, and offered supportive conversations about achieving future goals.

Finally, a study conducted by Bean, Bush, McHenry, and Wilson (2003) that examined the influence of parental support on academic achievement of African American and European American adolescents found that mothers' supportive behaviors

predicted adolescent academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between adolescent functioning (i.e., self-esteem and academic achievement) and parental support, behavioral control, and psychological control in European American and African American adolescents. Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that supportive behaviors of African American mothers toward their adolescent children positively predicted both self-esteem and academic achievement. Psychological control was significantly related to adolescent self-esteem in both the models of paternal parenting (African American and European American) and maternal parenting (African American) (Bean et al., 2003).

Particularly interesting was the findings of Kerpelman et al. (2007) as well as Bean et al. (2003), who found that parental support for achievement is significant, especially support from mothers. It causes one to wonder why the mother's support might be significant and how the researchers were able to draw such a strong conclusion from the surveys conducted in both studies. This would be a great topic for future research to explore the significance of the mother's influence more closely.

### **Student Involvement in Extracurricular Activities**

Students' involvement in extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, television, clubs) and the effect on achievement appear to have been extensively debated in the literature for a number of years. Currently, there seem to be two dominant views of the impact of after school pursuits on achievement. The first view is based on the zero-sum concept that asserts the greater amount of time spent on non-academic activities decreases academic achievement because the amount of time spent on academic activities is

decreased. In contrast to the zero-sum concept, the second view affirms that after school activities provide experiences that enhance students' overall development (Gerber, 1996; Marsh, 1992). Since supporting evidence for both views exists, it seems that a balance between these views would be beneficial; for example, some activities such as homework or participation in academic related clubs would be beneficial, whereas other activities such as television viewing could be detrimental to academic achievement (Chambers & Schreiber, 2004, p. 329). Chambers and Schreiber (2004) concluded that school academic organized activities were positively and significantly related to achievement in reading, science and geography for tenth grade African American girls indicating that the more they participated in academic activities the higher their achievement was in these subject areas. In general, their results do not provide support for the zero-sum concept. Involvement in non-academic activities did not have a consistent negative impact on achievement (Chambers & Schreiber, 2004, p. 343).

While the research addressing the plight specific to high achieving African American females was limited, other literature was convincing that there is a correlation between scholastic achievement and involvement in extracurricular activities. According to Brown and Evans (2002) extracurricular activity participation can be an important strategy for school attachment and perhaps the primary nonacademic activity available to educators to enhance school connections. Because the prevailing values in our educational system reflect the dominant European American majority, minority students may feel isolated and not supported in the school setting. Inclusion in extracurricular activities may facilitate inclusion in peer groups, positive school-related experiences, and

a sense of belonging, all of which may contribute to greater school connectivity and retention (Brown & Evans, 2002, p. 49).

As you will recall, the African American students in Wiggan's (2008) research concluded that extracurricular activities was one of three variables that impacted their academic achievement. Douglas Reeves (2008) called this phenomenon the "extracurricular advantage." Reeves (2008) reminded us of the chicken-and-egg question; Does involvement in extracurricular activities actually improve outcomes for individual students, or do better students simply tend to get involved in more extracurricular activities? (Reeves, 2008, p. 86) Many schools that make a concerted effort to increase extracurricular offerings and participation may contribute to school wide academic improvement.

Reeves (2008) examined one such school, Woodstock High School, in Woodstock, IL, which served almost 2,000 students. Of these 2,000 kids, 20% were defined as ethnic minorities and more than 25% were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Reeves, 2008, p. 87). According to Reeves (2008), Corey Tafoya, principal of Woodstock High School, credited hard-working teachers and administrators, a supportive community, a strong curriculum, and good assessment; he also acknowledged that the improved outcome occurred when there was a 400% increase (over a 5 year span) in student participation in extracurricular activities, including athletics, academics, ethnic identity clubs, cultural groups, and many more (p. 87).

Tafoya described what happened when the school analyzed the numbers (Reeves, 2008). Students who took part in three or four extracurricular activities during the year

had dramatically better grades than those who participated in no extra-curricular activities (although increasing the number of extracurricular activities above four did not appear to produce any consistent additional advantage). The Woodstock High School experience suggested that when a school makes a commitment to increase extracurricular participation, the entire school community benefits (Reeves, 2008, p. 87).

In a similar study published in the Nebraska State Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NSIAAA) Newsletter (Ress, 2010), Blake Ress suggested “Referring to activity programs (such as athletics, band, drama and debate) as “extracurricular” is a misnomer. They actually are “co-curricular” because of the many life lessons one learns through participation” (Ress, 2010, p. 3). This article went on to include a comprehensive statewide study conducted over a three-year period in North Carolina that showed dramatic differences between student athletes and non-athletes in five areas:

Grade Point Average	
Athletes:	2.86
Non-Athletes	1.96
Absences in 180-day school year	
Athletes:	6.52
Non-Athletes	12.57
Discipline Referrals	
Athletes:	30.5%
Non-Athletes	40.3%
Dropout Rate	
Athletes:	0.7%
Non-Athletes	8.98%
Graduation Rate	
Athletes:	99.56%
Non-Athletes	94.66% (Ress, 2010, p. 3)

Brown and Evans (2002) reminded us that as urban communities and schools become increasingly diverse, extracurricular activities that involve students from diverse ethnic backgrounds become critically important. Unfortunately their analyses revealed that ethnic student groups differentially participate in extracurricular activities. European American students were significantly more likely to participate, whereas Hispanic American students were significantly less likely to participate in activities. Interestingly, ethnic group differences were not found for sports participation. Participation in sports appears to cut across ethnic boundaries and seems to have greater attraction and retention for minority students. “Other categories did not reflect the same diversity of participation and may not maintain the same access or appeal as sports” (Brown & Evans, 2002, p. 52).

### **Summary**

In this chapter studies related to factors that may impact the achievement of African American females were examined. Specific factors that appeared to be present in the lives of successful African American females included influential teachers, a supportive home environment with a significant parent or guardian, and their participation in extracurricular activities. While some researchers have chosen to concentrate their efforts on the deficiencies that may be present when students don't achieve, the researchers mentioned in this chapter take the path less travelled by highlighting influences that show great promise for academic achievement among African American high school females.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Methodology**

Malcolm Gladwell (2013) investigated several concepts in his book, *David and Goliath*, which mirrored the work the researcher explored in unwrapping the lived experiences of successful African American females. Gladwell (2013) contended that much of what we consider valuable in our world arises out of lopsided conflicts, because the act of facing overwhelming odds produces greatness and beauty. He also suggested that “being an underdog can change people in ways that we often fail to appreciate: it can open doors and create opportunities and educate and enlighten and make possible what might otherwise have seemed unthinkable” (Gladwell, 2013, p. 6). The researcher would argue that the African American female student in today’s public high school might be considered an underdog given the forces, whether consciously or unconsciously, that tend to work against her. Yet in spite of these hurdles, the young women that the researcher was interested in highlighting excel at high levels.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study was to examine the factors that foster academic success in African American females at the high school level. The present study explored the experiences of high achieving Black female students in high school. The research focus was consistent with recommendations from several researchers including Mecee and Kurtz-Coates (2001) who explained that prior research was limited by a prevailing emphasis on risk factors that prevent students of color from achievement and suggested that more studies be conducted that highlight academic success and achievement.

### **Qualitative Research Approach: Phenomenology**

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Given that the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of successful African American females at the high school level, it was determined that a qualitative phenomenology research design was most appropriate.

Phenomenology uses inductive research methods to comprehend universally lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). A phenomenological researcher acknowledges the “whole might be quite different than the sum of its parts” (Omery, 1983, p. 53). The researcher analyzed and interpreted lived experiences to find essential themes and the themes taken together allowed meaning of the experience to emerge as a whole (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology as a philosophy grew in Western culture as a reaction to the notion that human behavior can be controlled by scientific method. Human behavior cannot always be predicted and boiled down to quantifiable data and logical terms. The Social Sciences adopted phenomenology as a method to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience. “Phenomenology has been used to examine areas that previously have not been amenable to traditional forms of scientific research” (Omery, 1983, p. 52).

Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, ‘bracketing’ taken-for-granted assumptions and usual ways of perceiving. “Epistemologically, phenomenological approaches are based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasize the importance of personal perspective and

interpretation. As such they are powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom" (Lester, 1999, p. 1).

"Phenomenology, as an approach, looks at the lived experiences of those who have lived with or experienced a particular phenomenon" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 85). Lichtman (2013) talked about the "essence of the experience" being a deeper level of understanding (p. 85). The researcher's intention was to do more than describe the successful African American female experience. Phenomenology, which draws from the philosophy, psychology, and education disciplines, (Creswell, 2013) was instantly appealing and seemed to be a viable way to communicate the richness of what it means to be an academically successful African American female. The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. "It would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 81).

### **Data Collection Methods**

The goal in choosing to use a phenomenological research approach was to have the participants describe their "lived experience." The purpose of the phenomenological approach was to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation. In the human sphere this normally translates into gathering 'deep' information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such

as interviews, discussions and participant observation, and representing it from the perspective of the research participant(s) (Lester, 1999, p. 1).

“We gather other people’s experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves” (van Manen, 1990, p. 62). The crux of phenomenology is that the researcher and the participants become partners in the process of understanding the lived experience. van Manen offers several ideas on how to collect experiential descriptions from participants: interviewing; protocol writing; observing; lay literature; art; and phenomenological literature. This study utilized four forms to collect rich, descriptive information including participant interviews, observations, parent/guardian survey, and a visual display as the methods for data collection.

### **Interviews**

The interviews were aimed at (a) gathering and exploring narrative material to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of interest, and (b) developing a conversational relationship with the interviewee to understand the meaning of the experience. It is important to remember, in the phenomenological interview, the interviewer (researcher) and the interviewee (participant) are partners in the process of discovery. Thus, formulating good questions before the interview is essential to ensure clarity throughout the interview (van Manen, 1990). The interview is a delicate balance between asking appropriate open-ended questions and allowing silences to help the participant proceed with their story.

The researcher’s primary sources of information consisted of two semi-structured interviews (Interview Protocol, Appendix B) with six students, as well as, informal

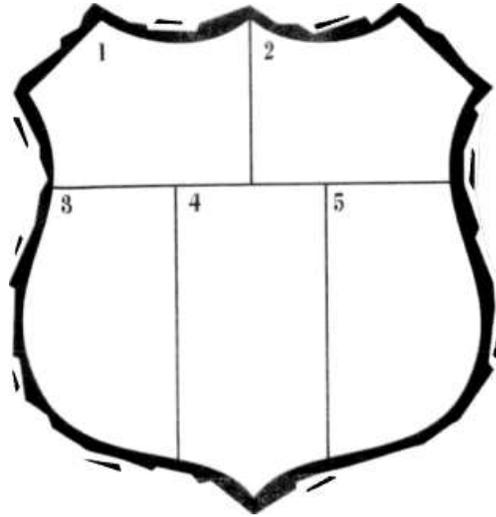
participant observations (Observation Protocol, Appendix C). The researcher conducted all interviews (both initial and follow up) and observations personally. The first semi-structured interview involved open – form questions about the participants’ experiences in high school. Though the initial questions were the same for each participant, their responses determined additional questions for probing. The second semi-structured interview expanded on themes that emerged from the initial interview and from participant-observation. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

### **Coat of Arms – Visual Displays**

According to Bushman (2012), a large body of research indicated that visual cues help us to better retrieve and remember information. He contended that the research outcomes on visual learning made complete sense when you consider that our brain is mainly an image processor, not a word processor. “The part of the brain used to process words is quite small in comparison to the part that processes visual images. Words are abstract and rather difficult for the brain to retain, whereas visuals are concrete and, as such, more easily remembered” (Bushman, 2012, para. 2). In an attempt to retrieve pertinent information related to the lived experiences of participants, the researcher asked each student to complete a Coat of Arms (Appendix E) visual display.

During the initial meeting with the parents/guardians and each participant, the Coat of Arms activity was introduced. This took place after the research project was discussed using the Participant Informed Consent Form (Appendix A). Participants were told they could complete the Coat of Arms on their own time and be prepared to hand it

in by the end of the second formal interview. Figure 1 shows the sample that was given to each participant.



- Space 1: words or pictures that you would use to describe yourself*
- Space 2: words or pictures that others have used to describe you*
- Space 3: Something you are really good at doing related to school*
- Space 4: words or pictures that you would use to define “success” at school*
- Space 5: an event or person(s) who most contributed to your success at school*

*Figure 1. Coat of arms visual display.*

**Parent questionnaires.** Parents play an integral role in the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development of their children. For this reason, the researcher felt it was vitally important to allow parents an opportunity to provide input on their daughter’s academic success. By gathering parents’ descriptions of their student’s experience(s) in school, this research study sought to develop a deeper understanding of the parents’ perceptions of success and whether it matched their daughters. The researcher believed this would provide yet another opportunity to gather data to help in

understanding the motivation to achieve for successful African American females at the high school level. The researcher provided a short questionnaire (Parent/Guardian Questionnaire, Appendix F) for a parent/guardian of each of the six participants. The questionnaire was presented at the initial meeting with parents/guardians and they were asked to complete and return the questionnaire prior to their daughter's second interview.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers to establish validity in their studies by analyzing a research question from multiple perspectives. Patton (2002) cautioned that it is a common misconception that the goal of triangulation is to arrive at consistency across data sources or approaches; in fact, such inconsistencies may be likely given the relative strengths of different approaches. In Patton's view, these inconsistencies should not be seen as weakening the evidence, but should be viewed as an opportunity to uncover deeper meaning in the data. In summary, the multiple sources collected for each participant included two face-to-face interviews, at least one informal observation, a parent questionnaire, and the completion of the Coat of Arms visual display. The researcher hoped that the additional data sources, in particular, the Coat of Arms, would provide these young women an open-ended opportunity to creatively illustrate their thoughts and experiences in a manner that may highlight their unique gifts and talents.

### **Sample Selection**

In choosing the six participants from the potential list of those who expressed interest, Jones and Shorter-Gooden's (2003) work with "shifting" suggested some key

concepts that were critical in determining which girls might be able to clearly understand and articulate their lived experiences.

For many Black women, shifting is a matter of long-term survival. “It’s a skill that African American women have mastered over centuries not only to broaden their opportunities socially, educationally, and professionally, but to rework the prevailing image of their Black sisters and brothers in the eyes of other Americans” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 62). It was important that each young woman chosen to interview had a good understanding of oneself and could articulate in some regard how her survival in a predominately white environment had shaped and affected her existence.

Shifting can be adaptive – it may, indeed, be a matter of survival—when it allows a woman to explore different genuine parts of herself, make connections with people who may be very different from her, and pursue opportunities in the mainstream. Some Black women are able to stay centered and keep their shifting within bounds, navigating the waters of adversity resourcefully. Moreover, the resilience and creativity of Black women who have managed to hold their heads high in the face of bigotry and remain true to themselves is legendary. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 63)

Finding these young women was the key to accurately communicating their stories and validating their determination to thrive in the company of struggle.

Having obtained permission from the school district, a query of all African American female students within the six high schools provided a list of potential participants. From this list a database was created to include the students’ name, current high school they attended, and contact information including parents/guardians. Because participants required parent/guardian permission to participate in this study, the researcher stressed the importance of this research in helping African American females continue to achieve at high levels within the public school system.

Purposive sampling was used for this study. Participants were selected based on their experience with the phenomenon. Information about the study was emailed out to parents/guardians of possible participants (Appendix F) based on the following inclusion criteria:

- African American high school females who maintained a cumulative grade point average (3.0 or higher) and were enrolled in college preparatory classes
- African American high school females who were involved in extracurricular activities

Participant Informed Consent forms (Appendix A) were emailed to all participants, along with their parents/guardians. When the parents/guardians of participants agreed to take part in the study, the researcher personally met or called each of them. Participant Informed Consent forms (Appendix A) were discussed and given to participants and their parents/guardians to sign at the first meeting. The current research literature consulted, including van Manen, did not indicate a specific sample size for this method, 6-12 is typical (Haase, 1987). For this reason the researcher chose to include six young women.

### **Data Analysis**

Merriam (2009) reminded us that the final product is shaped by the data that are collected and the analysis that accompanies the entire process. “Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed” (p. 171).

Merriam (2009) suggested that the researcher should engage in processes to suspend one's judgment in order to "see the experience for itself" (p. 199). For this reason the researcher began as Creswell (2013) suggested by "bracketing out" her own experience with the phenomenon. The researcher hoped to approach this analysis with an open mind realizing that her experiences may be different from African American females attending a public school today.

Qualitatively, the researcher spent time organizing and reading through the transcripts. Agar (1980) suggested that researchers read the transcripts in their entirety several times. "Immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts" (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 183). In following Creswell's (2013) Data Analysis Spiral, the researcher moved into coding which involved "aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information" (p. 184). Moving beyond coding, classifying pertains to taking the text or qualitative information apart, and looking for categories, themes, or dimensions of information.

From there the researcher moved into interpreting the data. Interpretation in qualitative research involves abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data. "It is a process that begins with the development of the codes, the formation of themes from the codes, and then the organization of themes into larger units of abstraction to make sense of the data" (Creswell, 2013, p. 187). Creswell (2013) suggested creating some type of visual image of the data, which should prove very useful in being able to fine tune, clarify, and make sense of the data.

Qualitative researchers have an additional difficulty of ensuring that their own prejudices and attitudes do not bias the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The researcher was careful to be mindful and ensure that she did not record what she wanted to see and maintain objectivity. Approaching this research, the researcher had personal dispositions about African American females, adolescents, academic achievement, and high school girls. These personal experiences, somewhat described in Chapter 1, led her to this study, and other studies have shaped her ideas. It's important to note that this study was designed to add knowledge, not to pass judgment or blame. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) described the difficulty in ensuring objectivity by noting "no matter how much you try, you cannot divorce your research and writing from your past experiences, who you are, what you believe, and what you value" (p. 34).

### **Summary**

This chapter explained methods that were used to highlight experiences and attributes of successful African American female students. Using a phenomenological design, the researcher hoped to discover multilayered information regarding factors African American females described as important to them in their academic success and achievement. The use of a phenomenological approach provided insight into the everyday lives of the participants and uncovered experiences that fostered their academic success. Through this approach, relevant themes emerged to define categories of understanding for academic success among African American high school females.

Knowing that successful African American females may have a shared experience will be a source of power for educators as they work to insure that all students achieve at

high levels. Educators must no longer leave the achievement of some to chance and fate. The intent of this research was to highlight the experiences of these young women in order to learn who or what ignited the torch for each of them. This knowledge will add to the repertoire and hopefully remind educators of how important it is to know the stories in order to foster opportunities for success.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Participants**

In today's global economy, a high-quality education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a prerequisite for success – and while African American females have made progress in educational attainment, opportunity and achievement gaps yet persist. This research study examined academic success in African American females at the high school level as measured by who or what positively influenced their achievement in school. The researcher was interested in highlighting what's possible when African American females obtain support that propels them to achieve at high levels.

Six high achieving African American females, who maintained a cumulative grade point average of a 3.0 or higher were interviewed for this study. They included three juniors and three seniors. The educational level of their parents varied and included non high school graduates to Masters degrees. The names used are pseudonyms and were chosen by each of the participants.

Table 1 includes an overview of the participants. A brief description of each participant follows the table.

Table 1

*Description of Participants*

Name	Grade	Extracurricular Involvement	Cumulative Grade Point Average	Racial Identification	Education Levels of Parents/Guardians and Occupations
Carlie Aston	12 <sup>th</sup>	National Honor Society, Upward Bound, African-American Caucus, Future Business Leaders of America	3.744	African American, African American father and mother	Father did not graduate from high school; Mother graduated from high school.
Olivia Bradley	12 <sup>th</sup>	National Honor Society, Volleyball, Cheerleading, Track & Field, Red Cross Club, African American Caucus, DECA	3.577	African American, Bi-racial father and African American mother	Mother has an Associate's degree and is a police officer.
Jennifer Johnson	11 <sup>th</sup>	National Honor Society, Theatre/Thespian, Speech, Fashion Club, Choir	4.357	African American, African American father and mother	Father did not finish high school, Mother attended college but did not graduate. Both unemployed.
Saniyah Mahaney	11 <sup>th</sup>	African American Caucus, Track & Field	3.287	African American, African American father and mother	Father has a Bachelor's degree and Mother has an Associate's degree. Father is a general manager of a local electrical company and mother works as a licensed practical nurse.

Table 1 continues

Name	Grade	Extracurricular Involvement	Cumulative Grade Point Average	Racial Identification	Education Levels of Parents/Guardians and Occupations
Leah Thomas	12 <sup>th</sup>	Youth Advisory Council, Spanish Club, Leap Club President, City Choir, Hospital Volunteer, Volunteer at Church Nursery	3.728	African American, African American father and Jamaican mother	Father has a vocational/technical degree, Mother has a Master's degree and is a special education teacher but is currently subbing. Father recently lost his job as an electronic technician.
Sylvia Wilson	11 <sup>th</sup>	Cheerleading, Track & Field, Student Ambassador, Tennis	4.038	Biracial, African American father and European American mother	Father started college but didn't finish, Mother has a Master's degree and is a psychologist.

**Olivia Bradley**

Olivia Bradley, an accomplished high school athlete, sent a text before the initial interview to indicate she would still be wearing her track clothes and to ask if this would be okay. The researcher was not interested in what she was wearing but picking her brain to understand her motivation. As Olivia stepped from her car she was matching from head to toe. Her “track” outfit looked like something from an exercise video. The researcher commented that she was not expecting such elegance and assumed she would be wearing grey baggy sweats with her school’s logo on them. She quickly dismissed this image and shared that even when she throws the discus it was important that she looks her best.

Her tall, lean body exuded confidence and it matched each word that she would later speak. Olivia’s descriptions of why she knows she will become a “baby doctor” in the future made the researcher believe every word that she uttered.

Olivia Bradley was a senior at the most diverse of the six high schools in the school district. Olivia, whose cumulative grade point average was a 3.534, recalled one of her biggest successes of the school year was induction into the National Honor Society. When asked to define success, Olivia revealed the importance of grades, realizing how much one’s aspirations are dictated by them.

Success in school I think is you’re getting good grades; you’re involved in extra-curricular activities; you are being respectful to not only yourself but to your teachers; and you’re just having an all-around good attitude toward school. I think you can be successful and athletic, but I also think that education comes first because at the end of the day if you have an athletic scholarship and you are grades aren’t there with it, it’s not gonna get you there, so you have to make sure you have the grades to go along with it.

A self-described outgoing, persistent, and courageous person, Olivia beamed with pride when asked when she knew she was going to college. Her response revealed the seed had been planted long before she could even remember.

I don't really have a specific time that I remembered, but ever since I was a young, young, young girl—I was saying I wanna be a baby doctor. I wasn't really sure of the specifics because I was so young, but I always knew baby doctor and doctor I knew well enough that it went with school. I don't think I was too worried about the college. I didn't fully understand how college stuff worked. I knew I had to get through elementary, get through middle, get through high school, but I didn't fully understand that stuff, but I knew I was going somewhere.

A varsity cheerleader and overall leader in her building, she was involved in volleyball, track and field, Red Cross, African American Caucus, and DECA.

The daughter of a local police officer, Olivia spoke of being proud of her mother for being one of only a few black police officers in the city. This pride was reciprocal as Olivia's mother described her daughter as a self-motivator. She also described that Olivia's motivation comes from her faith in God and unshakeable family support.

When Olivia was asked what she felt had been the theme of her high school career, she replied: "Never sell yourself short. The work you put in today will pay off tomorrow."

### **Jennifer Johnson**

Jennifer rushed inside the school building talking fast and furious as she followed the researcher into the main office for her first interview. She had just gotten off work but expressed excitement at being interviewed. Jennifer spoke with confidence using her hands to accentuate each word she spoke. At one point she talked about being "wordy"

and included the words busy, complex, and unbreakable on her visual display. When asked what she thought the researcher should know about her she openly responded:

I think that something someone should know about me is that I come from an interesting background. I come from struggle and I come from—you know, when I was younger I thought I had the best childhood possible. When I think about it and I think back I just think about always being happy but I didn't pay attention to what was going on around me. Then, when I'm older and I look back on stuff and I was like, "Wow. There were a lot of bad things going on around me that I didn't know.

Her description provided valuable context for the rest of what she shared in the weeks to follow including her reality of being homeless at one point earlier in the school year.

Jennifer Johnson was a junior at what might be defined as another socioeconomically and culturally diverse high school in the district. Jennifer's cumulative grade point average proved to be the highest of the six girls at 4.341. Jennifer divulged that she did consider herself successful, yet touted the need for good grades. She also mentioned the importance of effort.

I define success as putting your best foot forward; doing everything that you can because not every student can get straight A's because it's just not how they're built or they can't pass standardized tests with flying colors. Sometimes I feel like school is a box that not really designed for everyone. It's like you get A's, you do what you do and that's it. That's how we define if you're smart or not. I just think that if you put your best foot forward and you do the best that you can then you should reap good benefits from it.

Jennifer spoke with such delight when she recalled her extracurricular involvements, which included Theatre, Speech, Debate, Fashion Club, and Choir. While Jennifer mentioned that she had been involved in other clubs that "didn't take up as much

of her time” she felt that this list captured the heart of her extracurricular high school experience to date.

Jennifer described the theme of her high school career noting the importance of her social circle to her continued success.

Your group reflects your grades. I found that by surrounding myself with people with the same overall goals and drive as myself, I do better academically and socially. Friends are always a reflection of who you are and in high school, who you hang with influences a lot of your life. I think I was influenced for the better as I made some changes in who I was spending time with.”

### **Saniyah Mahaney**

Saniyah Mahaney divulged her “cheetah obsession” early during the first interview and the researcher smiled as she had already noticed the many artifacts that Saniyah carried with her that testified to this passion. Confident, kind-hearted, and outgoing are words that found their way onto Saniyah’s visual display as descriptors of herself. Saniyah was one of three juniors who had agreed to be a part of the study, yet the only one set to graduate at the end of the year. Graduating as a junior was a source of pride for Saniyah and was present throughout the researcher’s time with her. It surfaced once again when Saniyah described why she felt successful.

I think that the fact that I'm gonna graduate a whole year early is kind of big. I think that would make me in some sort of way successful, because not many people I know in my family do that and get accepted into college and just go right off the bat, like right getting out of high school. So I think that's something that would make me successful.

It was evident throughout the interviews that Saniyah held her mother and father in high regard, and was the only student to have both parents accompany her to the very

first meeting with the researcher and participants. She attributed her parents' persistence to her decision to go to college.

My parents said I have to go to college. It wasn't an option at all. It's something that I have to do because that's a part of being successful, and I know that if I don't go to college I'm not gonna be able to be a pediatrician. I'm not gonna be able to make all the money that I wanna make. I'm not gonna be – I'm not gonna see myself as successful if I don't go to college.

Saniyah's mother shared in her responses that Saniyah is highly influenced by material things and is accustomed to a certain type of lifestyle. Her mother believes that this has been a great motivator for Saniyah to stay on track, graduate early, and begin her college career.

Concluding her high school career with a cumulative grade point average of 3.287, Saniyah recalled being involved with African American Caucus and track and field. Saniyah paused for a moment as she was asked to think about the theme of her high school career. She landed on "The life behind a successful black woman."

### **Sylvia Wilson**

Sylvia Wilson was a junior at one of two more affluent high schools in the city. Sylvia, who carried a cumulative grade point average of 4.0 was the only participant whose mother was Caucasian. Since the researcher's initial contact with Sylvia's mother, she had shown her full support and on several occasions thanked the researcher for including her daughter in the study. Sylvia touted that she did consider herself successful and provided the following description of what being successful meant to her.

I think for me I have to see that I'm getting grades that are A's or B's preferably. This year for me it's been more about keeping an A average and then just knowing that I did my best and knowing that my teachers know I did my best as well. If that means I have to go in and talk to them just so they—if I can't for

some reason get above a B or an A, I don't want them to think that I was just not trying. For me mostly it's people knowing that I'm trying and myself that I know that I'm trying.

During a sharing session in which the girls talked about their Coat of Arms visual displays, Sylvia pointed out to the group that all of the capital letters on her display board spelled "African American." She radiated with pride, as if to be tickled that African American could be positively associated with words such as dreamer, free-minded, creative, witty, caring, strong, pushing myself, and other words she used to describe herself. Several girls commented, including the researcher, of how clever this was, and Sylvia's facial expression displayed affirmation that others were in tune enough to recognize her creative traits. Once again, Sylvia did not come in demanding attention with the quantity of words or velocity of her speech, but when she spoke, everyone took note.

Sylvia's reply to when she knew she was going to college spoke volumes to her mother's ability to instill an academic trajectory into her daughter's existence.

I'm not sure when I knew, but I never not knew. I never was like, "Oh I don't think I'm gonna go to college." Probably somewhere around seeing my mom. She finished up, she started and finished college after we were born.

Sylvia's mother described her daughter as a "self-directed thinker and planner." Her perspective added insight into Sylvia's quiet demeanor as she believed that part of Sylvia's motivation was an intrinsic reward of accomplishment and a natural curiosity.

Sylvia did not hesitate when asked about the theme of her high school career. Her response confirmed the confidence and resiliency noted as important factors in Sylvia's

success according to her mother. “In the end it’s going to be fine. You’re capable of more than you think, so take the challenge.”

### **Leah Thomas**

Leah’s initial quiet demeanor made the researcher a little nervous about whether she would be willing to open up and share her journey of being a high achieving African American high school student in the city’s most affluent and least diverse high school. Leah slowly approached the table where they would be sitting and began to speak very softly as she defined success as a combination of learning as much as you can and grades.

I would say it’s not necessarily getting good grades, but learning as much as you can in the time that you have. Then I guess good grades are a nice thing as well. Like A’s, B pluses and stuff like that.

While the manner in which she spoke remained the same throughout the initial interview, the depth of her responses were beyond what the researcher could have ever imagined. Leah described her school experiences with such clarity and certainty. These defining moments and incidents seemed to have been locked in Leah’s head and perhaps had been scratching and clawing to get out. The depth of her understanding of what life had been like for a cocoa brown female, born to a Jamaican mother and bi-racial father, did not seem to match her age.

It’s just like, it’s like you stand out. People think that you’re not on their level, but you just like continue to prove them wrong.

I think at least in my case I feel like I have to do well because I’m paving the way for someone else that’s coming along behind me. God in His wisdom, saw fit for me to be that person that would be able to do that. With His help I can handle that.

Leah recalled that she had always known that she would attend college as it was “never not an option.” She credited her parents’ consistent conversations about her

definitive educational path as key. This validated Leah's mother's belief who shared that having a home that sets boundaries and holds high expectations for learning and achieving great things was one of the keys to her daughter's success in school.

Leah was a senior this past year, earning the right to brag about her 3.709 cumulative grade point average. She described herself as being heavily involved at school including being a member of the Youth Advisory, Spanish Club, Leap Club president, and a member of the City Choir to name a few.

Leah summed up her high school career using the following theme: "Endings are better than beginnings; Sticking to it is better than starting big."

### **Carlie Aston**

Carlie entered the high school main office with a big smile on her face. She quickly asked for the researcher and was led back to a large conference room. As she entered the room, she was still smiling and quickly apologized for not being able to be at the initial meeting with the other five girls. Her excitement for being asked to participate was contagious as she communicated how honored she was to be asked to share her experience.

Carlie Aston shared early in the interview that she was still mourning the untimely death of her mother. Although her mother had been deceased since she was ten years old, Carlie spoke about her as if she was still very present in her life.

Never let obstacles beat you down. Make sure that you just have a positive attitude, because having a positive attitude just means a lot. Because I could be moping around. I could be depressed right now. That's just not gonna get me anywhere. I had a lot going on in my life, including my mom and grandpa's death, but I don't let that beat me down. I'm just overcoming obstacles, and that just every day, overcoming obstacles. It's just getting me farther in life.

Carlie spoke about her aunt stepping in to help in taking care of her after her mother passed away. The aunt was thrilled to have Carlie be included in the study and based on her response to what motivated her niece to be successful in school, it sounded like she knew her well. Confirming what Carlie had continuously communicated during both interviews, the aunt described her niece as being a very ambitious student whose mother and grandfather were her biggest motivators.

A senior at one of three more diverse high schools in the city, Carlie was elated to be inducted into the National Honor Society this past year. Carlie's cumulative grade point average was 3.744 and throughout the interview she talked about the need to continue to push herself. She too concluded that she did consider herself successful and summed success up in the following manner:

I think the definition of success in school is just keeping your grades up and just doing above and beyond, like above standards. Because success isn't—it's hard to reach. If you have the right mindset, and you stay determined, that's not impossible for you. To me it's just getting good grades, having a great time at school, because it's not always just about school and stuff like that. You can have fun, but also just have a right mindset of reaching success and just getting good grades.

Carlie's schedule was quite busy as she worked after school most days, yet her enthusiasm and desire to participate in the study pushed her to find time to share her experiences. Carlie's extracurricular involvement included Upward Bound, African American Caucus, and Future Business Leaders of America.

Carlie summed up her high school career using the following theme:

Shoot for the moon, if you miss you'll land amongst the stars...cheesy but true. I picked this title because I have seen several posters with the same quote on it in multiple classrooms and it seems cheesy but it has a beneficial meaning behind it. For instance, it means that you should set high goals for yourself throughout life

with determination, faith, and hard work but if you face complications on your road of success, you're not a failure, you just have to deal with plan B or even C which isn't bad at all. With me personally, I have always set high goals for myself and tried to do everything in order to reach my goals but there have been times where I faced setbacks which blocked my way of reaching my goals. But did I fail miserably? No. Did I just let my dreams and goals slip right past me? No, instead I just pushed myself to do better and to go with plan B or even plan C.

## Chapter 5

### Results

The purpose of this research study was to explore academic success in African American females at the high school level as measured by who or what positively influenced their achievement in school. Six high achieving African American high school females were interviewed for this study. The interview questions were clustered based on their relationship to the key variables identified in the research as possibly influencing their success. These variables included family, teachers, and/or extracurricular activities. The researcher posed a set of initial questions to determine how these students defined success, as well as, whether they considered themselves successful. Additionally, the researcher posed questions to aid in understanding how the participants described themselves and their future plans beyond high school. The researcher may have asked additional questions during the interviews for clarification purposes. The questions used for the first interview are included in Appendix C Interview Protocol.

The researcher was interested in the validity of the questions posed so sought feedback from a couple of different sources prior to deciding upon the initial set of questions. The questions were reviewed by a group of female administrators of color within the school district to get their feedback on whether the questions made sense and seemed appropriate for students to answer. These administrators, several of whom had recently completed a doctoral program, were able to provide useful feedback and felt that these questions would definitely provide insight into a student's motivation to be successful.

Lastly, the researcher sought input from a group of high school females, four of whom were seniors and one junior. These students were asked to read the questions and provide input on whether they were clear and easy to understand. All five students confirmed the questions were straightforward and easy to understand, including the question asking them to define success.

The interviews were transcribed to produce six verbatim transcripts, which included over 80 pages of data. The researcher read the transcripts several times to obtain an overall feeling for them. This process also allowed her to constantly compare each student's narrative in order to note thematic similarities. In exploring themes and insights, one can treat texts as sources of meaning at the level of the whole story; at the level of the separate paragraph; and at the level of the sentence, phrase, expression, or single word (van Manen, 2014, p 320). For this reason, a spreadsheet was created which allowed the students' responses to each question to be dissected down to the key words or phrases. This involved at least three rounds of analysis per question and an example of the spreadsheet is included in Table 2.

From this process significant statements, words, and/or phrases were extracted. Table 3 includes four examples of significant statements with their formulated meanings. These formulated meanings guided the researcher in identifying the four major themes that emerged from this process.

Table 2

*Data Analysis Spreadsheet*

	<i>Original Text</i>	<i>Round 1 Analysis</i>	<i>Round 2 Analysis</i>	<i>Round 3 Analysis</i>	<i>Synopsis</i>
<i>Interviewer Question</i>					
<i>Interviewee Response</i>					

Table 3

*Significant Statements and Their Formulated Meanings/Themes*

Significant Statements of Successful African American Female High School Students and Their Related Formulated Meanings/Themes	
Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning/Theme
... really breaking the stereotypical black girl image that everybody expects me to be is a motivator. I'm not gonna be that person. I refuse to be that person.	Successful African American females bear the responsibility of dispelling the stereotypes and assumptions made about them by making sure others think of black females in a positive light.
I want to follow his footsteps but even better and push myself to set a new standard in the family.	Successful African American females bear the responsibility of "setting a new standard in the family" by achieving at levels never before reached by family members as a way to bring honor to those who have supported and pushed them to achieve.
My drive to do better and be better because I watch my mom and several of my family members struggle and sometimes days are good, sometimes days are bad. Sometimes the money's there; sometimes it's not. I just want to make sure that I don't have to experience those low days.	Successful African American females persevere despite the struggles. The idea of not wanting to struggle in the manner noted in their current environment when they are older was a motivator to be successful.
I would always definitely make sure that my teacher's felt like I was a great student and looked at me in a positive light. I think that hearing from them, "Hey, you're doing a good job," hearing, "Hey, your child's a great student," it makes you want to do more and stay up to par to how they feel about you.	Successful African American females care about what their teachers think about them and work to strengthen their connections. Those connections and how they are perceived are motivators because it's another person who believes that they have the tools to do great things.

The six participants shared countless ideas, stories, and experiences that gave the researcher a clearer understanding of why they have achieved at such high levels and a glimpse into who and what they credit to their success. Four strong themes emerged that merit special attention and will be discussed in depth in this chapter. These four themes include:

1. Successful African American females bear the responsibility of dispelling the stereotypes and assumptions made about them by making sure others think of black females in a positive light.
2. Successful African American females bear the responsibility of “setting a new standard in the family” by achieving at levels never before reached by family members as a way to bring honor to those who have supported and pushed them to achieve.
3. Successful African American females persevere despite the struggles. The idea of not wanting to struggle in the manner noted in their current environment when they are older was a motivator to be successful.
4. Successful African American females care about what their teachers think about them and work to strengthen their connections. Those connections and how they are perceived are motivators because it’s another person who believes that they have the tools to do great things.

### **Dispelling the Stereotypes and Assumptions**

Jones and Shorter-Goodman (2003) contended that black women alter their behavior in order to disprove and transcend society’s misconceptions about them. The ability to take on and contradict the myths can be a motivator for one to achieve.

When the researcher asked Saniyah Mahaney to recall anything that she may not have mentioned as a motivation for her success, Saniyah reiterated a motivator for her academic success that surfaced several times during her interviews, “... really breaking the stereotypical black girl image that everybody expects me to be is a motivator. I’m not

gonna be that person. I refuse to be that person.” Recalling these powerful words spoken by the youngest of the six participants, the researcher determined that a central theme for these young women’s motivation to be successful in school might be defined as a desire to dispel the stereotypes and assumptions about African American females. Most of the young women recounted instances of bearing the responsibility of making sure others think of black females in a positive light. The young ladies suggested that in order to fit in and move forward, they must censor their conversations and funnel their ideas to overcome assumptions that they are uneducated and less intelligent.

Saniyah Mahaney was certainly not alone in her strategy of going out of her way to highlight her intelligence and value to people who may otherwise stereotype her.

When asked about what advice she might give for African American students who may be struggling, Olivia Bradley echoed:

Don’t follow the stereotypes and the portrayals that we get on TV because a lotta the time black woman are portrayed as always loud and always somebody’s mama without the daddy around. I just think that you shouldn’t have to want to be like what media puts us out there as. I think that you are gonna have—it might even be your own family that tells you you can’t, but it’s important that if you want something, you have to go get it and don’t worry about what others say. It’s too much just black and white stuff.

Even though they’re saying or thinking one thing, you can still do another. You can still be successful that what comes out of someone’s mouth does not determine how far you go in life. You can still—even though black males’ graduation and dropout rates are not to where they should be, that doesn’t mean that you have to follow that trend.

Leah Thomas’s strategies that she would suggest to other black students divulged her acknowledgement of a personal responsibility to be that student who shows onlookers the intelligence that is present in African American females. Based on some of the

interactions that Leah described, the researcher wondered how much more difficult this must have been for her attending a predominately white, upwardly mobile school.

I think I kind of change the way that people perceive black people because they perceive them as kinda like loud and wild or they don't care about school. I think for most of my friends I'm the black friend, and so I feel like their perception changed on how black people can be.

Sometimes it gets to me cuz I don't want to be just the black friend, sometimes I just want to be your friend. You can't ignore who you are, and I feel like almost every black person has that responsibility to uphold and get raised I guess and show people that you can be the best you can be.

When the researcher asked Jennifer Johnson about other motivations for her success she too addressed the need to “defy the statistics,” including the absence of her father.

I think that me trying to prove the statistics wrong is another one of the reasons why I strive to do better. It's really a mindset. It has nothing to do with if a father is there or not or a mother is there or not. It's your mindset.

If you feel like, “Hey, I'm gonna do better, regardless of my circumstances,” then that's what you do. My dad has tried. We've tried to have a relationship and I feel like it's—I feel like I've become better.

Defying those statistics and what society is supposed to think about me being an African American student and not having a father in my life constantly, day to day—I mean, I have a father but he's just not there. That's what drives me to make sure people know it's not what you've read and it's not the facts because that's not everyone.

Olivia Bradley spoke quite candidly about her motivation to be successful in spite of the assumptions of others.

I just think that you don't have to fit into a box that others have created for you based on where they think you come from. You don't have to be a follower. You don't have to fall into the same trend as everybody else. You can be one to stand out.

Sylvia Wilson expressed pride in being the only African American student in some of her more advanced classes and seemed to embrace this responsibility with candor.

I've noticed in a lot of my classes that are more advanced sometimes I'm the only African-American student in there. It's something that you notice and care about but try not to let it bum you out or that you think that you can't succeed cuz there are plenty of successful African-American people out there.

I take it as I'm proud that I might be the only one, but I'm proud that I'm maybe starting something or maybe teachers who don't normally have African-American students in their classes. Hopefully they get used to it cuz I hope there's more.

Saniyah Mahaney also expressed pride in being able to dispel the African American stereotypes.

I'm pretty proud of not being a part of the young African American lady stereotype. It's just that I was raised differently. I feel like I'm more proper and I carry myself better than the stereotypical black girl. I'm pretty proud of that.

She reiterated one of her motivations as being herself, when asked to rank order the things that have contributed the most to her success.

Number three would be myself, I think, because my feelings towards certain things like, again, I do not want to be the stereotypical black girl. I do not, and I won't. So I think the fact that I push myself even more to break that and not be that helps me out a ton. I don't want people to see me as the girl that can't make it, and she has so many kids that she can't barely take care of 'em. I don't want that. I don't want that at all.

After listening to Saniyah Mahaney and the other girls talk about not being a perpetuator of the stereotypes that tend to be associated with black females, it is evident that they may feel accountable for positively representing the possibilities that are always present for Black girls. The six participants displayed a strong internal locus of control, and as a result, are determined to prove others wrong by showing a commitment to their

academic endeavors. This finding is in line with the work of Moore, Madison-Colmore, and Smith (2007) who discussed the prove-them-wrong syndrome. Their study of successful African American men studying engineering found that a motivator for their achievement may have been associated with a need to disprove negative stereotypes about Blacks' academic achievement with their own success. Like the men who were a part of the aforementioned study, the six students in this study felt the need to disprove negative stereotypes.

Additionally, one might agree with Jones and Shorter-Goodwin (2003) who contend that much of the shifting that Black women do is motivated by a wish, sometimes conscious, sometimes not, to confront, transcend, and hopefully defeat the ugly myths and stereotypes that so many in society continue to hold about them. They propose that educational achievement is a way of reversing the myth of inferiority.

### **Pushing Oneself to Set a New Standard in the Family**

Alex Haley (n.d.) proposed that the family is our refuge and our springboard; nourished on it, we can advance to new horizons. In every conceivable manner, the family is link to our past, bridge to our future. Trotman (2001) found that like other ethnic groups, African American parents want their children to achieve academically (p. 275). The researcher found this to be glaringly true with the family members of the six participants of this study. In fact, their pride in having their daughters be asked to participant in this study confirmed how critical this undertaking was and that it may have been long overdue. In fact, one mother sent the researcher a thank you email after the initial meeting for recognizing her daughter and the other girls who participated.

Thank you for recognizing her and the other young ladies. I think it's a great opportunity for them. It's also very nice to have them be recognized because it's not seen or applauded by this school district very often, that our girls are being successful and going places. Thanks for seeing this.

For these young women, their family, often a mother or grandmother in particular, provided the much needed support and sense of purpose for their strong academic impetus. Each of the young women revealed an unshakeable desire to be successful because of the drive to satisfy a family member(s)'s wishes for them to be successful. Additionally they tended to see themselves as "the chosen one" in the family and talked about a sense of obligation to give back to those who had given so much to them. Jennifer Johnson's Coat of Arms visual display captured the essence of this phenomenon. In Section 5 of her display in response to the prompt, "An event or person who most contributed to your success at school," she wrote: "Uncle Tim went to college and became very successful. I want to follow his footsteps but even better and push myself to set a new standard in the family."

The researcher observed this idea reverberate in each of the participant's narratives and felt compelled to define this theme as pushing oneself to set a new standard in the family.

Although all of the students were successful because of their academic presence and potential, they often attributed their drive and determination to their family. Nurmi (1991) contended that parents play an integral role in communicating values, interests, and goals that affect how adolescents view their futures. The students in this study confirmed the importance of their family in pushing them to set a new milestone of achievement.

When asked who had contributed the most to her success, Olivia Bradley quickly gave credit to her family, including grandparents.

My family for sure because they—my grandparents especially. They grew up down in the south in the 60s, and I know how hard they are. I know because they didn't get the same opportunities that I did. They didn't get to have updated books and updated technology because, as they told me before, it was the white kids who got it, and they got the books that were two and three years ahead, and they didn't get that. I think that's part of the reason why they pushed me along with my mom too. She said, "I was never as smart as you," and I don't like when she says that to me because I think she's raised me very well, but I think she wants to see something in me that she didn't get to do herself.

The need to achieve for herself, yet equally as much for the family, was present in many of her responses as Olivia also worked toward setting a new standard for her family. Her grandparents growing up in an impoverished community in which outdated materials and insufficient resources hindered their ability to achieve seemed to spark such strong motivation in their granddaughter. Additionally, when asked about her biggest successes for the year Olivia mentioned making the National Honor Society. Once again, her reaching this prestigious milestone ignited a family celebration, yet also provided the extra push to excel that Olivia may have needed.

I would say making National Honor Society because that was one really big goal that I had for myself but throughout my family because I know how badly they wanted me to get it, and I knew I had to put in extra work to be able to get that honor. I ended up doing it, and so I think that was—that's a big part of what has made me how I am now. Even though it was only a few months ago, I think that it's made me more aware of the fact that—cuz junior year I got a little shaky, and I think that—I almost didn't make it because of just, oh, I'll be all right or I can just get by. I think that pushed me and made me realize I wanna be successful, and I wanna be able to wear the white sash at graduation.

Carlie Aston echoed similar sentiments when asked who has contributed the most to her success. What is remarkable about her motivation is how it transcends her mother

and grandfather's deaths. She spoke candidly about wanting to go above and beyond just for them.

Well, my mom passed away in 2008, so I was getting ready to start sixth grade. She's the biggest motivation because her and my grandpa—because my grandpa just recently passed away, too, about two years ago. Just the thought of making them proud and to just make them happy, that's the biggest motivation, because I just want to go above and beyond just for them. Because even though they're not here, I still see them here spiritually. Just being able to actually feel that, and understand that, just makes me want to push harder and to be more successful.

Her mother's struggles seemed to have created a deeper drive in Carlie as she described why her mother is her hero.

My mommy is my hero. I love her so much. Even though she's not with me, she means so much to me. I'll even sit down, and lie there and talk to her. Even though she can't respond back, it just—actually talking to her and stuff like that, it feels amazing. She's independent. She's beautiful. She's intelligent. She has done above and beyond for my two brothers, and me and it honestly means a lot. She broke down all the barriers that stood in her way, and she overcame almost every obstacle.

One need only listen to Jennifer Johnson a few moments to realize the impact that her great grandmother's presence had on her life and motivation. A surrogate mother in many regards, Jennifer's great grandmother instilled a deep sense of purpose and determination in her great granddaughter.

My granny has definitely contributed a lot to my success. I know she's looking down on me and I want to make sure she feels like none of it went to waste and I make her proud and so I'm making sure I take the right steps to make sure she feels that way.

Jennifer's desire to set a new standard for the family was deeply instilled in who she had become and surfaced repeatedly throughout the interviews. When asked what was important for the researcher to know about her, Jennifer responded:

One thing that someone should know about me is that I come from an interesting background. I come from struggle and I come from—you know, when I was younger I thought I had the best childhood possible. When I think about it and I think back I just think about always being happy but I didn't pay attention to what was going on around me. Then, when I'm older and I look back on stuff and I was like, "Wow. There were a lot of bad things going on around me that I didn't know."

Sometimes I look around me and I think I see more bad than I do good. I want to make sure that I'm the good that my little cousins can look around and see. That's the most important thing that people need to know. I don't come from privilege background. I didn't come up and I was just this person. I am a collection of all the people around me and I decided that, "You're gonna be better."

Sylvia Wilson shared how watching her mother work hard inspired her to want to do better. Sylvia's description speaks to the power of surrounding oneself with successful people who in turn push you to the next level.

I've watched my mom become really successful and she has inspired me to do better. I've watched people I know become really successful. No one has ever really given it to me ever, and I've had friends who just seem like they get things given to them or they don't have to try as hard. I've lived with people that have had to try really hard, and so being in that situation I think, and wanting a good future has helped me a lot.

Sylvia's mother described a desire to have a meaningful career and lifestyle as an adult as a motivator for her daughter. Her perspective echoed Sylvia's desire to have a good future.

Saniyah Mahaney expressed her appreciation for her mother feeding into her dreams. This mother's ability to be a pipeline to her daughter's aspirations motivated her to achieve. Later, when she described why she thought her father was successful she alluded to an admiration of his status in the family.

Oh, my mom is my hero because she's so cool. She's always there for me. I can always run to her with anything I know. She pushes me, and she always guides me the right way. She knows—she feeds into my— what? I don't know. She

feeds into my dreams, I guess, to become a pediatrician or something. She'll tell me, "Oh, you're gonna be this great doctor one day and make all this money." Stuff like that. I think she's my hero, because she's always there for me, and I know she wants what's best for me always. Her constant encouragement makes me want to do it just for them.

My daddy I think is very successful because all the stories that he's told me and showing us where he's come from. I think that where he's at now is—he's come a long way. He's done a lot, and I think it's cool that he can just sit back and have money to just spend and stuff like that. I think that makes him pretty successful because not a lot of people in his family can really do that. I think that it's cool that he can take care of his parents and stuff.

These findings are somewhat congruent with the work of J. R. Mosby (2009) who studied African American male community college students. He noted that the parents and family influence students' desire to attend college, their career goals in college, and their aspiration to continue toward identified career goals. The researcher found that these students' family definitely influenced their desire to raise the bar and achieve at high levels. Moreover, several attributed their confidence, people skills, and moral convictions to the family members who selflessly poured into them. Based on the conversations with these young women, one could certainly embrace and appreciate the words of Brad Henry (n.d.) when he penned, "Families are the compass that guide us. They are the inspiration to reach great heights, and our comfort when we occasionally falter."

### **Struggle as a Motivator**

Few would argue that financial success and stability could be an inspiration for personal and academic achievement. Yet, there may be things that one can learn when you grow up in an environment where struggle is evident. The researcher noted that the young ladies in this study did not define their backgrounds as affluent, yet their ability to

learn from the hardships in their modest environments may have been far more useful than one might think. These high achieving students described conditions and situations that required them to display resiliency and strength. Successful African American females persevere despite the struggles. The idea of not wanting to struggle in the manner noted in their current environment when they are older was a motivator to be successful.

The researcher noted an attitude of perseverance despite the struggles as one participant described “not wanting to experience low days” as a real factor in her drive to excel. Jennifer Johnson, who was homeless at one point during the past school year, described a number of struggles in her initial interview.

My drive to do better and be better because I watch my mom and several of my family members struggle and sometimes days are good, sometimes days are bad. Sometimes the money's there; sometimes it's not. I just want to make sure that I don't have to experience those low days.

Interestingly enough, Jennifer's mother shared that their family's setbacks, struggles, domestic abuse, and financial hardships have been a motivator for her daughter. Her mother described their family life as being unstable and rocky. Mom divulged that she was proud of Jennifer for her ability to persevere through these struggles and remain focused on her goals.

While Sylvia Wilson did not provide the depth of clarity about her family's struggles, she was pretty clear that this was a big part of why she was motivated to academically achieve. Her response to what has been the most influential in helping her to be successful sheds insight into her quest for success. “I would have to say just

looking to the future because I don't wanna struggle when I'm older. That's a big part of it."

Sylvia also shared her uncertainty regarding her area of study in college but mentioned her distaste with having to struggle when discussing her future.

I'm not really a hundred percent sure what I'm gonna do yet, but I don't want to ever have to struggle to do the things I want to do. I know that you have to lay a good foundation in high school to get there. Most of the time. I know there's some special cases, but that's not everybody so.

Leah Thomas spoke about the struggles she experienced in being one of a few African American females enrolled at a predominately white, affluent high school. She mentioned that being successful means that "you have to be a part of things." Since her family had only one car this was difficult at times. Leah described how she didn't want to be perceived as a needy person in this environment so recalled having to set her pride aside to make sure she was able to be involved in activities.

Leah expressed such pride in her parents' perseverance despite the financial difficulties but somewhat apologetically articulated her desire to not have to experience these struggles. Her response to what keeps her motivated to achieve once again testified to the desire to avoid hardships and allow her to position herself in a place to give back.

I'd have to say my parent's struggle. Even though they work really hard we still don't have a lot, and so I almost want to do better than them. I don't know if that sounds bad. I just want to have enough and be able to give back.

Olivia Bradley paid homage to her mother throughout the interviews describing how her mother's adversity has been a motivator for her to achieve. Olivia talked about her mother's heroism in persevering in the face of difficult times.

I would say she's my hero because I know she's gone through a lot of adversity to be one of the few black police officers, and I think that that has also inspired me to wanna become a doctor ... I think that she's gone through a lot growing up and being a single mom raising me.

Saniyah Mahaney's desire to be financially successful in her adult life was evident throughout the researcher's conversations with her, as well as, on her Coat of Arms visual display. She equated having the financial means to take care of her desires as an indicator of success. The desire "to make it" was a motivator for Saniyah.

I'm a very money-hungry person, and I know that it's very uncommon, I won't say uncommon, but I feel like if I don't go to school and I don't go to college and stuff like that, it's gonna be a lot harder for me to make it. I don't want to experience such hardships.

The participants discussed the importance of not having to experience the struggles they had witnessed in their current environment. Self determined and driven, their achievement testified to a desire to obtain a comfortable lifestyle as an adult. They each equated academic excellence as a means to a brighter future that would include stability void of the "low days."

### **The Connections with Teachers Matter**

So true are the words that what a teacher writes on the blackboard of life can never be erased. The six participants of this study confirmed previous research that the influence of a teacher matters (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Ferguson, 2002; Hale, 2001; Wiggan, 2008). What was interesting about this study is that teachers often mattered in a positive manner for the participants and yet several young ladies described examples in which the teacher's influence was nullifying. Leah Thomas described how

teachers definitely have been influential in helping her to be successful in school. She recalled,

I try to work really hard in class, and I try to make sure teachers know my name. Like I'll raise my hand and I'll talk. I'll stay after class to make sure they know who I am. Not just the black girl, but someone's who's invested and caring in class.

Leah's words are the inspiration for what several of the young women described, "I try to make sure that teachers know my name." Successful African American females care about what their teachers think about them and work to strengthen their connections. Those connections and how they are perceived are motivators because it's another person who believes that they have the tools to do great things.

The researcher found that several participants described the importance of their teachers knowing them and revealed how significant the teachers' opinions, and perhaps even assumptions, were about them. Jennifer Johnson, a self-proclaimed "teacher's pet," proudly acknowledged that she made sure that her teachers felt like she was a great student and looked at her in a positive light. Along those same lines, Sylvia Wilson confirmed the importance of her teacher knowing that she was trying. "I don't really think they need to talk to me. I just want them to see the work I'm doing, and they should be able to tell that I'm working hard."

*Working hard.* Two meaningful words to Sylvia. Working hard also manifested itself in Sylvia's Coat of Arms visual display in Section 3, which asked for things that she was good at doing related to school. The importance of the teacher knowing that she was working hard was important to this quiet young lady who often talked about sitting in

class and not necessarily being the most vocal student. The fact that Sylvia wanted the teacher to know this speaks to the influence that educators possess.

The teachers' opinions mattered to most of these students and often pushed them to "be a part of things" as Leah described at one point in her interview. She admitted to signing up for things based on her teachers acknowledging that she would be good at it. Jennifer shared an interesting story that illustrates how important her teachers' opinions were to her and a response to an interaction with one of her favorite teachers.

I didn't know I that could sing, actually. I was singing in the bathroom and my teacher came in and was like, "You know what? You need to be in choir." I got in choir. I was in concert choir and then I went to choreographed choir. My teacher has helped all of us with our sight-reading and our voices individually, too. I found a new thing that I could do.

The fact that a teacher would take the time to notice, acknowledge, and suggest a student follow up on a talent, speaks to how important their role and influence is in the lives of students. The researcher would suggest this to be especially significant in the lives of young women who may not otherwise have known or pursued this "new thing" that she could do. Ferguson (2002) discussed this in his research establishing "the distinctive importance of teacher encouragement as a source of motivation for nonwhite students" (p. 14).

Saniyah Mahaney described how some teachers have played a role in her success by "just their positive attitudes and pushing me to do better." She credited those teachers with why she had such a bubbly attitude and was motivated to go above and beyond. Saniyah explained that she had a better connection with some teachers in that she could talk to them about "other things." Jennifer reiterated the importance of the deep

connections that she made with her teachers and spoke about how important it was that she was able to talk to her teachers about stressors such as her dad going to jail. She talked about being able to confide in her teachers. Olivia Bradley also spoke of the deeper connections that she had with certain teachers when asked about whether teachers have been influential in her success.

I would say some teachers have. I think some teachers have worked with me more than others have, and I think I've had a deeper level of understanding with some teachers. Certain teachers I can go to about basically anything, and then some teachers I'll just go to *asking* what's the assignment.

The deeper connections seemed to be a motivator for these young women, some of who may not have had these connections with other people in their academic and/or personal lives. One would argue that certain teachers' ability to fan the embers for these students, often unknowingly, propelled them to believe and achieve at prodigious levels.

While several of the girls described deep connections to their teachers, several acknowledged their desire for teachers to care more. Perhaps realizing the power that teachers possess, some participants talked about how much better black students might do if they had teachers who related to students in a more committed way. The researcher appreciated Olivia Bradley's honesty when she was asked to rate teachers (on a scale of 1 to 10) on how significant they have been in her success:

I would say as a whole around a six just because I think that some teachers, just not necessarily with me but, just attitudes in the classroom, sometimes are just to get it over with and get it done. I think that as far as in this community, they don't have such a good connection with the black kids who aren't doing well in school. I've been in some of those classrooms. I think that some of them are understanding— but others they see them as a pain. I think that if some teachers were more willing to understand and go deeper and work with that student to make them successful, I think there can be some different outcomes in graduations in the past years and in the years to come.

Carlie Aston also described teachers who she perceived as simply not caring.

Not all the teachers that I've had have been so pushy for me to do better in school. Some teachers, they honestly don't care. There are teachers that honestly do care. I appreciate them 100 percent. I just wish that there were more teachers within the district that would be more caring and helpful towards being successful.

When the researcher prodded Carlie as to what caring looked like she elaborated on the importance of the connections.

I think a teacher truly cares if they—if you've been gone for a day or two, if they come in and ask you, "Oh, how's everything going," and actually engaging into a conversation. Just asking how your life is outside of school, I think that means a lot.

The researcher discovered that successful African American females described and affirmed that teachers matter. This is consistent with the research of Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2012), Ferguson (2002), Hale (2001), Wiggan (2008) and others who concluded the importance of teachers. These six participants described incidents that affirmed that what their teachers thought of them mattered deeply. Several participants worked to strengthen and genuinely appreciate the personal relationship established with their teachers. Those connections, along with how they are perceived by teachers, were motivators for these young women. When the relationships were non-existent, or perceived in that manner, the young women noted this as a barrier to student success. Lastly, they were committed to making sure that teachers knew they were capable and hard working, which is the essence of them "knowing their name" as Leah Thomas suggested.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations**

#### **Summary**

This study was important to conduct as it provided insight and a glimpse into the lived experiences of six successful African American females in high school. In particular, the researcher was interested in who or what are the factors that motivated them to achieve at high levels. Based on the research findings this study is significant because it has broadened the knowledge base about Black female high school students and the factors that are important to their continued achievement. As we work to close the achievement gap and insure that all students experience success in school, we must be deliberate in our efforts to reach out to students whose realities have been distinguishable from the norm.

The goal of this research study was to highlight factors that positively influence successful African American females in the public high schools. As Henry (1995) suggested, there is a need to make African American female participants' lives the starting points and foci of the research. The researcher's desire to do just that was the definitive purpose of this work.

Previous studies that focused on African American academic success stories contributed significantly to the researcher's understanding and influenced the design and scope of this study (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Bean et al., 2003;

Ferguson, 2002; Hale, 2001; Kerpelman et al., 2007; Wiggan, 2008). The literature review in Chapter 3 corroborated that contributing factors to the academic achievement of students of color included family support, teachers, and involvement in extracurricular activities (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Bean et al., 2003; Ferguson, 2002; Gerber, 1996; Hale, 2001; Kerpelman et al, 2007; Marsh, 1992; Reeves, 2008; Wiggan, 2008)

Chapter 5 detailed findings related to academic achievement among the six African American female participants of this study. In particular, these successful African American females:

1. Bear the responsibility of dispelling the stereotypes and assumptions made about them by making sure others think of black females in a positive light.
2. Bear the responsibility of “setting a new standard in the family” by achieving at levels never before reached by family members as a way to bring honor to those who have supported and pushed them to achieve.
3. Persevere despite the struggles. The idea of not wanting to struggle in the manner noted in their current environment when they are older was a motivator to be successful.
4. Care about what their teachers think about them and work to strengthen their connections to teachers who are a motivator for their success.

As previously noted, these young women developed coping strategies and supports to help them maneuver the many demands and complexities associated with being a high achieving Black female in today’s high schools. All of the young women

spoke with conviction and determination, stressing their desire to someday give back to others as a way of completing their narratives. In many ways this resonated as the absolute summation of the participants' lived experiences.

While the findings of this study align with some of the research findings identifying the power of teachers and the family to African American students, the young women of this study did not identify extracurricular activities as a major motivator to their success (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Bean et al., 2003; Ferguson, 2002; Hale, 2001; Kerpelman et al., 2007; Wiggan, 2008). All of the participants were involved in extracurricular activities yet most of them didn't rank their activities as high as other factors. All six young women acknowledged the importance of being involved at school and believed that this broadened their options and provided opportunities that they would not have had otherwise.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

1. This study was limited to six African American females at high schools in the Midwest. In order to further strengthen the findings it would be helpful to increase the number of high achieving African American females included in the study to determine if the findings would be similar.
2. It might be important to isolate some of the variables unique to this study to determine their significance. This would include a deeper exploration of what it means to be a high achieving female as opposed to a male. It would definitely be worth the time to further explore if a student's motivation to

achieve varies dependent upon gender. Additionally, what are the barriers to achievement and what role, if any, does gender play?

3. The researcher intentionally did not ask students questions specific to their beliefs about how their race may have played a factor in their motivation yet the participants identified issues related to race when it was determined that dispelling stereotypes was a motivator to their success. It might be important to explore the racial component in more depth by focusing on the concept of racial identity and it's significance with today's African American students.
4. Several of the participants of this research study described an environment where financial hardships were the norm. It might be important to conduct a study of African American students in an affluent environment to determine the impact that class may have within the Black community as it relates to academic motivation and achievement.
5. This study looked specifically at students who were identified as African American to determine their motivation to be successful. Would one find the same motivations within other female students of color? It might be important to conduct a similar study of another ethnically diverse group of females to compare and contrast the findings.

### **Recommendations for Further Practice**

This study examined the factors that motivate African American females in high schools. The fact that the researcher had to spend countless hours and extra effort to find six females from six high schools in a large city within the Midwest denotes the need for

efforts to close the achievement and opportunity gap that currently exist in our public schools. For this reason recommendations include the following:

1. Restructuring of the high school environment to better meet the needs of the diverse student population currently being served is needed. This should include a deliberate effort to insure that students of color are represented and supported in college preparatory classes.
2. Continued staff development for teachers on the power of building strong and genuine relationships with all students, but particularly students of color is necessary and vitally important.
3. Identify schools and districts who have seen gains in student achievement among their ethnically diverse populations in order to identify specific steps those environments have taken that might account for their gains.
4. Establish a support network within the high school for high achieving students of color. This could include assigning a mentor to these students that could follow them throughout their high school career.

In closing, this research has provided important insight into factors that motivate successful African American females at the high school level. A sense of urgency is needed in this regard in order to facilitate interventions that support this often-overlooked population. Given the immense challenges that high schools face in meeting the needs of this population, it is the researcher's hope that study findings can lead to enhanced discourse among educators about challenges and opportunities for educating African American females. Ultimately it is our responsibility and moral obligation to be more

deliberate and purposeful in order to yield better academic outcomes for African American females.

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**Appendix A**

**Participant Informed Consent Form**



**Title:** The Quest for Success - Understanding the Experiences of Successful African American Females In High School

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this research study will be to explore student engagement and success in African American female students at the high school level. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are identified as an African American female who has been successful in your high school experience. There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant. The research will be beneficial to society as this study is interested in understanding the experiences of successful African American females. The researcher believes that your experiences may be different from other students and will be important information for helping schools better work with African American females. Additionally, the researcher is conducting this study in order to fulfill the requirements for a Doctorate in Educational Administration from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

**Procedures:**

You will be asked to participate in no more than two face-to-face interviews with one researcher. The interviews will be approximately 1 hour long and will be audio recorded with your permission. The interviews will be conducted in a conference room at your high school. These interviews will be scheduled based on your availability and the availability of the researcher.

**Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant. The research project will benefit the researcher in fulfilling the requirements for a Doctorate degree.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the investigator during the study. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as aggregated data. Participants' names will be changed if referred to in the published work.

**Compensation:**

You will receive no compensation for participating in this project.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator at the phone number below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, Lincoln Public Schools, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature, along with your parent/guardian's signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Signature of Research Participant:**

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**Parent/Guardian Signature:**

---

**Date:**

---

**Date:**

---

**Name and Phone Number of Investigator(s)**

Vann Price  
Principal Investigator

Office: 402-436-1305  
Cell: 402-525-7033

Dr. Jody Isernhagen,  
Doctoral Committee Chair

Office: 402 472-1088

**Appendix B**

**Parent/Guardian Informed Consent Form**



**Title:** The Quest for Success - Understanding the Experiences of Successful African American Females In High School

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this research study will be to explore student engagement and success in African American female students at the high school level. You are being asked to participate in this study because your daughter has been identified as an African American female who has been successful in her high school experience. There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant. The research will be beneficial to society as this study is interested in understanding the experiences of successful African American females. The researcher believes that your daughter's experiences may be different from other students and will be important information for helping schools better work with African American females. Additionally, the researcher is conducting this study in order to fulfill the requirements for a Doctorate in Educational Administration from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

**Procedures:**

You will be asked to complete and return a short questionnaire.

**Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant. The research project will benefit the researcher in fulfilling the requirements for a Doctorate degree.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the investigator during the study. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as aggregated data. Participants' names will be changed if referred to in the published work.

**Compensation:**

You will receive no compensation for participating in this project.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator at the phone number below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, Lincoln Public Schools, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Signature of Research Participant:**

**Date:**

---



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**Name and Phone Number of Investigator(s)**

Vann Price  
Principal Investigator

Office: 402-436-1305  
Cell: 402-525-7033

Dr. Jody Isernhagen  
Doctoral Committee Chair

Office: 402 472-1088

**Appendix C**

**Interview Protocol**

**Title:** The Quest for Success - Understanding the Experiences of Successful African American Females in High School

<b>Time of Interview</b>
<b>Date</b>
<b>Place</b>
<b>Interviewee</b>
<b>Interview Number</b>

**Introduction:** Hello \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you for agreeing to talk to me today about your success in school and your involvement in extra-curricular activities. I want you to speak freely about your experiences and I may ask a clarifying question to probe a bit more. Before we begin, I'd like to go over the consent form with you to insure you understand that this is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time.

**Questions:**

*Defining Success*

1. How do you define success in school?
2. Do you consider yourself successful?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Why not?
3. Who do you think is really successful? Why?
4. What were your biggest successes for the semester?
  - a. What is your best memory this school year?
5. Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 of how successful you have been this school year.
 

Not successful at all -----**TO**----- 10. Very successful

*Motivations for Being Successful*

1. What would you say contributes the most to your success in school?
2. What keeps you motivated to achieve?
  - a. What are you most proud of yourself for?

*Contributors to Success*

1. Do you have a person(s) in your life who has been the most influential in contributing to your success? Who is that person and how have they contributed?
2. Who is your hero? Why?
3. What extra-curricular activities are you or have you been involved in at school?
4. Do you think these activities made a difference in how well you do in school?
  - a. If so, how?
  - b. How would you rate the effectiveness or influence of extracurricular activities on your success in school? Talk about why you rated it the way you did.
    1. Not successful at all -----**TO**----- 10. Very successful
5. Have teachers played a role in your success in school? If so, how or how not?
  - a. How would you rate teachers' effectiveness or influence on your success in school? Talk about why you rated it the way you did.
    1. Not successful at all -----**TO**----- 10. Very successful

*Challenges to Being Successful*

1. What are some of the challenges that you face in being successful?
  - a. How do you or have you responded to those challenges?

*Recommended Strategies for Success*

1. What strategies do you recommend to help other African American students succeed?
  - a. What advice would you give to a student who is struggling in school?

*Getting to Know the Participant*

1. What 3 words best describe you?
2. What are your plans for the future?
3. Do you have plans to attend college? If so, when did you know you were going to go to college?
4. What do you think is the most important thing that I should know about you?

*Follow up Questions*

1. What has been the theme of your high school career? If you were to write a book about your high school career, what would the title be?
2. What do you think you will remember 20 years from now about your high school experience?

## **Appendix D**

### **Observation Protocol**



**Appendix E**

**Visual Aid: Coat of Arms**

## COAT OF ARMS

A “Coat of Arms” is a unique design on a shield used by medieval knights to cover, protect, and identify the wearer. I am interested in how you have “covered, protected, and identified” yourself as it relates to your school experience. Create a Coat of Arms using the criteria listed below. Each symbol on the coat of arms should represent something that has an important meaning to you. Illustrate by drawing or cutting out words or pictures for each of the following categories.

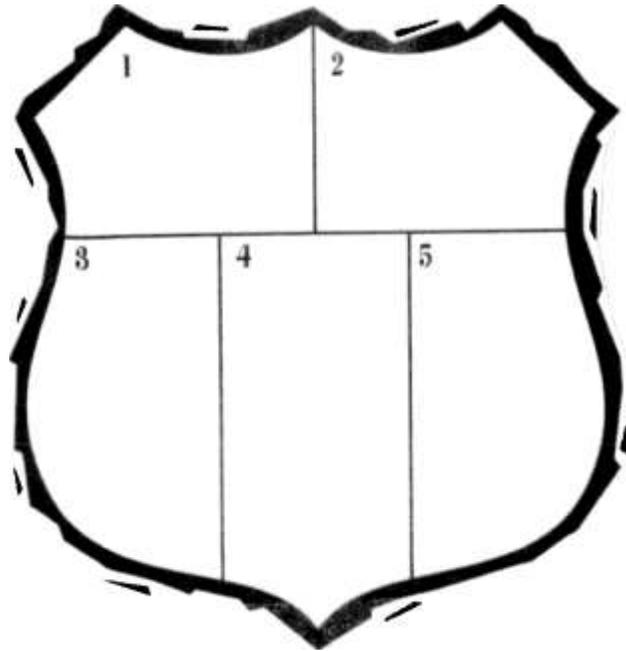
*Space 1: words or pictures that you would use to describe yourself*

*Space 2: words or pictures that others have used to describe you*

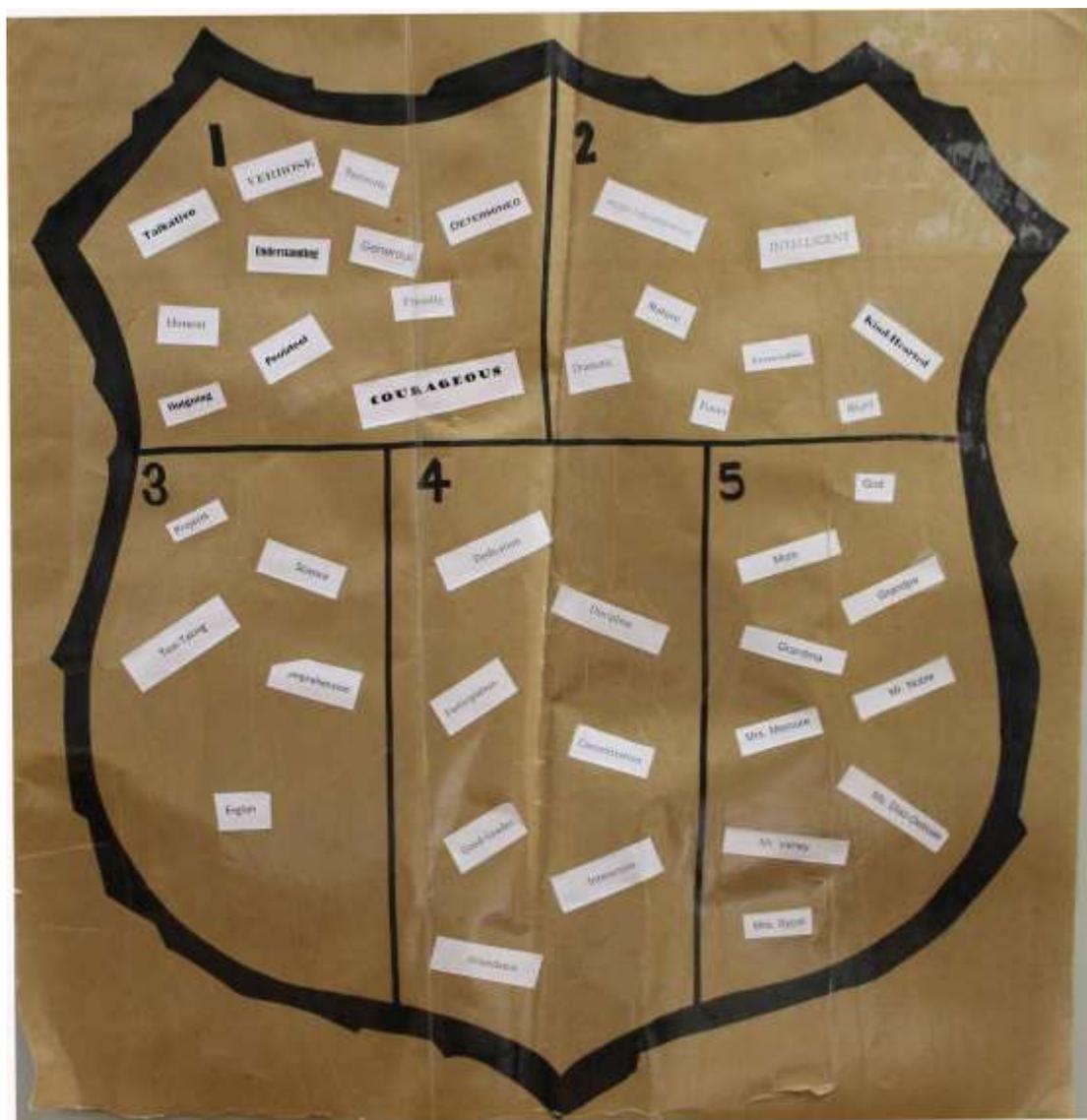
*Space 3: Something you are really good at doing related to school*

*Space 4: words or pictures that you would use to define “success” at school*

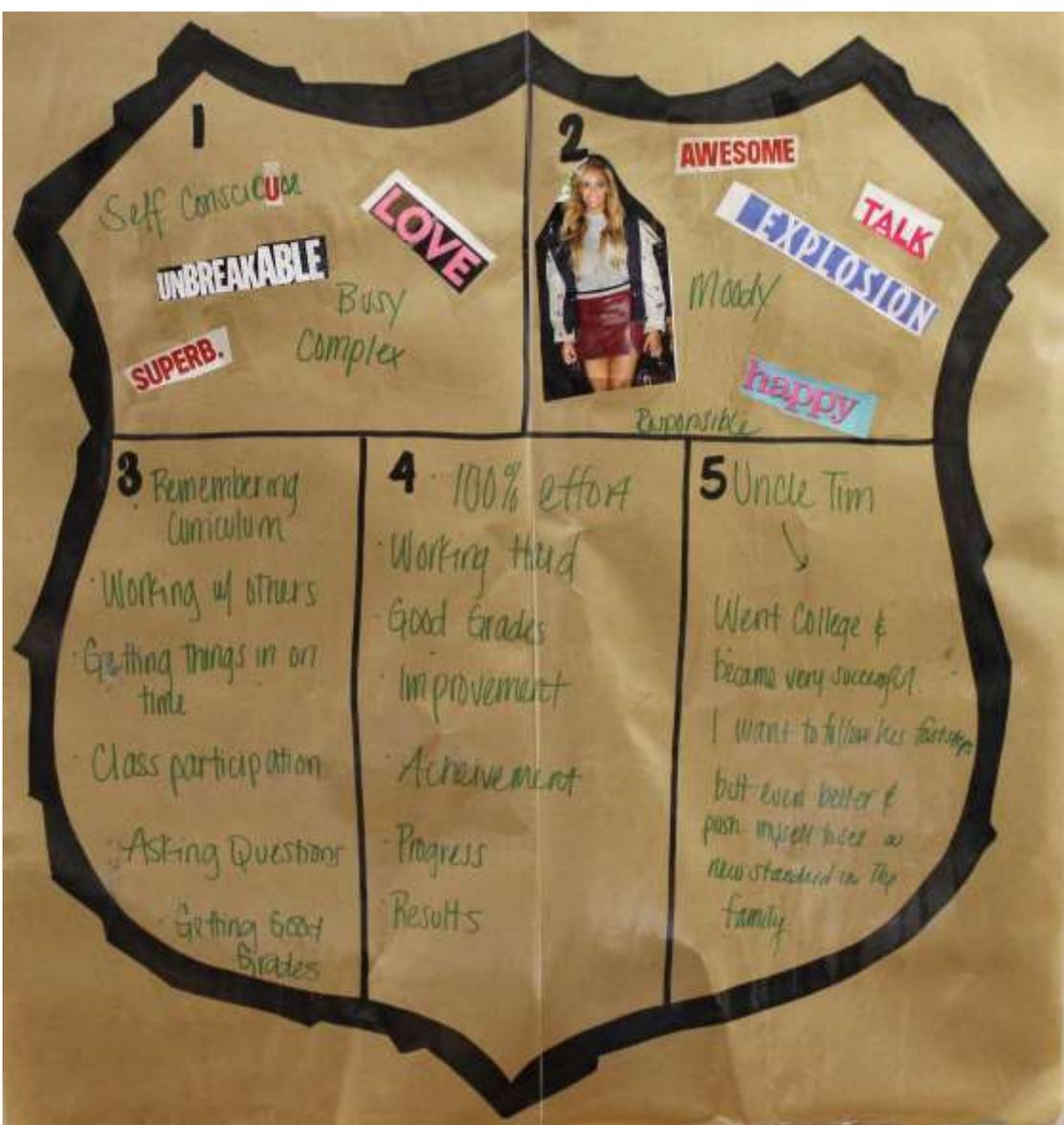
*Space 5: an event or person(s) who most contributed to your success at school*



Olivia Bradley:



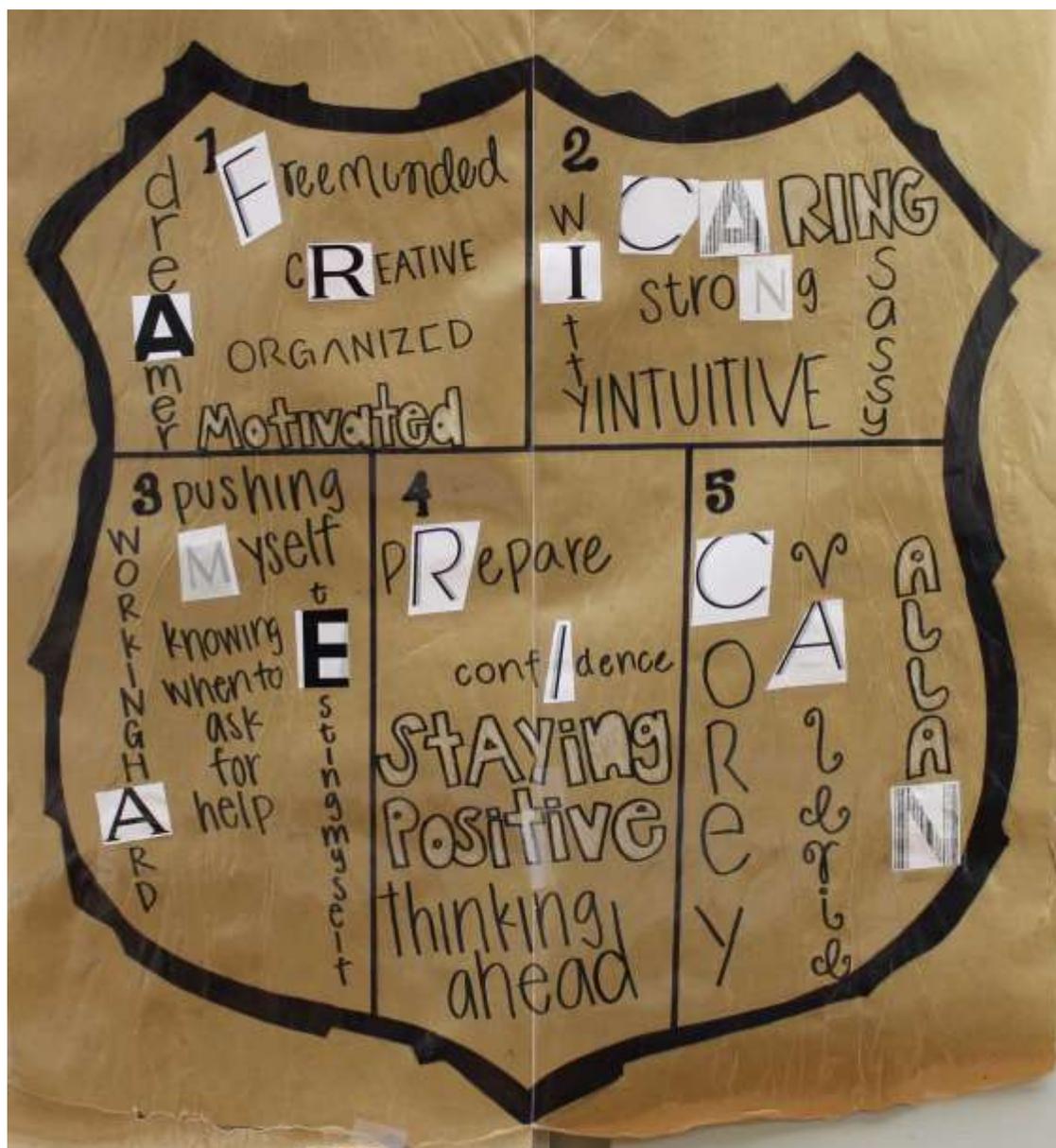
Jennifer Johnson:



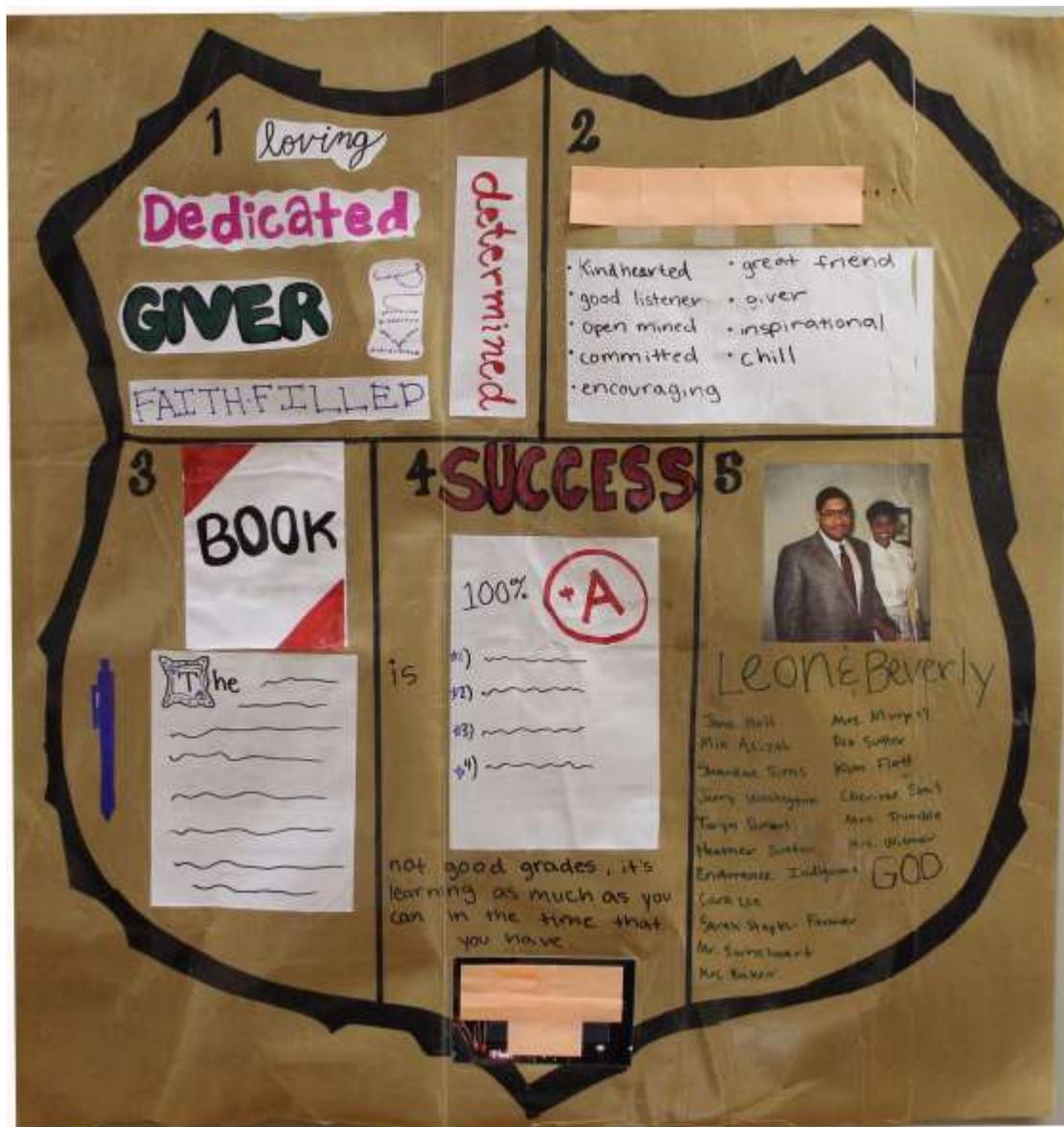
Saniyah Mahaney:



Sylvia Wilson:



Leah Thomas:



1 loving

**Dedicated**

**GIVER**

FAITH FILLED

determined

2

- Kindhearted
- great friend
- good listener
- giver
- open minded
- inspirational
- committed
- chill
- encouraging

3

**BOOK**

The \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

4 **SUCCESS** 5

100% **A**  
 1) \_\_\_\_\_  
 2) \_\_\_\_\_  
 3) \_\_\_\_\_  
 4) \_\_\_\_\_

is

not good grades, it's learning as much as you can in the time that you have.

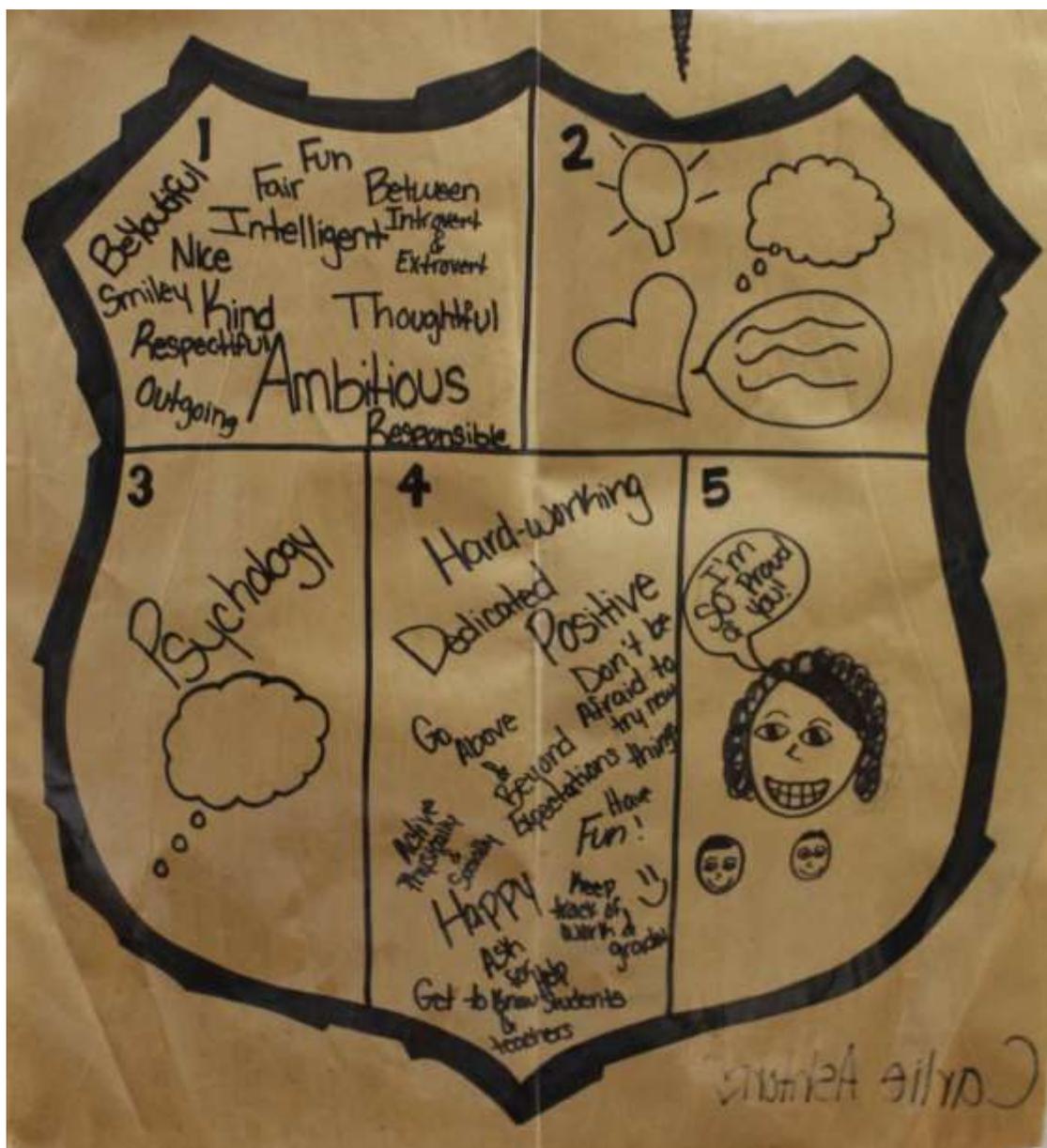


Leone Beverly

- Tina Holt
- Mrs. Murphy
- Mia Azizah
- Dea Supar
- Jhandra Torres
- Kim Flatt
- Jenny Washington
- Cherise Sam's
- Tanya Simons
- Mrs. Trumble
- Heather Sutton
- Mrs. Williams
- Enderleze Indigona
- Cora Lee
- Sarah Shapiro-Fanner
- Mr. Sarracomb
- Mr. Baker

**GOD**

Carlie Aston:



**Appendix F**

**Parent/Guardian Questionnaire**



**Appendix G**

**Initial Email to Potential Participants' Parent/Guardian**

January 2015

Dear (Parent/Guardian's Name):

I am writing to ask your help in exploring what makes students successful in high school so that educators can learn better ways to help all students achieve. Your daughter has been identified as a successful African American female in Lincoln Public Schools. I am very interested in understanding what has motivated her to be successful and would like your permission to interview her. I strongly believe that my research will be beneficial to society as this study is interested in understanding the experiences of successful African American females. I believe that your daughter's experiences may be different from other students and will be important information for helping schools better work with African American females. Her opinions and observations are critical in understanding and supporting other students in school. Additionally, I am conducting this study in order to fulfill the requirements for a Doctorate in Educational Administration from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

The interview should take no more than an hour to complete and I would schedule a time outside of your daughter's normal school day. Her responses are voluntary and will be kept confidential. Your daughter's name will not be associated in any way with her responses. If you have questions about this interview, please contact me, Vann Price, the principal researcher, by telephone at (402) 525-7033 or email [vprice@lps.org](mailto:vprice@lps.org). This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Nebraska Lincoln Institutional Review Board. If you have questions about your rights as a participant of this study, you may contact them by telephone at 402-472-8127.

I hope you will consider allowing me to interview your daughter so that she may share her thoughts and opinions. If so, please respond back to this email so that I may follow up with a phone call to schedule a time to meet with you and your daughter. Thank you so much for taking the time to read and respond to this email.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Vann Price".

Vann Price

Principal Researcher, University of Nebraska – Lincoln