

The Experience of Achievement Academy Students:
What Their Experience Can Tell Us About Success

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to answer the question, "What are the experiences of students who have completed the Achievement Academy program?" In collecting data to answer this question, a series of clarifying questions also emerged: "What are the cultural, academic, and personal costs and benefits associated with being a part of Achievement Academy?"; "How have students defined or redefined their cultural, social, academic, and personal identities because of Achievement Academy?"; and "In what ways have the students used their surroundings and experiences to overcome preconceived notions of either what they were capable of or general expectations of those around them?" While there have been studies undertaken to examine students' experiences in both public school and private school academic programs, there is currently no research on the unique academic program and partnership of Achievement Academy with both public and private schools. This study provides direct insight from a participant focus group and individual participant interviews of students that attended Achievement Academy. A phenomenology research methodology was used to collect the data and Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as the lens through which the data from the focus group and interviews were analyzed. This analysis resulted in three distinct findings in the research data: peers, program environment, and the presence of a mentor or positive role model are the major influencing factors for their success both in Achievement Academy and afterwards. First, the Achievement Academy students' peers in the program

had a strong positive influence on how they viewed and defined themselves. These interactions allowed some students an opportunity to re-evaluate and recreate their identities and allowed validation of identity for others. Second, the Achievement Academy program, and more specifically its stated mission and practices, also provided a strong positive influence on their success. Third, the presence of a mentor or role model was instrumental to their success. The program's emphasis on empowerment and enrichment also created opportunities for students to stretch themselves academically, socially, and culturally.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my four women whom I love unconditionally

and with my entire soul and being:

Mistalene, Isalyn, Amaya, and Mom

Mistalene:

Without your encouragement, patience, laughter, guidance, hugs, kisses, perspective, support, and love, this work would not have been possible. You have been there every step of the way, and I could not have asked for a better partner in this work and in my life.

Isalyn and Amaya:

Neither of you were even born when I started this work, but your presence in my life since your arrival has only pushed me to be better—a better man, a better husband, and a better father. Thank you for all you have brought and continue to bring to my life and for making my life much more complete.

Mom:

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Marshall and Rossman (1989) believe there are three possible areas for a research study's significance: (a) knowledge in the area, (b) policy considerations, and (c) use by practitioners. This study contributes to all three areas. The focus of my research was to document, analyze, and (re)report the experiences of Achievement Academy¹ students. The question that guided this research is the following: "What are the experiences of students who have completed the Achievement Academy program?" The students in Achievement Academy have experienced and been a part of a unique program in Arizona; these students attended public school while receiving weekend and summer enrichment provided by a private school.

Background and Need for the Study

There are many studies that have researched students' experiences in academic programs and in public and private school (Alfaro, Umana-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, Bamaca, & Zeiders, 2009; Austin, 2006; Beer, Le Blanc, & Miller, 2008; Borman, Goetz, & Dowling, 2009; Cannon, Broyles, Siebel, & Anderson, 2009; Caruso, 2008; United States Department of Education, 2006; Dryfoos, 1990; Green & Brown, 1983; Hany & Grosch, 2007; Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee, 2004; Soussou, 1995); however, there has been no research on

¹ Achievement Academy is a pseudonym for the actual program

the unique experiences of students who have participated in Achievement Academy.

In 2006, the Beat the Odds Institute, a program under the Center for the Future of Arizona, with funding from the Morrison Institute for Public and Policy at Arizona State University, sought to answer the question, “What does it take to get great results in schools with mostly low-income, mostly Latino students?” (Beat the Odds Institute, 2006). Once the Institute completed its research on schools in Arizona, a report was created entitled, “Why Some Schools With Latino Children Beat the Odds...and Others Don’t.” While this report highlights a very clear need for schools serving Hispanic/Latino students to be more active and accountable to the needs of the students they serve, this report follows very closely with what others have deemed as deficit thinking with regards to these students. Deficit thinking is a concept in which failure, in this case failure in school, is blamed on the individual rather than positioning the “failure” in the institutional structures and inequitable framework of schools and schooling (Valencia, 1997). This report, while meant to be a positive reinforcement for the schools, and by default the students in these schools, ends up reinforcing this deficit model of thinking. The Beat the Odds Report concluded by offering a list of things for schools to follow if they want to be one of the “beat the odds” schools. This list had a significant void because it did not direct any attention to the actual students’ stories within the schools. The research that was completed was based on two key criteria, which were interviews with school administrators

and teachers, and students' assessments in reading and math on a variety of different tests. While one could argue that the researchers' focus on structure and leadership directly impacts the students and that analyzing student test scores provides a very necessary assessment of how students are doing in certain subject areas, I firmly believe there was a lost opportunity in the research process to involve students in an effort to find solutions. There was no direct and formal student input, leaving the most affected with no voice and no opportunity to tell their story, a story that I would argue cannot be told by test scores or school leadership alone.

My research question—"What are the experiences of students who have completed the Achievement Academy program?"—was largely shaped by The Beat the Odds Report because all the students attending Achievement Academy were from schools listed in the report. Due to the schools they attend, as well as their racial and ethnic identities, and their socio-economic status, these students have been categorized as educationally disadvantaged. According to the federal government, they represent the first generation of their family attending college, come from a low SES background, and have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education in the United States (United States Department of Education, 2004). The statistics for students who fall into the category of educationally disadvantaged (United States Department of Education, 2004) indicate they are less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to both attend and graduate college (Alliance for Educational Excellence, 2006), and have a much higher rate

of incarceration (Human Rights Watch Press, 2002) compared with students who are not burdened with this label.

Yet the students in Achievement Academy, whose mission is to enrich, engage, and empower educationally disadvantaged students, have “beaten the odds” of the aforementioned report, by being in a program grounded in the belief of an “expectation of success” for all students (Achievement Academy Newsletter, 2010). This expectation of success frames how the program interacts with, engages, and supports the students in the program. This framework is in direct opposition to the idea that some students are an “exception to failure,” which is a way of thinking that makes failure the norm for disadvantaged students. While the Beat the Odds Report does not use my terminology, its findings support the fact that the schools researched and found to “beat the odds” in terms of student success were the exception to the many other schools that failed to “beat the odds” (Beat the Odds Institute, 2006).

Because Achievement Academy serves the same students from the schools in the Beat the Odds Report, I was very interested in researching how these students felt about their experiences in Achievement Academy. Instead of talking to teachers and administrators in the program, I wanted to represent the perspective of the students, the most glaring omission from the Beat the Odds Report. I wanted my research to serve as a platform for the voices of those closest to both the problems and the solutions; in this case, those voices belonged to the

students. It is this void—this omission—that I sought to illuminate and clarify with my own research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to answer the question, “What are the experiences of students who have completed the Achievement Academy program?” My intent was to answer this question by discovering and representing the stories of my participants. I utilized qualitative methods because I felt that this was the best way to understand and represent their stories. I also used qualitative methods because this approach provided me with the necessary tools and data to explore and answer not only my research question but to allow access to a richness of data that quantitative inquiry is not meant to achieve. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) state, “[Q]ualitative methods have been useful for and attractive to researchers who have been excluded from, or are studying the perspectives of people excluded from, the mainstream” (p. 14). The qualitative nature of my study combined with the lens of Critical Race Theory attempts to represent the “lived experience” of those I was studying. Van Manen (1990) warns the researcher of the inherent difficulties of this task stating, “It is not enough to simply recall experiences I or others may have had...[the researcher] must recall the experience in such a way that the essential aspects, the meaning structures of this experience as lived though, are bought back, as it were, and in such a way that we recognize this description as a *possible* experience” (p. 41). While the

outcome of any research is to collect and analyze data, it was important to me that such data in my research allowed me to create the context of their individual experiences to create a general experience. Because I was dealing with lived experiences, I also recognized that they only represent a moment in time for these participants that in this case has already passed, creating a situation where their “lived experience” is a “re-lived” remembrance. Re-living the moment has the potential to leave out critical details that telling the story in the moment or in real time might not; however, I argue that the re-living of stories provided a richness of hindsight perspective that allowed the storytellers to actually provide more detail and understanding to their experiences.

Research Question and Problem

My research question, “What are the experiences of students who have completed the Achievement Academy program?” By using this as my overarching research question, I was able to develop a few guiding or clarifying questions that helped to draw even deeper meaning for the reader. These include, “What are the cultural, academic, and personal costs and benefits associated with being a part of Achievement Academy?”, “How have students defined or redefined their cultural, social, academic, and personal identities because of Achievement Academy?”, and “In what ways have the students used their surroundings and experiences to overcome preconceived notions of either what they were capable of or general expectations of those around them?” By seeking clarification and understanding

of these questions, my research sought to provide even greater meaning to these students' experiences. Although my research question in conjunction with the clarifying and guiding questions lead to many other questions, I purposefully kept the research focused on the lived experience of Achievement Academy students.

Research Rationale

For decades, academic research, mainstream media, and law and policy makers have focused on the underachievement of students with an especially heavy focus on the underachievement of students of color (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 1992; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1991; Rothstein, 2004; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). While these researchers all offered rationales and some solutions for this underachievement of students, none of them used the students' stories and voices as the primary focus of their research. Focusing on understanding achievement disparities among all groups of students is important; however, I wanted to make sure that my research stayed true to the students and their recounting of their actual experiences. By using the voices of the students in Achievement Academy as the data for my research, it provided an important step in adding a richness and texture to previous research that cannot be added without their voices. I contend that my research is a powerful reminder of the importance of representing and listening to the students' voices in educational discourse.

Theoretical Framework

hooks (1994) talked about the liberating facets that Critical Race Theory (CRT) bring to examining the relationship of race and power in America, a dynamic always present when dealing with minority or underserved or underrepresented groups. CRT, although initially developed as a part of legal research to account for personal narratives as they related to a person's race, has been adapted to encapsulate a wide array of scholarly work including education (Ladson-Billings 1995b, 1998). CRT has been described as both a theory and a social movement because it cuts across disciplines (Broido & Manning, 2002). "CRT not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better" (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001, p. 3). In essence, CRT is truly a theory that "challenges conventional accounts of race in education and other institutions and the social processes that occur within them" (Powers, 2007, p. 151). It is precisely this sense of action that Ladson-Billings (1998) advocates for in terms of using CRT to place race back in the center of conversations regarding underrepresented students and education. CRT theorists such as Delgado and Stefanic (2001) and Ladson-Billings (1998) believe that the construction of race as a "biological, singular truth serves the interests of White people" (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 440) and that the benefits of this "biological hierarchy of race extend across class and other differences" (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 440). CRT asserts that racism is normal, expected, and intertwined in the

fabric of modern society and that it is far more surprising to not see the presence of racism than to see racism (Broido & Manning, 2002).

CRT was designed to challenge the belief structures and institutions of the dominant group in order to create a more realistic perspective of the experiences of students of color (Huber, 2010). Crenshaw (1993) addresses this intersectionality in her work on identity politics. Crenshaw's paper was primarily focused on the role of violence against women, but she makes a strong case for using this approach in other structures of domination as well. She notes that the intersection of race and gender as well as other ways that people use to identify themselves only "highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 1245). Crenshaw's work is linked directly to CRT in that she acknowledges that the intersectionality of the identities of people of color are impacted and shaped by the inherent dominant structures that they work within and live (1993). Crenshaw asserts that the only way to get at the true stories of people of color is to understand and acknowledge that the dominant group has for generations controlled stories of other less dominant groups (1993).

Abrams and Moio (2009) add to Crenshaw's position by acknowledging that "although CRT theorists and practitioners have diverse approaches and emphases, their scholarship and advocacy share a common ground" (p. 251). This common ground of theorists and practitioners is laid out through the lens of education by many different scholars (Carter, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Ladson-Billings &

Tate 1995; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Tate, 1997) and is the foundation from which the basic tenets of CRT are derived.

CRT presupposes that a) racism is endemic to American life and that rather than accepting racism as abnormal or individualistic, racism is an ordinary, everyday occurrence for people of color; b) the stories and narratives of those who are marginalized or underrepresented are a legitimate form of knowledge and inquiry and give them an authentic and unfiltered voice; c) the experiences of the oppressed and disenfranchised should both be known and shared; and d) racial accounts of history must be analyzed for accuracy and confronted when necessary (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lynn, 2004, 2006; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Lynn & Villalpando, 2007).

When CRT is used in education, it intersects and informs policy, research, and practice. Some call this approach “critical race methodology” (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). It is characterized by five basic tenets: 1) race and racism are intimately interconnected with other subordinated areas of inquiry including gender, class, and sexual orientation (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Russell, 1992); 2) CRT is instrumental to ensuring institutional impartiality by challenging the dominant perspectives and ideologies that tend to provide privilege to majority groups (Apple, 2000; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Harris, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Powers, 2007); 3) CRT is firmly centered on the commitment to social justice as an outcome (Bell, 1987; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001); 4) the experiences

and experiential knowledge of minority and underrepresented groups along with their use of individual narratives and storytelling is a legitimate and important way to convey their histories (Bell, 1987, 1992, 2004; Delgado & Stefanic 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); and 5) the use of a cross-section of disciplines and perspectives to identify and analyze the existence of and function of race and power (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

These tenets and the CRT framework are essential to understanding the nature of the experience of the students in my study. While the tenets described above are necessary to understanding how CRT relates to education, these same tenets are also an important analytical tool by which to study my qualitative data. Specifically, CRT provided a set of theoretical tools for challenging the idea of an exception to failure response so often associated with high achieving underrepresented or minority students. I contend that this idea of exception to failure falls directly in line with the traditional deficit-based studies of minority student success and achievement (Lynn, 2004, 2006; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Lynn & Villalpando, 2007) and that by using CRT to analyze my data, I have provided a means for authentic narratives and voices to study this issue.

DeCuir and Dixson explain that in order to “fully utilize CRT in education, researchers must remain critical of race, and how it is deployed” (2004, p. 30). By using CRT as a lens through which to view the stories of my research participants, I was able to examine and re-examine the stories and “allow for the deprivileging of mainstream discourses while simultaneously affording the voices, stories, and

experiences” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 30) of the many Achievement Academy students.

Researchers must continually and consistently challenge ideas, theories, and agendas of those groups and institutions that historically have provided privilege and power to racial majority groups. Love (2004) argues that until researchers take up the cause to challenge the notion of "majoritarian storytelling" that the ability to provide a true-to-life analysis of the minority student experience is almost assuredly not going to be possible. Love goes on to describe majoritarian storytelling as "the description of events as told by members of the dominant/majority groups, accompanied by the values and beliefs that justify the actions taken by dominants to insure their dominant position" (Love, 2004, p. 229).

By not being sought out in this project, the students in this study would continue to be subjected to a majoritarian view of their experiences with no context of the "structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant positions in and out of the classroom" (Love, 2004, p. 228), leaving their stories to remain untold. CRT is centered on the notion of authentic voice and acknowledges that groups having a voice and dictating their own reality is key to them being truly understood. "CRT theorists posit that any 'story' that claims to include or refer to the lives of subordinated peoples is incomplete until it takes into account and includes the voices of those people who have lived the experience of subordination" (Love, 2004, p. 228). Ladson-Billings

and Tate (1995) go on to argue that “the voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system.... Without authentic voices of people of color it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities” (p. 58). The construction of majoritarian stories by the mainstream population has served to obscure dominant group privilege causing it to seem normal, ordinary, and even natural (Love, 2004).

By (re)presenting the stories and experiences of the Achievement Academy students in my research, it places front and center the narratives of the other, which Bell (1992) described as those “at the bottom of society’s well” (p. vi). These stories offer not only a chance for these students to have their narratives told, but it directly challenges research “that de-centers and even dismisses communities of color—through majoritarian storytelling” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36). Without this type of CRT grounded research, majoritarian research will continue to perpetuate the belief that "schools are neutral and apolitical, promoting the myth of meritocracy, [and] endorse the notion that there is equal educational opportunity for all, referencing dominants as 'people' while 'othering' subordinates" (Love, 2004, p. 229).

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), CRT is a particularly powerful tool to use for qualitative research that involves the use of narratives and stories. The research in this dissertation provides data that when used in conjunction with CRT, provides a lens through which to analyze the narratives of the Achievement Academy students and thus positions their experiences as being assets rather than

deficits. Matsuda (1995) asserts that “[t]hose who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen” (p. 63). Teranishi (2002) as cited by Dixson and Rousseau (2005) notes that “CRT [is] instrumental in providing a voice for students who are otherwise not heard, thus allowing students to provide their own perspective on their educational experiences” (p. 11), which is the root of this dissertation.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to answer the question “What are the experiences of students who have completed the Achievement Academy program?” In order to fully understand the data that was collected, this chapter will seek to examine the relevant literature and scholarship surrounding achievement, specifically as it relates to the effects of cultural literacy, social capital, and the role of interpersonal relationships on academic achievement.

Cultural Literacy

For the purposes of this research, the literature review on cultural literacy will be focused on two areas that are most closely linked to the research: 1) the role that teachers play in cultural literacy and academic achievement; and 2) the role that curriculum can play in increasing cultural literacy in an attempt to address the achievement gap. Addressing these two themes in the literature offers an intimate look into the different realities in schools that have the potential to influence the academic performance and achievement of underrepresented students.

Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) do not go so far as to assert that cultural literacy actually causes the achievement gap between underrepresented students and majority students. They do, however, offer a few suggestions as to how cultural literacy has some causal effect on the achievement gap. The arguments

that Uhlenberg and Brown put forth are based on the research of Ogbu and Simons (2002). Uhlenberg and Brown note that the "fear of acting white" has the real potential to be a contributor to the achievement gap between underrepresented students and white students (2002). Uhlenberg and Brown are referring to behaviors of underrepresented students such as speaking proper English, dressing a certain way, or giving in to the traditional norms of public school education (2002). Uhlenberg and Brown assert that such actions by underrepresented students are seen as giving up their minority status, which in the context of an educational environment could have "potentially detrimental effects on school performance" (2002, p. 495). The idea of "acting white" or "selling out" are terms that many underrepresented students associate with academic achievement (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002).

The curricular content provided by Achievement Academy is driven by what is relevant to the students and takes into account the fact that Achievement Academy students come from a wide variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Achievement Academy is able to meet this diverse set of student needs because it is not bound by the prescribed and test-centered curriculum of No Child Left Behind (Achievement Academy Newsletter, 2010). Commeyras and Alvermann (1994) assert that students want to be engaged in academic material that reflects their "own understanding of how the world works, what counts as knowledge, and whose knowledge counts" (p. 269). Commeyras and Alvermann (1994) go on to argue that underrepresented students within schools who feel marginalized

because of the content they are being taught will not learn to "reposition themselves" within the dominant culture or become producers of culturally valued knowledge. While Commeyras' and Alvermann's research does not go so far as to say that teaching cultural relevant material will increase academic achievement, they do acknowledge that students who are more engaged in the material they are being taught are more open to new ideas (1994).

Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) took the concept of cultural literacy a step further by arguing that underrepresented students perceive less of a return on their educational investment than non-minority students do, which has the potential to manifest itself in the same behavioral patterns that Uhlenberg and Brown described as "acting white" or "selling out" (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998). By being in classrooms that teach with cultural literacy at their core, students do not feel that they have to give up something in order to be successful, one of the core tenets of an Achievement Academy education.

In the national bestselling book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, Hirsch (1988) argues that, "[t]o be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world" (p. xiii). Hirsch goes on to state that "Cultural literacy constitutes the only sure avenue of opportunity for disadvantaged children, the only reliable way of combating the social determinism that now condemns them to remain in the same social and educational condition as their parents" (1988, p. xiii). In conclusion, Hirsch recommends a set of over 5,000 words, phrases, events, dates, etc. that he feels

that every literate American needs to know and that he feels needs to be taught to students at some point during their kindergarten to 12th grade years. Kosmoski, Gay, and Vockell (1990) pick up Hirsch's claims about the necessity for a more standardized set of norms to define cultural literacy. They studied over 600 fifth graders who attended 16 different elementary schools in a mid-sized industrial city in Indiana. The students came from very similar backgrounds to those of the Achievement Academy students: almost 70% of them coming from Title I or high poverty schools and only 31% of the students coming from underrepresented backgrounds (Kosmoski et al., 1990).

Their research found there was a significant positive correlation between cultural literacy and academic achievement across the standardized tests that they examined. Kosmoski et al. (1990) did not acknowledge or investigate at all the role that a student's own cultural literacy might play in helping him or her achieve. They argue that because poor and ethnic underrepresented students are taught similar content and skills as middle-class and white students, their engagement should make the mainstream culture "less alien" (1990).

Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) add to Kosmoski's et al. (1990) assertion with research that looks at how the "ethnic and cultural backgrounds and traditions in American schools has grown more pronounced" (p. 430). Because of this growing change, Bainbridge and Lasley argue that in order to start to address the achievement gap, we are in need of more "culturally relevant" teachers that understand that "diversity requires new approaches to the teaching craft" (2002, p.

431). Bainbridge and Lasley conducted a review of achievement gap data from almost twenty different studies. Although they did not conduct their own primary research, Bainbridge and Lasley did conclude from their analysis that there was not a singular approach that would effectively cure the achievement gap problem. However, they do assert that the educational establishment, especially teachers, have to rethink what they do and how they do it and that such efforts "will not be easy to achieve" (Bainbridge and Lasley 2002, p. 435).

Ladson-Billings (2006) makes a very compelling argument about why focusing on the achievement gap, while important, is misplaced in terms of finding solutions. Ladson-Billings believes that this "all-out focus on the 'Achievement Gap' moves us towards short term solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problem" (2006, p. 4). Ladson-Billings believes that the only way to address and ultimately dismantle the "achievement gap" is to first address what she calls the "educational debt" (2006, p. 5). The educational debt is a metaphorical connection to the national deficits and national debt of the country (2006). The description provided by Professor Emeritus Robert Haveman of the University of Wisconsin's Department of Economics, La Follette Institute of Public Affairs, and Institute for Research on Poverty, as quoted by Ladson-Billings states:

The education debt is the foregone schooling resources that we could have (should have) been investing in (primarily) low-income kids, which deficit leads to a variety of social problems (e.g. crime, low productivity, low wages, low labor force participation) that require on-going public investment. This required investment sucks away resources that could go to reducing the achievement gap. Without the education debt, we could narrow

the achievement debt. The message would be that you need to reduce one (the education debt, defined above) in order to close the other (the achievement gap). A parallel is trying to gain a growing and robust economy with a large national debt overhang (2006, p.5).

Ladson-Billings (2006) goes on to argue that there are three primary reasons for addressing the debt: “1) The impact the debt has on present educational progress; 2) The value of understanding the debt in relation to past education research and findings; and 3) the potential for forging a better educational future” (p. 9).

Ladson-Billings (2006) talks primarily about large system changes and the need to address this debt on a large scale; however, there seems to be no literature that attempts to address how dealing with the educational debt on a smaller scale might lead to an eventual larger scale impact.

The Role of the Teacher in Cultural Literacy

The role of the teacher is a very important subject of the literature on cultural literacy and academic achievement. Dooley (2008) argues that teachers are essential in helping students see the value in their own culture and notes that when this happens in the classroom, students learn "ways to restructure learning opportunities to support equity" (p. 56). This equity in learning is at the core of the academic learning in classrooms because students need to feel a sense of worth in the curriculum that they are being taught. Dooley (2008) recognizes that this is not an easy task, as most teachers and the teacher training programs they attended do not address this issue. Dooley insists "Nowadays, teachers need to learn not only the technical methods for teaching, but also how to negotiate

among methods and adjust instruction to each student's learning while also maintaining a culturally responsive classroom atmosphere and curriculum" (2008, p. 55). Yet, as Dooley sees it, not enough teachers are trained to do this. Dooley believes that teachers must be trained to maintain classrooms that cultivate cultural literacy and that teachers have to be willing to be learners so that they can "move from narrow definitions to broader definitions for a more nuanced understanding of culture" (2008, p. 62). Dooley advocates that there needs to be more emphasis in teacher training programs in helping teachers "reflect on their own cultural backgrounds and become more sensitive to their students' cultural funds of knowledge" (2008, p. 60). Dooley's ideas support the findings of Kosmoski et al. (1990), but Dooley insists that all teachers need to be "prepared to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students" and that teachers need to "fertilize" the knowledge already incorporated in students in order to promote "ongoing literacy learning" overall (2008, p. 55). Dooley points out that by adopting a cultural literacy framework that acknowledges the students, teachers can teach some of those core tenets that Hirsch (1988) thinks that everyone should know, yet without having students feel as if they have to assimilate in order to be successful academically (2008). Although Dooley (2008) does not agree with all of what Hirsch (1988) posits and doesn't get to the level of detail that Hirsch did, he does acknowledge that some shared knowledge could prove useful.

While many researchers (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Apple, M.W., 1990 & 2009; Banks, C. A. M., 1997; Commeyras & Alvermann, 1994;

Delpit, 1988; Sledd, A. E. & Sledd, J. H., 1998) have challenged the validity of E.D. Hirsch's ideas and research on cultural literacy specifically because the majority of the content is so Eurocentric, Johnson, Janisch, Morgan-Fleming (2001) offer a very different way of looking at Hirsch's book. They selected a group of teachers taking graduate school courses and had them develop and teach units of study based on Hirsch's book. They acknowledge in their article that much of the content of Hirsch's book is likely to be seen on many of the standardized tests that students will take during their schooling. These contents are important because knowledge of them arguably can help increase academic achievement at least on standardized testing (2001). Although the argument can be made that doing well on an obscure, abstract test is not a fair marker of academic achievement, there is no denying that certain standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT are an essential and required component for most students to obtain a post-secondary education at a college or university. But Johnson et al. take this thinking a step further and investigate how "adapting" Hirsch's work instead of "adopting" it actually provides the foundation for greater academic achievement both on standardized tests and in the classrooms (2001).

By adapting the content of Hirsch's book instead of adopting it, Johnson et al. (2001) argue that teachers can teach cultural literacy to underrepresented students in a way that allows them to be a central part of the learning process. Johnson et al. (2001) advocate that teachers be given more space and resources to adapt and modify the core knowledge areas laid out by Hirsch and that they be

allowed to make "moral choices" for the sake of their students about what should be included in the curriculum (2001). Johnson et al. (2001) pointed out that this was a very important part of the teaching process and profession because adhering strictly to what Hirsch defines as cultural literacy is generally "non-responsive to minority students" (p. 260). Like Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) and Commeyras and Alvermann (1994), the research of Johnson et al. (2001) does not provide the data necessary that creates a direct link between teaching cultural relevant material and increasing academic achievement; however, they did find that all the teachers involved in their study reported "their surprise at students' ability and desire to study material previously thought to be too difficult for them to tackle, and to do so with interest and enthusiasm" (p. 267). Although the teachers in the Johnson et al. (2001) study did not agree that following the Hirsch content in its entirety was either desirable or feasible, they did agree that the questions raised by Hirsch's content were worthy of discussion and that incorporating the students' cultural backgrounds into the material made the content all the more important (2001).

Although there is limited empirical evidence that indicates using a student's own culture as a part of the cultural literacy curriculum in the classroom will raise grades and shrink the achievement gap between underrepresented students and majority students, the work of Trueba (1993) makes a strong case for this type of learning. Trueba followed and researched a group of Chicano students in the San Diego area over a four year period and found that "culture is closely

related to the acquisition of knowledge and to motivation to achieve” at a social, personal, and academic level (1993, p. 5). Trueba’s research showed a very clear pattern that the engagement of students increases when the material is more reflective of who they are, which he linked to their increased academic achievement over this period of time (1993). Delpit (1988) also addressed this very issue. Delpit is a forceful advocate for incorporating and using a student's background and culture as a complement in the classroom as opposed to seeing it as a deficit. She wrote "students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American Life...within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors" (1988, p. 296). It is the "communicative endeavors" that make cultural literacy so important to the education of students. Although the authors discussed earlier give some validity to having a student’s cultural background represented in the curriculum, the current research on how cultural literacy affects the achievement gap between underrepresented students and majority students has been focused almost entirely on what all students need to know as opposed to building on what students already know.

The Role of the Student in Cultural Literacy

Polite and Davis (1999) stated that “the common reason that alienation and poor academic performance is apparent with African Americans is that they perceive most educational experiences as irrelevant to their development” (p. 3). This statement could be expanded and applied to Hispanic students as well. This

argument mirrors one major strand of educational research that can be traced back to the writings of educational theorists Fordham and Ogbu (1986), who argued that African American youths' lack of academic success resides in a fixed and negative relationship between white academic culture and Black identity.

Fordham and Ogbu coined the phrase for African-American youth of "acting white" (1986). Conversely, alternative educational research (Noguera, 2008; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003) asserted that school culture and pedagogical practices mitigate African American identities and academic success. Other educational researchers (Akom, 2008; Gay, 2000; Noguera, 2005) contended that African Americans do embrace educational success where relevant curriculum aligns with instructional practices.

Drawing on Fordham and Ogbu's research, Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) suggest that underrepresented student behavior might have some causal effect on the achievement gap. Uhlenberg and Brown note that the "fear of acting white" has the real potential to widen the achievement gap between underrepresented students and white students (2002, p. 495). Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) assert that these actions of acting white for many underrepresented students is seen as giving up their minority status, which in the context of an educational environment could have "potentially detrimental effects on school performance" (p. 495). The ideas of "acting white" or "selling out" are terms used primarily in the United States. Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and Hamilton (2006) addressed a similar feeling of "acting white" or "selling out" that minority Maori students feel when

they are compared with the majority groups in New Zealand. They hypothesized that underrepresented students' actions in school are detrimental in nature because underrepresented students perceive there to be less of a return on their educational investment than non-minority students do (Rubie-Davies, Hattie, & Hamilton, 2006).

Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) also see disruptive or inappropriate minority student behavior as having a potential causal effect on academic achievement. Underrepresented students tend to be punished more often for transgressive behavior than the majority students in their schools (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). Because of this discipline disparity, minority students' behavior has a greater impact on the amount of school and class they missed due to disciplinary actions. Downey and Pribesh (2004) add another layer to this discussion by asserting that Hispanic and African American students' behavioral infractions are associated with their teachers' ethnicities; when Hispanic and African American students are taught by a teacher that does not share their ethnic background, their behavioral infractions tend to increase. However, this pattern was not evident for Asian American students. Downey and Pribesh (2004) also found that Asian Americans did not have the same outcomes as African Americans and Hispanic Americans when holding for teacher ethnicity. It is clear that the role of the student has the potential to be a major factor in determining academic success.

The Role of Teacher Behavior

In the United States, public schools are serving greater numbers of racially diverse students but the teaching pool has been and continues to be largely white (National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, 2010). Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) follow this assertion with a study that examines how the "ethnic and cultural backgrounds and traditions in American schools has grown more pronounced" (p. 430). Because of this growing change, Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) argue that in order to address the achievement gap between minority and white students, we need more "culturally relevant" teachers that understand that "diversity requires new approaches to the teaching craft" (p. 431). Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) do not believe there is a single approach that will effectively close the achievement gap. However, they do assert that the educational establishment, especially teachers, have to rethink what they do and how they do it and that such efforts "will not be easy to achieve" (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002, p. 435). Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) do open up the debate in a positive manner by acknowledging that underrepresented students do have innate abilities and skills that they bring to schools and that if schools were more responsive and aware, they would figure out how to maximize the skills and knowledge their students bring to school. By meeting a student where they are and acknowledging the positive aspects of their educational knowledge, teachers and schools will create environments that foster and support student success.

Ferguson (2003) also argues how important the role of the teacher is:

No matter what material resources available, no matter what strategies districts use to allocate children to schools, and no matter how students are grouped for instruction, children spend their days in social interaction with teachers and other students (p. 461)

Ferguson (2003) contends that it is essential to understand how teachers' attitudes towards students might close the achievement gap. Ferguson goes on to argue that because of this intimate relationship between students and teachers in the classroom that "perhaps the behaviors of both teachers and students are affected by the combination of the students' race and teachers' perception of performance" (2003, p. 472). Ferguson's research clearly makes a correlation between teachers and students in regards to achievement. However, he disagrees with Downey and Pribesh (2004) and concluded that 'mismatches' of teachers and students' races do not appear to be a central problem when addressing the achievement gap between minority and majority students; however, he concedes that teachers of underrepresented students need to adjust to their students if they expect to see change in achievement (Ferguson, 2003). Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) state that "teachers represent the front line in education. They spend a great deal of time with students and therefore have a significant influence on them" (p. 499). The research that Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) performed also found that underrepresented students, in this case, black students, had a greater potential of being influenced by teacher expectations than white students, which makes a strong case that the role of teachers indeed does impact student achievement.

Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and Hamilton (2006) found very similar results regarding the "teacher expectation effect," which they concluded can "positively

and/or negatively influence student performance and achievement" (p. 429).

Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and Hamilton (2006) assert in their research that the teachers they documented in their study generally had high expectations for every group other than the Maori. Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and Hamilton (2006) argue that this had a measurable impact on the achievement of the Maori students (2006). This research adds to the literature that the idea of an achievement gap is at least in part fueled by the expectations of teachers and that it is not just a phenomenon of the United States.

Social Capital

The term “social capital” was introduced by Bourdieu (1973). It was considered groundbreaking at the time, as Bourdieu used it to understand and explain how the social reproduction of the elite class in France was able to keep its monopoly on the access to resources. Bourdieu’s research suggested that there were three types of resource capital, economic, cultural, and social, and that when they are all effectively working together, they can significantly influence a person’s disposition or “habitus” (1973). Since its introduction, the idea of social capital has been mainstreamed by a variety of disciplines; for the purpose of my research, I will examine how the concept of social capital applies to educational achievement (Dika & Singh, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Bourdieu (1986) would later argue that social capital to him was only as useful in as much as it could and would provide some form of wealth or economic resource by virtue of

belonging to a specified group. However, Lin (2001) described social capital in a broader context, writing “social capital are resources embedded in the social networks accessed and used by actors for actions” (p. 25). Stanton-Salazar (1997) compares social capital to a “social freeway” in which people must navigate the pathways of power, privilege, and status. Navigating these pathways also means figuring out where the on-ramps and exits are, by means of building sustained relationships and connections that teach and show you the way. The better and more influential these relationships and connections are the greater your chances for success (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Bourdieu (1986) used his definition of social capital as a very exclusive and exclusionary lens through which to view the privilege and power of the upper class in France. Other researchers have used the lens of race and class to show how this same concept can and has both contributed to, with a lack of social capital, and benefited from, with pronounced social capital, the experiences and lives of underrepresented and minority groups and other economically disadvantaged groups (Portes & Landolt, 1996; Martineau, 1977; Smyth, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Coleman (1988) argued that social capital is defined by a series of social networks and systems that allow for people to trust both each other and the systems and networks themselves in pursuit of advantageous relationships, opportunities and outcomes to both them and the group. When applied to minority, underrepresented, and economically disadvantaged groups, the research supports the view that the most effective way for them to access so-

called “middle class” social capital is to move outside of their normal social networks, generally meaning a movement away from their racial or ethnic group (Green & Perlman, 1995; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Croninger and Lee (2001) advocate for racial and ethnic groups to move outside of their social networks in search of different and potentially more useful social capital, which means they are “dependent on schools for support and guidance and the development of social capital” (p. 549). Coleman (1988) adds that the social capital that these students are gaining in school has the potential to allow events and create connections that might not otherwise occur without some other sort of intervention.

Although social capital has been used as an educational research instrument, a meta-analysis study by Dika and Singh (2002) found that even though the studies they used showed a correlation between social capital and positive outcomes, their study did not find sufficient theoretical or empirical data to support the perceived positive relationship between education related factors and social capital. Dika and Singh (2002) argue that many of the studies they reviewed in their meta-analysis had either weak evidence or had misapplied the construct of social capital. Dika and Singh (2002) use Coleman (1998) as an example of how his indicators of social capital were so closely aligned and linked to wealth and privilege that the only true conclusion one could or should make is that the rich stay rich and that the poor stay poor, which in their opinion does not fully address what is happening. Despite the documented empirical weakness of

Coleman's (1998) research as examined by Dika and Singh (2002), Coleman's (1998) research has had a tremendous impact and influence on this field of study. Coleman's three elements of social capital still continue to dominate the study of social capital and are widely accepted as the normative thinking pertaining to social capital: 1) information networks, which refer to the nature and structural make-up of our internal and external group relationships; 2) norms and sanctions, which refer to a shared sense of trust, obligation, and expectation with regards to how the individual interacts with the group; and 3) peer and institutional capital, which refer to having, maintaining, and accessing one's social groups, relationships, and networks for positive gain (1998).

While there are no standard definitions of social capital, the general sense is that social capital is something that the larger group considers beneficial to its members. So while some clubs, organizations, teams and even fraternities and sororities actively recruit members that they feel will both uphold the values and traditions of the group and provide potential new benefits to the rest of the membership, the same also holds true for gangs, organized crime, drug cartels, and other illegal organizations. While one can debate the relative merits of each of these types of organizations, the fact still remains that each does provide a kind of social capital that is beneficial to its membership regardless of what we perceive to be right or wrong. When social capital is applied to educational institutions, research indicates the success of spreading social capital is tied to whether the members, in this case the teachers and administrators in schools, are capable of

transferring and establishing a set of skills, information, and practices that new members, which are students and sometimes parents, are willing to accept, strengthen, and maintain as their own (Coleman 1994; Gonzalez, Stone, & Jovel, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Spreading social capital is not an easy feat given the nature of schools. Stanton-Salazar (2001) makes the argument that because of the complex and interconnected nature of schools, successful students have created other pathways and avenues of social capital within the institutions themselves in order to ensure their success including seeking out individual students, teachers, classes, and activities that provide them an alternative to what the institution as a whole might be providing, thus providing them more control over both the kind and types of social capital they are getting and the source that it is coming from.

While the research on social capital may still be inconclusive about its overall impact on student achievement, there is no denying that it is a theory worth investigating when it comes to student achievement and educational outcomes.

The Role of Interpersonal Relationships in Student Achievement

While there is considerable literature on both minority student achievement and the factors that contribute to this success, for the purpose of this study, this portion of the literature review will be dedicated to those interpersonal relationships that account for minority student achievement. There is a substantial

and growing body of research that lays claim to the importance that interpersonal relationships have on our health (Berkowitz, 1996; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; De Leon, 2000; Fyson, 1999; Glover, Burns, Butler, & Patten, 1998; Hill, 1996; Moos, 2002; Royal & Rossi, 1996; Sarason, 1993; Weisenfeld, 1996). There is also a body of literature that talks about the emotional and social development of a person as defined through their relationships (Abbott & Ryan, 2001; Kelly & Hansen, 1987; McCarthy, Pretty, & Catano, 1990). The focus of this literature review is on the influence that interpersonal relationships have on minority student achievement and motivation in school. Wentzel (1999) argues that relationships affect achievement mainly due to a direct influence on one's beliefs and emotions. Wentzel (1999) asserts that motivation is a set of interrelated beliefs that can influence and direct behavior both negatively and positively depending on the circumstances. When these interrelated beliefs are sustained over time with others in the environment, they serve as a way for individuals to learn about themselves and about the intrinsic needs to fit into a specific group. Wentzel contends that in trusted and healthy relationships, students not only learn the particular values that are helpful for that moment, but that they will also eventually internalize the values of the other person in the trusted relationship. Ryan and Deci (2000) apply this idea to an academic setting, arguing that good relationships with a particular teacher are more likely to lead to a student internalizing the teacher's beliefs about school and schoolwork, which will serve to help increase their achievement in that class. Ryan and Deci (2000) also assert

that this internalized view of school and schoolwork has the potential to be transferred to other classes and teachers essentially teaching students how to act in school in general, which is more likely to lead to student success. While Ryan and Deci (2000) did not specifically address the reverse of this situation, they did acknowledge that there is the potential for a negative interpersonal relationship with a teacher to lead to a decrease in student motivation and achievement.

Furrer and Skinner (2003) offer another lens by which to view the role of interpersonal relationships on achievement. They argue that relatedness or the “need to belong” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497) is also a factor in student achievement. Furrer and Skinner (2003) contend that relatedness is an important defining component for students because it allows them to align themselves with those groups or things that they feel most connected to, thus providing the positive emotional response that is a key factor to motivation. Connell and Wellborn (1991) add that when students feel related to others in significant ways, it creates positive emotional attachments that serve to also provide the individual with more positive feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. The ideas of positive self-worth and self-esteem are important because both have been attributed to sustained motivation and achievement outcomes (Covington, 2002; Thompson, 1994). The research on the impact of interpersonal relationships on achievement offer significant insights into how a student’s processing of the relationships around them can have not only significant positive educational outcomes, but can provide very positive social, emotional, and physical outcomes for those students

The expectancy-value theory developed by Atkinson (1957) and extended by Eccles (1983), Wigfield (1994), and Wigfield and Tonks (2002) moves student motivation and success away from interpersonal relationships and back to the student. Expectancy-value theorists suggest that this framework can be applied to a whole range of behaviors because the strength of an individual's motivation is directly related to his or her perception of the likelihood of success on a given task (Nicholls, Cheung, Lauer, & Patashnick, 1989; Wigfield & Tonks, 2002). Nicholls et al. (1989) found that when this theory is applied in an educational setting those students who believe they can be successful at or capable of mastering the work in a class are more likely to have a high degree of motivation resulting in higher levels of achievement or success. Nicholls et al. (1989) goes on to make a case that while this theory as a "stand alone" does not address interpersonal relationships as being a factor, they make the case that expectancy-value theory is indeed influenced by interpersonal relationships. They established that a student's individual expectations and values are directly influenced by a student's relationships either inside or outside of the school as an institution, thus making their ideas and definitions of successful completion of a task a combination of individual decisions and the influence of others.

Another theory that has been used to account for student achievement as it relates to interpersonal relationships is goal theory. Goal theory focuses on how students attach meaning to achievement situations and ultimately how this meaning creates purpose within them (Ames, 1992; Barker, Dowson, &

McInerney, 2002; Dweck, 1992; Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle, 1993). Martin, Marsh, McInerney, Green, and Dowson (2007) focused their study on those factors that students might attach meaning to in a school setting that could move them to positive action towards a particular goal. The research of Martin et al. (2007) found a significant association between the quality of the student-teacher relationship and a student's willingness to engage in a task and the outcomes associated with that task. The work of Martin et al. was built off the work of Lemos (1996), Stipek, Giwin, Salmon, and MacGyvers (1998), and Taylor (1995). While Martin et al. (2007) found the student-teacher association and relationship to have the greatest impact on a student's completion of a goal, they also found that peer-to-peer relationships as well as student-to-parent relationships had strong associations to goal completion when these relationships were positive. Dowson and McInerney (2003) found some of the same results in their study, although they found the student-to-parent relationship to have the most significance in terms of goal completion. Regardless of which association has shown to be most effective, the research is clear that as students adopt and adapt their educational goals, these goals are not independent of the influence of the relationships the students have with teachers, peers, and parents.

The study of how interpersonal relationships shape, influence, guide, determine, and support student achievement is a rich field of study for those who are looking for ways to increase student achievement in schools. The studies and theories that I presented in this literature review are more focused on the

intentional relationships that students engage in; there is still even more research surrounding the role of mentors (Bandura, 1997; Karcher, Davis, Powell, 2002; Noble & Bradford, 2000) and extracurricular activities (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Valentine, Cooper, Bettencourt, & DuBois, 2002). The review of the literature on how interpersonal relationships can impact student achievement shows that there are multiple ways that have proven to be positive influences on motivation and as a by-product, student achievement. The literature clearly supports the rationale that when students are in positive, high quality relationships that these relationships contribute significantly to “their academic motivation, engagement, and achievement” (Martin & Dowson, 2009, p. 351).

Potential for Future Research

The literature review that was presented in the previous chapter acknowledged a substantial range of potential variables based on the research of a significant number of authors that have the potential to impact underrepresented student’s academic achievement and success. The literature review provides a solid foundation to begin to study the experiences of underrepresented students, but it was also clear in the lack of research that was found on empowering and amplifying student’s voices and experiences that more research needs to be done. By insisting on more research that allow underrepresented student’s experiences to be heard, validated, acknowledged, trusted, and deemed important, it is

necessary for researchers to continue to look to these “stories” and “narratives” to provide guidance in the search for solutions. In fact, Dixson and Rousseau (2005) contend that as researchers continue to look for the most effective solutions to closing the achievement gap between majority and minority students, that educational reform policies, educational experts, and especially educational researchers must validate what they create, do, and see through a lens that includes the real life experiences of the students; it might possibly be the only way to find true solutions to this problem.

Chapter 3

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research methodology chosen to explore the experience of students who have graduated from Achievement Academy. Because of my use of Critical Race Theory as the theoretical framework, in order to get the type of understanding that was needed for my dissertation, I interviewed students who had finished Achievement Academy. I also conducted a focus group with all of the participants.

Research Design

I had access to a pool of over a hundred students who had finished the program in the last 24 years. I sent a letter to and spoke directly to seventy participants outlining my research and asking them to consider participating in my study. Of the seventy participants that I contacted, twenty-one responded, and my interviewees were selected from this group. In order to have an opportunity to create as diverse a group of participants as possible with respect to gender, race and ethnicity, and sending school², I chose seven former Achievement Academy students who had completed the program and had been involved in the program for at least five years. I use the term completed the program instead of graduated from the program because Achievement Academy students are considered to have completed the program once they graduated from their respective high schools.

² Sending school refers to the public schools that Achievement Academy students attended when they were apart of the program.

Before participating in the interviews and the focus group, each participant was given an information letter and a letter of consent for the individual interview and focus group. The documents outlined my research and informed each participant of the goals and purpose of the study; the process for confidentiality and anonymity in the individual interviews was also detailed, while alerting the participants to the fact that if they participated in the focus group, confidentiality and anonymity could not be guaranteed. The consent letter also gave each participant the option of withdrawing from the study at anytime without penalty³.

According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), "qualitative research begins with questions; its ultimate purpose is learning" (p. 4). This theme of learning was my focus. The complexity of the process of interviewing and establishing meaning was paramount to the project as my research sits at the intersection of philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. This intersection of disciplines adds texture to the learning that takes place, making this type of qualitative research even more powerful.

Rossman and Rallis (2003) go through a process of defining learning and conclude that what is missing in the standard definitions of learning as it relates to qualitative research is the "notion that learning is a constructive process, not merely an acquisitive one....Learning is also situated--it takes place in particular contexts that foster learning" (p. 34).

³ All recruitment letters are included under Appendix A & B.

In keeping with Seidman (2006), I conducted seven individual three part in-depth phenomenological interviews of the participants. The spacing of these interviews was dictated by the parameters of my interviewees and by my ability to transcribe the previous interview for review. There was no more than three weeks between any of the interviews. By using Seidman's three-part interview structure (2006), which included a focused life history, details of the experience, and a reflection of meaning, I was able to collect in-depth data as well as check for verification throughout the process. I asked each interviewee a set of standard and identical general open-ended questions⁴. My first interview was designed to document family history and background information. This interview was important because it established the interview protocol. I purposely conducted all of the interviews in the same environment so as to keep them all as similar as possible (Creswell, 2009). All of the interviews were done onsite at Achievement Academy in order to provide a familiar and safe environment for the interviews. Each interview was at least one hour long and all of the interviews were conducted in the same room under the same conditions. I used a digital audio recorder for all of the interviews as a precaution to making sure that the accuracy of the interviews were maintained. I also took notes to document not only my general thoughts, but also any of the non-verbal cues that could potentially be used as data.

⁴ The list initial of questions is included under Appendix C.

In the second interview, I focused on their stories and their experience in Achievement Academy. While all of the second interviews had a few standard and identical general open-ended questions, the corresponding follow-up questions in each interview varied where appropriate in an attempt to clarify meaning, provide greater depth of understanding, and to tease out any relevant data. The last round of interviews was designed to be a reflection of meaning. In keeping with Seidman's (2006) model, I provided participants a copy of the transcription of interviews one and two to check for accuracy and as a way for me to ask follow-up questions in an attempt to member check (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). I did all of the transcriptions for the second and third round of interviews myself and used a professional transcription service (www.castingwords.com) to transcribe the first round of interviews. The practice of member checking was an important component of my research because it allowed me to not only ensure the accuracy of my research and data, but it allowed me to follow up on my initial interview in order to make sure that I had complete understanding of what had already been said. This initial understanding was key to the three-part interviewing procedures as outlined in both Seidman (2006) and Rossman and Rallis (2003) because any misunderstanding or presumption during the first interview had the potential to change the way the data were collected and analyzed during the other parts of the interview series.

After I conducted all three in-depth interviews, I then invited all of the participants back for a focus group to talk about their individual and collective

experiences. Morgan (1997) defined a focus group as a way to collect data using group interaction as the primary mode of answering questions collectively. The focus group followed much the same format as the interviews, including taking place in the same space and documenting the focus group with a digital audio recorder. All the participants attended and participated in the focus group. While the in-depth interviews focused on the individual personal stories, the focus group was much more broadly focused, relying on a few of open-ended questions in order to spark dialogue and conversation. I used the focus group as a part of my study because I was working under the assumption that “an individual’s attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum: people often need to listen to other’s opinions and understandings to clarify their own” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, pg. 193). Kruegar (1994) added to the value of a focus group in a project such as this: “People open up in focus groups and share insights that may not be available from individual interviews, questionnaires, or other data sources” (p. 32). Because the participants did not know each other but shared the experience of having gone through Achievement Academy, there was a feeling that this type of data collection would allow participants to both talk about their own experiences while listening to the experiences of others. The focus group provided each participant another perspective on their experience, thus helping to clarify their individual experience and providing me with a data source to complement the individual interviews that I had already conducted.

Coding and Data Analysis

After I finished the interviews and focus group, I analyzed my data by going back over each of my audio recordings, transcripts and field notes. I followed Creswell's (2009) data analysis approach to peel back the layers of the information that I had gathered. According to Creswell, there are very specific levels of analysis that must take place before a researcher can verify the accuracy of the information they have gathered (2009). Because I used Seidman's (2006) three-step interview process, my participants were given a transcript of their interviews and a transcript of the focus group, and each was given an opportunity to edit or clarify the transcripts before I started my data analysis and coding. I used two different ways to code my data. As previously discussed, I transcribed the second and third round of interviews and the focus group discussion, which gave me intimate knowledge of my data. I then coded the hardcopy transcripts by highlighting and making notes as I discovered connections, similarities, and even contradictions in my data. By doing this, I was able to visualize and interpret my data as well as find "indigenous meanings as represented in talk" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 295) and in order to create a thematic approach to analyzing and (re)porting my findings. This process allowed me the opportunity to get to the essence of the lived stories that I collected (Seidman, 2009). In order to keep true to my data, I coded my data for common themes and categories before I looked for the key concepts of my theoretical framework. I also used a computer-based program for MAC computers called HyperResearch, which allowed me to code

my data electronically as well as manually. This program provided another layer of re-verification of my coding. I uploaded all of my transcripts in the program, and the program allowed me to code, combine, and retrieve the data more easily than going back to my manual data analysis.

The results of my data analysis were the recognition and formation of different themes. Upon analysis, I formulated three common and overarching themes. I identified peers, program environment, and the presence of a mentor or positive role model as the major influencing factors for students' success both in Achievement Academy and afterwards. First, the Achievement Academy students' peers in the program had a strong positive influence on how they viewed and defined themselves. These interactions allowed some students an opportunity to re-evaluate and recreate their identities and allowed validation of identity for others. Second, the Achievement Academy program, and more specifically the stated mission and practices, also provided a strong positive influence on their success. The program's emphasis on empowerment and enrichment created opportunities for students to stretch themselves academically, socially, and culturally. Third, the presence of a mentor or role model was instrumental to their success. While each student went about identifying a mentor or role model differently, it was clear that regardless of how they picked this person, the positive influence of the mentor was paramount in their success. The experiences and student stories examined in this study offer insight into a unique program and describe a common set of experiences that were essential to the success of

Achievement Academy students. These themes, including some of the variations of these themes, will be more fully examined in Chapter Four. An analysis of how these themes fit into my theoretical framework will also be a part of this discussion. The following sections will set the context of the Achievement Academy Program and will offer an introduction to the actual participants in the study through anonymous vignettes that offer a portrait of each participant.

A Portrait of Achievement Academy

Achievement Academy is the product of a private school/public school collaboration that was established initially as a way for Eagle Heights⁵, to give back to those school communities from which it recruited some of its students. Achievement Academy is a unique place to do research because it figuratively sits at the crossroads between one of the wealthiest and academically challenging private schools in Arizona and an urban public school system that has been cited as one of the worst in the country both in terms of expenditures per student and academic achievement in math and science (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). The private school where this program is housed has as part of its mission to provide a rigorous liberal-arts curriculum, which prepares graduates for admission to the nation's top colleges and universities. Extensive facilities on the 40-acre campus include: fully integrated computer infrastructure; modern

⁵ Eagle Heights is a pseudonym for the school that houses Achievement Academy.

science labs; art studios and music building; gymnasium, swimming pools, tennis courts, athletic fields, and outdoor play areas. The school has more than doubled the number of its underrepresented students in K-12 over the past ten years as it has sought to embrace the local community more. The school pulls students from over thirty miles away in each direction; 1 of 5 students are on some sort of financial assistance, and over 30% of the student population is self-identified as coming from an underrepresented background (Eagle Heights Admissions Brochure, 2010). This description is in stark contrast to that of the Title 1 public schools from which Achievement Academy students attend. Schools that by definition serve predominantly underrepresented students from high poverty backgrounds, who usually have students that academically are at risk of falling behind (United States Department of Education, 2010). Currently in the state of Arizona, students attending Title 1 schools trail in academic proficiency and yearly progress in every academic category (United States Department of Education, 2012).

Achievement Academy currently serves over 150 public school students from 16 different districts in grades 3-12 (Achievement Academy Newsletter, 2010). The mission of Achievement Academy is to enrich, engage, and empower first-generation students from local public schools and partnering organizations, their parents, and their teachers by providing resources and opportunities to encourage intellectual, cultural, and personal growth. Inherent in this mission is an expectation of success. By expecting their students to become sensitive and

responsive to the complexities of modern society, to gain the skills, values and courage to face the future with self-confidence and self-discipline, and to embrace, take ownership of, and to lead by example in all aspects of their lives, the Achievement Academy program was designed to be a catalyst for student success (Achievement Academy Newsletter, 2010).

Introduction of the Achievement Academy Participants

Seven participants were selected as a part of my study, and each was given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. At the end of this section, I also included a chart that will help visually capture the descriptions of each participant.

Maria

A very proud self-described “Mexican-American,” Maria is a first-generation college student currently attending college out of state at a small liberal arts college on the west coast on a full academic scholarship. Maria spent her entire childhood in the same neighborhood, which was in her words “entirely Hispanic with Spanish as the national language.” She attended and walked to her neighborhood schools, which were all predominantly Hispanic and Title I schools, from first grade until her high school graduation. Her father passed away when she was 10 years old, which she said she used as a motivational factor in her life. She is very proud of the fact that she is fluent in both Spanish and English. She has two younger siblings. Her younger sister is eight years younger than she is and her younger brother is almost seventeen years younger than she is, which she

says makes it very “difficult” at times to be so far away from home attending college. Her mother is remarried and works as a member of a cleaning crew that cleans office buildings, which is where she met Maria’s stepfather. Maria intends to graduate on time and still keeps up with former Achievement Academy friends via Facebook, email, and texting.

Paulina

Paulina is truly a ball of infectious energy. This same energy was evident throughout the interview as she rarely stopped moving for any significant period and was by far the most verbose of all of the participants. Paulina’s parents came to the United States from Mexico in their teens and have been married for over twenty years. Paulina is currently in college in a small state college within driving distance of where she grew up. Paulina admits that while she considers herself incredibly close to her family both in the U. S. and in Mexico, she hates the way women in her culture are treated and “refuses” to be a stereotype for anyone. Paulina has two younger siblings that are still at home and she worries that they will fall into the wrong crowds because her neighborhood has “changed” since she was there. Paulina admits that she has always been “overly social” and still keeps in touch with almost all of her childhood friends in some way or another.

Roberto

Roberto describes himself as a “White-Mexican” because although ethnically he is Caucasian, his living and schooling in predominantly Mexican American enclaves has engendered the Mexican culture in him as though it was his own. His bilingual abilities have also contributed to his sometimes being “mistaken” as a Mexican American. Roberto is currently a senior at a local university and has his eyes set on being a teacher when he finishes because he wants to be the same kind of positive influence on students as his teachers were to him. Roberto has been very active at his university with issues of social justice and has even started his own program to address these issues with college students. Roberto has a calm and easy-going personality that makes him easy to talk. This warm personality contrasts with his larger than average size. It was clear from the focus group that Roberto draws people to him and that people trust him as a friend. Essentially an only child the majority of his life and raised by his mother and grandmother, Roberto speaks fondly of his “role models” and credits them with much of his success. Roberto is comfortable with who he is and attributes that to being a “minority” all of his life.

Thomas

Thomas has been out of college four years and currently works for a local non-profit organization. He attended a small private liberal arts college out of state and believes “going away” to college was a very important step for him in

terms of growing into an adult. Thomas is a very reflective and serious young man. He talks softly and concentrated intently before answering each question. He describes himself as African American and grew up in neighborhoods that were predominantly African American. The first time he was a part of the minority group was when he changed high schools and then at his college, which were both predominantly white, so the majority of his adult life has been spent adjusting to being a “minority.” Since coming back from college, Thomas has been volunteering at Achievement Academy and still feels grateful for what Achievement Academy did for him as he was growing up.

Sonya

Sonya did not hesitate to give credit to her mother for her academic success. Currently a junior in college, Sonya is intensely loyal to her friends and family, and although she was not taught Spanish by her Mexican American parents, she feels very connected to the culture. Sonya has had two other siblings, one older and one younger who were in Achievement Academy and one sibling, who she describes as a “rebel”, that did not attend Achievement Academy. Sonya switched back and forth between being very serious in our interview to being very funny and fun-loving. Sonya was also quick to point out how important Achievement Academy was to her in terms of her educational aspirations. She found her passion for climate change and the impact it has on animals after a workshop at Achievement Academy and currently aspires to become a professor

in this field. There is a seriousness of purpose with Sonya. In my interview with her, I was strongly convinced that she will accomplish anything that she sets her mind to and that no one is going to get in her way or stop her.

Grace

Grace is a first generation Japanese American, which she laughs about because her parents own a Chinese restaurant even though her mother is Japanese and her father is Caucasian. Grace is very comfortable with who she is and states that she always gets “looks” when people see her speak Spanish, which she learned in school and by being raised in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood. She was the main translator of Spanish at her parents’ restaurant all through her middle and high school years. While she looks back on this with fond memories, she acknowledges that it did mean that she was not always able to participate in school activities because of her work schedule. The one exception was attending Achievement Academy, which her mother found out about through a friend and never scheduled Grace to work on those days. Grace started her college education at a local community college and eventually graduated from the local state university almost six years after she started her schooling. Grace takes her education seriously and at the time of our interview was studying for the LSAT as she has plans to go to law school. Grace is confident and articulate. Grace is also very proud of the fact that she has “paid” for her education by herself.

Ruben

Ruben has wanted to be a doctor from the moment he played with his first Operation board game. He admits being oblivious to the fact that not only was he a first generation college student, but he was the first person in his immediate family to graduate from high school. It is clear that Ruben is very proud of his accomplishments, but there is sadness in his voice when he talks about the trials and missteps of his siblings and some of his immediate family. Ruben attended a highly regarded east coast university on scholarship and enrolled directly into medical school after graduation. He is currently finishing up his residency at a local hospital, which he admits that he only took because his mother is and has been “sick” for a number of years. Ruben’s mother is Filipino and his father is Caucasian, but he acknowledges that most people think he is Hispanic because of how he looks. He no longer bothers to correct people anymore. Ruben was a “lifer” in Achievement Academy, starting as a rising fourth grader in the summer program and attending until he graduated from high school.

Table of Study Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Self- Identification	Years in Achievement Academy	Current Educational Status
Maria	18	Female	Mexican American	9	Freshman in College
Paulina	20	Female	Mexican American	6	Junior in College
Roberto	22	Male	White Mexican	5	Senior in College Graduated from College and Working
Thomas	26	Male	African American	7	College and Working
Sonya	21	Female	Mexican American	7	Junior in College
Grace	28	Female	Japanese & Caucasian	6	Applying to Law School
Ruben	32	Male	Filipino & Caucasian	9	Medical Resident

Personal Perspective and Researcher's Role

My own educational experience is similar to this study's participants.

While I did not grow up in an urban environment like my participants, I was a first generation college graduate and spent most of my educational years before college in Title I schools that served a predominantly minority population. I left my hometown to attend a predominantly white university and since graduating from college have worked in predominantly white environments. Ten years ago while living in Boston, I helped start a program specifically geared to enriching the lives of underserved populations in my hometown back in Kentucky. I had always been interested in this type of work as a volunteer, but as one of the co-founders of the program, it was the first time that I had an opportunity to actually design a program specifically to meet the needs of those being served. The experience of creating a program for underserved students certainly played a role in the focus of this study, because what I learned was that it did not take massive amounts of money or fancy facilities to make a difference. Rather, it took a commitment and consistency of effort to provide those students with educational and life mentoring and advocacy that most were not getting at home and even fewer were getting in their schools. I also have a professional relationship to this study in that I am the current Director of Achievement Academy.

Prior to doing this study, I did not know any of the participants in my study, but I realize that my role as the current director of this program adds another layer of potential bias to this study. I was committed in all of my

interactions with the participants to stay true to my research question of understanding their experiences with Achievement Academy. I sought participants that I did not know and who did not know me before the start of the study. Because of these restrictions, my overall pool of students from which to choose from was smaller, yet still diverse enough to create a good cross-section of the student population of Achievement Academy. Even though I only interviewed participants that I did not know, there is no denying that I have an interest in the program and have to own up to the bias potential that is always inherent in this type of research. In order to ensure my own personal bias did not hinder my inquiry and data gathering, I built into my interview protocol some steps that Rossman and Rallis outline: “triangulation of data, participant validation also known as member checks, using a critical friend, and using the community of practice” (2003, pg. 69). The nature and time frame of my project allowed me the opportunity for prolonged/non-hurried engagement which Rossman and Rallis (2003) believe enhances the credibility and rigor of the study.

Many of the participants inquired about my background and my reasoning for doing this study, which I answered honestly and directly. Although my ethnicity in terms of being a part of a traditionally underserved population probably gave them some sense of ease, I was reminded by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) that “(S)kin color, race, and cultural identity sometimes facilitate, sometimes complicate, and sometimes erect barriers in fieldwork” (p. 86). With this knowledge, my own connections to Achievement Academy, and the

similarities that my educational background had with the participants, I felt the added pressure as a researcher to ensure that I represented the stories of the participants professionally, accurately, ethically, and respectfully.

Chapter 4

REPORT OF FINDINGS

After interviewing all seven participants, holding the focus group, and coding the data that I gathered, three distinct yet overarching themes emerged from the data: 1) their relationship with their peers, 2) the program environment, and 3) the presence of a mentor and/or role model in their lives. I will address each of these themes in the following chapter, combining relevant quotes from the participant interviews and focus group and the corresponding supporting scholarly literature to maximize and strengthen the formation and presentation of each theme.

Theme One: Relationship with Peers

There was not a participant in my study who did not talk about or tell at least one story about their peers in Achievement Academy. The literature on the effects that peers have on each other is incredibly diverse and covers topics from teenage delinquent behavior (Evans, Oates, & Schwab, 1992) to elementary school achievement (Hanushek, Kain, Markman, & Rivkin, 2003) and many topics in between. For the purpose of my study, I referenced the work of Manski (1993), who established three distinct ways in which an individual's relationship with peers can influence individual behavior: a) the *endogenous effect*: the behavior of the individual is influenced by the behavior of the group, b) the *exogenous effect*: the behavior of the individual is influenced by the

characteristics of the group, and c) the *correlated effect*: the individual and the group behave in the same way due to the similarity of their environment. Manski (1993) argues that these three ways of peer interaction can lead to either positive or negative outcomes. As evidenced in Achievement Academy students' experiences with their peers, it is clear that regardless of which of the three models from Manski (1993) that is used, their experiences were overwhelmingly positive.

The Endogenous Effect of Peer-to-Peer Relationships

In many ways, Achievement Academy has used peer-to-peer relationships and interactions as a foundational component of its program. By bringing students from over fifteen different districts together, putting them in small classes, and challenging them in areas beyond the usual academic subjects⁶, Achievement Academy has counted on the interactions of students to be a major focus of the learning. When I was in college, I was often told that I would learn as much from my peers as I would from my professors, which in hindsight carries some validity. In many ways, Achievement Academy was an example of this type of thinking. In talking about his classroom experience at Achievement Academy, Roberto recalled a story about a peer-to-peer interaction from when he was in fourth grade.

Actually, I remember, the first Saturday workshop I went to, we created these books that were based on our favorite animal, and we had to find

⁶ A sample of the courses offered at Achievement Academy is provided under Appendix E.

facts about these animals. We then cut the book out into the shape of whatever animal it was. I remember actually enjoying, being creative, but also showing off my knowledge. And I remember just being with the other kids. There's another little girl, Riana. I remember her talking about these little monkeys in Africa. She was telling me all about them, and she could tell me every fact about them. She told me how smart they were, how big they were, all these different facts and things. I was blown away about how intelligent my peers were. I never experienced that before. Everyone in my group was this way with their animals, so I worked even harder on my animal because I wanted to be able to do this as well. I can still tell you more about Amazon poisonous frogs than you would ever want to know and it is because of Riana and the rest of my peers in that class.

Paulina also recalled a moment at Achievement Academy when her interactions with her peers truly produced a very positive and lasting impact on her.

In my regular school, there was always 30 plus kids all around you yelling all at once, 'How do I do this?' and 'How do I do that?' because they were not paying attention to what they should be paying attention to in order to actually understand how it's going to work. Then the teacher had to go around telling every single individual all over again how to do something because they weren't paying attention. I don't have a problem with helping people. I love helping people, but that used to drive me crazy in school. It was in one of my first times at Achievement Academy that I was sitting in

a class of probably 12 to 15 kids, and the teacher asked us a question, and I blurted out the answer without raising my hand, which was the norm in my school, and all I remember is 12 to 15 pairs of eyes looking at me with their hands raised. You can bet that I never did that again. It was just so foreign to me at the time. While I was the talkative one in my school, at Achievement Academy, I found myself listening to and watching my teachers and classmates much more. I learned a lot from them including proper classroom etiquette!

The stories of Manski (1993) acknowledge that there is difficulty inherent in measuring or estimating the effects peers have on one another, but argues that a change in behavior either positive or negative is a likely outcome. While Paulina had a behavioral change and Roberto had a motivational change, each of these positive changes was prompted by either another individual in the group or the entire group as a unit. In addition, both experiences stayed with Roberto and Paulina even to this day. All of the participants expressed at least one moment in their Achievement Academy careers that caused them to pause and re-evaluate their own thinking or behavior because of their peers.

During the focus group there was a very lively discussion about chess. Chess is taught to all of the Achievement Academy students and based on the focus group conversation, it is also a badge of honor for those who win the championship. Ruben, Sonya, and Roberto were all former chess champions, and they were quick to remind everyone else of their achievement. The interesting

thing about this conversation was that because some of the matches they had on Saturday would run beyond the time that they had, they would often have to leave their games and come back to them later. It was fascinating to listen to the group talk about how important it was to be honest and not cheat. Even though they all attended Achievement Academy at different times, they all were emphatic about this rule. I asked them why they were so adamant about not cheating and whether it was something that the teachers had instilled in them. To my surprise, they told me that not only had they learned how to play from other Achievement Academy students, but that the rules were only discussed among the students. Sonya put this into perspective saying,

In most settings, students are usually trying to not disappoint the teacher, but here at Achievement Academy, we were much more concerned about not disappointing each other. I never really thought about this until now, but we essentially had an honor code for ourselves—I guess it was a positive Lord of the Flies type of thing.

Gaviria and Raphael (2001) would argue that this type of peer to group influence, or endogenous effect, has the least amount of bias in it in terms of positive outcomes because Achievement Academy and other shared experiences like chess are considered fixed effects and thus provide a set of controls for those variable effects that are not being controlled for in this scenario. Thomas sums this up nicely in his individual interview when he says,

I loved coming to Achievement Academy because it was the only time that I knew I would be challenged both by my teachers and the other students. I felt like I got smarter every time I was there. My teachers were good, but thinking back on it, my classmates were awesome. They pushed me and I think I responded to that push because for some strange reason I did not want to disappoint them....even though I hardly knew them at the time.

Critical Analysis and Relation to CRT:

The Endogenous Effect of Peer-to-Peer Relationships

It is clear that when thinking about how the participants saw their peer-to-peer relationships that they brought out the best in each other both in terms of behavior as well as academically. The positive display and reinforcement of these norms provided an environment where peer pressure created an atmosphere that both encouraged and rewarded positive behaviors and outcomes. I have always had the mindset that the only way that anyone will do anything is if they really want to do it regardless of whether there is a penalty or reward for doing it. In the case of these participants, their individual actions were informed and modeled because of those students around them. They used the other students as examples to guide their own actions, thoughts, and behaviors. Because all of these things were done with respect and trust and in a positive and encouraging environment, it resulted in positive results as defined by the students. They all came to

understand that conforming to the norms and standards of those around them provided them with a series of successful moments. Whether it was Roberto wanting to learn more, Paulina learning appropriate classroom actions or Sonya and Thomas not wanting to disappoint their peers, all of their actions were a direct result of them being influenced and directed by their peers.

In analyzing the stories of my participants, many of the participants stereotyped Achievement Academy participants. This stereotyping involved the positive reinforcement of the behaviors and actions of those around them that they equated with success. The term stereotype is most often associated with putting people or things into categories using simple and subjective judgments with a disregard for the individual. Most stereotypes are used to marginalize and carry with them a negative view of the group as a collective (Codjoe, 2001). When societal or outside stereotypes are applied to minority and underrepresented students like the participants in this study, it has a “real implication for their educational chances” (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997, p. 115). In the case of my participants, this “real implication for their educational chances” (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997, p. 115) turned out to be very positive: a positive stereotype image and was actually generated by the students of Achievement Academy and used by them to establish a sense of belonging, appreciation, and outcomes. Just as negative stereotyping has the ability to impact a student’s aspirations, expectations of self, and academic success, it is clear that

the positive use of stereotyping as seen in the peer-to-peer relationships at Achievement Academy have served to do just the opposite.

When hooks (1994) talked about the liberating facets that CRT brings to bare on examining the relationship of race and power in America, I can clearly draw comparisons to the stories of my participants. CRT emphasizes that we have to challenge the belief structures and institutions of the dominant group in order to create a more realistic perspective of the experiences of students of color (Huber, 2010). The peer-to-peer relationships that these students established do just this. These relationships were established inside an environment that allowed the students to define them as they saw fit and to apply them as needed. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) used the term “acting white” to account for the educational success of students of color (specifically Black students in the case of this study). In contrast, this study provides evidence that the educational success for my participants was derived from those students around them, which were overwhelmingly minority. This challenging of the normal belief structures of society is an important reminder to all researchers that the narratives and stories of people of color is an important and necessary component to academic research.

Summary

While the endogenous effect of peer-to-peer relationships as outlined above helps to explain some of the fundamental interactions of the Achievement Academy students, the research is clear that these relationships provided a

positive reinforcement of success for these students. Whether it was shaping their behavior or sense of self, the peer-to-peer effects on my participants created an atmosphere that brought out the best in them. They appreciated what others provided and in doing so directed their own actions and behaviors to fall in line with those around them, which ultimately produced very positive results. They were not confined by the negative stereotyping that is so often associated with the physical appearance and geographic origin with students who look like they do and come from the areas that they come from. Their stories inform us of an alternative set of results and outcomes for students of color that does not fit the typical view of these students.

I am reminded of the impact of their stories when I reflect on my own life. While I was never fortunate enough to be a part of a program like Achievement Academy in my educational life, I do have a core group of friends that I grew up with that provided me with a positive peer-to-peer relationship that was an “alternative” to the reality that was happening around me. Collecting these students’ stories opened my eyes to the fact that these types of positive experiences are happening all over and in many places where one would not think to find success. This research in my opinion is not an exception, but a true portrayal of the power of positive peer-to-peer relationships.

The Exogenous Effect of Peer-to-Peer Relationships

In different times in my life, I was responsible for living with students in a boarding situation. Although each of these situations was varied in terms of location, students' socioeconomic status, ethnic background, and gender, the one thing that they all had in common was the fact that there were institutional admissions criteria for each in order to facilitate the end result. When I think about Achievement Academy and the data that I collected from the participants, I realized that that part of the reason why the Achievement Academy students had such similar experiences has to do with the overall characteristics of the actual students in the program and how these characteristics manifested in collective behaviors, actions, expectations, and outcomes.

The current admissions criteria for Achievement Academy students states that they “must be first generation college bound students, in good standing academically, and must be coming from a Title 1 sending school or district” (Achievement Academy Newsletter, 2010). During my research, I found that no two students that I interviewed were admitted under the same guidelines, although they all were first generation college bound and all went to Title 1 schools. So while there were admissions standards for all of the incoming students, these requirements were either not uniform from year-to-year or had changed in between when they were admitted to the program. The participants in the study also each provided different stories as to how they found out about the program. Some of the participants were encouraged to apply because of a teacher or

administrator at their sending school and others found out about the program through word of mouth from their peers or family members. These various deviations on admissions criteria and how the students got to Achievement Academy add to the level of influence that students experienced at Achievement Academy.

In her individual interview, Grace told me a story about the collective dynamics of Achievement Academy that was important to her development.

I don't remember there being many rules at Achievement Academy, and I never saw anyone get in real trouble at Achievement Academy. I remember though that there was this one rule that we all had to follow, and it was something like 'no one is allowed to get in the way of someone else's learning or education'something like that . Anyway, discipline just wasn't an issue because everyone who was there wanted to be there and the tone of the program was that we all belonged there. We all knew that individually we were smart, so the group dynamic was always one of doing the best we could. The program made us set aside our egos because for many of us, it was the first time we were in a place where everyone was as smart as we were, which was a huge shift away from the group dynamics that most of us experienced in our home schools.

Gaviria and Raphael (2001) point out that this type of context, in this study—admissions criteria—is a valid way to examine group behavior. Although there were admissions criteria to get into Achievement Academy, how admissions

standards are applied to each individual does not impact individual background characteristics and does not by itself directly influence the individual (Gaviria and Raphael, 2001). Given my data, I would argue that the admission standards of Achievement Academy and the corresponding expectations of students once they were admitted frame and inform the characteristics and behavior of the group. The exogenous effect of peer-to-peer relationships is exposed once all of the students get to Achievement Academy and interact with each other. In the focus group, Ruben and Thomas discuss this directly.

Ruben:

I was always so impressed with how all of the students just did what we were supposed to do. We did not have to have hall passes to go to the bathroom and when the weather was nice, we were even allowed to go outside to read by ourselves.

Thomas:

Yeah, I remember that as well. It was almost like we were self-policing ourselves with regard to our behavior. There was this time at lunch that I remember when one table did not pick up after themselves and some of the older kids went and got them to come back and get the stuff...I mean this would never have happened at my school.

Ruben:

You are totally right! The longer we were in the program the more protective of it we got. There was almost this group think mentality that

was always there to remind us that individually we had a responsibility to the program and each other.

Thomas:

I do not remember there being rules about any of this stuff, but I guess the program picked kids who would embrace this kind of group behavior.

Ruben:

That is probably true, but I also think that many of my friends at least, were influenced just by watching how the rest of the group acted, especially the older students in the program above us.

After this exchange in the focus group, as I looked around the room, there was this general sense of collective agreement as everyone was silently nodding affirmation of Thomas' and Ruben's comments. This affirmation was an interesting phenomenon because each of the participants, as expressed earlier, by virtue of the different times they attended all had slightly different admission standards, but to these Achievement Academy participants that formal component was less influential than the groupthink that occurred once the program was in effect. Not one of the participants in either their individual interviews or in the focus group could remember what they had to do to be admitted to the program. This lack of remembering the admissions criteria was due in large part to the fact that once in, they based their actions and interactions on what they experienced from the collective group around them. It seems that even though the program picked all of its students, being selected was secondary to the group in terms of

peer influence. When I asked the group if they had learned as much from each other as they had in the classes, there was unanimous agreement. The exogenous effect comes into play because although the program selected students based on shifting criteria, the program still expected a specific type of behavior. It was these individual personalities that the participants felt impacted how the collective group worked, less so the actual admissions criteria. The manifestation of this for the participants was learning from each other, but I suspect that the program was counting on their admissions standards to create the desired characteristics of the group.

Critical Analysis and Relation to CRT:

The Exogenous Effect of Peer-to-Peer Relationships

Dei (2008) found that the educational environment for students of color oftentimes contributes to a feeling of isolation and disenfranchisement that usually leads to lower expectations of these students, which in turn leads to lower levels of academic success. Dei (2008) also contended that as students feel more invested in their communities, they are more likely to aspire to and achieve academic success. The participants of my study addressed the issue of expectations directly in their stories. When Ruben talks about “group think” and Thomas talks about “group behavior” in relationship to expectations, it was clear that for them these things were important components of the program and that Achievement Academy provided them the physical environment in which

expectations were derived. Achievement Academy provided a space and set of rules or expectations that were inclusive of the group. These rules, which according to the participants were applied equally and fairly, were in large part enforced by the students themselves. The story that Thomas tells about the picking up of the lunchroom addresses directly this idea of collective ownership of both the program and of the groups' collective actions.

Achievement Academy is able to select its own students through an application process, which in many ways helps to create an artificial environment that is not true to a normal public school. In analyzing the stories of the participants, I was struck by the fact that like me, many of the participants themselves were questioning how this environment could be replicated in a regular school setting. Ultimately, I am not convinced that this exact environment can be replicated in a typical public school classroom, but the stories of the participants clearly outline an ideal that in their minds leads to considerable buy-in and positive results. Howard (2002) argues that regardless of the ethnic and socio-economic makeup of the students in a given classroom, they are all capable of academic success when they all have the opportunity to reflect upon those things that unite them and build their relationships on their similarities as opposed to their differences. Although the admissions process for Achievement Academy enabled the recruitment of a specific profile of students, if we are to believe Howard (2002), then this effect can be created without the use of a certain criteria.

CRT is firmly centered on the commitment to social justice as an outcome, and the research makes the case that part of the reason Achievement Academy works the way it does is because the experience of each student was valued. I agree with DeCuir and Dixson (2004) that in order to “fully utilize CRT in education, researchers must remain critical of race, and how it is deployed” (p. 30). In the case of the participants of Achievement Academy their experiences all have race at the core by virtue of who they are, so in analyzing their stories it was imperative to maintain their identity as key to their experiences. The narratives provided a glimpse into an environment in which many of the core aspects of who they were was valued, allowing them to focus their attention on those collective behaviors for which to aspire. The valuing of the individual provided a level of comfort that collectively created an environment that both accounted for things like race while at the same time creating conditions free of fear, which the participants address directly when they talk about trying new things later in this chapter. Palmer (1998) tells us that “fear shuts down those experiments with truth that allows us to weave a wider web of connectedness” (p. 36). If social justice is an outcome of CRT, then providing an environment in which fear is not a factor is a central aspect of looking at Achievement Academy. The stories that the participants told were void of fear and accounted for their individual identities in relation to the group, allowing for them to be connected to each other in ways that produced positive group interaction, behavior and ownership of the program.

Summary

The exogenous effect of peer-to-peer relationships offers a very specific look at the groupthink mentality as expressed by the participants of Achievement Academy. Their expression of collective responsibility and of genuine belonging to and ownership of the program was the result of an environment that was governed by an appreciation and acceptance of who they were as individuals. In order to create this type of environment in public school classrooms, the structures and instructors within these classrooms are going to have to reexamine the policies and practices within their classrooms that divide instead of bring together. The idea of focusing on those things that students have in common and using that as the foundational component of the teaching environment means creating a space where social justice can be realized as an outcome and the true value of each student is positively expressed.

It is clear that the admissions aspect of Achievement Academy accounts for some level of collectiveness that the participants expressed in their stories. I opened this section by talking about a personal experience of learning more from my peers than from my teachers. While the admissions criteria of Achievement Academy may make this true, I believe that if we had classrooms where social justice and the value of every student were outcomes, we would more readily be able to create these types of collective experiences for all students.

The Correlated Effect of Peer-to-Peer Relationships

According to Manski (1993), the correlated effect of peer-to-peer relationships comes into play when the individual and the group behave in the same manner because of the similarity in the environment that they happen to be immersed. Gaviria and Raphael (2001) argue that networks, institutions, organizations, and groups constrain individual behaviors so that the more connected the individual is to these entities, the more consistent their individual behaviors and norms are in these entities. The data from the interviews bear this out. Maria was very clear in that she had to act and interact with people in a very different way than how she did at home and in her home school.

I was so surprised at how nice everyone was to each other. I just remember hearing a lot of ‘please and thank you’s’ every time I was there. This was so different, almost foreign to me, given the schools and neighborhoods that I came from. It wasn’t like they told us we had to say these things, but rather it was just the normal or right thing to do, so we all did it. It was of kind of, like our brains were wired differently when we were at Achievement Academy.

Sonya mentioned a very similar feeling in her interview:

I was in an assembly sometime during my first year in the program, and everyone was talking and laughing. It was pretty loud and then one of the teachers stood up and put her arm in the air. I continued talking to girl sitting next to me, but as we talked, I started noticing that many of the

students had started to raise their hands and that the noise level in the room started to fade until there was complete silence in the assembly room. I am talking maybe one hundred and fifty kids all getting quiet in a matter of seconds; all because one person stood up and put her arm in the air. I still remember telling my mom about this when I got home because it was so different...really it was wonderful. I oftentimes wished that it would work in my classrooms in school, but I think it was an Achievement Academy thing...the kids, the teachers, everybody at Achievement Academy just seemed to know what to do and when to do it...thinking back on it now, it almost sounds a little cultish (*said with laughter*).

While Sonya joked about a cult-like atmosphere, her story emphasizes the role of the groups' behavior. All of the participants in this study had an example of this "group think" moment when everyone in the program acted in the same way. These behaviors were passed on to other students not so much by written rules and teachers telling them, but in a much more organic way, by way of how the group acted in certain situations or environments. Whether it was Sonya talking about "lining up for lunch" and watching everyone "go quietly into the cafeteria" or Paulina telling a story about her "experience going to a museum with Achievement Academy" in which "no one got in trouble" and the group "actually stayed together", it was clear from the data that the environment of being with other Achievement Academy students influenced them in such a way that their individual actions mirrored those of the group. While Gaviria and Raphael (2001)

use drinking and smoking habits of college students in a dorm as their target for their study group of peer-to-peer influence, the participants in this study illustrate that a more positive set of behaviors can also create peer-to-peer influence. The environment at Achievement Academy creates an environment for both the individual and the group that forces everyone to adhere to the norms and behaviors of the program. Maria's comment below is indicative of the group of participants in that the influence of Achievement Academy transcended the program.

When I got to college, I had an advisor that I worked closely with during my freshman year, and he commented to me once that 'I was one of the nicest students that he had ever worked with.' I asked him why he thought that and his response was, 'I have never had anyone say thank you so many times and actually mean it.' I guess Achievement Academy kind of rubbed off on me that way.

Critical Analysis and Relation to CRT:

The Correlated Effect of Peer-to-Peer Relationships

The narratives that the students told each represented an experience that clearly represented for them an environment in which the positive peer-to-peer relationships that they had established within Achievement Academy had caused them to pick up and/or mimic the habits and behaviors of those around them. Sonya's experience with the students getting quiet was an experience that she

only had at Achievement Academy, yet it was one that she wished she could have had more of in her regular school. This type of behavior, while experienced only at Achievement Academy had a major impact on how she acted outside of Achievement Academy because she had an alternative experience there that provided her value. The idea that this type of behavior was normal is also important because it set the stage for the Achievement Academy students to equate positive behaviors with behavior that was both normal and acceptable. The positive behaviors that Sonya and the rest of the students experienced took place in and helped to maintain an environment with learning at the center. The behaviors and norms experienced by the Achievement Academy students helped create respect and trust among the students and empowered them to conform to the norms of the program without feeling like they were giving something up. There was a shared sense of responsibility to uphold the norms of the program that provided them with both physical and emotional benefits.

Participating in the behaviors and norms of Achievement Academy provided benefits to the participants, as demonstrated in how the students referenced the use of “thank you” and “please”. Five students mentioned this in the interview and focus group, and the comments from Maria directly address the benefits of behavior. According to Froh, Sefick, and Emmons (2008), when students give as well as receive gratitude both verbally and physically, positive emotional responses are triggered, increasing achievement. The research of Watkins, Woodward, Stone, and Kolts (2003) concluded that there is strong

evidence that gratitude can actually cause happiness. Emmons and McCullough (2003) conducted three separate studies, each building on the other, that concluded that when acts of gratitude are directly manipulated, there is a direct positive effect on happiness and a feeling of well-being. Looking at the data from this study, I conclude that the normalcy of saying “thank you” and “please” not only served the purpose of being polite, but also acted as a catalyst in producing a feeling of well-being and happiness in the students, which ultimately helped build a sense of connection with the program. This connection and positive feeling associated with the program served as the bridge to establishing correlated peer-to-peer relationships. This connection to the program affirms exactly what Gavoria and Raphael (2001) experienced in their research: the more connectedness people have to programs, networks, organizations, institutions, and groups, the more consistent their individual behaviors are to one another. The connectedness of the participants resulted in actions that directly corresponded to the fact that they were all a part of Achievement Academy.

While the impacts of CRT were discussed alongside the first two components of how peer-to-peer relationships impacted the students of Achievement Academy, I would argue that this part of the correlated effect of peer-to-peer relationships also provides another glimpse of how CRT plays out in the lives of the participants. CRT pushes researchers to examine the narratives of people of color in a way that is mindful of the intersectionality of the multiple identities that people of color must navigate (Crenshaw, 1993). Achievement

Academy provided experiences for the participants that allowed them to connect to the program in positive ways through equally applied and fair group action and expectations. The narratives of the students from Achievement Academy show that Achievement Academy is an integral part of their lives both then and now. The acknowledgement of the impact of the program as a part of their narrative is critical to understanding who they are. CRT tells us that in order to ensure authentic narratives we have to take into account these intersectionalities of identities of which Achievement Academy is one of them.

Summary

Achievement Academy had a real impact on the lives of the participants by virtue of the group dynamic of correlated peer-to-peer relationships. While my research did not separate out completely the adaptive nature of the students to pick up and internalize the positive group attributes they encountered at Achievement Academy versus the impact that the admissions criteria and structure of Achievement Academy had on students, the data did solidify for me the impact that Achievement Academy had on them. For many of the participants, they did not realize the impact until they started to share their collective stories, which revealed a similarity in experience and behavior that can be directly attributed to the time they spent at Achievement Academy. The participants did not all experience Achievement Academy at the same time, and while some of

them did have some of the same instructors, the one thing that they all shared was their participation in the program.

This participation was not only positive and reassuring, but it had the added benefit of increasing the level of happiness in the students by having gratitude as an expected part of the experience. At least three of the participants commented on how the expression of saying “thank you” is something that they still do and how they traced origin back to when they attended Achievement Academy. The Achievement Academy experience for the participants added significant value to the lives of these students and their narratives speak directly to this.

Theme Two: The Program Environment

While the correlated effect argued by Manski (1993) specifically addresses how the environment of the organization causes the peer-to-peer relationships to behave similarly, the way that the participants in my study talked about the program itself had more to do with the programmatic content components than a relational environment. In going through the data, the theme of program environment emerged as a primary piece of data that was manifested in two different ways: 1) it was safe place to be smart and 2) it was okay and expected to try new things. There was not a single participant who failed to mention these two qualities in their interview. In fact, these two data points were a hallmark of many of the interviews that I had with the participants. When this

topic was addressed in the focus group, it was also clear that collectively they felt the same way about the program.

A Safe Place to be Smart

Grace was especially vocal about Achievement Academy being a safe place to be smart.

I was always considered the ‘smart one’ in my house compared to my siblings and in my school compared to my classmates. While many people might consider being the ‘smart one’ something to brag about, I hated that label because in the environment of my home and school, it just brought about so much unwanted attention. I was teased non-stop by my classmates. They called me the ‘teacher’s pet’ and they often excluded me from any activities. I especially hated recess because I spent the majority of my time sitting by myself because no one wanted the ‘nerdy girl’ on their team.

Grace’s was a story echoed by a number of the participants in terms of how they were excluded due to whom they either were or were perceived to be. When I asked the participants about their ability to control and deal with these situations, most of them commented that they dealt with it mainly by just trying to ignore it, which was something that they never felt like they had to do at Achievement Academy. Grace also went on to talk about how this affected her at home as well.

My life at home was no better because my mother so often told my siblings that they should be more like me that they started to resent me for it, and I had nothing to do with it. It is actually kind of sad to think about now, but Achievement Academy was the only place that I actually felt okay with who I was. I remember one of the teachers telling the entire class that we were all smart, and I was like ‘WOW’. I had never heard that before. There was no singling out of students for being smart, but instead the focus was on learning. I was never sure if I was the smartest or not in my classes at Achievement Academy, but it was fun and safe to learn here...something that I did not have anywhere else in my life. I hated going home after Saturday workshops because I knew it was not going to be the same.

Grace’s comment about Achievement Academy being a place where she “felt okay with who [she] was” is a powerful statement about the positive environment of Achievement Academy and the impact that it had on her. Ruben echoed this feeling in his interview as he also valued the space that Achievement Academy gave him to “just be” as a student as well.

Being Asian or in my case half Asian, many of the kids in my school just thought that I was a walking stereotype for being smart. I would always get the ‘of course you did well, you are Asian’, from my classmates.

While my parents told me those kinds of remarks should make me feel proud, I secretly wanted to do poorly just so the other kids would leave me

alone....but that was not an option with my mother! My teachers never singled me out for being Asian, but they did add fuel to the kids by always using my work as the example or asking me to help other students in class who did not understand something. So, I liked it, but I also hated being the ‘smart Asian’. I guess that is why I loved coming to Achievement Academy. I just blended right in with all of the other smart kids. They expected all of us to do well, so there was not a sense of sticking out. And while I can admit it now, it was also the first time that I had ever been a little jealous because someone either knew more or could do better at something than I could, and in hindsight, this was probably a good thing for me.

The focus group also solicited some very interesting dialogue about this topic as well.

Paulina:

In my school, I used to always be the first one finished with my homework in class and then I would just sit there waiting for everyone else to finish. I was bored most of the time.

Sonya:

It was the same way for me. I remember playing a game with myself to see how long I could hold my breath after I finished my work. I got pretty good at it....I think I held it once for almost two minutes.

(Laughter from the group)

Ruben:

I never held my breath, but I did spend a lot of time with my head down on my desk. There were a couple of other students in my class who did the same thing.

Roberto:

And things seemed to be just the opposite at Achievement Academy. I remember working on a math problem that was put on the board and kid after kid going up to the board to try and solve it. None of us could get it, and we were so frustrated. We even kept trying to get it over lunch, something that would have never happened in my school. I can't remember who actually finally got it, but it wasn't me and that was a first for me. There were several other times when this happened to me at Achievement Academy and it was actually fun. Everyone really pushed each other in a positive way. It was pretty cool to be smart here and at the same time, you were constantly being reminded by the interactions with the other kids that everyone was smart and that most days you weren't 'the smart one' at all.

Thomas:

For me it was not about being the smart one so much as it was about being able to talk to other kids about the things that were interesting to me. I did a report on becoming an astronaut at my home school and after I gave the

report to the class, they had so many questions for me. I gave that same report to my class at Achievement Academy....

Paulina:

You plagiarizer!

(Laughter from the group)

Thomas:

It wasn't plagiarizing because I wrote the original *(more laughter from the group)*. I just remember that after I gave the presentation, instead of getting a lot of questions like I did at school, the kids started asking me things like 'what about this or you forgot to include this' and before long, we were having a whole discussion about time travel and the feasibility of moving at the speed of light...it was awesome. I felt so comfortable at that moment. I felt safe and like I belonged to this group. I loved it!

Whether it was Thomas talking about feeling "comfortable" and "safe", Grace feeling "okay with who [she] was", or Roberto not being scared to be "the smart one", all of the participants had a story to tell of how their experience at Achievement Academy provided them with a space and place where they could be themselves without any fear, which clearly impacted each participant in a very positive way.

Critical Analysis and Relation to CRT:

A Safe Place to be Smart

The stories of the Achievement Academy students paint a picture of a supportive and welcoming environment in which students all felt like they could be their true selves. In analyzing the narratives, I found that the safe space that the students had assigned Achievement Academy was their way of identifying what some researchers have called third spaces, which can be physical spaces, moments or individual practices (Bhabha, 1994; Delgado Bernal, Aleman Jr., & Garavito, 2009; Karanja, 2010; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejada, 1999; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004). These third spaces allow students to take stock of the world around them and to challenge the practices, attitudes, and ideas of how things are outside of this third place (Bhabha, 1994). For the participants in this study they gathered collective purpose, understanding, acceptance, and a sense of belonging and power from being at Achievement Academy.

Highlighting Achievement Academy is an important aspect of the narratives of the Achievement Academy students because for all of them it represents the one place in which they were free to negotiate, create, establish, and define themselves free of judgment. The inclusiveness of Achievement Academy created an equal foundation that supported each student where s/he was both academically and in his/her self-discovery. The participants used the words “safe,” “home,” “supportive,” and “mine” to describe Achievement Academy and

words like “accepting,” “belong,” “understanding,” and “positive” to describe the other students and teachers. These words were the foundation of how they viewed their experience at Achievement Academy. Howard (2002) argues that when students belong to a community—school or home—that believes in their ability to be successful, they are more motivated to obtain success. Multiple participants expressed their investment in what they were learning at Achievement Academy, which according to Dei (2008) is a key component in one’s ability to achieve academic success. For the students in the study, Achievement Academy provided them a space that valued and supported who they were and that encouraged academic success both as a collective and individual endeavor.

Powers (2007) wrote that CRT is a theory that “challenges conventional accounts of race in education and other institutions and the social processes that occur within them” (p. 151), and I would argue that Achievement Academy for the students in this study was a place that challenged the conventional for them. I am not sure that Achievement Academy actually put the students’ race and ethnicity at the center of what they did, but it is clear from the narratives that all aspects of who they were was valued, supported, and included. By doing this, Achievement Academy allowed each student to create and define his/her own story in a way that was unique to him/her. In many important ways, Achievement Academy represents a valuable counter-story to the majoritarian stories described by Love (2004) as perpetuating the power and privilege of the dominant group at the expense of other groups. According to the stories of the participants,

Achievement Academy is in direct opposition to this type of story. While the program cannot directly tell a counter story, Achievement Academy directly supports the telling of counter stories by those students that have gone through the program, which is why this study represents an important addition to literature that is seeking to acknowledge authentic voice.

Summary

Each participant in this study articulated a way in which they felt valued, affirmed, and supported by being a part of Achievement Academy and how this validated them, which in turn gave them the safe space to be themselves. In analyzing the narratives, I realized that Achievement Academy for these students was a space that provided, friendships, inclusivity, acceptance, openness, and individual acknowledgement in a collective setting. The participants valued the program because it valued them and gave them a safe place to be and become who they wanted to be. Many students of color oftentimes find themselves in schooling environments that they feel intellectually inferior (Dei, 2008), and I observed that Achievement Academy for the participants in this study was actually the one place in which they felt a sense of power, which helped bring out the best in them.

Solórzano et al. (2002) found that minority students, in their study African Americans and Hispanic students in predominantly white institutions created and used counter-spaces in order to have safe physical and emotional environments.

While, the research of Solórzano et al. (2002) speaks more to the students creating this counter-space, Achievement Academy in many ways has created this counter-space for its participants to utilize. The participants' narratives directly associate Achievement Academy as a safe place to be that provides them with the freedom and opportunity to learn and interact in a nurturing environment. The nurturing and safe environment of Achievement Academy also allowed the participants to be true to themselves in ways that they could not be in their sending schools. Achievement Academy was an affirming space for the participants individually and served to validate their experiences collectively as a counter-space, even though it was not a physical space that the students themselves had created.

Expected to Try New Things

In my analysis, I was struck by how many times the participants mentioned trying new things. Whether it was trying a new food, a different way of doing a math problem, singing in another language, or learning how to ride a bike, all of the participants had a story in which something they were asked to do at Achievement Academy made them try or do something new. They drew special attention to those things that they were expected to do, but sometimes did not want to do; yet they all talked about how positive the experience had been for them.

Maria:

Did you guys ever have to do that thing...I think it was in Mr. Slide's class...where you had to draw a perfect circle without using anything but a pencil and piece of paper? *(A lot of nodding and chuckling in agreement. Mr. Slide has been with Achievement Academy for twenty-one years, so all of the participants know him)*. I tried and tried everything to do it and basically gave up by telling Mr. Slide it was impossible to do...and I wasn't the only one who gave up. But instead of letting me and the others give up, he simply put us all in the same group and told us...well, more like made us try it again as group. I remember us talking and trying a few different things out, and then all of a sudden we had actually done it. I still remember Mr. Slide telling me, 'It is amazing what you can do if you just keep trying.' I used that motto a lot in my college calculus class!

(Laughter from the group).

According to the participants, working in groups was a very different experience at Achievement Academy because they did not have to do all of the work. By being surrounded by other motivated students, it proved to be a bit of a humbling experience for the participants. This same type of humbling was also represented in the data when the students were talking about trying other new things outside of just academics as expressed by Thomas.

I do remember this time when we were doing a class about different kinds of food and while trying food may not count as academic to some, I

learned so much about food that day and I got to try avocado for the first time. My food knowledge didn't get me a college scholarship, but I am sure glad I tried it that day because it honestly is my favorite food...I mean it is its own food group to me. (*laughter from the group*).

The group got a good laugh out of Thomas' comment, but I actually found it very profound. While this type of experience is not academic, I do believe it speaks volumes to the fact that all of the experiences the participants mentioned were significant and sometimes life changing for them. Trying a new food may seem trivial, but it was clear from the participants that there were many seemingly trivial moments that they experienced at Achievement Academy that were important to them.

In their individual interviews with me, they talked more specifically about how trying new things during the course of their time at Achievement Academy truly did have a direct impact on the direction of their lives. Sonya talked a great deal about her love of learning in our interview, and she had a very vivid memory of an Achievement Academy moment that had a profound impact on her.

The program made me feel more comfortable in pursuing something higher and pursuing something that I enjoy. I remember Mr. Rodriguez, he taught about animals and ecology and stuff like that. He made everything really interesting. They called him the animal man. He would bring like lizards, snakes, and other animals in and I really enjoyed it. That's something that I am currently really interested in and that I want to pursue.

I really appreciate the program bringing that into my life so that I have some idea of maybe, ‘Hey, this is new. Maybe I want to do this.’ or ‘Hey, maybe I want to do that.’ It was all new to me, but that experience shaped my life and me.

For Sonya, this story illustrates the beginning of her passion for animals. This introduction to something new gave her the space and exposure to realize a dream that she did not even know that she had. Although Sonya did not specifically talk about academic achievement in this story, I would argue that this experience was a factor in her current academic success defined by her majoring in this field in college and wanting to pursue it as a job after college. As an educator, I have always felt that you just never know what you will say or do that might just prove to be the inspiration for a student, and in the case of Sonya and the other participants, at least one moment of inspiration was derived from an experience they had at Achievement Academy.

Paulina echoed a similar sentiment in her interview with me. She talked a great deal in our interview about the expectations that her family had of her to be a “good Mexican woman” and that because of that she was not often allowed to do things like play sports. In our interview, she recalled a story from Achievement Academy in which she participated in a gym class that truly sparked an interest in sports for her that she had never been able to express.

In my home school, we had PE, but we never really did anything except jog around the field or play kickball. We never got to use the gym except

for assemblies. When we had swim and gym at Achievement Academy—we actually got to use the gym and the pool—there was more of a teaching component. I learned how to swim, which I still do today. I also played and learned about badminton for the first time at Achievement Academy. I think I actually sweated for the first time other than just being hot playing badminton—and it felt good! Even though my family still never let me play organized sports in school, I truly appreciated the introduction to sports and real physical education by Achievement Academy. Otherwise I doubt I would have the appreciation I do for it today.

The interview with Paulina gave me a vivid look into her life and especially of the “cultural norms” that she described as an expectation of Mexican women. Paulina used Achievement Academy as a safe space to try new things because it was the only space in her life that this was possible. When she was home, the expectations that her family had of and for her were male dominated, passed down from generation to generation, and provided very little deviation from the norm. Paulina loved coming to Achievement Academy because she knew that she could shed those expectations of her family—if only for a few hours—and be the Mexican woman that she wanted to be. Paulina’s experience of trying something new like badminton may seem as trivial as Thomas eating avocado, but to them both, their experiences in Achievement Academy were special and life changing.

Grace also expressed how the expectation to try new things really impacted her own thinking about herself.

I think Achievement Academy has given me a lot of different opportunities and different ways to get involved both in my education and in the community. The stuff that I did at Achievement Academy helped me find myself more, and if I needed help, it was easy for me to go and talk to a teacher because the classes were so much smaller. Achievement Academy changed me because I saw the world from a different side, it showed me that it was okay to do new things, in fact, trying new things was the only way that we could grow. I remember one summer when they made us go out into some of our own communities and do service. It showed me how fortunate I was even though my family did not have much. I have been doing service ever since, and I have Achievement Academy to thank for this. I doubt I would have ever volunteered to do community service had it not been for the program.

More than any of the other participants, Grace talked a great deal about her financial situation or “lack of money” as she often said, which was why she was so proud of paying for her own education. Grace is fluent in three languages- Japanese, English, and Spanish, yet she never felt comfortable speaking in any language in front of people and writing. The new thing that she is referencing in the above quote had to do with her Achievement Academy teachers encouraging her to speak up and present her work, which fits right in with her wanting to now be a lawyer. Because of her “lack of money”, she always thought she was worse off than the other students, and it wasn’t until a community service trip sponsored

by Achievement Academy to help a local shelter that she saw firsthand that her situation was not as bad as she thought. As her statement attests to, this experience changed how she viewed her own situation and caused her to act in a way that is still impacting her life positively even today.

Every participant that I interviewed had a story of how trying something new at Achievement Academy helped them either add something new in their lives or find an interest that they did not know that they had. A couple of them also talked about the fact that most of the time when they were being asked to try new things that almost everyone in the class was also trying it for the first time which took the pressure off of them in terms of being the only one.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), whose research is on self-determination theory, all human beings have a natural and normal propensity to seek out growth opportunities. Their research identified three psychological needs: 1) competence, which refers to a person believing they are capable of achieving something, 2) autonomy, which is the sense of freedom and control a person feels in a given situation, and 3) relatedness, which refers to the level of social support and connectedness a person has to others, and all of these have to be met in order for people to continue to pursue growth. According to Ryan and Deci (2000),

Despite the fact that humans are liberally endowed with intrinsic motivational tendencies, the evidence is now clear that the maintenance and enhancement of this inherent propensity requires supportive

conditions, as it can be fairly readily disrupted by various unsupportive conditions (p. 70).

In putting the participants in situations that encouraged them to try new and different things, the Achievement Academy program played an essential role in these students' self-determination. By putting the participants in situations that were safe, supportive, and new, Achievement Academy was able to provide the essential psychological components needed for self-determination. Self-determination manifested itself in the participants by creating a direct correlation between what they did and what they currently do. The interaction of the participants with the other program participants, the program content and expectations, and the overall program environment combined with their own feelings of acceptance in and by the program provided all of the necessary ingredients to motivate the participants to continue to pursue growth long after they left the program.

Critical Analysis and Relation to CRT:

Expected to Try New Things

Every participant that was interviewed gave at least one example of something that they did at Achievement Academy that was a new experience for them. The interesting thing is that no two of these experiences were the same, and each experience impacted the participants in a positive and lasting way. Each participant found individual meaning in their experience that they applied to their

lives in some significant way. Whether it was what they studied in college, the food they ate, or the realization of their situation, the participants in this study all expressed appreciation of what they were allowed and encouraged to do as a part of Achievement Academy.

Deci and Ryan (1985) found that students who had a high level of academic success in schools had a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as a desire or motivation to both start and complete a task simply for the fun and enjoyment of it without having to rely on an outside variable (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Extrinsic motivation is defined as a desire or motivation to start and complete a task because of the possibility of receiving a reward because of the completion of the task (Deci and Ryan, 1985). The participants' experiences in this study do not sit in either of these categories independently but rather have components of each when applied to trying new things. Some of their stories point directly to the participants doing something just for the fun of it. There was no reward for learning to swim, play badminton, or eating avocado, which fit more closely in with intrinsic motivation. Things like doing community service or pursuing a certain area of study in college and beyond all come with some form of extrinsic motivation because there is a reward that could be associated with these. Whether the motivating factor was intrinsic or extrinsic is actually secondary to the fact that all of these things happened at and because of Achievement Academy and continue to provide a positive memory and motivation that for the participants is still important to them today.

Crenshaw asserts that the only way to get at the true stories of people of color is to understand and acknowledge that the dominant group has for generations controlled their stories (1993). The narratives of these student's experiences would likely be dismissed as trivial by the researchers at the Beat the Odds Institute, not taking into account just how important these experiences were for the participants. By unpacking these stories with CRT as a framework, it has allowed me to not only take their narratives seriously, but to place them in a context and space that gives them meaning and validity. CRT makes me as the researcher stop and critically acknowledge what is valuable and important to these participants as expressed in their narratives. For the participants, re-telling these stories was important because no one had ever asked and because in doing so they were able to re-live and draw new meaning from their experiences.

Summary

Listening to and going back over the narratives that the participants told about trying new things caused me to do my own reflection about those things that I did or tried that currently provide meaning in my life. I found that like the participants in my study there were some seemingly small things, such as being asked to help others with their reading or being made to participate in every school musical, that I was asked to try or do that have helped provide, structure, meaning, and foundation in my life. The stories of the Achievement Academy students indicate the same effect. Sonya's comment that her experience "shaped

[her] life” was a clear indication of just how impactful new experiences can be. The data was rich in the area of trying new things because when the participants were asked the question and given the opportunity to reflect on their answers, they were able to associate meaning to their experiences. Experiences that they are now able to look back on with fondness and a clearer sense of what the actual experiences meant to them.

Theme Three: The Presence of a Mentor and/or Role Model in Their Lives

All of the participants mentioned a relationship with an adult when they were in Achievement Academy that impacted their decisions, decision making, and ultimately helped shape and define them in a positive manner. Not all of the mentors and role models that participants mentioned were directly connected to Achievement Academy, but because of the frequency and richness of the participants’ narratives involving a mentor and/or role model, this theme emerged as a major factor in the success of the participants both in and out of the Achievement Academy program. While the participants directly attributed their relationships with their mentors and role models as being manifested through academic achievement, these people actually impacted the students beyond academics. The most important thing the mentors and role models did for the participants were “care about them.” Whether the “care” was in making sure that Grace was not scheduled to work on the days she attended Achievement Academy or Sonya’s mother always finding a way to be at every parent-teacher conference

for her, these acts of “caring” had a deep and lasting impact on the participants. According to Noddings (2005), “a caring relation is a connection or encounter between two human beings—a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for and involves a certain amount of reciprocity” (p. 15). It was clear in my interviews and focus group that this idea of “care” was essential in the relationship with their mentor and role model. Noddings (2002) defines caring as “a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding, and appreciation” (p. 283). It is this “constellation of encounters” that for the participants proved to shape and form their lives. Some of these encounters were for long periods over many years, and some of the encounters were fleeting and minimal in terms of time, but no less important and relevant to the participant.

Paulina recalled an Achievement Academy teacher named Mr. Rodriguez, and her interactions with him over the years she was in the program.

With Mr. Rodriguez, he wouldn’t call me by my nickname. He would say, ‘that name is not on the roster, it’s Paulina.’ So, he would be the only person who called me Paulina. It was also the first time I had a teacher address me in Spanish when outside of class. I remember how odd it was when he put his email and phone number on the board and told us to contact him if we needed anything. It was probably two years later that I actually emailed him with a question, and true to form, he replied.

Honestly, he has been a part of my life every since. He made me not only

aspire to be and do more, but he challenged me to make my dreams a reality by putting actions to my words. He never put me into the stereotypical 'Mexican woman' category. He told me to go after what I wanted and not to be scared or allow others to define me. I didn't always get his words at the time, but as I think back on it, I think I can say that I owe a lot of my success to his gentle and consistent prodding.

According to hooks (2003), "teachers who do the best work are always willing to serve the needs of their students" (p. 83). Mr. Rodriguez was that teacher for Paulina. Paulina speaks directly to the fact that his interest and belief in her inspired her to aspire for more. Howard (2002) found that when a student feels that a teacher is genuinely interested in their well-being, they are almost always willing to do whatever they have to in order to not disappoint their teacher. For Paulina, the validation of her heritage without the stereotypes associated with them was a real connection point for her with her teacher. The support and care that Paulina received from Mr. Rodriguez was reaffirming to her because Paulina was also very clear that her family was not included as being a positive mentor or role model in her success.

I could see how a lot of people, when they get asked about who influenced them, they'd be like, 'they [family] were a big support. They helped me. They cheered me on. They rooted for me.' That's not the case with me. We don't really support each other in the way that we should support each other, which was why Mr. Rodriguez was so important to me.

In the interview, I asked Paulina if she is still in contact with Mr. Rodriguez, and she smiled and told me that they are still connected via email. The relationship that Paulina has with Mr. Rodriguez represents a direct connection to Achievement Academy that has transcended the boundaries of the program for the betterment of the student. I have no way of knowing how many of these positive mentor relationships exist between Achievement Academy faculty and students, but the combination of Paulina's narrative and the narratives of the other participants infer that Paulina's and Mr. Rodriguez's mentorship is a normal byproduct of Achievement Academy.

Maria talked about her mentor in much the same way, but her mentor was from her sending school and not Achievement Academy. Maria also had a "formal" mentor through her involvement in another program, but according to Maria, Ms. Barbara had a much larger impact on her.

Ms. Barbara was amazing. I remember her so clearly. She had such a large impact on me. I am not even sure she knows what she meant to me. The thing I loved was that she would take the time to talk to me both about my work and about life in general. She always stayed late in her classroom, and I would stay there and do my homework, and we would talk about all sorts of things. She was so great at giving encouragement to everyone—I just always felt so good about myself after talking to her. Even to this day, I try and model my behavior after her. I had her for one year in fifth grade,

but she was more important to my academic achievements than any other person. I wonder what she is doing now. I should see if I can find her.

Although the relationship between Maria and Ms. Barbara only lasted during her fifth grade year, the fondness and clear memories of her tell me that Ms. Barbara played a very important role in Maria's life even if only for a moment. The fact that Maria says that she "was more important to my academic achievements than any other person" speaks volumes to the importance that was placed on Ms. Barbara and the relationship they had.

Sonya was very clear that her mentors and role models did not come from any of her schooling. While she acknowledged that most of her teachers at Achievement Academy and some from her sending school influenced her, Sonya cited her mother as both the central figure in her life as well as her role model. Her relationship with her parents and mother in particular was very strong and influential to her development.

My mother played a big role in my life at school. She made sure that the teachers were challenging me. She made sure that the teachers were giving me extra work. My mom was always making sure that I was pushing myself. She had incredibly high expectations for my siblings and me. There wasn't really a lot of talking about it. It was more of, 'you're required to do this. Anything less than this, that's a no-no. you can't. That's a no. You'll get in trouble for that. You have to have this or else you'd get in trouble.' Like if I were to get a lower grade, I'd be in trouble.

But if I get straight A's, nothing good happens. There was no reward for getting good grades because that was what you were supposed to do. I know that I have done as well as I have because of my mom pushing me. She was truly my biggest supporter, fan, and cheerleader. I would not be who or where I am without her influence in my life. I feel really blessed to have her as my mom.

The mentor/role model relationship that Sonya had with her mother established and reinforced a set of expectations and norms that transcended the relationship and manifested itself in terms of achievement in life and in school. The positive encouragement and upholding of standards by Sonya's mom was the fundamental foundation for how Sonya has lived her life and represents a very important part of her story.

Thomas cited his mother and one of his elementary school teachers as having the biggest impact on him in terms of being a mentor and role model.

I remember my mom taking me to get me tested for the gifted program in my district. I skipped kindergarten and started first grade at five and was admitted into the gifted program later that year. I think that for most kids, it was probably teacher-based for getting into district gifted programs, but in my instance, my mom made sure of all that for me. I really liked learning. I loved math. I remember being really, really good at math. I remember helping teachers grade and things like that. My mother always rewarded me for doing well in school, and I think I did really well partly

so that I would not disappoint her. Besides my mom, I would have to credit my second grade teacher. She always pushed me and told me that I had the potential to be anything I wanted. I am pretty sure that she told everyone in her class this, but for whatever reason, I always felt like she was talking directly and only to me. It is really funny for me to talk about her because who would think a second grade teacher could still have that much influence on me.

During the focus group, when the topic of mentors and role models came up, Roberto offered the group his assessment of the impact of the mentors and role models in his life from Achievement Academy.

I feel that the faculty at Achievement Academy gave me a good foundation of tools that I needed to be successful, if that makes sense. Achievement Academy gave me again, like I said, the extra push, gave me more people that were invested personally in my academic success. If you look at it in a different light, more people potentially to let down if I wasn't successful. So, I guess with the connections that I built in Achievement Academy...Ms. Signs would write me an occasional letter of recommendation for scholarships and Mr. G had written me one. I guess with that network or support that I had and the network of people that were willing to come just listen to me talk about my plans. There wasn't one special person but more special people that mentored me. I remember from about fifth grade every summer, I would talk to Ms. Signs and she'd

ask me, ‘what do you want to do? What do you want to do in college?’ I remember every year, she’d tell me what my plan was. At one point, I remember telling her I wanted a double major in business and theater and open a dinner theater or something. She’s like, how are you planning to do this? Instead of telling me I was crazy, she listened, encouraged me, and made me come up with a plan. So I do feel those faculty members that constantly were invested and were curious and wanted to see where I would be really helped me to actually think about those topics when I wouldn’t necessarily be presented with those thoughts, just going through the system normal. I feel that with Achievement Academy, you’re almost taking that ideal of creating an impact to third grade, fourth grade. Look, you can make it. You can be successful. We all care about you. We want you to come back next year, show you these other things. They might not be your core subjects but they’re going to be something that enriches your life or touches you somehow. Maybe gives you this idea of, ‘Man, this would be a fun idea. This is what I want to do someday, whether I want to teach someday or I want to be an architect someday or whatever it is.’ The program and all of the people—faculty and friends—were all my mentors and role models.

The list of Achievement Academy teachers that Roberto credits with some sort of influence on him is impressive because it speaks directly to the quality of the teachers and their intimate involvement with the students. The relationships that

Roberto established with faculty at Achievement Academy extended well beyond the program, and he is still in touch with a couple of his teachers. Howard (2002) asserted that when students received positive verbal encouragement from their teachers, they were more likely to perform at a higher level academically, which is exactly what Roberto's narrative illustrates as happening in his life.

Jeynes (2007) did a meta-analysis of 52 different studies and found that parental involvement in education was a strong predictor in positive academic results for all students. So while not all of the my participants listed their parents as a direct role model or mentor, the research does hold for those that did in terms of contributing to their academic success. For those participants that listed teachers or other people as a mentor to them, Kerka (1998) defines this relationship as "a relationship between an experienced and a less experienced person in which the mentor provides guidance, advice, support, and feedback to the protégé" (p. 1). Consistent with this definition, I found that the positive interpersonal commitment of the mentor to the mentee was the most important, regardless of the role/title of the mentor or the longevity of the interactions. Connell and Wellborn (1991) concluded in their research that a person's life, positive emotional connectedness to peers, friends, parents, teachers, and outsiders encourage and support healthy social, emotional, and intellectual functioning which lead to increased self-worth and self-esteem which are both directly related to sustained academic achievement.

Critical Analysis and Relation to CRT:

The Presence of a Mentor and/or Role Model in their Lives

It did not surprise me that each of the participants in the study had someone in their lives that they attributed to helping them be successful. Whether it was a caring teacher or parent, the research clearly draws a conclusion that this relationship played a major role in their lives. For those participants that had a teacher as their mentor/role model, Dei, Mazucca, McIsaac, and Zine (1997) found that there were five characteristics that teachers who were perceived as being role models all had in common: 1) teachers actually believed that all students are capable of some level of success, 2) teachers built relationships beyond just the classroom and instead took a personal interest in students and built relationships that were founded in trust and mutual respect, 3) teachers that could relate to and understand the personal problems of students and remained open and willing to help them through their challenges, 4) teachers engaged students in equitable relationships where respect and trust were both given and received, and 5) teachers allowed students to think freely in class in order to create a sharing of knowledge and appreciation of knowledge. Although the scope of my research did not cover these five components in depth, each participant that talked about a teacher mentor/role model named at least three of the characteristics as defined by Dei et al. (1997).

For those participants who listed a parent as their mentor/role model, Gandara (2002) found a direct link between the role of the parent to student

achievement. The power of parents to influence the expectations and aspirations of their children is illustrated in the narratives and for the participants in the study offered a very positive influence in their lives. With the exception of Paulina, all of the participants mentioned some positive relationship that they had with at least one of their parents. The parent role model for the participants was part cheerleader, part disciplinarian, and part motivator, and could assume all of these roles simultaneously depending on the issue. Although the work of Dei et al. (1997) focused on teachers as mentors, my interviews yielded that the five characteristics that they found could also be applied to a parent as a role mentor. The dynamic of a parent mentor relationship has some inherent differences than that of a teacher student mentor relationship in terms of power and authority, but the characteristics remain applicable. Ultimately both of the parent-student and teacher-student mentor relationships provided a positive and successful foundation for the participants in the study that they each still recognize as important to them.

The positive relationships that the participants had with their mentors were an important component of their overall success. By telling their story, this study puts their voices at the center of determining what has worked for them. CRT tells us that this is the only true way to ensure an authentic and credible account of the experience of people of color. CRT informs how these relationships should be considered. According to Love (2004), researchers must continually and consistently challenge ideas, theories, and agendas of those groups and

institutions that historically have provided privilege and power to racial majority groups, which is exactly why this study is so important.

Summary

The presence of a mentor in the lives of the participants was essential to their development and achievement. The term “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” was given national coverage when Clarence Thomas was undergoing his confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court. The more I understand the experiences of the Achievement Academy students, the more I realize that when one uses CRT as a lens to see these stories, no person of color truly has the ability to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” in our society. The majoritarian story dominates what we are supposed to know and assume about people of color, and without some level of support, it is almost impossible for a person of color to navigate this landscape alone. The mentoring relationships that the participants developed were based on a sense of shared power and trust, which allowed for the support necessary for the participants to be successful in a society that does not expect them to be successful. Although Achievement Academy’s impact on this finding is limited, the fact that some of the participants were able to find a mentor there speaks to the structure and personnel of the program as being one that advocates and supports all of its students.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will serve to re-present the information and stories that were collected as a part of my research. In going back to my study's purpose, my research questions, and the findings, I hope to bring the voices of my participants to life in a way that allows their words and experiences to live well beyond the interviews and focus group. I identified the power, strength, and courage in the stories of my participants. These stories deserve a place at the proverbial academic table to be discussed and treated with significance and importance. While their experiences as a part of Achievement Academy were the focus of my research, I learned a great deal more about each one of my participants: their lives, their families, their fears, their failures, their hopes, their dreams, and their successes.

Each Saturday, I get a chance to impact the lives of over one hundred Achievement Academy students. As the current director of the program, I get to experience the students, their teachers, and their parents as they participate in a program that was truly created for them and with their needs in mind. I began my research with a general question of experience, hoping that whatever was found could be used to better the lives of participants and contribute to the importance of the counter story in traditional educational research. My research question was "What are the experiences of students who have completed the Achievement Academy program?" I also used three clarifying questions in order to further

dissect their experiences. These include, “What are the cultural, and personal costs and benefits associated with being a part of Achievement Academy?”, “How have students defined or re-defined their cultural, social, academic and personal identities because of Achievement Academy?”, and “In what ways have the students used their surroundings and experiences to overcome preconceived notions of either what they were capable of or general expectations of those around them?”

What are the cultural, and personal costs and benefits associated with being a part of Achievement Academy?

In my interview with Paulina, she told me that her decision to attend and stay in Achievement Academy went like this: “I decided, ‘Well, if this is supposed to prepare you for college, why not? That’s what I want to do.’ I’d be the first generation. I want to get my higher education...I want to be someone in life. So that’s where I am going to go. Achievement Academy made perfect sense to me.” I found very similar reasoning in all of my participants. For participants, the concept of “costs and benefits” was not articulated in a way that intimated an expense—fiscal or otherwise—of the program. Rather they spoke directly about the positive outcomes, or benefits, they received from the program.

If I look at the three themes that came out of the research, they all identified three very positive influences on them because of the program. For my participants, the culture of Achievement Academy was unique and different than

anything else in their lives, so each identified the program as a very special place. A couple of the participants even described it as a “a safe haven.” The culture of Achievement Academy is established in its mission statement and the one guiding rule that all participants must follow: “Never get in the way of someone else’s learning.” This culture along with the faculty, other students, and curriculum fostered in the participants a sense of togetherness that went beyond ethnicity and culture for them. While there was a mention of the lack of close friends within their sending schools, this was the only thing that could have even remotely served to be a negative. If there were truly other costs to being a part of the program outside of them having to give up their time in order to attend, they did not acknowledge them in either the individual interviews or in the focus group.

How have students defined or re-defined their cultural, social, academic, and personal identities because of Achievement Academy?

One of the major findings from my research was that the participants did indeed define and re-define themselves in relationship to the program and specifically their peers in the program. Grace told me,

Achievement Academy was a significant part of my life. I was in it for a really long time. I stayed in the program because it was fun, because I liked it, because it helped me be the person I am now. I am sure that I could have just stayed and worked at our restaurant, but I knew what happened to people that didn’t graduate high school. Because of

Achievement Academy, I was surrounded by a bunch of people that were extremely motivated, and they constantly pushed me. I wanted to be like them, so I did.

For many minority groups, Grace's statement speaks to assimilation, which is oftentimes used as a way to get minority populations to conform to the dominant structures and values around them. I would argue that assimilation as it pertains to Grace's statement is actually a positive thing. Achievement Academy is a program that is predominantly minority so in essence students are assimilating to a program that values and respects their experience because the program is defined by their experience.

The participants in the study all had their own version of Grace's statement, but it essentially revolved around this idea that at least when they were at Achievement Academy, they had the ability to define and re-define themselves in whatever way they wanted with no consequences. Whether this re-definition was around academic achievement, gender roles, racial or ethnic background and identity, or socioeconomic status, the only true thing that mattered was that it was theirs to define. For some of my participants, the ability to define themselves differently than what was expected in their homes, neighborhoods, or schools was the reason they kept coming back to Achievement Academy. I discussed earlier their feelings of being "safe" at Achievement Academy, and it was clear in my research that they each felt this way.

The social component also added a level of protection for many of my participants. Because the other students in the program came from all over the city and up to seventeen different districts at any given time, the social nature of the program created a peer to peer social network that the participants all agreed would not have been possible in their sending schools and/or neighborhoods. While the social components of Achievement Academy were incredibly positive for the participants, they also acknowledged in the focus group that Achievement Academy alone did not always work.

Roberto:

I definitely heard stories and knew people that were in Achievement Academy that were not successful in life after they left the program. With the population of students that Achievement Academy works with, you are taking students from high-risk areas, you know what I mean? As good as this program is, as much good as it does, it doesn't necessarily always make up for parents or other positive people in a student's life that don't push you or an environment that's constantly trying to lead you astray or make up for that lack of determination that you don't naturally have.

Thomas:

Yeah, there's a few people in our class that tried the college route and have since dropped out, or a couple of people I can remember in our class that, towards the end, towards our high school years, sort of developed drug problems and went that route.

Sonya:

I see what you mean is that no program has a 100% success rate. We would like to think that everyone who comes out of the program will be successful but that's just not the case. Personally, I don't have any anecdotes. I'm sure that it happens but it's not the fault of the program. It's just life is life.

I think this realization in the focus group was important for them to articulate because it both showed the realities of what they each faced in some way and affirmed the fact that even with all of the things that could have gone wrong, they figured it out and were indeed successful. This conversation provided me yet another lens with which to look at the program and gave me another avenue of research to consider in the future regarding understanding how Achievement Academy might have been culpable and/or how Achievement Academy might have prevented these perceived failures.

The focus group proved to be a very powerful reflective tool for the participants because they identified with the success that they each had even though they did not all know each other. There was a common bond within the group that they all identified with in a positive way. Whether that identification was based in the cultural atmosphere of the program, the social network of being around like-minded people, the knowledge that they had all obtained a level of academic success, or that their personal identities were shaped more by what they were not as opposed to what they were is hard to tell, but it was clear in my

research that at least for the participants in the study, Achievement Academy provided a safe and nurturing place for all of these things to potentially happen.

In what ways have the students used their surroundings and experiences to overcome preconceived notions of either what they were capable of or general expectations of those around them?

Each of the participants talked about the educational “norms” they experienced either in their families or in their sending schools. Paulina talked about her family wanting her to be a stereotypical “Mexican woman” and Thomas talked about a teacher in his middle school telling him that there were higher chances of him going to prison than graduating from high school. While Thomas acknowledged that this teacher was saying this as motivational tactic, it was not the type of statement that actually made him feel good about himself. Roberto and Grace both talked about the expectation of finishing high school and then staying home to work with or for their parents instead of going to college. These stories are a few examples of what each of the participants brought to the program in terms of outside expectations from either their families or schools. In working with each of the participants on this project, it was clear in my conversations with them that part of the reason they were so appreciative of Achievement Academy was because they knew they would have positive reinforcement, high expectations, and the support needed to help them achieve their own goals. The focus group conversation really illuminated this.

Ruben:

What I can take away from my experience in Achievement Academy is not only the knowledge and things I learned but the memories, the connections that I have made here. That holds a lot of worth for me.

Paulina:

I just remember the girls at Achievement Academy wanting to be doctors and lawyers and scientists. I remember the older kids talking to us and telling us how important staying in school was. This was a far cry from the kinds of things being said to me by my family, 'Oh you're the next one. You're going to be pregnant by 15. You're going to have a kid. You're going to have two!'. Since that didn't sit well with me, that's what I used as my motivation not to have that happen for my life. So, I decided, in order for me not to have that happen, I have to keep going with my education and staying in Achievement Academy around these strong 'girls' was important to me. So I turned 15, and guess what, I wasn't pregnant and I wasn't going to get pregnant.

Sonya:

My family was very supportive of me, but if you go to a lot of elementary schools, you'll see that there are a lot of students who don't care about their education who are there to have fun, who are there because someone's making them go. With Achievement Academy, I made friends that will last me a lifetime and who are educational-oriented and who do have

goals, who do want the same things as me. Maybe not the same careers but the same aspect. They want to have a good life. They want to have their education and they want to pursue something higher. They don't want to be like everyone else and neither did I, so I used this as motivation.

My research tells me that each of these participants used Achievement Academy in some capacity to justify and affirm that they could and should be thinking differently about their success, regardless of what others, even family, might be telling them. It was also clear that each of the participants had a mentor or role model who modeled this type of thinking for them as well. The participants all expressed that a central component of them embracing Achievement Academy was the fact that Achievement Academy never made them have to choose between their lives at Achievement Academy and elsewhere, and instead always pushed the same message of enrichment, empowerment, and encouragement; a message that they all took to heart and that provided a great deal of positive reinforcement in their lives.

A Re-examination of CRT as a Theoretical Framework

I entered this research knowing that I would be listening for and recording the voices of students who have been marginalized by society in many different ways. Regardless of the basis for their marginalization (socio-economic status, race or ethnicity, family background, schools they attended, or neighborhoods they came from), I believed their stories had relevance and importance. This is

why I chose CRT as my theoretical framework: it allowed me to examine the experiences of my participants in a context that afforded them the educational value that is usually inherent in other types of studies. Looking at their stories through the lens of CRT was important because what these counter-stories tell us is that these participants and many others like them in Achievement Academy have been able to find success, thus beating the odds. The participants in my study used the negativity of any stereotype as fuel for their positive achievement. According to Steele (1997) and Griffin (2006), it is a common occurrence for students to expend energy disproving negative or unflattering stereotypes. The participants in my study used this energy as a means to enhance and surpass the expectation of others and even themselves.

I found that some of my participants took a more passive approach to how racial identity and stereotyping impacted them which usually resulted in a rationalization that did not take into account their racial identity or the possibility of them being discriminated against or stereotyped. The interesting thing about this is that all of the students felt very strongly connected to their ethnic background. I observed that many of my participants chose to ignore or discount the role of race, ethnicity, and stereotyping. I attribute this to the fact that they all attended schools where the majority of people identified as they did, thus creating a sense of false security that because they were among “their kind”, that race and stereotyping did not exist. According to Wout, Shih, Jackson, and Sellers (2009), when students do not have to contend with being stereotyped, their cognitive

response is to expend more energy on their actual academic performance. I found that many of my participants reflected this characteristic.

While the idea of “acting white” has long been studied as a possible explanation as to why some underrepresented students do well in school, I would argue that for my participants, they were actively disproving negative stereotypes through their actions of doing well in school and staying out of trouble, not “acting white.” The results of my study point to this distinction, though current research as described earlier still fails to depict minority student achievement as a positive outcome instead continuing to make it out as a way of “acting white” for minority students. The participants in my study represent a direct counter story to the majoritarian stories that say that only white, affluent students succeed academically and that the only way for “at-risk” or “underserved” minorities to achieve is by assimilating to this majoritarian story. The students in my study explicitly made a point of alerting me to the fact that they gravitated to students that were as committed to educational success as they were, which was one of the reasons that they enjoyed the Achievement Academy program so much. Flores-Gonzalez (2002) validates this thinking in her research on “school kids” versus “street kids.” She asserts that academically motivated students will generally “reject the peer ranking promoted by their street-oriented peers. Rather, they exhibit school-sanctioned behaviors and enact a number of strategies to minimize contact and conflict with street-oriented peers. Perhaps the most successful strategy for avoiding exposure to street-oriented peers is involvement in school

[oriented] programs” (p. 105). This also validates the positive peer-to-peer relationships that each of the participants felt was so important to them.

The stories of my participants speak directly to them wanting to be successful academically. They all valued education and regardless of how they came to value educational success, their actions clearly spoke to doing whatever they needed to do in order to ensure this success was not fleeting. They took their education seriously and whether they were aware of it or not, they did not allow their race or being stereotyped to get in the way of their success. While I would argue that some of their strategies of disproving or passively ignoring stereotypes may backfire and lead to more issues later, I have to acknowledge that at least for this group of participants it has seemed to work for them and is still seemingly proving to be a successful technique for them. The tenets of CRT tell me that even with their success and their propensity to not address it outright, the racial underpinnings of who they are, it cannot be ignored because they cannot escape the endemic racism that is an everyday, ordinary occurrence for people of color (Abrams & Moio, 2009). The stories of my participants show multiple ways in which CRT is embedded in their lives both consciously and subconsciously, which is precisely the reason that we cannot forget the role of racial identity in their stories. Because the dominant structures of society promote that if we “pull ourselves up by the bootstraps” that anything is possible, what they forget to mention is that the “bootstraps” are only accessible for certain people. While these “proverbial” bootstraps seemed to be available to the participants in my

study, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that as wonderful as Achievement Academy was for these students, it is still a program that was designed to “enrich” the lives of these types of students and is housed and run on the campus of one of the most expensive private schools in Arizona. Yes, I can see the good in Achievement Academy by virtue of the stories that I recorded from the participants, but CRT also allows me to take my research deeper than just the story to see the stories for their own intrinsic value and to validate the experiences of my participants in a way that gives more meaning to their own personal challenges, struggles, and of course successes; successes that deserve our attention and the space to be told and represented for their true worth.

The participants in my study spent a lot of time working on and understanding their strengths and viewed their weaknesses as things that could be fixed. Clifton and Nelson (1992) developed a theory that posits that every individual has a particular and specific set of strengths, and that when these things are focused on rather than trying to become adept in their weaknesses, the strengths can become powerful enough to make weaknesses obsolete and irrelevant. The participants modeled this theory. They were determined to do and to be the best, acutely aware of who they were and what they needed to do in order to achieve their goals. Because they found success early in their lives, specifically in school, and that success was built upon by either other people in their lives or by the actual act of being successful in school or other activities, I found that the primary role of Achievement Academy for my participants was to

serve as a place that valued education but more importantly valued them. For these participants, Achievement Academy was a constant for them for many years, from the physical space and faculty to the different students that attended. They also knew that in order for them to be successful academically they could not conform to the stereotypes of what was going on around them or what the world at-large might think about them or their abilities.

There was a resilience in these students that I believe played a major role in them getting to where they currently are. It was this resilience, which I believe for them overshadowed the issues that might have been a part of their racial status. This resilience was not about ignoring the problems inherent with their lives in terms of family, school, or society, but instead served to be the thing that allowed them to block some of these things at times in order to truly focus on their goals. And while some of my participants did not come to Achievement Academy on their own, they all stayed ultimately because they wanted to stay and because they knew that being a part of Achievement Academy was a positive and supportive activity.

CRT in many ways helps to legitimize the stories of my participants. In telling their stories, I know that I am adding to the scholarship of educational research and helping to provide meaning and understanding to the stories of my participants. To hear and document true stories of success among a population of students that by many were destined to fail before they even began, is to acknowledge the strength and collective power that these students have. They

have the “right” to have their stories be told. There is no denying that the worlds they come from, live in, and that their children will inherit will continue to be racially charged to some degree, which makes their accomplishments all the more necessary to be told.

Everything that the participants referenced about Achievement Academy including the structure, environment, their peers, and the faculty provided a foundation actively disproving the majoritarian stories that have so often and casually been assigned to the participants in the program. By purposefully trying to value the stories of each student, Achievement Academy has created an environment that allows some of the most underserved and at-risk students in the city to not only find success, but to find value. This idea of “value” is not one that I hear much in the traditional classrooms of either public or private schools. When one “values” something, it means that they place special meaning to it and actively seek to protect and keep it safe, even sometimes going to extremes to do so. CRT posits that it is exactly this “value” that has been placed on education by a white majority, whether intentional or not, that seeks to protect and keep safe education from the growing masses of “at risk”, “underserved”, and “underrepresented” students. Achievement Academy acts in direct opposition to this by placing the value on the student with the educational component shared freely with all participants. And more importantly, Achievement Academy stands as an example of what can happen to students when they are given a chance to succeed in institutional structures like education, which were designed for and by

the majority. While I do not know the full history of Achievement Academy, the history as expressed by the participants, clearly defines a program that sits in direct opposition to the schools that they attended when they were growing up, and they all expressed their gratitude for the opportunity. For these students, their participation in Achievement Academy served to represent a new status quo for them that they had control of instead of being controlled, which I would argue is a primary reason each of the participants still speaks so fondly of their experience in Achievement Academy.

Implications and Recommendations

By working with both public and private schools, Achievement Academy sits at the crossroads of two very different educational entities. The independent resources, hiring practices, curricular decisions, and size and structure of Achievement Academy are representative of private schools and all the students that attend Achievement Academy are from public schools. The findings in this study present clear evidence that something very positive and arguably life changing is happening in Achievement Academy and being transferred to the students. Some might draw a conclusion that an easy solution would be to send all public school students to private schools and everything will be solved. Unfortunately, this “solution” is oversimplified, unrealistic, and in the end, not a solution at all. The recommendations that come out of this study represent an

understanding of both the public and private school sides of Achievement Academy—sides that I believe could learn a lot from each other.

Reflection of the data and outcomes of this study left me strongly believing that if education in the United States is going to improve especially as it pertains to minority and underrepresented students, then we have to stop doing the things that we have historically done. There is a colloquial saying that insanity is the act of doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result, and from my vantage point as both a researcher and a practicing educator, I would argue that our education system is closer to insanity than it is true change. I started in education because I wanted to be a change agent. I wanted to use my talents to motivate and inspire students to learn. I wanted students to know that education was, is, and will be a valuable tool in their lives. I wanted students to know that education really can open doors and change lives. I didn't get these ideas from passively looking at what my impact on the lives of students could be, I got them from actively evaluating the things around me and being steadfast about both what I can change and the impact of that change. So my recommendations may not represent a realistic approach to helping our failing educational system, but I would challenge anyone to tell me that these things are not needed. Whether they can be done or not is still the question that needs to be answered, but whether they should be done or not is a clear "absolute" in my mind. This study provided me a look in an idealistic, unique, and reaffirming environment for students as seen through their eyes, and honestly, their stories

changed my life. I know I will be a better educator because of their stories. Their stories illustrated for me the power that a single individual can play in their lives, the power that an encouraging word can provide, and the power they individually and collectively have to be and do whatever they want.

This study illuminated for me my role as an educator. I have never taken it lightly, but because of this study, I now take it more seriously than ever. I realize that for many of the students that walk through our collective classroom doors, we, as educators, are the gatekeepers. We have both the power and the obligation to shape children's lives so that they can take advantage of all of the opportunities that an education can provide. While Malcolm X used "by any means necessary" to talk about what Blacks needed to do in order to gain freedom, justice, and equality for themselves (Malcolm X Speech, 1964), I truly believe that as educators this has to be our motto when thinking about how we educate children. While the list of recommendations below is not exhaustive, it connects directly to the research, the lessons learned in this study, and having the courage to shift our thinking and our actions is what these represent. It is our collective duty as educators to make sure we are working on these for all kids. In doing this, especially when it gets hard or unpleasant, we have to ask ourselves whether we are part of the solution or a continuation of the problem. I hope we all become change agents and problem solvers using these recommendations as marching orders.

1. **Every student deserves to be taught in a safe classroom by a teacher who values and supports him or her for who he/she is.** The implications of accomplishing this would mean a complete shift in how schools view and interact with students and a very real likelihood that student outcomes and achievements would increase considerably.
2. **Every student should have at least one adult in their lives that they trust enough to be their mentor.** The implications of this would mean that fewer students would be left to figure out the educational system on their own. The access and interaction with a mentor could provide the necessary extrinsic motivation that a student needs to be successful.
3. **There has to be more love incorporated into the classrooms and schools.** hooks (2003) wrote that “love in the classroom prepares teachers and students to open our minds and hearts. It is the foundation on which every learning community can be created. Love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us. This is the heart of the matter” (p. 137). The implications of implementing this type of change in schools would be a radical shift from what we currently do and know. Properly incorporated, the classroom would instantly become a place that allowed and advocated for social justice for everyone.
4. **We must never allow failure to be normative in classrooms for any group of students.** Our educational systems have to be rebuilt around the

idea of success for all students because without it, schools will continue to alienate and disenfranchise the systems' most vulnerable participants, the students.

5. **Educators must remain ever vigilant about the impact that their own beliefs, expectations, and actions have on student aspiration.** We have to deconstruct our thinking and actions while at the same time examining how our teaching can result in real transformative change in the lives of our students. In essence, we have to learn to be honest with ourselves in a way that goes beyond just self-reflection.
6. **All schools, and by default, all people who work in and administrate over schools, must never forget to keep children securely anchored and at the center of all that is done educationally.** If politics and politicians were the solution, our schools would be better. If it was just about money then why doesn't throwing money at the problem work by itself. The things that ail our schools cannot be fixed overnight, but I argue that if we fail to keep the needs of students at the center of this conversation, we will never succeed as educators. If we continue to allow outside forces to impact the educating of the nations children by controlling the purse strings, designing only market-based curriculum, and dictating a student's and school's worth as measured by a test, then we have moved a long way from education. If we, as educators do not start to participate, guide, and insist upon changes, we are essentially conceding in

a battle our society will lose collectively on the backs of our most vulnerable; our children.

Concluding Statement

I undertook this study to find out about the experiences of Achievement Academy students with the hope of uncovering specific qualities about the program that could be reproduced so that more students could enjoy the kind of learning and caring that takes place at Achievement Academy. What I ultimately found was that if students are given the right educational environments of safe exploration, encouragement, and fostering of a sense of respect among all constituents, nurturing and caring adults who both have high expectations for them and support them in achieving those expectations, and a group of like-minded, not like-ability, peers that collectively seek success, that when all put together will provide great opportunities for students. I hope that every Achievement Academy student—past, present, and future—gets a chance to read this and “see” themselves in these pages because this research represents the collaboration of an organization and students in which success is the foundation and failure is the exception to the norm. Chapman (2007) tells us that we have to keep telling these types of success stories because they force other educational researchers to challenge the stereotypes about these types of students and to draw attention to how these students negotiate their educational and family lives in order to be successful...to beat the odds.

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APPENDIX A

MAILING SCRIPT AND INFORMATIONAL LETTER

Dear _____:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Bryan Brayboy in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to document experiences of students that have completed the Project Excellence program.

I am inviting your participation, as a student who has completed the Project Excellence, which will involve three 30-45 minute interviews and the optional participation in a 45-60 minute focus group. The interviews and focus groups will take place at Phoenix Country Day School in the Community Engagement Office in the Upper School and will include questions regarding your participation in the Project Excellence Program. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the interview at any time. The interviews will take place during the month of June. All participants selected for the study will be contacted directly to set up their interview and all participants not selected will be notified of this as well.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be at least 18 or older to participate in the study.

Although there are no direct benefits to you associated with this study, possible benefits of your participation in this study include: Being able to understand the Project Excellence Program better, the possibility of future funding sources for Project Excellence, more local and national exposure for Project Excellence, and the establishment of other Project Excellence programs in other states and between more private and public schools. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

For all of the individual interviews, your name and any identifying personal markers besides your gender and the fact that you were a participant in Project Excellence will be coded so as to make you anonymous throughout the study. Your optional participation in the group focus group may mean that your identity will be made available to the other participants in the study, but the published results of both the interview and the focus group will be anonymous. Because of the nature of a focus group, your responses during the focus group may not be completely confidential. While the conversation during the focus group may not be completely confidential, I will assign you a pseudonym for research purposes and any other personal identifying markers will be masked in order to protect your privacy. Your responses will be anonymous and combined with the responses of the other interviewees in order to draw meaning from all of your

collective experiences in order to understand your overall experience in Project Excellence.

I would like to digitally audiotape this interview. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be digitally recorded; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know. The results of this study will be used in my doctorate thesis and may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

Once my research study is complete, I will give you a copy of my research. I plan to keep the transcript and digital recordings of the interview and focus groups for three years in order to keep live data for examination and investigation if necessary. The digital data and the transcription will be encrypted and kept remotely on a secure external hard drive. All data will be destroyed three years after completion of my research.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: James Calleroz White at 602-908-9563 or at james_calleroz_white@asu.edu or contact Dr. Bryan Brayboy at 480-965-5327 or at bryan.brayboy@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please let me know if you wish to be part of the study by signing the agreement below and sending it back in the self-addressed postage paid envelop enclosed with this letter.

By signing below you are agreeing to participate in the study by being interviewed.

Signature

Date

By signing below you are agreeing to participate in the study by participating in the focus group.

Signature

Date

By signing below you are agreeing to participate in the study by participating in both the individual interview and the focus group.

Signature

Date

By signing below, you are agreeing to be digitally recorded.

Signature

Date

Please provide your phone number and email address below if you plan on participating in any part of this study. I will contact you upon receipt of this document.

Phone Number

Email Address

APPENDIX B
WRITTEN SCRIPT GIVEN AFTER CONVERSATION WITH
PARTICIPATION

Although I covered the information listed below during our conversation, I am giving you a written copy that also includes a couple of different signature lines for you to sign depending on what you would like to participate in for my study. Please read carefully the information listed below and let me know if you have any questions.

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Bryan Brayboy in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to document experiences of students that have completed the Project Excellence program.

I am inviting your participation, as a student who has completed the Project Excellence, which will involve three 30-45 minute interviews and the optional participation in a 45-60 minute focus group. The interviews and focus groups will take place at Phoenix Country Day School in the Community Engagement Office in the Upper School and will include questions regarding your participation in the Project Excellence Program. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the interview at any time. The interviews will take place during the month of June.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be at least 18 or older to participate in the study.

Although there are no direct benefits to you associated with this study, possible benefits of your participation in this study include: Being able to understand the Project Excellence Program better, the possibility of future funding sources for Project Excellence, more local and national exposure for Project Excellence, and the establishment of other Project Excellence programs in other states and between more private and public schools. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

For all of the individual interviews, your name will not be used but your gender will be recorded. Because of the nature of a focus group, your responses during the focus group may not be completely confidential. While the conversation during the focus group may not be completely confidential, I will assign you a pseudonym for research purposes and any other personal identifying markers will be masked in order to protect your privacy. Your responses will be anonymous and combined with the responses of the other interviewees.

I would like to digitally record you. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be digitally recorded; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know.

Once my research study is complete, I will give you a copy of my research. I plan to keep the transcript and digital recordings of the interview and focus groups for three years in order to keep live data for examination and investigation if necessary. The digital data and the transcription will be encrypted and kept remotely on a secure external hard drive. All data will be destroyed three years after completion of my research.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: James Calleroz White at 602-908-9563 or at james_calleroz_white@asu.edu or contact Dr. Bryan Brayboy at 480-965-5327 or at bryan.brayboy@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. I will also provide a copy of this signed document for your records if you request it.

By signing below you are agreeing to participate in the study by being interviewed.

Signature

Date

By signing below you are agreeing to participate in the study by participating in the focus group.

Signature

Date

By signing below, you are agreeing to be digitally recorded.

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions for First Interview

1. Demographic information: age, race/ethnicity, educational background, major, family Background (parent, siblings, children)
2. Tell me about yourself.
3. When did you enroll and how long did you stay in the program?
4. What led you to enroll in Achievement Academy?
5. Looking back on your time in Achievement Academy, what stands out for you?
6. What are your most vivid memories and stories about your peers at Achievement Academy?
7. What are your most vivid memories and stories about your teachers at Achievement Academy?
8. What are your most vivid memories and stories about the program...classes, field trips, etc.?
9. What are your most vivid memories about learning?
10. What are your most vivid memories of the program overall?
11. What did you like most about Achievement Academy?
12. What was your least favorite thing about Achievement Academy?
13. What was your biggest challenge in attending Achievement Academy?
14. What was your biggest success in attending Achievement Academy?
15. Did the experiences you had at Achievement Academy impact any other parts of your life? If so give me an example or a story that illustrates this. If not, why do you think it didn't?
16. Did your experiences at Achievement Academy change you? How? To what do you attribute the change and how has that played out in your life to date?
17. Did your race or ethnicity or the race and ethnicity of your peers impact your time at Achievement Academy? Did these things impact you outside of Achievement Academy?
18. What types of things did you study when you were in Achievement Academy? How did they impact you?
19. Is there anything else that you remember about your experience at Achievement Academy that you would like to share at this time?

Questions for the Second Interview

1. After looking over the transcript of our first interview, is there anything that you would like to add or clarify?
2. Who and/or what motivated you during your time in Achievement Academy?
3. Tell me a story or give me some examples from a time at Achievement where you felt the program had an impact on you.
4. Do the same people and things that motivated you during your time at Achievement Academy motivate you now? If so explain and if not, why?
5. Did Achievement Academy play any role at all in your academic success to date?

6. Did Achievement Academy play any role with regards to your current educational status and/or career? If so how and why.
7. Is there anything else that you remember about your experience at Achievement Academy that you would like to share at this time?

Questions for Third Interview

1. After looking over the transcript of our second interview, is there anything that you would like to add or clarify?

The rest of the questions asked during this interview were all clarification questions that the researcher had from the previous two interviews.

APPENDIX D
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. How would you, as a group of former students, describe Achievement Academy?
2. How would you, as a group of former students, describe your peers in Achievement Academy?
3. How would you, as a group of former students, describe your teachers in Achievement Academy?
4. How would you, as a group of former students, describe your classroom experience in Achievement Academy?
5. What are some of your fondest memories of Achievement Academy?
6. What did you get out of attending Achievement Academy if anything?
7. What challenges did you face in attending Achievement Academy if any?
8. What was the best part about Achievement Academy when you attended?
9. What was the worst part about Achievement Academy when you attended?
10. Do you think Achievement Academy was successful in its mission?
11. What impact did Achievement Academy have on you then? What about now?
12. What aspects of Achievement Academy would you like to talk about that have not been addressed yet?
13. Is there anything else you want to add regarding your experience in Achievement Academy?

APPENDIX E
SELECTED LIST OF ACHIEVEMENT ACADEMY COURSE
DESCRIPTIONS

A WORLD OF SHAPES AND PATTERNS

(Grades 4-6)

Our first activities will require students to work with their hands to figure out the area of common shapes such as rectangles, circles, and squares. Students will study numbers and create rules and formulas to find area and create patterns. During the second part of the workshop, students will describe and make patterns using shapes and numbers. We will use objects such as coins and toothpicks to make patterns and then tell what pattern was created. Students will also write rules and graphs to describe each pattern. For the final project, students will use their imaginations to create a picture using different shapes.

MUSIC HISTORY: 50 YEARS OF MUSIC, EVENTS, & PEOPLE

(Grades 4-6)

Students will spend time listening to and learning about different types of music. Students will watch videos and listen to the most popular music from 1960 to 2010, while learning about important people in music history and the events that took place when certain types of music were most popular. Students will end the course with a musical performance that represents the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s and 2000s.

LEARN FROM THE PAST, WATCH THE PRESENT, & CREATE THE FUTURE

(Grades 4-6)

Students will read two books set in World War II Europe - *The Diary of A Young Girl* by Anne Frank and the novel *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. Students will discuss the books' characters and settings and analyze the causes behind the prejudices of that time. With those ideas in mind, students will create a proposal outlining ways that they can make a difference by bringing about positive change and acceptance of differences in their own community.

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

(Grades 7-12)

Students will learn the basics of designing a floor plan for a functional living space, taking into account basic human needs when designing rooms. Students will describe and draw plans for the ultimate teen bedroom and bath suite, study and write about great works of architecture, and learn about ways to conserve energy in home construction. The final project will be to design a classic adobe home and build a 3-dimensional model of their unique design. Possible field trips to Taliesin West and the APS Energy Conservation House.

FREEDOM AND PEACE THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING

(Grades 7-12)

Oppressed communities globally have come together recently in order to experience a free and peaceful life on their terms. From slogans to songs to sonnets, those looking for freedom have found non-violent ways to express themselves and change their lives. This course explores how these goals have

been pursued and arms students with the ability to speak out effectively. Students will find their cause and explore the power of the pen. To conclude the course, students will present written work on their personal pursuit of freedom and peace – potentially treating the audience to some slam poetry as well!

INTRODUCTION TO CERAMICS

(Grades 7-12)

This class is designed for students who want to work with clay. Students will gain experience in hand-building sculptural pieces as well as wheel-throwing cups and bowls. The items students make in ceramics will be theirs to keep and even use at the dinner table.

ROBOTICS AND ELECTRONICS

(Grades 9-12)

Students will learn how to build and program robots. First they will learn the basic concepts and theories behind electricity and simple electronic devices, and they will construct simple electric circuits. Students will then work in small groups to assemble, wire, and program robots. They will focus on accomplishing specific tasks, which will become more challenging as the course progresses.

PROJECT CITIZEN

(Grades 4-6)

Students will work in teams to identify a public policy problem in society. By following a step-by-step process of researching the problem, examining alternative solutions, and developing an action plan, students will learn firsthand what it means to be an active citizen living in a democratic society.

DATA AND PROBABILITY

(Grades 4-6)

Students will begin this exciting course by exploring two very important mathematical concepts: data analysis and probability. They will be challenged to design surveys, collect data, and display their findings with the help of technology. In cooperative groups, students will conduct probability experiments, predict outcomes, and describe the probability/chance that an event will happen. For their final project, students will apply their knowledge of mathematics by researching solar energy and designing a solar oven or water heater. They will predict outcomes, collect data, make modifications to their design, plot their findings, and compose a description of their project.

INTRODUCTION TO MOVIE MAKING

(Grades 7-12)

Did you know that Steven Spielberg got his start making short movies as a student in Phoenix? In this course, students will get a start in the basics of documentary moviemaking by creating a movie about one aspect of Arizona history. To celebrate the centennial of Arizona's statehood, students will study the people and events of the last 100 years in state history. For their final project, students will

choose one of those topics as the subject of their movie. To conclude the course, students will share their movie online for the world to see, and will also share it during a film festival at Open House.

BE THE CHANGE!

(Grades 7-12)

This course will explore the ideas of social justice and activism. Through hands-on activities and group discussions, students will tackle such issues as racism, sexism, violence, and prejudice. They will look deeply into the problems facing society today. Students will learn the skills needed to become active community leaders. At the end of summer session, they will have gained the tools required to truly “be the change” they want to see in the world.

CSI: ACHIEVEMENT ACADEMY

(Grades 7-12)

Students will become crime scene investigators of a real, double-murder cold case! They will learn a variety of forensic techniques to examine such crime scene evidence as fingerprints, hair, blood types, footprints, blood spatter, pathology reports, and even DNA. Principles from many different branches of science will be reinforced through the investigations, including those from biology, physics, and analytical chemistry. A formal conference will be held at the end of the session, during which various teams of “Achievement Academy crime techs” will present the different lines of evidence they analyzed. Then the entire group will attempt to establish, once and for all, who really committed this crime!

APPENDIX F
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

To: Bryan Brayboy

fo From: Mark Roosa, Chair *sm*
Soc Beh IRB

Date: 05/31/2011

Committee Action: Exemption Granted

IRB Action Date: 05/31/2011

IRB Protocol #: 1105006496

Study Title: "The Experience of Achievement Academy Students"

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.