

A Qualitative Analysis of High Achieving African American Females' Perceptions on Factors
That Impact on Time High School Graduation in Southeastern Virginia

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences, attitudes, and successes of a group of high achieving African American female students that impact their on-time high school graduation. On-time graduates are described as students who complete high school in four years. High achieving African-American female students completing high school on time identified factors related to family, school, and community as essential in their success. Several underlying factors are within the three themes that studies show can be used as a way to pilot programs, deter drop-outs from leaving school early, and cohesively work in communities across the United States.

A qualitative approach was used to analyze a selected group of high achieving African American females' perceptions to their success in high school. The research questions were:

1. What school factors do a group of high achieving African-American female students perceive as attributing to their on-time graduation from high school with honors and advanced diplomas?
2. What family influences do these high achieving females perceive as attributes to graduating on-time with honors and advanced diplomas?
3. What community influences do these high achieving African American females' perceive as contributors to on-time graduation with honors and advanced diplomas?

Twenty-four high achieving African American females' from one high school were eligible to participate in the study. Eight students participated in the study, which included open-ended interview questions and a sentence completion questionnaire. All interview questions were centered on the support provided by the school, community, or family.

The results of the study showed parents; specifically the mothers of the participants had the greatest impact on the high achieving African American females' performance in high

school. The teachers of the high achieving African American female students were supportive and caring. The community recognition that the high achieving African American females received was a motivating factor to varying degrees. The high achieving African American female participants, in the study, all possessed intrinsic motivation and work ethic to be academically successful.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband David for all of the times you had to listen to ‘just this one sentence’ and encouraging me to never give up. This is your dissertation too.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my daughters, Markelle, Deja, and Desiree, three high achievers that gave me the inspiration for this topic and this choice in university. I not only accomplished this for me but for you.

Every strong woman has an even stronger mother. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my mother, (Dr.) Rosalyn Roberts. You started the same journey a few years ago and inspired me to pursue this dream.

I have so many others who I would like to add to my list of dedication to cover all of the groups of people this is dedicated to my family, friends, church family, colleagues, and students that I am fortunate to know.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

United States researchers estimate that between 40% and 50% of high schools graduate fewer than half of their ninth grade students in four years (Alspaugh, 2000). This is particularly true in high poverty school districts, where on average more than 40% of overall student loss occurs in the ninth grade, compared with 27% percent in low poverty districts (Alspaugh, 2000). Research indicates that 70% to 80% of students who fail the ninth grade will not graduate from high school (Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, Husband, and Lindsay, 2003). If students are given the tools to equip and handle the core challenges of gaining a high school diploma regardless of their circumstances, then their success in high school will determine their success throughout their academic career and life (Herzog & Morgan, 1998). While previous data showed the disparity of minority students failing to complete high school, there have been improvements over the past seven years (MacIver and Groginsky, 2011).

Historical Perspective of African-American Females in Public Schools

Until the last fifteen years, most literature related to African-American female students had focused on the deficits to their achievement such as, high school drop-out rates, pregnancy rates and social problems (Evans-Winters, 2005). Positive approaches to describe African American females performance in public has focused on the successes. According to Darling-Hammond, Williamson, Hyler (2007), basic literacy was the first goal of Black children earning an education. Black and White abolitionists who started schools sought to elevate the Black race; however, they were forced to only allow Black students to be trained in manual labor areas (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). State governments limited funds to Black institutions of learning if they were offering a liberal education laced with literate goals and critical thought that

was viewed as dangerous by the politicians. Some early Black high schools funded by freeman and freewomen out performed White schools in the surrounding areas. M Street High School (existing Dunbar High School) in Washington D.C., founded in 1870 was one high performing school and the dominant feeder school for Howard University. In spite of the growing disdain for a fully educated Black race, M Street High School continued to educate its students in all majors, not just the agricultural, low skilled majors (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). The practice of keeping Blacks uneducated caused low morale among some and created a sense of worthlessness regarding education among others (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

The most important case that brought monumental change to public education was *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, KS 1954* (Alexander and Alexander, 2001). The basis of the plaintiffs' arguments in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS 1954* is that segregated schools are not equal and were not able to ever be made equal under the separate but equal clause. Furthermore, Black children were deprived equal protection of the law (Alexander and Alexander, 2001). Cases from Kansas, Virginia, South Carolina, Delaware, and Washington, D.C were argued in Supreme Court in December of 1952. Lower court decisions in those cases propelled the higher courts to rule in favor of the plaintiffs that separate was not equal and that it would have a negative effect on the children in society (Alexander and Alexander, 2001).

Brown v. Board plaintiffs were Black elementary students in Topeka, KS where statute allowed a population of 15,000 or more to maintain separate facilities for Blacks and Whites. The lower courts in Kansas ruled that separation of the two races was detrimental to Black children but denied relief because the facilities were equal (Alexander and Alexander, 2001). After the ruling, some state officials went to great lengths to keep integration from happening. In Little Rock, Arkansas for example, the National Guard was called by the governor to keep the

Black students from entering school. In Prince Edward County, Virginia the public schools were closed for five years causing families to send their children to other counties and out of the state to be educated while some White students turned to private schools that received monetary assistance from the commonwealth.

Statement of the problem

African-American females have more access to educational opportunities; however, they still lag behind their White counterparts in achieving a high school diploma (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2011). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012) the high school drop-out rates for White females were 4.6% while the rates for African-American females were slightly higher at 6.4%. Similarly, a 2010 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report states the on time graduation rates for all females was 90.6%, with 94.2% for White females and 86.9% for African-American females. Although the achievement gap is getting smaller, it still remains a point of contention for educators to tackle each year due to students being left behind and not achieving.

Significance of the study

National Perspective. With the passing of the Public Law 107-110 or *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* in 2001, a renewed interest began among researchers in estimating high school graduation rates (Heckman and LaFontaine, 2007). *NCLB* made increased high school graduation rates a primary objective and required states and schools to monitor them as measures of adequate yearly progress (AYP) as of 2012 called annual measureable progress (AMO) (American Institute for Research, 2011). States must set AYP objectives (steadily increasing tests scores and graduation rates) to ensure 100% of high school students achieve at proficient

levels by spring 2014 (Joftus and Maddox, 2006). Furthermore, states must comply with the federal formula for the determination of graduation rates, defined as the percentage of students who graduate from high school with a regular diploma in the standard four years (Joftus and Maddox, 2006).

Commonwealth of Virginia perspective. Virginia has an accountability structure for districts to assess students' learning and teacher effectiveness. Districts set their own credit requirements along with implementing The Standards of Learning (SOL) or End-of-Course tests. They are measured each year in core subjects while high school students must earn at least six verified credits in order to earn a standard diploma. The six verified credits are as follows: one in math, one in social studies, two in English (reading and writing), one in science and one can be student selected. For students earning an advanced studies diploma, the students can earn nine verified credits. They can earn two in English (reading and writing), two in math, two in science, two in history and one can be student selected. Additionally, in the Commonwealth of Virginia, high schools are to meet benchmarks in graduation and completion. The required Graduation Completion Index (GCI) for districts is 85 or higher.

Local Perspective. Goals are created each year to meet the AMO requirements set by the Commonwealth of Virginia, developing improvement plans for each school each year, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of student performance and teacher effectiveness. Additionally, each school participates in an annual academic review evaluation to make sure they continue to follow district and Commonwealth standards. The same sub-group data used by the Commonwealth is used for the evaluation of the schools (Virginia Department of Education, 2013). In order for students to graduate they must earn at least 22 credits for a standard diploma and 26 credits for an advanced standard diploma. The students also are required to earn verified

credits six for a standard diploma and nine for an advanced standard diploma by completing an end of course Standards of Learning (SOL) exam.

***NCLB* and Implications on Graduation Rates**

Not only does *NCLB* emphasize improved access to a quality education for all, but it also emphasizes a complete education with college and career-ready standards and assessments (*NCLB Act 2001*). School districts are required to keep track of their data and report them to each state board of education and the federal offices of accountability to show annual measureable objectives (AMO). On-time graduation is an important aspect of school districts meeting AMO status each year. *NCLB* implemented increased high school graduation rates as a primary objective and requirement for school districts (*NCLB Act 2001*). If school districts do not meet the AMO requirements, they could face sanctions, primarily in the form of reduced federal funding.

The changes in guidelines have been in place and districts across the country have struggled to meet AMO each year, in 2011 the Obama administration offered waivers to states implementing reform and improvements to their schools in order to meet the required benchmarks (ESEA, 2010). Since the waiver offer in 2011, 45 states, the District of Columbia (D.C.), Puerto Rico and the Bureau of Indian Education have applied for the *NCLB* waivers in exchange for their developed plans to prepare their students for college and career readiness. As of August 2013, 41 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) were approved for waivers while the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), Illinois, Iowa, Puerto Rico, and Wyoming have a pending status, California was rejected, and North Dakota and Vermont have withdrawn from the waiver.

Nebraska and Montana have not applied for the waiver (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).
(See Table 1)

Table 1. *Non-Waiver by State*

Pending	Rejected	Not Applied	Withdrawn
BIE	California	Nebraska	North Dakota
Illinois		Montana	Vermont
Iowa			
Puerto Rico			
Wyoming			

According to Heckman and LaFontaine (2007), students graduating on-time and being able to contribute to the economic advancement of this country is an important research topic with many implications. The first implication is decreased worker productivity that fueled early America (Heckman and LaFontaine, 2007). Since the founding of this country, the wages for the educated have risen drastically. With the technology boom in manufacturing in other countries, the United States has had to look at how schools could produce the workers to compete in a global economy. The real wages of high school drop-outs have declined since the early 1970's while those of skilled workers have risen sharply (Katz, Autor, and Kearney, 2005). Another implication is the ever changing technological advances in the world. In order to maintain the status as the world super-power, the U.S. must continue to compete with other countries in the fields of industry, commerce, science and technology.

Furthermore, states are now required under the *NCLB Act*, to show growth in the graduation rate every year and are using associated waivers to meet this requirement. There have been studies conducted over the past thirty years with controversial results from the on-time completion rate being as high as 88% for all students and 79% for minorities (Heckman and

LaFontaine, 2007). Other studies have not shown this high completion rate; they have shown consistently lower rates as low as 73% for an overall on-time completion and 65% for minorities (Hirschman, Pharris-Ciurej, and Willhoft, 2006). With this large discrepancy, researchers have had to look at how the data are collected and to clearly define an on-time graduate. On-time graduation is important for students in the United States due to the economical effect that an educated student will have on society as well as the economic impact an uneducated student will have.

The Purpose of the Study.

The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences, attitudes, and successes of the group of high achieving African American female students and how those experiences impact their on-time high school graduation. On-time graduates can be described as starting high school as a ninth grader and completing it in four straight years. A qualitative approach was used to analyze the high achieving African American females' perceptions to their successes in high school. Individual interviews were used allowing the respondents to answer open-ended questions in order to find out what caused them to successfully complete high school on-time with honors. The individual interviews sought to explain the "Why?" for the successful completion of high school for high achieving African-American female students (Merriam, 2009). The final themes garnered from the results of their interviews were used to gain insight that may help administrators assist African American girls reach similar milestones. The study offers educators' best practices for this population of students to close the achievement gap.

Research Questions.

Questions to answer were:

Research Question 1-What school factors do a group of high achieving African American female students perceive as attributing to their on-time graduation from high school with honors and advanced diplomas?

Research Question 2-What family influences do these high achieving African American females perceive as attributing to their on-time graduation from high school with honors and advanced diplomas?

Research Question 3-What community influences do these high achieving African American females perceive as contributors to on-time graduation with honors and advanced diplomas?

Theoretical Framework.

The theoretical framework used for this study is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1976, 1979) ecological systems theory. His theory considers the human development where growth occurs within a complex system of relationships. It is based on five socially organized subsystems: a microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

- Microsystem contains the social roles of the developing person in a face-to-face setting such as family, school, and peer group.
- Mesosystem comprises of the processes taking place between two or more settings such as the relationship between home and school.
- Exosystem links two or more settings with at least one of the settings not containing the developing person but events in that setting can have an indirect influence on the processes within the immediate setting. An example of this would be the school and neighborhood.

- Macrosystems is the belief systems, values, and life-styles of a culture or sub-culture.
- Chronosystem involves the changes in the characteristics of the environment over time (Bronfenbrenner's (1976, 1979).

Due to the norms, roles, and rules that Bronfenbrenner describes as shaping development of decisions, performance, and choices, this theory suggests the ways in which school, community, and home life can have an impact on student performance. Thus, a child's personal attributes can be shaped by the environments in which they live. The diagram below (figure 1) displays the connection and relationship of all of these factors with the student's on-time graduation as the central focus in the age of accountability.

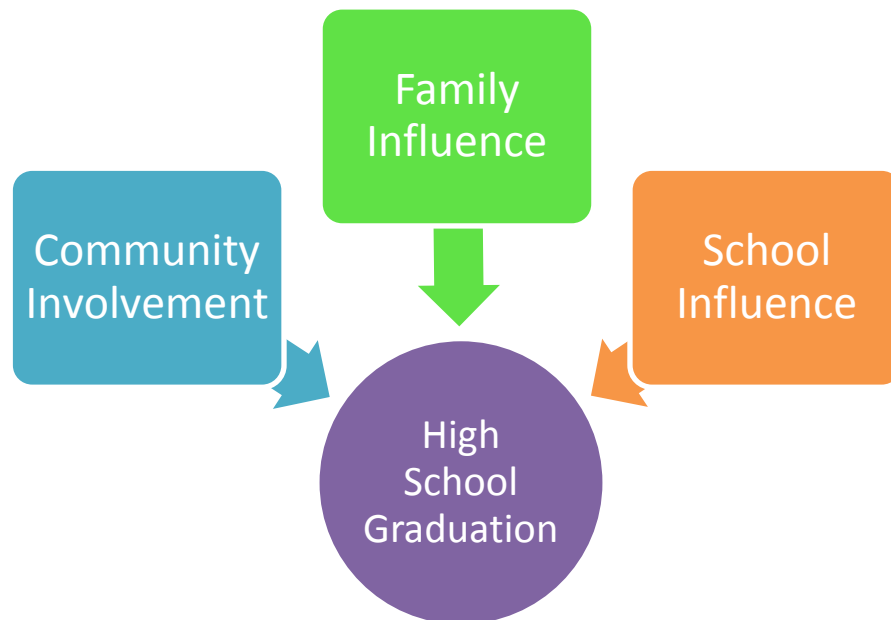


Figure 1 *A model to describe the factors of successful on time graduation*

Limitations.

The limitations of the study were gaining one group's perspective on the topic of successful on-time high school completion. Another limitation for this study was researcher bias, interviews are based on performance and perceptions of personal experiences in high school that took place two years ago there is no guarantee of accuracy or honesty. All of the participants were from the same high school enrolled in most of the same classes being taught by the same teachers. The results offer general practices for schools with the same type of demographics to look for specific theories of performance of African-American students.

De-limitations.

The target goal of interviewing a group of eight females from one high school is a de-limitation in the study by only gaining the opinions of a small portion of the graduates. No teacher or parent input in the study was a choice selected by the researcher.

Organization of the study.

The study is organized into five chapters. A qualitative approach was used to analyze the performance data of a group of high achieving African-American female graduates from a Southeastern Virginia high school along with interviewing eight of those females. The study consists of five chapters. The first chapter lays a foundation of the topic giving a brief synopsis and history of high achieving African-American female students on time graduation. Next, the second chapter consists of a review of pertinent literature for this topic. The third chapter gives an overview of the intended methodology for the study. In the fourth chapter the findings of the interviews with the participants and their responses to the open-ended questionnaire are described. Lastly, the final chapter discusses the results and conclusions of the study.

Chapter 2 Review of the Relevant Literature

A review of literature was conducted related to on-time graduation and the prevalent themes pertaining to high achieving African American female students meeting the requirements and standards. The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences, attitudes, and successes of the group of high achieving African American female students that impact their on-time high school graduation. While analyzing the research studies for on-time graduation rate of African American female high school students, three important themes that emerged related to reasons why some complete school on time and others do not. The review of literature was focused on the following: school impact, family influence, and community involvement. Each category includes prior research to show what researchers have identified as the correlation of the variables to on-time graduation for African American females.

Search Process

To look for sources and information Virginia Tech Summon was used along with Christopher Newport University library search engine, Google Scholar, EBSCO, ERIC, Virginia Department of Education website and the U.S. Department of Education. Search terms such as: high school graduation, African American females' success, African American males' success, resilience, drop-out, high school completion, achievement gap, literacy, high school reform, graduation rate, parental involvement, school reform, academies, middle school, grade level literacy and NCLB were used to search online resources.

Significant Researchers and Scholars

Proactive researchers have been developing solution orientated methods for educators to use to help strengthen the school environment and improve achievement for African American

students. They feel the deficits have been pointed out and described but more has to be developed in order to see a true change (Leak, 2008). Ladson-Billings (2006) states that education researchers have devoted a great amount of time investigating the poor minorities, without providing remedies that help solve their problems. She posits most inquiries about issues facing the African American community confound and challenge the public. Ladson-Billings (2012) argues that race and literacy in the U.S. goes hand and hand because early legislation made it a crime to teach enslaved children to read and write. The stigma of African American learning has stuck in some areas of the country and communities. Some of her early work focused on Black student conceptualization of themselves in response to the National Assessment of Educational Progress that reported that they were poorer students than Whites. She found that premise ‘hyperbolic’ due to the long history of contributions Blacks made to the founding of the U.S. She resolved to answer in her research what is right for African American students and students of color.

Similarly, Darling-Hammond, Williamson, and Hyler (2007) focused some of their research on achieving the type of education that “secures access to schooling and curriculum for full citizenship” (p. 281). She recognized the inequalities that face children of color, but writes about ways to level the educational platform for all. Just as Ladson-Billings posits, Darling-Hammond et al., (2007) also addresses “the gains in educational attainment of African American students since the U.S Census began keeping records organized by race in 1940” (p. 281). Her research focused on the educational needs of minorities in the classroom first, accounting for past mis-treatment and how it is a bridge to future triumphs (2007). Darling-Hammond et al., (2007) postulates that standards based rhetoric is appealing, but schools will not improve unless real deficits of students are raised to the public. Standards and tests will not improve schools or

create educational opportunities where they do not exist (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Her remedy is to level funding in areas of need for labs, books, and resources.

Some other prolific researchers are Fordham and Ogbu (1986). Their perspectives differ from the perspective of Ladson-Billings and Darling-Hammond. They portray African American culture as “anti-intellectual”. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) contend that high achieving African American students may not have a true choice because of possible cultural differences with the school’s culture. They contend that high achieving African American students are forced to choose between their ethnicity and intellect, in order to take advantage of the schools opportunity structure of achievement and college information. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) state that high achieving African American students will act “White” or not pursue college preparatory courses in order to maintain connection to lower achieving African American students. Fordham (1996) states that African American students are often perceived as adapting to and accepting the White culture and “acting White” for enrollment in college preparatory courses while appearing too intelligent. She posited that high school success and the appearance of “acting White” are the reasons why some African American females shun the college preparation studies track, due to the perceptions of being intelligent and the feeling of emotional alienation from their peers (Fordham, 1996, Fordham and Ogbu, 1986).

Salient themes to the topic of successful African American high school students are in the areas of school impact, family influence and community involvement. Other studies have contributed to the topic offering findings that could benefit educators.

School Impact

The relationship between the school environment and student achievement is one that researchers have been keenly focused on in order to develop proactive attributes for school improvement (Morse-Mendez, 2014). Considered one of the most important educational studies of the 20th century, *Equality of Education Opportunity* (Coleman, 1966) examined school level factors such as segregation and equal access for all students. The study surveyed more than 600,000 superintendents, principals, teachers, and students paying close attention to 6 racial and ethnic groups: Black, Native Americans, Oriental Americans, Puerto Ricans (living in the U.S.), Mexican Americans, and Whites. The study answered the following questions:

- To what extent are the racial and ethnic groups segregated from one another?
- Are schools offering equal educational opportunities in terms of facilities, curriculum, resources, academic offerings, teacher quality and training, teacher salaries, student body, parent economical level, and parent education which are regarded as good indicators of educational quality?
- How much did the students learn measured by their performance on standardized tests?
- What are the possible relationships between student achievement and the kinds of schools they attend? (Coleman, 1966).

The Coleman Report was commissioned by the U.S. Office of Education, as declared by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to help assist in implementing integration in public schools. It became the foundation for practices of cross town busing and purposeful mixture of ethnicities in public school. With much bitterness, controversy, and resistance to change, the Coleman Report became the foundation of studies on the impact of student achievement in the U.S. (King, 2013).

Two more reports were released with the last in 1981; it evoked just as much controversy as the first. It was widely criticized for stating that private schools were better than public schools.

Rativich (1981) asserts that the 1981 report is important for its focus on schools making the difference in education not just the public or private education aspect. Two of the major findings from this study are that private schools offer safer, more disciplined, more orderly environments than public schools and non-Catholic private schools have sharply lower student/teacher ratios (Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore, 1982).

After the 3rd Coleman Report, educators began to look at what they could change and control within the school setting, especially related to programs. Those programs included; course offerings, class size, and pedagogy. Public school educators soon started mimicking the private school feel by mandating teacher-to-student ratios in classes, or smaller class size (Kahlenberg, 2001). However, female students continued to be overlooked and often ignored in policies and improvements in school reform (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

This is a Man's World. Results from the Women's Educational Equity Act Resource Center (Fleming, 2000) show progress in educational outcomes for female students. They have increased sports participation, improved math proficiency, and increased scores on achievement tests. More females are pursuing post-secondary education and minority females' students have higher academic and career aspirations (Fleming, 2000). The report goes on further to state that females enter school enthusiastic and excited about learning, but by 4th grade they are less confident and view school with less excitement due to bias and gender stereotypes that exists in the classroom (Fleming, 2000).

Even with the great gains females have made in obtaining an education and being as a part of the professional workforce, there is still the practice of girls being treated as invisible by

teachers, administrators, policymakers, and oftentimes male peers (Franzosa, 1993). In 1991, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) began a concerted effort to bring attention to the issues facing females in public education (AAUW, 1992). It was noted that true changes in equity for females could be made with policies that focused exclusively on them. Some results from the compilation of studies found that girls received less attention than boys from teachers in the classroom. Additionally, African American females had fewer interactions with teachers than did White females, in spite of evidence that they attempted to initiate interactions more frequently. Furthermore, the study reported a rise in sexual harassment of females by male students in public schools (AAUW, 1992).

Clark in the 2006 study of academically successful Black female students who had a positive racial identity, focused on the recommendation of Mecee and Kurtz-Costes (2001) that a great deal of research prior to 2001 was based on prescribing 'at-risk' behaviors of Blacks not one of a proactive stance. The school and the students that were a part of her study lived in low-income housing in low socioeconomic neighborhoods. It was due to be torn down later that school year, during the study the population decreased due to voluntary transfers during the study.

The study used a mixed methods design approach; she interviewed the girls, their parents, teachers, and administrators, while she conducted interviews she used the RIAS-B, the Racial Identity Attitude Scale. The RIAS measures the racial identity of Black people. The first group of respondents using the RIAS was Black, females, in the 6th and 7th grade. The MEIM, a scale survey measuring ethnic identity for adolescents, regardless of race was given to the White females of the group. The data from both scales was used as a comparison for performance and

attitude. Clark (2006) used ethnographic methods to investigate the life experiences of the students to find out the keys to their success in school.

Some of her findings were the Black respondents were not mature enough to understand race and took on the notions of their parents not their own. They viewed racial problems as a thing of the past because they were no longer segregated. The researcher reported that some derogatory comments were made to one of the girls in her presence and the student did not seem affected by it. When she asked the student about the racist remark she did not understand that the term was meant in a derogatory way. Clark (2006) identified the students age as a limitation to her study. Their adolescent age was a hindrance to their life experiences and ability to identify those experiences. The Black participants viewed their race as a positive part of their life and education. The girls that scored lower on the RIAS, tended to have higher G.P.A.'s than those who scored the higher, they had lower G.P.A's.

Teacher Expectations of African American Females. Teacher expectation greatly impacts students' success, performance, and motivation (Russell, 2005). While studying the perceptions of high performing African American girls, Archer-Banks (2007) found that teacher efficacy was integral to the success of the girls. She interviewed six 11th grade girls and one 12th grade girl and reported that when the participants experienced challenges or inequities in school, they had at least one staff member who encouraged and helped them maintain the high academic success. Furthermore, Archer-Banks (2007) used individual interviews, focus groups and journal entries to analyze the emergent themes of her study. Some of those themes were attending college, school experience, student engagement, family influence, and bridges to academic success.

Walker-Bowen (2007) studied traits of effective Caucasian female teachers of African American students by using a multiple case study design in an urban southern school with a student body comprised of 95% African Americans with 85% of those students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Her study found that the teachers understood and valued their teacher student relationships and the impact it has on the student's academic achievement. They were purposeful in developing positive relationships by listening and learning about their students. According to Walker-Dalhousie (2005), unless purposeful relationship building is sought by teachers, African American students are less likely to have a positive relationship with their teachers.

The level of care and influence of teachers can have a positive impact on the lives of African American females. Studies pertaining to African American teachers as "Warm Demanders" (Ware, 2002) are teachers described as effective and culturally responsive. They are firm, caring, demanding, and holding high expectations for their students. Ware (2002) identified common traits of two exemplary African American teachers from different backgrounds. She conducted a qualitative study on a 30 year veteran elementary school teacher and a 6 year middle school reading teacher. The researcher explored whether the traits, beliefs, and practices of the two teachers identified some of the culturally specific ways that African American teachers have successfully nurtured and instructed African American students to succeed academically.

Ware (2006) examined the teachers' instructional practices, beliefs and how they were similar and different. Additionally she examined evidence that the shared culture/ethnic background of the teachers and students influenced instructional practices. She interviewed and randomly observed the teachers in their classes over a period of six months. The study was

conducted as a comparative case study of two generations of African American teachers. The older teacher was a pillar in the school and community who taught several generations over her career. She had creditability with the students because she would remind them of the success their older siblings and parents had while they were students in her class. The younger teacher was an up and coming pillar in the community also showing her creditability with the students and parents by her caring nature and remarkable ability to teach reading.

Ware (2006) reported both of the teachers were successful with students of color because, “these teachers did not lower their standards for the students and were willing to help them.” (p. 436). The teachers showed the students respect, care, and concern while demanding that they maintain (or improve) a good academic work ethic. Although they could be viewed as hard, mean, or yelling at their students, based on the observations the students listened and followed whatever the teachers stated. One of the teachers described her conversations with her classes as “mean-talking” the students but she would always communicate care while she addressed inappropriate behavior. Most of the students were from low socioeconomic, impoverished areas where education was not a priority with the families. Both teachers used the warm demander approach with the parents of their students to help the entire family get their needs met while helping to educate them.

Both teachers admitted that they consistently addressed discipline immediately without forsaking teaching and learning. They spent more time at the beginning of the school year reviewing and instructing the students about the order and discipline procedures in the classroom (Ware, 2006). They had the “other mother” self-perception that they felt that their supportive nature was just as important as their teaching. Both teachers took away the excuses from the students while offering multiple opportunities to learn. They were culturally responsive, “an

approach to teaching and learning that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18)

Although this research pertains to high achieving African American females’ successful completion of high school, a study on successful African American college students has similar recommendations and solutions for educators. Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) posits that students of color have different experiences in intuitions’ of higher learning. They feel that African American students regardless of the type of institution need like minded peer groups that accept their perspective and ‘voice’ without judgment or critical opinion (Fries-Britt and Turner, 2002). Their study sought to identify the experiences, challenges and supports for academic successful African American students at traditionally White institutions (PWIs) and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) used a qualitative design to try to understand what students’ experiences were that had the greatest impact on their performance. Their first finding was the students’ need for campus support and involvement in social and emotional experiences on both types of campuses. The researchers recommended that these students have a supportive environment from caring faculty and staff members. The students’ opinions, viewpoints, and acceptance should be “honestly accepted” (p. 322) from their White counterparts and professors in the classroom.

Fries-Britt and Turner (2002), reported that the African American students at PWIs had support from their African American peers in their classes, a theme they identified as fortunate. Another major theme that emerged from their interviews was student involvement in campus activities are more likely to make that student feel part of and connected to the university (Fries-Britt and Turner, 2002). A second finding discussed in this research is that academic institutions

should learn how to build confidence in African American students “by creating personal and institutional systems... The energy that is cultivated or diverted in students can propel them towards academic pursuits or impede their progress (p. 326).”

Social support from parents, teachers, and peers can promote positive development during adolescence (Wang and Eccles, 2012). In a longitudinal study of 1,470 students from twenty-three schools in a diverse county near Washington, D.C., data was collected when the students were in 7th grade until 11th grade. The purpose of the study was to examine the role of social support from parents, teachers, and peers on student engagement during middle and high school. Wang and Eccles (2012) defined school engagement as positive conduct, compliance with school rules, enjoyment and interest in the classroom. Indicators of school engagement declined from 7th to 11th grade. The different sources of support worked against the declines and had varying degrees of influence on the different facets of school engagement (Wang and Eccles, 2012). Some findings were peer support was associated with declines in participation in extra-curricular activities, sense of school identity, and subjective valuing of learning at school (Wang and Eccles, 2012). Parent support had a positive impact on school engagement and stronger impact than peer social support.

Tierney and Colyar (2005) reported that peer relationships influence students’ academic success. They reported that many students look to their friends for social and emotional support and educators can use that influence for academic success in general and college-bound behavior (Tierney and Colyar, 2005). Some recommendations they made for educators are to: establish cohorts of students, make those cohorts visible with specific paraphernalia, schedule regular meetings over a sustained period of time focusing on academic preparation, provide opportunities for students to learn, apply and prepare for college (Tierney and Colyar, 2005).

Performance at grade level. Another important aspect of African American females' on-time graduation is their grade-level literacy. Grade level literacy in reading and mathematics is an essential factor to on-time graduation. Students reading at or above grade level normally have a higher rate of graduation than their peers reading below grade level. The two teachers in the Ware (2006) study made promises to their parents that the students will be able to read by end of the marking period. They both identified meeting the basic needs of the student first then allowing no excuses or distractions from their students' learning due to their students often lacking basic reading and writing skills. Balfanz and Herzog reported in a 2006 study, "Students who entered high school two or more years behind grade level in math and reading literacy have only a 50/50 chance of on-time promotion to 10th grade and then graduation" (p. 2). Early academic performance is an indicator of student success in high school. If students are reading at or above grade level by the time they reach middle school, it is predicted that they will graduate on-time (in four years) upon entering high school (Hirschman et al., 2006).

Researchers have used the pivotal grades to measure future success; third-grade, sixth-grade and ninth-grade. A 2010 report, looking at the longitudinal data of third grade students in Chicago Public Schools in 1996-1997 and their educational outcomes, predicted that schools across the country will graduate 45% of their students in five years that are below grade level in reading as compared to 60% of students who read at grade level in third grade (Lesnick, George, Smithgall, and Gwynne, 2010). Urban teenagers who leave school without graduating often have experienced earlier crisis points in high school, notably severe academic difficulty during the first year of high school (ninth grade for most students in the United States) (Neild, Stoner-Eby, Furstenburg, 2008). Progress made in the ninth-grade year is crucial to on-time graduation. Challenges to making progress apply, not only to becoming familiar with the new freedoms of

high school, but also mastering new difficult courses. On-time graduation is difficult to accomplish if students, upon entering the ninth-grade are weak in mathematics and reading comprehension skills (Roderick and Camburn, 1999; Neild and Balfanz, 2001).

Family Influence

Research shows that middle and upper middle class parents are more involved with school activities (Ho and Willms, 1996). School-family relationships can range from assisting children with homework and simple encouragement to achieve, to monitoring their children's progress. According to Henderson and Mapp (2002), families dramatically influence the degree to which children are engaged in school and how they identify themselves as learners. Data from this study showed that students with involved parents, regardless of income or background, were more likely than those without involved parents to have good attendance records, achieve at high rates in class and on tests, enroll in challenging courses, have fewer social problems, graduate high school on time, and go to college (Henderson and Mapp 2002). Educators have increasingly identified parental involvement as the primary vehicle by which to raise academic achievement (Hara and Burke, 1998).

Researchers have argued that in many urban areas, parental involvement may be especially important because of high family dissolution rates, numerous two-parent working parents, and unique family pressures on children. Those pressures might include older siblings taking care of younger siblings, students coming home to an empty home with no adult monitoring or supervision, and no access to extra-curricular activities (Bauch and Goldring, 1995). "Once educators know the constructs inherent in parental involvement, they can better predict the family and social attributes most important to producing parents who participate in the educational experience of children" (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, and Apostoleris, 1997).

In a study on African American female graduates of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, a science and math magnet program, similar positive results of parental involvement were found (Hrabowski, Maton, Greene, and Greif 2002). The high achieving females in this scholars program scored high in math and science and scored high the math portion of the SAT tests. The researchers used interviews and questionnaires on the graduates of the program, their parents, and other adults who influenced their lives. The participants were from different socioeconomic levels, educational backgrounds, family structures, public and private schools.

Some results of the study were the influential role the mothers had on the participants' performance in school. They were the advocated for their daughters especially when they felt their daughters were inappropriately placed in low level classes. The mothers developed close relationships with the teachers who had high expectations for the participants. Their fathers if educated assisted with homework. From the participants' viewpoint, their parents were the most influential on their success in the program and in high school (Hrabowski et al. 2002). The participants shared several characteristics of their successful performance: their parents and teachers showing an interest in them, parent assistance with homework, reading literacy at an early age, student and teacher relationships, teacher support in extra-curricular activities, and the adults in their lives having high expectations for their performance.

Parents have influence on students attending school regularly (Allensworth and Easton, 2005, Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012). The variable of students' attendance in class has many implications for school districts. Over the last ten years school districts have been trying to handle the group of students that do not regularly report to school. Larger urban school districts have had studies conducted that smaller districts could use as indicators. Furthermore, school districts could implement alert systems to help identify students who have attendance problems.

Allensworth and Easton (2005) have reported that having early warning signs established for districts will make it easier to identify and help students become on-time graduates.

Military families- a positive impact. Just as past research conducted on African American female performance was from a deficit approach, past research on military dependent children was from the same deficit approach. Recent research is dispelling the deficit perspective for both groups. Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, and Lerner, (2013). approached the topic of military connected children's' resilience and a theoretical model of how they demonstrate resilient functioning. They described military dependent resilience as, "a fit between a person's individual characteristics and supportive features of his or her environments (p. 110)". They posit resilience is not static but can change across time and situation.

The researchers offer individual characteristics of children and adolescents that promote resilience functioning in the face of adversity; intelligence and cognitive flexibility, positive regulation and expression of emotion an internal locus of control, personal agency and self-regulation, or social temperament, optimism and good health (Easterbrooks et al.). These characteristics are dependent on the family, social, and community environment. Easterbrooks et al. recommend that children who encounter adversity need supportive and sensitive adults who are available physically, mentality, and emotionally. Positive approaches to the stress that military families receive can help the child's viewpoint change from burden to "badge of honor" (p. 104) if they are encouraged to view their parents' responsibilities as a positive contribution to keeping their country safe and stable (Easterbrooks et al.).

In another study conducted on 1500 military dependent children aged 11-17, and how they coped with parent deployments showed that two-thirds reported no emotional difficulties (Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, Jaycox, Tanielian, Burns, and Ruder, 2011). Families with deployed

parents grew closer and the children show more independence and responsibility. Easterbrooks et al. recommended that the positive findings counter weight past findings that focused on problems, rather than recognizing families strengths. They found that military children were able to navigate their environments, were more open to others, and were more apt to participate in community building activities than their non-military dependent peers. A Department of Defense Education Activity reported African American and Latino military children outperformed their civilian peers on the SAT (<http://www.DODEA.edu>). The researchers state, “In military families, minority youth avoid some of the hardships that minorities in general populations disproportionately experience, such as parental unemployment, limited education, poverty, and a lack of adequate health care, good schools and safe neighborhoods (p.110).”

Cunningham and Swanson (2010) conducted a quantitative study of African American adolescents in a large metropolitan area of South Central United States comprising, of 135 females and 71 males from ages 13-18. The students’ grade distribution was evenly comprised of 9th-12th grade. The purpose of their study was to examine the home and school based supports that the students received and if those supports had a positive impact on their achievement outcomes. They were interested in comprehending factors associated with educational resilience. Educational resilience represents “a specific domain where youth have positive educational adaptations and outcomes within the context of significant adversity” (p. 473). The impact of stressful life events, perceptions of school social support, academic confidence and parental monitoring are explored. These topics were chosen because they highlight how students who are resilient tend to have high self-esteem, social support and high parental monitoring.

The goal of the study was to use a representative sample of students from the school. The respondents were asked questions regarding their mother’s education and employment

history. Based on the results, females in the study had higher academic expectations than the males. The authors reported that the data suggests the academic self-esteem is a prevalent component of educational resilience. Additionally, there was a positive and statistically significant correlation between mother's work history with academic self-esteem and school support. They suggest that mothers who worked knew the importance of education on work opportunities for their child's future endeavors. The authors only found gender differences with the sample that they used and offer that the school context should be nurturing with excellent instruction.

One of the important studies for this researcher was a qualitative study on African American males by Leak (2008). He sought to answer how a group of males considered 'at risk' were able to be successful in high school and go on to top colleges and universities in the country. His study used the premise of parental involvement, peer relationships, environmental relationships, and neighborhood relationships and their impact on student achievement to gain the perceptions of a group of high school male students in North Carolina. He explored the "ameliorating effect of protective factors on competence and mastery in the educational domain in the presence of risk factors" (p.24).

Leak (2008) did not follow the problem-focused or reactive stance that was prevalent when discussing African American students. He posits that problem-focused literature was for students that were already in trouble. The protective factors of: family, school, and community were used to support his assertions that given the right adults in the lives of 'at-risk' individuals they could succeed. The family protective factor was based on the quality of care the respondents received from the parents or guardians at different phases of their adolescents. The community protective factors were the relationship of the young man's risk for failure and his

low socioeconomic status. Leak (2008) states, some low socioeconomic communities act as a buffer from the adverse effects of crime and violence associated with impoverished living. Lastly, the school protective factors are the supportive teachers, staff, and relevant curriculum. The study focused on the respondents' view of themselves and their environment.

Leak (2008) procured the lists of resilient African American males from two separate high schools from the guidance counselors, deans of students, and school social workers. He had a short criterion for the respondents in order for them to be a part of the study which comprised of G.P.A. honors and AP class enrollment, extracurricular participation and resiliency characteristics. He interviewed the parents, teachers, and the students asking questions related to the protective factors. His findings supported his assumptions that the protective factors solidified the success of these 'at-risk' young men. All of the students had supportive parents who encouraged them to achieve in school, had an open line of communication, helped their child develop coping strategies, provided guidance and support in academic areas while all of the parents did not have a high school education. He also reported that the respondents received support from their extended family, neighbors, and church members. They kept abreast of their progress in school, offered advice and encouragement.

Furthermore, Leak (2008) reported that the teachers of these students were an integral part of their success, increased their learning and helped raise the motivation and attitudes of the students. The teachers were able to help the students with daily school stress and master new experiences. Another major group that contributed to the success of these boys was their like minded peers. All of the boys gave a description of their close friends as other African American males with like circumstances and situations. The participants also all had a strong mentor-like relationship with other African American college age young men. They reported that those

relationships gave them the optimistic outlook that helped them set the right goals to be like them educationally.

The last protective factor of community did not have as much of an impact as Leak (2008) thought. All of the respondents reported that most of their neighbors were cordial, polite, and standoffish. Their neighbors would communicate on a surface level but not like the other groups that they responded to. However, all of the young men belonged to a church or religious congregation that also played an integral role in them having the support they needed to navigate their world. Overall the young men that participated in the study possessed a sense of autonomy, viewed themselves as achievers, winners, with problem solving skills, and very optimistic about their future. Leak's (2008) study was significant because of the focus on students' success due to the small amount of research conducted at the time of his study.

Researchers have found parental involvement has an impact on achievement high school students. Strayhorn (2010) used the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS 88/00) to explore the roles of families on math achievement for African American students and found that it was significant predictor of achievement. To measure the relationship between math achievement and social-psychological, family and school variables, Strayhorn conducted hierarchical linear regression test with a nested design. Out of the eight items used to assess parental involvement three of these predictors were statistically significant predictors of math achievement. Strayhorn concluded that parents that attended school meetings (PTA and parent-teacher Conferences) students earned high achievement in math than parents who did not attend school meetings. Parents are able to gain information and knowledge about resources pertaining to their child's progress and academic needs. Additionally, Strayhorn (2010) shared

that students' whose parents checked homework consistently tended to have higher math scores than students whose parents rarely or never checked their homework.

Community Involvement

In order to get the graduation rates to increase researchers at Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, offer ways to get the community involved with school changes. From alert systems when students are absent, to instant communication to parents when students are not maintaining passing grades, keeping the constant communication open has helped student progress (Balfanz, Herzog, Douglas, and McIver 2007). According to Balfanz et al., this may involve faith-based groups and other community organizations joining with teachers to be on-call in the mornings to call students everyday they are absent, within 30 minutes of the start of school, to see what help they need in getting to school. "This may involve artful uses of technology and linking teachers with laptops to parents with cell phones, so teachers can send out instant alerts to parents when students do not show up for school or cut out early" (Balfanz et al., 2007 p. 230).

Community involvement can be a source of external force for change to help school reform as well as influence students to see beyond the sometimes mundane life of classes and homework (Arriaza, 2004). Civic participation increases when a group of citizens hold tightly knit connections via formal institutions (ex. PTA, Little League, Sports Booster Clubs) or informal networks (school meetings, local shops, supermarkets). Putnam (2000) pointed out that ample evidence exists on the positive impact that community involvement can have on achievement.

Arriaza (2004) conducted a case study in the Salinas School District the grassroots efforts of the community to bring swift reform to their failing schools. The Latino American community members, parents, and teachers of Salinas banded together to make swift improvements to the district on the basis of equal education regardless of English language competence. He argues that school reform initiatives have a stronger chance of becoming institutionalized if the community actively participates as “an empowered change agent” (p. 11). Arriaza looked at how the community became an external force for school reform and the impact of those reforms in student achievement. The researcher used semi-structured interviews of the key individuals who generated the push for change in the schools. He also used the legal and administrative documents from the school district, legal advocates and school leaders’ documents. He triangulated the respondents’ interviews, documented accounts, and printed sources. His results defined the community as an external and complementary resource to the school’s mission not the major goal.

A second significant study was by Jackson (2005), also a qualitative study sought to gain the perceptions of African American high school females’. She focused on the perspectives of her participants about the impact of race and gender within the context of school, family and community and how those factors affected their lives and academic successes. She used semi-structured, open-ended group interviews that took on a conversational format once the participants were comfortable. Her study considered what factors impede or enhance these girls’ academic experiences and achievements. Jackson (2005) selected two high schools that greatly differed in location, socioeconomic status, extracurricular activities, racial composition of the students and faculty, size of the student population, curriculum, teaching, and counseling. Her

results showed that organizational structures, procedures, and policies impacted the participants' identity with school, home, community prospects, norms and values.

Family and community relationships can have a positive effect on student achievement and attendance in school which will then have a beneficial effect on the graduation rates of students (Epstein and Sheldon 2006). When school staff members develop meaningful teacher and parent relationships they have a dramatic effect on student success (Ho and Willms 1996). According to Epstein (2001)

There are six types of involvement in a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships which include the following: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. This approach provides schools with a structure to help organize specific activities to involve parents in their children's education. Schools choose which partnership practices are likely to produce specific goals and choose how to implement the selected activities for their students (p.197).

In the study by Epstein and Sheldon (2006), they reported on research conducted at eighteen (18) schools from Ohio, Maryland, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Kansas, and California. "About 75% of the schools from each level reported that they receive Title 1 funds, with a small but diverse sample size that showed a range of baseline data" (p. 199). The results of their study showed that 51% of the students met or exceeded satisfactory levels on standardized math achievement tests. Students earning lower grades (D's and F's) declined slightly when the factors above were implemented. Epstein and Sheldon (2001) collected data

during the 1996-1997 school year from schools participating in the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University.

Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, and Van Hooris., (2002) further explained that each type of involvement and practice also poses some challenges that schools must meet to reach all families, not just those who were the easiest to involve. An example of this would be for schools to provide their parents information in their native language or provide interpreters to work with parents with limited English. Also schools may be faced with the challenge of providing ways for all parents to contact, and communicate with, teachers and administrators so that information about students flows in two directions-from school-to-home and from home-to-school (Epstein et al., 2002).

Some effective examples of partnership in the schools that were implemented showed that specific practices for involving families in mathematics were related to student outcomes at the school level. The three practices that had the highest rating were:

1. Giving parents information on how to contact mathematics teachers
2. Scheduling conferences with parents of students who were struggling in mathematics
3. Providing information about student progress and problems in mathematics on report cards (Epstein et al., 2002 p. 201).

In almost all instances, school rated activities as most effective if they implemented the activities. There were a few notable activities. The first, offering families videotapes, was rated as more helpful by schools that used the practice than by schools that did not. ($M= 2.3$ vs. $M= 1.83$). More dramatic differences were found between schools that did and did not conduct

workshops during school hours ($M=2.37$ vs. $M=1.50$) and that did and did not assign mathematics homework that required students to show and discuss skills with their families ($M=2.75$ vs. $M=1.75$). Evening workshops for parents (Type 1) were rated more effective than daytime workshops, presumably due to parent work schedules. Teacher-designed interactive homework and mathematics materials for families and students to use at home (Type 4) were rated more positively for boosting students' skills than were videotapes. All of the Type 2 communication strategies were viewed as likely effective by the schools that implemented them. According to Epstein and Sheldon (2006), "The innovative activity of issuing certificates to students to recognize mastery of specific mathematics skills was implemented by fewer schools than the more traditional communications but it was rated highly by the schools that used this strategy (p.201)." When schools find innovative ways to involve parents in their child's education they will make the path to graduation much easier (Epstein and Sheldon, 2006).

Researchers have investigated the influence community involvement may have on student achievement. Franklin (2011) established a clear connection between community involvement, which impacts school climate and student achievement. In his study, he reports that when a school's community relationship was based only "parent and community influence and preferences not student based" (p. 97), the results had a negative effect on student achievement. When the community is engaged in the school, community members can become more aware of the needs of the school and of the school climate, encouraging community members to help the school achieve its goals (Donlon and Wyatt, 2013).

Summary

Several factors are used to link the success of as a tool for closing the achievement gap of African American and White students. The prevalent factors presented in the research are: school demographics, family influence, and community involvement. While studies have been conducted on the attainment of high school diplomas by high achieving African American female students, a deeper analysis is still in need in order for continued success and closing the achievement gap for White and minority students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, Leak, 2008, Ladson-Billings, 2006, Jackson, 2005, Archer-Banks, 2007). According to Jackson (2005), “There is an urgent need to look beyond the surfaces of our society where we have focused for many years, to establish what is really needed to prepare our children for the futures we desire for them” (p. 80). A complete understanding of the African American female students’ needs, desires, and challenges require a new paradigm of thinking and doing in order to achieve success (Jackson, 2005). The Jackson (2005) study recommends that further research on the African American female school experience continue to be conducted in order to provide a nurturing community of learners.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences, attitudes, and successes of a group of high achieving African American female students that impact their on time high school graduation. On time graduates were described as starting high school as a ninth grader and completing it in four years. The current study addressed the students' perceptions that school experiences, family influences, and community involvement might have influenced a group of high achieving African American females' achievement and future academic experiences. This chapter describes the methodology, research design, study participants, instrumentation and planned procedures.

Research Design

The study used a qualitative approach. Creswell (2009) defined qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p. 4). Merriam (2009) suggested “all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret meanings (p. 25).” The study answered the following questions:

Research Question 1-What school factors do a group of high achieving African American female students perceive as attributing to their on-time graduation from high school with honors and advanced diplomas?

Research Question 2-What family influences do these high achieving African American females perceive as attributing to their on-time graduation from high school with honors and advanced diplomas?

Research Question 3-What community influences do these high achieving African American females perceive as contributors to on-time graduation with honors and advanced diplomas?

Study Participants

A copy of the 2012 graduation program and student yearbook was obtained from a Southeastern Virginia high school and used to identify the high achieving African American girls from the graduating class. The honor graduates were identified in alphabetical order in the front portion of the program. The researcher's personal pictures from attending the graduation were used to verify the potential respondents' participation as honor graduates. The girls that were members of the National Honor Society wore additional paraphernalia signifying their membership.

There were twenty-four eligible African American female honor graduates, eight were selected. Creswell (1998) states that interviewing five to twenty-five participants in a phenomenological qualitative study are enough to garner the information needed. The participants were mailed a letter describing the study. Interviews were scheduled as the perspective participants called or emailed the researcher. The researcher used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and phoned the perspective participants to follow up the letter of invitation. Voice messages were left for those who did not answer. Eight participants agreed to be interviewed for the study. They were selected based on the following criteria:

- Graduation with an advanced studies diploma
- Completion of honors and advanced placement (AP) courses
- Graduation with a 3.0 or higher grade point average (GPA) on a 4.0 scale
- Completion of a minimum of seven years of schooling in the selected district (middle and high school)
- Participation of at least one year of college or university and currently enrolled in a college or university program

Informed Consent. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and individual semi-structured interviews took place at a public establishment. Before the interviews were conducted the participants gave their consent to be a part of the study and signed the consent agreement. Merriam (2009) suggests good respondents are those who are able to express their feelings, clarify their thoughts, and give insight into their perspectives on the topic being studied. A sentence completion questionnaire was given to the participants prior to the interview for completion (Appendix C). During the interview open-ended questions were used and follow-up questions addressed the responses collected from their sentence completion questionnaire (Appendix E).

Data Collection Procedures

To gain a better understanding of the perceptions of a group of high achieving African American female students the researcher used a phenomenological approach to identify the life experiences of the students. A phenomenological study centers on a concept or phenomenon and seeks to understand the meaning of experiences of individuals about the phenomenon (Merriam

2009). In a qualitative design the intent is to develop, explore and make informed inferences about the topic not a generalization (Creswell, 2005). An inquiry into the nuances if any and the differences across members of a unified group will explore the topic where little is known to give a detailed understanding of the associated phenomenon (Creswell, 2005). The inquiry of educators may not only be the why of a phenomenon but also the how which can be called subjective research, the purpose of qualitative research design (Creswell, 2009).

Interviewing the participants allowed the researcher to ask immediate follow-up questions, note the body language and expressions while being personable with the respondents to get a clear honest answer (Butin, 2010). Questions for the interviews were created based an open-ended format allowing the respondents to freely share their responses and allowed the researcher the opportunity further probe when clarification was needed. Effective interviewing skills elicited answers through open-ended questions. Meaningful and deep responses were sought by using this approach (Butin, 2010). The interviews were recorded on a recording device transcribed after the interview, while the researcher wrote notes based on observations of the respondents' body language and facial expressions. The researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the study. The lengths of the interviews were between 45 minutes and one hour. The participants were asked questions that are tied to the research literature. The semi-structured questions created by the researcher allowed the participants to provide well thought out responses that the researcher can further identify any emerging issues (Merriam, 2009).

Data Gathering Procedures

The researcher submitted a research proposal to Virginia Tech's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to gain permission to conduct the study on human subjects. All of the participants in the study were at least twenty years old, thus parent permission was not required. Once

permission was granted to conduct the study, the twenty-four honor graduates were contacted. Their last known addresses of the potential participants and their personal cell phone numbers was used to contact them. Two letters of the twenty-four that were mailed were returned unopened to the researcher due to a change of address of the respondents. The first eight African American females agreed to be interviewed and interviews were scheduled.

The researcher scheduled the interviews as close together as possible in order to address follow-up questions that occurred when the participants brought up new ideas from their answers. Interview questions were centered on school impact, family influences on education, and the community involvement on the achievement for the participants. The interview questions allowed the participants to be the experts by expressing their perceptions and experiences in high school. When completing the initial interview the researcher gave the participants a sentence completion questionnaire for them to complete and return to the researcher (See Appendix A). At the conclusion of the semi-structured interview questions, clarifying questions were addressed based on the responses of the sentence completion handout.

According to Merriam (2009), the most common way to interview is to use a recording device. It ensures the researcher is preserving everything that is said by the respondents. Data was collected using the following technique: audiotape, note-taking, and written documentation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the advantages of tape recording; they report that it provides an “unimpeachable” data source; assuring completeness; providing the opportunity to review as often as necessary to assure complete understanding; provide opportunity for later review for nonverbal cues such as pauses, raised voices, or expressive outburst; and providing material for validity and reliability checks.

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) indicate that note-taking and/or memo writing is a valued technique when used as a reflective tool for assistance in developing thoughts for new perspectives and insights, as well as on-going data analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed “hand written notes provide the researcher an opportunity to listen closely to what is said, formulate new questions and make comments inclusive of attention to non-verbal cues, to flag items to return to during the interview process and compose the post-interview summary.” (p. 43)

The researcher transcribed the interviews after each were completed following the protocol and requirements of the university. A decision to conduct the transcription of the interviews was made after listening to the first interview on audiotape. In order to be familiar with the data and location of specific information shared by the participants, transcribing the data proved to be helpful. Merriam (2009) states, that assigning codes to pieces of data is the way to begin to construct categories by keeping a list of these groupings on a separate piece of paper. The participants’ interview transcripts were coded, as were their responses from the sentence completion. After the first transcript was coded, the researcher also analyzed and coded the observation notes that coincided with the interview.

The interview transcripts and notes were stored in a secure locked filing cabinet in the home office of the researcher for safety and ensure confidentiality. The transcription data will be destroyed after completion of the dissertation.

Validity

Qualitative research requires that the validity and reliability are conducted in an ethical manner (Merriam, 2009). After IRB approval was received, the interview questions were

reviewed by a high school guidance counselor, one high school English teacher, and fellow doctoral students. Guidelines were given to make sure the open-ended questions were clear and concise and focused on the topic. Feedback from the individuals that reviewed the questions helped with the validity of the questions confirming that the questions were appropriate for the research that was being conducted.

The assumption made in qualitative research is that it is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing (Merriam, 2009). The use of qualitative methods afforded the opportunity to explore participant behavior and expand an understanding of the interactions that exist within the research context as well as the subjective position of the researcher within the project. All of the participants could give a different perspective on the questions asked due to their individual experiences.

Data Analysis

The data were collected and organized using the three prevalent themes found in the literature review: school impact, community involvement and family influence. Glesne (2006) and Patton (2002), assert that organizing data into themes or topics is the most frequently used technique. It will involve coding and segregating data into groups or clusters for further analysis and description. Coding is a process of sorting and defining collected data by linking pieces similar in groups creating an organizational framework.

Phenomenological analysis is a way of ferreting out the important tenets of the study (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) explained that several techniques can be used to analyze the experiences of the high achieving African American females. For the purposes of this analysis,

imaginative variation (Merriam, 2009) was used to gain a perspective on the several viewpoints. Moustakas (1994) states,

“The task of Imaginative Variation is to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination... approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions. The aim is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced.” (p. 96-97)

The identified reasons, after analysis, that these high achieving African American females were successful in high school were listed in a column table using key words to place the potential respondents' answers into themes.

Coding the Interview Transcripts. Three main categories used for coding the transcripts of the participants fall in distinct groups based on the research questions:

- School Characteristics
- Family Influence
- Community Impact

All of the interviews with the high achieving females were transcribed and assigned a continuous line number for reference. The line numbers for each quotation that is directly cited or referenced can be located in the transcription using that line number and the first letter (or first two letters with the same initial) of the participants pseudonym.

Analysis of the Open-ended Questionnaire. In addition to analyzing data gathered through interviewing participants, the researcher analyzed the responses from the open-ended

questionnaire. The participants' answers were used as a part of the description in the participant introduction section and confirmed some of their oral responses they shared during the interview.

Timeline for Completion

Once IRB approval was received and finalized questions were validated as previously described interview letters were mailed. Questions were created by the researcher as the research questions and purposes were developed. When the information from other studies and the literature review was completed, more information was gained on the open-ended questions needed for the study. The sentence completion was created by the researcher to gain a first thought or idea the participants had. Interviews were scheduled within three weeks of IRB approval. In order to focus and concentrate on the interview process and the data collected; the researcher completed the interviews within a two week period. The goal was to have all interviews, member checks, and follow-up interviews (if necessary) completed during the summer of 2014. The results, analysis, findings, and recommendations (chapter four and five) were completed by the end of the summer of 2014 into the early fall semester. The goal was to have the final defense completed during the fall semester of 2014.

Methodology Summary

This chapter described the methodology and procedures related to this qualitative analysis of high achieving African American females' perceptions regarding on time high school graduation. The study used data collected through interviews, researcher notes, and participants' sentence completion about themselves. The participants in the study were eight high achieving African American female honor graduates from a southeastern Virginia high school. The focuses of the questions for the interview were based on the three prevalent themes in the

literature review: school impact, community involvement, and family influence. The data were analyzed using the phenomenological analysis and imaginative variation method to identify salient themes from the participants' responses.

Chapter 4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings from interviews of eight high achieving African American female students from a high school graduating class of 2012 in a Southeastern Virginia school district. The participants were invited by letter mailed to their last known addresses to be a part of the study. Open-ended questions were used to identify their experiences, attitudes, and successes pertaining to their graduation from high school. The participants completed a sentence completion questionnaire describing themselves and their performance. The findings are described based on the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What school factors do a group of high achieving African American female students perceive as attributing to their on-time graduation from high school with honors and advanced diplomas?

Research Question 2: What family influences do these high achieving African American females perceive as attributing to their on-time graduation from high school with honors and advanced diplomas?

Research Question 3: What community influences do these high achieving African American females perceive as contributors to on-time graduation with honors and advanced diplomas?

The students' perceptions of their school experiences, family influence, and community influence that impacted their achievement in high school and future educational experiences were analyzed. The females were interviewed along with their completion of an open ended questionnaire given to them before the interview. Pseudonyms were selected by the participants. The participants' selected names are: Taylor, Star, Jordyn, Erin, Lisa Cole, Tina, Naomi, and

Ashley. The written responses of the participants' from the open ended sentence completion questions were included in the participants' description. The five interview questions used were based on the research questions. The first interview question dealt with the participants giving basic demographic background information and characteristics of themselves. Questions 2-5 were more specific dealing with the protective factors involved in their academic success. Extensive quotations are used to display and describe the feelings, attitudes, and successes of these students. The emergent themes are listed in Table 2 and an explanation of data is described at the end of this chapter. Additionally, a brief summary is the final portion of this chapter linking the emerging themes and introducing the final chapter.

The open-ended questions the participants answered before the interview were:

- My most memorable high school experiences were...
- My motivation for class participation was...
- My recipe for success in high school was...
- My one word to describe my performance in high school would be...
- I am intelligent because....
- My parents' expectations of my high school performance were...
- In high school my teachers were...
- I can describe my community as...

Participant Descriptions

Student #1- Lisa Cole

Lisa Cole is a twenty year old college student majoring in business and marketing while working at a popular food establishment in a leadership capacity. During her high school career she was active in athletics, drama, theater, and chorus. She participated and excelled in emergency medical technician program at the school's vocational center. Her father is from Trinidad and her mother is Puerto Rican from Connecticut. Her family moved to Southeastern Virginia when her father was stationed on a Navy base in the area. Lisa has lived in Virginia since she was two years old, growing up in the same neighborhood. She has been a part of the same group of friends she described as 'structured' since she was in elementary school (LCI 44-45). Even with honor graduate status, Lisa was much harder on herself, held herself to a higher standard and felt she could have done better. She felt she could overcome any challenge with hard work. Lisa's most memorable moment in high school was her senior year spirit week, her senior night for her sports team, both vocational and school graduations, and all of her theater productions. She felt she was motivated to participate in class because she knew participation was required. Her recipe for success was her mother, her friends, leaving time for her studies and getting involved in school activities. Lisa's one word to describe her performance in school was "decent". She identified herself as intelligent because her parents raised her to strive for the best. Their expectations of her performance in school were to earn straight A's or at least honor roll. Lisa described her teachers as (some) frustrating, some very helpful and wanting success from their students. She described her community as a family and peaceful.

Student # 2- Tina

Tina is a twenty year old college student who quickly identified herself as a Navy 'brat' (TII 2). She comes from a blended family but primarily was raised with her two brothers. Her parents are from Charleston, SC and Miami, FL both recent Navy retirees. Tina states that she is

from a “normal middle-class family” (TII/ 6). In high school she participated in a variety of clubs, the National Honor Society and was very involved with the school’s marching band. She felt her performance in high school was outstanding because she always pushed herself to do her best in all endeavors. Tina was motivated to do well in high school because her parents, aunts and uncles accomplished so much in life and started with little. She credits her mother’s siblings with being a hard working group of people that did not have an easy life; however, they went from homelessness to earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Tina credits that she had to be successful and work hard because she had good examples in her life (TII/ 177). She said her most memorable experiences in high school were the trips with the extra-curricular organizations she was involved with. She was motivated to participate in class, because she wanted to get feedback from other students and teachers. Tina felt her recipe for success in high school was staying focused and being involved with several activities. Outstanding was the word she used to describe her performance, and she indicated that she was intelligent because she pushed herself to do her best. Her parents’ expectation of her performance in high school was for her to always apply herself. She described her teachers as great with a few exceptions. She feels her community can be described as diverse.

Student #3- Erin

Erin is a twenty year college athlete who played varsity sports during her four years of high school. Both of her parents are Navy veterans, her father is a recent retiree. She has lived in several states across the country and moved to Southeastern Virginia during her 4th grade year of elementary school. Her mother is from Raleigh, NC and her father was born on the island of St. Lucia but was raised in Brooklyn, NY. She is the only child who feels she started high school very strong academically (EI/ 13). Erin wanted to do well in high school because of her

involvement in varsity sports. She wanted to play and keep her spot on the teams. She made sure she maintained a solid grade point average at all times. Erin's most memorable moment in high school was her first varsity volleyball game. Her motivation for class participation was to make sure she would graduate with honors and to do well just like her mother. She said her recipe for success was to study right after school to retain the information. Erin's one word to describe her performance in high school was "advance". She felt she is intelligent because she tried her best in high school to use the information she learned on a day-to-day basis and that she does great retaining information. Her parents had very high expectations for her high school performance and her teachers were described as fair. Erin described her community as quiet and her community members as very well mannered.

Student #4- Jordyn

Jordyn, a twenty year old rising college graduate, finishing a year early and is planning to enter a dual masters' degree program in which she will earn her MBA and a corporate law degree. She has excelled in school all of her life and makes it a point for all of her teachers to know her by name (*Jl 233-234*). Jordyn challenges herself to be the best student in class. She was excited about learning and wanted to go the extra mile in all of her classes in high school. Her involvement in extra-curricular activities has opened doors for her to be a leader in several organizations in college. She said while in high school she maintained a 4.2 GPA and scored 1800 on the S.A.T exam (*Jl 19-21*). Jordyn's family moved to this school district when she was six years old. She has always been at the top of her class receiving accolades from her peers and teachers. Her academic goal in high school was to exhaust the school's AP curriculum so that she would be a competitive candidate for her college of choice. Jordyn's most memorable moment in high school was the senior prom. She felt that her class really enjoyed each other.

Her motivation for class participation was to push herself to be one of the best and outspoken in her class. Sacrifice and dedication is a part of her recipe for success. She said she worked twice as hard as many of her peers to set herself apart from them. Her one word to describe herself was “hard-working”. Jordyn wrote that she is intelligent because she can think outside the box to solve issues and she likes to challenge herself to find answers no one else can. Her parents had extremely high expectations of her and she described her teachers as lackadaisical. Jordyn described her community as strong.

Student #5- Ashley

Ashley is a twenty year old college junior participating in a math and science honors institute putting her on track to go directly to medical school after she finishes her bachelor’s degree. She said she studied hard while in high school always thinking about her dream of having the college experience (A/ 20). Both of her parents were in the Navy while she was in high school and have left the area after she has graduated. Ashley felt she had the right experiences and attitude in school that has helped her be successful. She participated in several clubs and activities that helped her stay balanced and focused on her goals. Ashley’s most memorable moment in high school was the time she spent with her friends. She was motivated to participate in class because she knew she wanted to go to college and her teachers stressed the importance of participation. Her recipe for success was her dedication to her goals and she worked hard in all academic subjects. She described her performance in high school as “very good”. She said she is intelligent because she does what is needed to learn. She studies very hard and asks questions. She said her parents had high expectations for her performance in high school and she couldn’t earn anything lower than a B. Her high school teachers were described as some were helpful and good and others just viewed teaching as a job but overall they were

helpful. Ashley described her community as family orientated with block parties or on-going activities.

Student #6- Naomi

Naomi, a twenty year old college junior, is enrolled in a math and science honors program on track to go to medical school to become an OB-GYN. She said she has had that goal since she was in the 7th grade watching the birthing channel (NI 13). Both of her parents were in the Navy and she has been living in the same neighborhood since she was seven years old. Naomi's mother is from Long Island, NY and her father is from Atlanta, GA. She has had the same group of friends since elementary school. She participated in several clubs, chorus, and performing arts while in high school. Naomi said she realized that her performance in high school would dictate the type of college she could attend (NI 15). Naomi said her participation in the high school musicals was her most memorable moments. She was motivated to participate in class because she wanted to accomplish her dreams and goals. Her recipe for success was to try hard and to do her best. She described her performance in high school as "great". She feels she is intelligent because she studied hard. Her parents expected her to try her best that is all they asked of her while in high school. She said her teachers were supportive and always willing to explain things further if she didn't understand. Naomi described her community as peaceful and supportive.

Student # 7- Star

Star, a twenty year old college senior, has a dual major in neuroscience and biology and a dual minor in leadership and psychology. She could have graduated last May but decided to complete another major while in undergraduate school. Star was the valedictorian of the class

completing an associate's degree before graduating from high school. She said she used all of her extra time to study and prepare for high school classes (SI 47). She participated in sports and a variety of clubs while in high school. Star reflected that she doesn't know how she accomplished so much in high school and was very sleep deprived but did not realize it until a few days after graduation (SI 43). She was focused and determined to meet her goals while in high school because she knew she had the ability to do so. Her mother is from a small town in Georgia and her father was born in the area but grew up in New York City. Star identified her most memorable moment in high school was her lunch time and studying with her friends. She said it was like the United Nations with all types of races and nationalities. Her motivation for participation in class was she wanted to learn as much as possible and move the discussions along. Her recipe for success in high school was to do the best that she could and aim for the top. Her one word to describe her performance was "driven". She feels she is intelligent because she completes her work to the best of her ability. Star said everyone can perform well but they do not do the work to the best of their ability. She said her parents had high expectations of her because they knew she could perform at the top of her class. Her teachers were described as helpful, kind and supportive. Star described her community as supportive, welcoming, and understanding.

Student # 8- Taylor

Taylor, a twenty year old college junior, has her sights set on becoming a pathologist. She plans to go to medical school after she completes her bachelor's degree. Taylor comes from a Navy family. Her father, recently retired, is from Mobile, AL and her mother is from Miami, FL. She identified her performance in high school as "pretty good" (TAI 20) never earning anything less than a B. Taylor said she surrounded herself with like minded students who had

goals and wanted to be successful in life (TAI 125). She had to move to Alabama for two years of middle school and was happy to return to the same community high school. Taylor participated in various clubs and activities along with being a part of the orchestra and chorus. She feels she has to work hard now to achieve her goals for the future. Taylor identified her most memorable high school experiences were senior skip day, meeting new and interesting people, her involvement in clubs, and her AP government class. Her motivation for class participation was to get out of her AP English class. Taylor's recipe for success was to study but also have fun. Her one word to describe her performance in high school was "different". She said she is intelligent because she has confidence in herself and constantly tells herself she can achieve anything. Her parents had high expectations for her high school performance and she described her teachers as awesome. Taylor said her community is supportive.

Explanation of the Data

The purpose of the interviews was for the young ladies to share their lived experiences and reflect on their journey through high school preparing them for college. To address the research questions, the first section discusses how the participants' performed in high school and the causes for their performance. The second section discusses the contribution of family, school, and community to their performance. The final section will discuss the participants' individual characteristics that influenced their success in high school.

Modest explanations at best. When asked how they performed in school, the participants' answers range from being extremely modest to not giving them credit and saying their performance was average or decent. Lisa Cole responded, "Decent. Because when I think about it I did graduate with honors, A's, B's mainly and a random C's here or there I could've

done so much better had I really applied myself (LCI 60-63).” Tina said, “I think I performed pretty well in high school I mean above average for most of my classes (TII 12-13).” Erin felt she started out strong academically but got comfortable and had to get back on track her senior year but always maintained her honor status. Jordyn identified that she got a little complacent during the 10th grade but quickly recovered after her father reminded her of a goal she wrote about in middle school to have a 4.0 GPA. Likewise, Ashley said she focused more on academics than her social life. She felt she was a very good student. Naomi said, “I feel like I performed great in high school (NI 10).” Star said, “I know my classmates would get tired of hearing me talk like this but I thought I just did it as normally or okay (SI 13-14).” Finally, Taylor said her performance in high school was pretty good.

Laziness was not an option. For high achieving African American female participants in this study, hard-work was the only way they were expected to perform by their parents, teachers, church leaders and extended family members. They knew early that they were going to have a productive adult life that would involve several years of college and studying.

College was an expectation early and the participants started preparing in elementary and middle school. The participants freely spoke about their mothers being the driving force in their families and speaking to them clearly about their expectations of success in high school and going to college. Jordyn shared that during her first week in the school district in elementary school her mother demanded that she be tested for all of the gifted programs that was offered. She said, “I remember going to school and my mom said you are not just going to school you are going to be tested for every gifted program that there is in this school. And I was (JI 84-85).” Taylor identified her mother as the driving force to do well and pursue college because her

mother had to drop out of college her sophomore year. She explained, "...she pushed me to go further and wanted me to go further than she did (TAI 25-26)."

Lisa Cole said her mother was strict when it came to grades. She would question her performance asking, "Why have a B when you are not average? You are not an average child you can do so much better (LCI 162 and 164). Tina mentioned her mother also stressing the importance of her gaining an education, "She always told us how important education was since she didn't have as many opportunities (TII 14)." Erin talked about the example her mother set in front of her by the way she took care of her family, worked long hours, received promotions, and completing her own college degree. She said, "I guess I got that (attitude towards work) from my mom because she is still in school just watching her I had that mindset that I have to get this (education) done now and play later (EI 76-77)."

The participants spoke about their fathers' role in their performance as one to challenge them, make them think about their future and expose them to different social experiences. Their fathers supported them in athletics and extra-curricular activities. Star mentioned that her father was much older and he often would reflect on how African Americans were looked over for jobs and positions because of race. He instilled in her at a young age that she had to be the best student in class. She said,

"So he remembers back in the day how things used to be. He was like there is no excuse for people not to do well because you have so many opportunities today...a White person with all things being equal was going to get more preferences you have to really be better, to really stand

out. Because if you are really good no one can deny that you are really good (*SI 22-26*)”.

The discussions her parents had with her about their life experiences she said caused her to not make any excuses and to always do her best. Lisa, Jordyn, Erin, and Ashley all stated that their fathers would make sure they stayed involved with social activities. Jordyn said,

“My father used to introduce me to lawyers once I told him I wanted to be a lawyer; he would introduce me to different lawyers around here. He would say it is not enough to say you want to be one you need to actually go talk to these people to get your name out there so after college you could intern with these people (*Jl 39-44*).”

Ashley described her father asking her about their college choices and traveling with her on college visits while she was in high school she said, “My dad took me on college tours to a couple of schools in Virginia before he left. So that exposed me to different colleges. It had me really excited about college after we did that (*Al 70-71*).” Likewise, Erin said when it came time to pick which sport she would play in college, her father was willing to help her and traveled with her to meet the coaches and visit the schools. Lisa Cole said her dad was the social one he would encourage to speak up and to join new teams and activities she would go to him since her mother focused more on her grades she said it was a good balance for her.

Providing opportunities for success. The participants of this study discussed how their parents provided opportunities to enhance their learning. Jordyn responded that her father found her a tutor for math when she needed help. She said, “I had to take calculus and I needed a tutor. My dad got me a tutor and made me drive all the way there and he made sure I did not make excuses

for failing (Jl 306-307).” Star identified times when her parents were not able to help her with the high level math classes so they would get her tutors. Taylor said her father wasn’t as influential on her educational decisions but her uncle was and he called her at least four days a week to check on her progress and to make sure she is on track in school. Erin and Ashley explained that their mothers would help with writing and editing papers, Erin also said her dad was “a math nerd (El 55).” He would make sure she understood her math assignments all through high school. Tina said her mother would

“...go through the material with me. She would go through the problems with me literally stay up with me prepping me for tests helping me just like I am a writer and if I entered a competition she would review them for me (TII 101-103)”.

Furthermore, Naomi mentioned when a teacher made a smart remark to her about already having a degree she needed to get her own. She said, “So I took that to heart and we went and found some outside help (NI 33).”

Perceptions about performance and achievement. A variety of feelings were stirred when talking about success and effort with the participants. All but two mentioned their parents’ role in their success; Naomi credits her older sisters and their success as the driving force to her performance. She said,

“Just seeing how driven they were and how focused they were that kind of drove me as well. They know what they wanted to do with their lives...My sisters always wanted me to do better than them...it started with my sisters but then ultimately it was my dream (NI 21-22, 24, 26, 27).”

Erin spoke about the impact of her varsity basketball coach. She said he was a second dad to her. He influenced her academic performance he would not allow her to practice until she completed her homework. She credits him with reinforcing what her parents especially her father instituted by studying daily and completing assignments the day they were assigned. The rest of the participants mentioned their mothers and fathers as the models of their work ethic to show them how they would tackle the commitment to academic work.

Lisa Cole discussed her mother was not going to support any poor performance and indecisive choices when she got to her senior year. She said, "I would go to her and say I don't know what I am going to do. She was like you are gonna find it but I want you to go to community college because I can't afford to waste money at a university (LCI 181-182)." Taylor responded about her mother's push when it came to assignments, "She would make me do extra assignments if I didn't understand something to go ask for extra help she really motivated me the most (TI 28-29)." Ashley said her family encouraged her to have an independent mindset. She said,

"My family has always encouraged me to just always want more and do more for myself and they always gave me that mindset, that independent mindset as far as just wanting to start on my own as far as getting into my career. The times were different they couldn't really help me academically. They would push me to go talk to my teachers... (AI 27-30)."

Star credits her mother's confidence in her and instilling in her that she was smart enough to be at the top. She reported, "And then my mom since I was her only child I know she was like I

know my baby can do well and do well in everything (*SI* 26-27).” Tina mentioned that her parents pushed her,

“I think I performed pretty well in high school I mean above average for most of my classes. I think why because my parents always pushed me especially my mom she always told us how important education was being that she didn’t have as many opportunities (*TI* 12-14).”

Lastly, Jordyn talked about her mother’s perseverance and showing an example of being a hard worker was and is a catalyst for her own work ethic. She talked about her mother being a young parent, working 60 hour weeks, working on her master’s degree while her father worked full-time on his bachelor’s degree and still taking time to raise her and her older brother. Jordyn said,

“I saw my mother as literally someone who wanted the best for her family. She would literally give her last (of her time, energy, and money) so we could have everything. Seeing that made me have so much of an appreciation that I owe it to this women I literally owe it to this women to do the very best that I can. She went to school, while my dad was in school she went to school too to get her master’s degree and that alone I saw the strain in taking care of a household, working 60 hours a week plus, and you still find the time to get your master’s degree I have no excuse (*J* 94-97, 143-146).”

The participants gave their best academically as a way to repay their parents for their hard work and dedication.

School factors that impact performance. The topic of teachers and how they impacted the performance of these high achieving females was met with enthusiasm. The participants spoke candidly about their teachers who pushed them, dedicated their extra-time to tutor and help them along with not allowing them to get lazy or slack in their performance. Jordyn identified two teachers that changed her life. She said, “Two teachers I can think of the most changed me forever. I think if I had not had them (for teachers in high school) I would have fallen in a trap and lost my dream of the college I attend (*Jl 255-256*).” She goes on to say when she performed poorly on a test,

“...she would just lay it down on the our desks and say you see that score do you think you deserve that score and she would say let me tell you something I don’t want you to ever agree to a poor score like that again. You are better than that you are not doing your best but I know that you are better than this (*Jl 267-269*).”

Naomi mentioned that she was motivated by her teachers who were not willing to give her the help and explanation in math that she needed, “I didn’t want to blame them for how poorly I did in their class. It motivated me to do better and seek outside help and go find help wherever I could... (*Nl 30-31*).” Lisa Cole discussed a math teacher she had that seemed to not like her but she soon learned the teacher was trying to get her to see the potential she had as a math student and show her the way to achieve the good grades she is used to earning. She said the teacher would not accept poor work from her and often seemed to be on her about the smallest mistakes. Lisa Cole later remarked,

“Because she cared about me and wanted me to do well and the whole time she was nagging on me and getting on me because she wanted me to leave the class with at least a B because I started out with a C (LCI 86-88).”

Ashley also commented on her math teachers’ push and encouragement since math was a difficult subject for her. She said her math teachers challenged her in a positive way. Erin identified one of her math teachers and the three years she had this teacher helped in her understanding the often difficult concepts for her. She spoke of how this teacher saw math was a struggle for her and would allow her to come to his class for extra help in the morning and during her free blocks. She said he was an encouraging teacher for her.

Tina felt her honors and AP teachers prepared her for university level classes by pushing her to think and with the amount of work they assigned. She commented on the discussions they had in class made her see other viewpoints that she would face in college. She said along with these teachers pushing her, “...they graded the work kind of hard it was kind of a known thing in the 10th grade when you got to their classes we knew that would be a class we had to work hard in (TII 59-60).” Star mentioned that her teachers were supportive, nice, and kind. One of her AP teachers she mentioned treated the class as adults and valued their opinions. She credited him and his class as the catalyst to bring her out of her shell.

Another example of the supportive nature of the teachers the participants mentioned is the comments Taylor made about her two favorite teachers. She remarked that these two teachers treated her as a little sister. They were very caring and used that care to help her understand difficult concepts and achieve at high levels. She said, “... I just wasn’t good with

the application part; he would always help me out with the word problems... (TAI 35-36).” As the participants spoke about their teachers all of them smiled and advised that they had good experiences with their teachers in high school.

A point of difference. The participants of this study freely discussed the diverse groups of friends they were able to make. Since they primarily were in honors and AP classes they mentioned having two sets of friends; one group that were honors students and the other were the friends from the regular classes that they have known longer. It wasn’t until high school that they separated from their longtime friends because of their different schedules. Jordyn spoke extensively about having a long talk with her friends who were not on the same academic path. She said, “I had to express to them that it’s not you, it sounds a little selfish well I’m sorry I have to make sure I get to where I need to go...(JI 59-60).” She also said she was normally one of few African Americans in her AP classes and soon made friends with other students in those classes.

Tina spoke about her school as having a unique characteristic of the diversity and range of students on different socioeconomic levels and how they all mixed in with each other well. She said, “Just being in a diverse area makes you view things differently, how different people live and if anything that is kind of what pushed me to want to go places... (TI/ 121-122).” Lisa Cole freely spoke about hanging around other African Americans who were well spoken and with White students who were the same. She said she was drawn to like-minded peers who were level headed.

Likewise, Star called her group of friends The United Nations. She said she was able to befriend other students from all races and nationalities. Star admits that they were ‘nerdy’ like her but had a variety of different interest than her, “Some were in the Arts school so we would go

to the art shows and things or they would come to my academic competitions... (SI 138-139).”

Naomi mentioned her two separate groups of friends she had; one group was in her AP and honors classes and the others were from her neighborhood and regular classes. She offered,

“I have two different sets. I have the honors ones and the regular ones.

The ones in the honors they pushed me to match them because I would get

lazy like when I didn't feel like doing my homework ...you have to

graduate with honors you started this you have to finish this. They were

like a support system when we had to do homework or study together...

Then my other friends showed me the flip side of it they just did bare

minimum (NI 60-67).”

Taylor gave an account of her peers of different races and how they stood up for her when girls she didn't know wanted to cut her hair because it was long. She said, “But there were some people around who I was friends with that stood up for me. Guys included and they said to those girls they better not mess with me (TAI 175-177).” Taylor said her friends shielded her from conflict and she was fortunate to have friends from all walks of life in her corner. Tina discussed how her class displayed unity when a set of twins transferred to their school from another local high school they told her how surprised they were that all of the different races were friends, sat together at lunch, invited them to join their clubs. They told her they never seen that in their previous schools which were very diverse but separated by race.

It takes a village. During the discussions with the participants they mentioned the same thing- in class competition with each other's academic performance and the competitive nature that formed between them. Tina, Jordyn, Ashley, Naomi, Lisa Cole, and Taylor all said there was a

subtle competition between the African American females in the AP and honors classes. Tina responded, “It is kind of like subtle competition when you see someone else doing good and getting acknowledgement and recognition and things like that you want to do that too (TII 40-41).” Jordyn too said she felt the competitive edge when it came to her African American peers. She went on to say, “... in the AP classes the grades were posted each week and everyone would ask what did you get? I am going to do better than you. So it was definitely healthy competition we pushed each other (JI 334-336).” She advised that it was not a situation where they brought each other down but they used it as a source of motivation.

Furthermore, Ashley commented that her peers she surrounded herself with did have that competitive nature that made it more of a competition. She said, “It was like a sense of competition we weren’t against one another but to always keep up with one another (AI 81-82).” Naomi went on to say similar to the others. She said, “You always had that one that was at the top and you were reaching to kind of edge over her to have that shining moment and do better than the best person in our class (NI 75-76).” Lisa Cole offered her competitive nature was out of trying to keep up with her friends, “... A lot of my friends would try for the most part but it seemed like it came easy to them and I wanted to be on that level (LCI 124-126).”

Supporting and encouraging each other also assisted in the sense of unity between these girls and their peers. Lisa Cole discussed her friendship with two other African American honor graduates in her classes. They would encourage her to do well on her tests and she was confused they would open their books and show her how to complete the problems. Jordyn said,

“I remember in calculus the White kids had study groups together when all of us would stay back after class for extra help he would only focus on

them. He thought we didn't get it quick enough. He would even say that to us Blacks, you are not getting it quick enough and we are ready to move on... When we didn't get it from him we got together and made our own study group after school. When we took tests it wasn't just for ourselves but we all were going to do well (*J/ 352-359*)."

The participants said they took part in community service not just as a requirement but also as a way to get to know how others live. Tina said, "To see how other people live is intriguing to me I do a lot of long term community service (*TII 132-133*)."

Lisa Cole responded that she wanted to learn how to properly interact with different people a skill that she uses on her job she volunteered to work with children from different backgrounds for multiple summers. She said it taught her how to communicate with people. Star said she did not volunteer for any community service projects until her senior year not realizing that she had to because she was so focused on doing well academically she started participating because she wanted to take part.

Several of the participants mentioned their participation in church activities. Taylor, Naomi, Tina, Erin, and Ashley said they were often recognized by their church for their hard work in school. Naomi advised,

"They (church) would have events for all of the honors students where they would pull us up front just to recognize us. That I loved them showing support and financial support or sometimes a little certificate so I like that personally just to show they were interested in us (*NI 103-107*)."

Taylor went on to describe her church members' care and concern and the impact it had on her performance,

“I grew up in that church...my pastor he always pushed me, always talked with me, he was like another supporting factor in my life just to make sure I was on target...they (church) were very supportive I know they love me...they call to see if I need clothes, money or food while I am at school...I can't let them down (TA/ 156-160, 163).”

Ashley also mentioned the influence her church had on her performance she said, “They would recognize the students accomplishments and let the entire church embrace them it was just really nice thing and welcoming and warming place (AI 74-76).”

Motivation was a prevalent topic mentioned by the participants in this study. They spoke about wanting to be successful, to reach their long-term and short-term goals. They discussed how they owned their success and set themselves up for positive high school experiences. They credited their parents for providing the right environment for them so they felt compelled to do well in school. Jordyn said,

“And her being my mother and my father always reminded me that she was my mother that pushed me to want to exceed every limit there is so I could show her that what she did was not in vain. I did this for me but I did this for you (JI 98-100).”

Other participants discussed how tirelessly they worked to accomplish their goals and maintain their honor status throughout high school. Tina said,

“I think both it's a mixture. Everyone has their days where they do not feel like studying but you don't want to be the one who fails so it still kind of pushes you. But I do always have an internal drive

that has been instilled in me because I've always had an interest in doing my best in school (TII 68-71).”

Star shared an example of her hard work during her last year of high school. She said she was intrinsically driven to succeed in high school. She said,

“I think I realized the summer after my senior year that I did burn myself out I would not get as much sleep as I probably should have. But it was actually pretty easy to me because if we had a break I would do work then. Pretty much during car rides I would do work. Pretty much any time I had a break. I would do work. I would say oh since I have a break I will begin to write this lab report. Then at home or at a club meeting or sports meetings if I had time I would just work on my stuff for my classes and come back and finish then go to sleep (SI 42-48).”

Erin described a conversation she had with another scholar athlete from her graduating class. She lamented how they discussed the younger student athletes she keeps in touch with through sports camps and work-outs with her former team and their lack of concern about their academics and work ethic. She said she feels that they do not seem to have the drive and determination that her group has.

Naomi shared that because she has the goal of becoming an OB-GYN she had an understanding of what she had to do in order to be successful in high school. She established goals to accomplish and used that as a source of motivation. Likewise, Taylor discussed that her motivation to be successful was due to the tiring low wage job she had during her last two years of high school. She shared,

...my junior and senior year it kept me grounded and I realized I had to work hard so I would not have to work a job like that for a career. I hated it and will never work there again or any other job that is like that.

Working those hours like that and being treated like that... I want to make a big salary and travel all over by the time I am 50 (TA/ 105-108, 111).”

Emergent Themes

As displayed in this study, this group of African American girls had the ability to reflect on their choices, environment, and goals. All of the participants enthusiastically expressed their feelings and goals freely. These African American females possessed individual characteristics, family and school characteristics which enabled them to be successful. They had the intrinsic nature, vigor, and dispositions to be self-sufficient while obtaining their goals. In the table below, some prevalent and emerging themes developed while reviewing the data.

Table 2. *Emergent Themes*

Family Influence	School Characteristics	Community Impact
Supportive	Support	Positive Relationships
Care	Time	Subtle Competition
Concern Opportunities Providing	Help Attention Commitment	Supportive Encouraging
Modeling Behaviors Hardworking	Diverse Acceptance	Opportunities Variety of activities
Perseverance Goal Orientated Intuitiveness	Open Empowering	Acceptance Expect success Faith Based
Parental Attitude Loving Demanding	Rigor Demanding High Expectations	Recognition Rewards Encouragement
High Expectations Resilient Motivating	Nurturing Relevant- Curriculum	Positive Examples

Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergent themes prevalent in these data are discussed in chapter five. The high achieving African American female participants offered their perceptions on successful high school completion. The next chapter begins with a brief review of the purpose of the study and research questions. Immediately following is the summary, discussion, and implications of the findings. Some practical implications for administrators and other stakeholders are provided and suggestions for future studies are offered.

Chapter 5 Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences, attitudes, and successes of eight high achieving African American female students that impacted their on-time high school graduation. The study addressed the students' perceptions that school experiences, family influences, and community involvement influenced their achievement and future academic experiences. A qualitative research design was used to address the three research questions:

Research Question 1: What school factors do a group of high achieving African American female students perceive as attributing to their on-time graduation from high school with honors and advanced diplomas?

Research Question 2: What family influences do these high achieving African American females perceive as attributing to their on-time graduation from high school with honors and advanced diplomas?

Research Question 3: What community influences do these high achieving African American females perceive as contributors to on-time graduation with honors and advanced diplomas?

Summary of Findings

Finding One. High achieving African American females are intrinsically motivated to be successful. They believed that they are intelligent and can accomplish any academic challenge regardless of the difficulty. They contributed their success to hard work and dedication to their academic career. The participants displayed a sense of autonomy when it came to their choices in friendships, classes, and life. Their work ethic oftentimes separated them from the average student. Star, Jordyn, Lisa Cole, Tina, and Taylor, all spoke about their relentless work ethic

often choosing to complete their school work before being with friends. Jordyn said, “I don’t just do what is asked of me. I do what is asked and so much more...I work in the role before I get it because when I ask you for it you will wonder why you didn’t give it to me at first....” (*Jl* 93-94). Star comments, “...it was more like I put pressure on myself. I was one of those kids like if I didn’t get a 100% on something I would be like what did I do? (play crying) (*Sl* 31-32). Erin discussed having a goal of playing sports in college at a Division I university which gave her the drive and determination to stay in rigorous classes.

Their high self-esteem, determination, and drive were prevalent in their choices. Erin and Naomi shared that they would study as soon as they finished school even if no homework was assigned. Unlike the participants in Ladson-Billings (2012) work, they did not have a stigma about learning, nor did they think of themselves as academically inferior to their White peers. They became adept at navigating the school curriculum to attain academic excellence (Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein, 2012). These high achieving African American females easily adapted to any social setting or group. The participants were able to easily fit in to any ethnic group opting to be around like-minded peers.

Finding Two. High achieving African American females are competitive with their peers.

The competition between the participants was a motivating factor for them. Most of the participants mentioned that there were a small number of African American students in their classes so they began to silently compete with each other. When grades were posted they always tried to score the highest comparing themselves to the others. They would encourage each other if one of them did not do well on a graded assignment. Lisa Cole remarked, “Yeah I noticed that people who I have been around are similar to me (*LCl* 19). She said, “...my friends, those girls were smart and would do their work. It would come easy for them and I wanted to be on that

level. They would help me with my math problems and encourage me to try hard (LCI 105-106). Their peers had an impact on their performance because they did not want to be left out of the group of smart students. Being considered smart was an honor and privilege for them that kept them motivated to achieve. This confirms the findings of Wang and Eccles (2012), "...peers are just as likely to exert positive influences on adolescents as negative influences" (p. 891).

They reported their level of engagement and productivity was higher due to their like-minded peers. According to Lisa Cole, Naomi, and Ashley said they felt a sense of ownership for each others' performance in class. Naomi remarked, "The ones in the honors they pushed me to match them...when I didn't feel like doing my homework they would say come on you got to do well you have to graduate with honors..." (NI 68-70). The participants formed a "peer network" described by Tierney and Colyar (2005) as, "...a mediating influence by promoting an ideology of academic achievement among students. This role embodies the perspective of social capital (bonding) in which individual members focus on achieving a common goal. The participants believed that enrollment in college preparatory classes and involvement in extra-curricular activities with like-minded peers would aid in advancement and achievement. The participants did not want any of their peers to score higher on tests and quizzes. Jordyn describes the feeling she had when her name was at the top of the class lists, "When grades were posted I would go look to make sure my number was at the top of the lists...I loved seeing there it made me feel that I can beat anyone..."(JI 125-127).

Finding Three. High achieving African American females' strong presence of their parents' support, care, and challenging nature was highlighted as a major contributing factor to their success. They highlighted their mothers' success in handling multiple life activities such as: taking care of the family, having a career, while achieving advanced degrees.

Erin discussed that her mother was a high achiever, busy serving in the Navy, running a catering business, while earning an advance degree. Jordyn adds, “I saw the drive and the strength in my mother and I was like that’s the type of person I want to be (Jl 93-94). She attributed this example as one she is to follow. Tina shared examples of her mother’s dedication to her performance, “She would go through the problems with me literally stay up with me studying and prepping me for tests...” (Tl 111-112). Cunningham and Swanson (2010) reported a significant correlation between a mother’s work history with academic self-esteem and school support. This was due to the mother’s knew the significance of work and achievement.

Strayhorn’s (2010) study found that parents that are involved in their child’s education had higher achievement rates in math than those whose parents who were not involved. The high achieving African American females credited their fathers as the parent who challenged them to think and helped them explore their possibilities for the future. Some of the participants’ fathers gave them a perspective of navigating the real world philosophies and the ability to respond appropriately. The participants commented that their parents’ expectations of their performance in school especially from their mothers were the driving force to their success. Their mothers held a high standard for them to achieve. They did not hover or force them to perform at high levels, but held a standard for them to be successful. They shared that their mothers showed an interest early in their education setting a foundation for academic success and achievement (Henderson and Mapp, 2002).

Jordyn and Taylor recalled their younger years when their mothers made them read and helped them develop a love for learning. Taylor said, “She would make me do extra assignments if I didn’t understand something to go ask for extra help...” (TAI 28-29). The majority of the participants spoke of their mothers being their advocates making sure they were enrolled in more

rigorous classes and meeting their academic potential. The participants' parents viewed earning an education as necessary and valuable. They showed this by earning advanced degrees while the participants were in middle and high school. Furthermore, the high achieving African American female participants discussed their parents' role as providers for enrichment activities, tutoring help, and extra-curricular participation without a thought about the expense.

Finding Four. High achieving African American females showed that they did not have to choose between displaying their intelligence and appearing to act "White". They strategically sought high level classes and rigorous schedule achieving their honor status and appearing to be acting "White". Fordham (1996) asserted that African American female students had to choose between intelligence and emotional alienation from their peers. The participants all eagerly pursued higher education, harder classes and maintained the ability to be different than the average student. Lisa Cole referred to herself and her close friends as "well-spoken" not white because they were more structured and goal orientated (LCI 89). She said, "I find myself drawn to the more structured Black people...Most people say I act White but I feel I surround myself with well spoken people..." (LCI 50-51, 45). All of them had goals of obtaining an advanced degree to meet their planned financial goals and standards of living. Jordyn, Tina, Ashley, and Taylor shared that they formed this mindset of academic success without fear of being ostracized by other African American students.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) reported that African American parents teach their children to be twice as good as their White counterparts, but not boast. Star called her father "old school" when she shared his speeches about young African Americans not having an excuse for high achieving because they have every opportunity that once was kept from their parents and grandparents. He would tell her if she pursued being the top student in her class than no one can

deny her because of her race. Jordyn stated that her mother continuously told her that she had to be twice as good as non-African American students to be considered an equal. These girls were taught to perform better to get opportunities and recognition. They did not have to downplay their achievement as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found in their study on African American high school students.

Finding Five. High achieving African American females have supportive and encouraging teachers. All of the participants spoke candidly about their teachers' role in their performance in high school. They recognized some of their teachers' care and concern for their performance as a factor to their motivation to learn. They felt their teachers encouraged them to achieve to their abilities while giving them the freedom to express themselves as individuals. Erin said, "My math teacher really helped me, I struggled a little bit in his class (he taught me for three years in three different math classes). He would always help me and he answered all of my questions." (E1 28-30). Their teachers challenged them to think differently about life and their viewpoints of others. Jordyn said, "Now she would give me my tests back and ask if I was satisfied with a low grade then announce to the class that we better not be satisfied with low grades." (J1 125-127). The participants spoke of how their teachers would not allow their school performance to be mediocre or average. Once they showed them how well they were able to perform in school on tests, quizzes, essays, and oral presentations, they did not allow the participants to achieve any lower. This often posed a challenge, because some of the participants spoke about not giving their full effort at times focusing on the social aspect of high school.

The participants' description of their teachers' expectations solidifies Russell's (2005) research that states teacher expectation impacts students' success, performance, and motivation. Furthermore, the teachers of these high achievers did not allow them to deter from their goals of

graduating with honors, enrolling in challenging courses, and becoming satisfied with average grades. They spoke of the encouraging atmosphere that they had in their classes being exposed to others' viewpoints on world issues. The participants spoke about their teachers allowing them to voice their concerns and get the extra help they needed. Archer-Banks (2007) found that teacher efficacy is an important part of African American female students' success. Their teachers treated them with respect and motivated them to learn. The high achieving African American females were engaged learners contributing the class discussions, completing all of the assignments, and being exemplary students. Naomi, Jordyn, Taylor, Tina, and Lisa Cole all discussed their teachers' attitudes towards their learning. They made sure the participants put in the effort and worked to their abilities. Naomi said, "My chorus teacher was really supportive. She was there always to guide through my problems and whenever I needed help with anything she was there." (NI 45-46). Although they mentioned the positive relationships with their teachers they did not share that their teachers had the most impact on their performance.

Most of the participants spoke of the difficulties they experienced in math. They applauded their teachers for not allowing them to get complacent and steering them into the right direction to meet their academic goals. The participants spoke of their teachers as encouragers who helped them come out of their shell and learn to speak confidently. Their teachers established purposeful relationships with them (Walker-Dalhouse, 2005) causing them to have the nurturing environment in school. Their teachers were described as effective and culturally responsive. Lisa Cole and Jordyn spoke about their teachers not allowing them to be satisfied with average grades. They spoke about the firm, caring, and demanding nature of their teachers (Ware, 2002) causing them to overcome challenging and rigorous classes.

Finding Six. Two parent households had a positive impact on high achieving African American females' performance in high school. Military families had a positive impact on high achieving African American females' performance in high school. All of the participants in this study came from two parent families. Six of the eight participants had at least one parent that was (is) a member of the armed forces. Four of the six participants from military families, mother and father were in the military. They spoke candidly about the different places they were able to see and live due to their parents' duty stations. Tina felt that being a military dependent gave her a mindset to embrace others ethnic groups and nationalities. Erin said being a military dependent allowed her to meet different people and experience other cultures. She said, "I would volunteer with my mother's ship and do my community service with them they would clean the bay and my church would feed needy people every month." (E1 91-92). They all said that their experiences with the military allowed them to fit in to any group in high school. Tina explained she had an open mind about making friends easily with students of other ethnic groups. She said, "...because the military has a high rate of interracial marriages. They are forced to live and work with people who are not like them. I think that has an effect on us kids." (TII 145-146). The participants were used to moving, making friends, and meeting new people. Their parents decided to stay in the Southeastern Virginia duty station so that their children could complete middle and high school in one area. This gave them the ability to be a part of the honors and high achieving groups of students in school and be able to befriend those who were not a part of the honors and high achieving groups.

Most research on children in military families was from a deficit approach (Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, and Lerner, 2013). However, a recent study suggests further research should look at the resilience of military youth. Easterbrooks et al. (2013) states, "Resilience comes from

interactions between people and their environments as part of a dynamic developmental system. Thus resilience can change across time and situation (p. 3).” Military dependents possess the following characteristics: competence, confidence, character, connection, contribution, coping, and control (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). The military dependent participants of this study did possess the description given. They displayed their competence in their academic high achievement by navigating through high school with the ability to use coping skills and successful interaction with their peers.

The high achieving African American female military dependents in this study displayed the confidence to take risks and make wise decisions regarding their future goals and aspirations. They displayed character in their friendships, leadership in the classroom and extra-curricular activities. The high achieving African American female military dependents connected their hard work and achievement to future success. They were able to envision what their college experiences and opportunities would be based on their performance in middle and high school. They made a positive contribution to the classroom environment and the overall school by sharing their creative abilities and positive nature. The high achieving African American military dependent females had the coping skills and control to pursue their academic goals while maintaining positive relationships with teachers and their peers.

Finding Seven. Recognition from the community for academic achievements had a positive impact on high achieving African American females. The participants shared the role communities played in graduating with honors. Some community influences included: area businesses, churches, work, and volunteer opportunities. They shared that they received accolades, recognition, and rewards for their performance in high school. Taylor, Naomi, Ashley, Jordyn, and Tina shared that this was a source of encouragement that caused them to

want to continue to perform at high levels. Ashley stated, “I can definitely say that my church community supported me. They always recognized the students when it came to graduation and accomplishments in school.” (A/ 92-93). They said they wanted to live up to the expectations that the community organizations had for them. Five out of the eight participants spoke about their churches’ recognition for their achievements. They did not want to fail in school or perform poorly because they had other children aspiring to be like them and adults encouraging them to achieve by giving financial support and rewards. Naomi shared that the certificates and money she received for earning A’s was a motivating factor for her.

According to Epstein and Sheldon (2006), family and community relationships have a positive effect on student achievement. They concluded that when family and community partnerships are strong there will be a beneficial effect on the graduation rates of students. Student centered activities have a beneficial effect on student achievement (Franklin, 2011). The participants were able to be a part of engaging activities that assisted in motivating them to continue performing at high levels.

More attention has been given to at risk African American students experiencing academic failure instead of high achieving African American students experiencing academic success (Fries-Britt and Turner, 2002). The misconception of educators is that high achieving African American students have fewer problems than their low-achieving peers (Fries-Britt and Turner, 2002). Experiences of successful African American students are significant of studying to dismiss common beliefs, mindsets, and stereotypes that impact programs and staffing in public schools. The participants of this study proved that they were steered academically by their parents, relied on their teachers for information, and their community for encouragement.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory considers human development where growth occurs within a complex system of relationships (1976, 1979). The high achieving nature of the participants occurred due to the contribution of the 'ecological' relationship between their willingness, ability, and readiness to achieve in conjunction with their family impact, community involvement, and school impact. The attributes of the high achieving females' strong family support connected with the school impact to help them achieve at high levels. According to Bronfenbrenner, resources from one social system may mediate risk factors from another. Such as, a strong parental involvement in their daughters' school activities might compensate for negative peer influences. Specific attributes of the high achieving females in this study shows the close connection of the parents early motivation and involvement to assist them in learning caused them to be successful in high school.

Implications

The findings of this study have many implications for educators and educational leaders in other similar settings to consider as they seek to improve the performance of African American females. The following implications are suggestions because they address areas that were identified in the research as beneficial to the participants in the study.

Implication One. School leaders should encourage parents to set high expectations for achievement early. The parents of the participants set high expectations for their daughter to achieve at high levels. They seemed purposeful in where they selected to live and send their daughters to school. A strong relationship with working parents of the high achieving African American female should be developed with the administrators. Educational leaders should look for ways to start out the year building relationships by communicating often with the parents.

Implication Two. School and community leaders should recognize and celebrate the academic success of students publicly and prominently. Since a strong peer group was already established in middle school, high school and community leaders should capitalize and advertise the academic success these high achieving African American females possessed. Showing the positive aspect of learning and academic success will also aid in the subtle competition that the students already established.

Implication Three. Teachers should openly hold students to high expectations. The participants indicated that some teachers influenced their actions. Those teachers had high expectations for these students demanding that they learn at high levels while offering a nurturing environment is an important finding for educators. They held a high standard of excellence that forced these students to achieve. They did not allow excuses for their students nor did they make any for them. The same expectations they had for students of other races they had for them. The teachers treated them as young adults and seemed interested in their opinions making an environment conducive for learning.

Implication Four. Educational leaders and community organizations should aid in offering support through guidance counselors and college access counselors. A partnership should be established with community organizations to support student recognition of achievements. When students are commended and recognized in their community, they should also be acknowledged by the educational leaders. It is important to understand what ingredients it takes to develop successful students. It is equally important to understand what contributes to African American female performance in secondary school. In this study, the high achieving African American females displayed certain characteristics that influenced their success. These characteristics yield valuable insights regarding the reasons why young African American

women excel academically. The participants demonstrated confidence in their cognitive abilities and they saw school as relevant to achieving their goals and aspirations. They became adept at navigating the school curriculum to attain academic excellence (Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein, 2012). Their motivation to learn at high levels was evident in their responses. They did not allow others to steer them away from their goals.

Implication Five. Educational leaders can positively influence students by expanding, developing and offering an advanced curriculum in an atmosphere of high expectations. The participants of this study advised that they felt prepared for college because of the rigorous curriculum they encountered in their AP classes. However, they did note that there were not many AP courses from which to choose that could expand their learning. In order to be competitive in college entry, educational leaders should provide students the opportunity to learn about college preparedness early. When students move from elementary to middle school, a clear academic plan should be created so that the students can see their performance and its impact on their goals. Those goals should be reviewed when the student leaves middle school and reviewed multiple times during high school.

Implication Six. Educational leaders should provide all students the opportunity to learn about student performance and its impact on economic and professional opportunities. Early in their education, the participants connected academic success to economic prosperity. They researched the steps they needed to take in order to achieve their goals. School personnel should be available to help connect the dots of performance and achievement. Real world examples should be used to challenge the students using challenge contracts or goal setting contracts set by the student, parent, and guidance counselor to use a

measure of achieving goals. A part of this challenge contract should be a visit to colleges, universities, and industries to help the students gain a vision for their future endeavors.

Implication Seven. Educational leaders should develop parent resources on their district websites, guidance offices, and community centers. A parent resource center could be established for all grade levels as a means to provide support, promote programs, resources, and opportunities. It should be promoted and maintained in order to assist all parents as they can influence the decisions of students. While developing the resources in schools, educational leaders should encourage parents to become engaged their student's learning and connected to their students' teachers.

Implication Eight. Educational leaders should encourage students to engage their parents in education and provide the link between their parents and their teachers. The participants of the study did not identify a strong relationship between their parents and teachers. Their navigation through school was primarily on their own with encouragement from their mothers. Opportunities for parent, student, and teacher relationship building should be established to encourage student engagement. Fun activities can be arranged that involve parent participation and input.

Implication Nine. Educational leaders should encourage parents to become actively engaged in the education of their children. The participants of this study shared that they had at least one of their parents involved in their education. They attributed their success to the level of engagement by their parents. Districts could require parents to volunteer in the schools for multiple purposes, such as: extra-curricular activities, chaperones, fundraising, and tutoring. Furthermore, parent-teacher conferences could be arranged in the evenings making the time

more convenient for working parents. Districts could communicate with parents through social media keeping them informed of the events and opportunities in the schools.

Implication Ten. Educational leaders should encourage communities to develop recognition programs for students and to engage in cooperative support with schools.

Some of the participants shared the recognition they received from their community organizations and churches was significant to them. Districts can recognize their achievers through partnerships with community organizations by publicizing the accomplishments of their students in academics, athletics, and community service. School and community partnerships could be used to enhance the education of students through meaningful relationships.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Future research should include military dependents resiliency in education in public schools. More of a focus should be on their performance due to the number of parents who are absent from the home because of frequent deployments.
2. Further studies on high achieving minority students across the United States in urban and suburban school districts would help educators with finding best practices in closing the achievement gap between minority and majority students.
3. A specific focus should be made on investigating the intrinsic motivational factors of high achieving students in order to use those findings to help other students.
4. Expanding research that involves a larger sample of successful African American female students would benefit those who want to better understand the relationship among the school, community, and family factors that contributed to their success.

5. Replicating or expanding the research with a focus on successful African American males could also benefit school divisions that are seeking to support student success.

Conclusions

What I learned from the writing this paper was that intrinsic motivation and work ethic of the participants, while not a focus of this study, was an important part of the study. Motivation and work ethic were prevalent in all of the interviews as a characteristic of high achieving African American females. Their intrinsic motivation and work ethic came from the drive to succeed and be the best student in their graduating class. Originally, school impact, family influence, and community involvement were the only factors considered; however, after meeting the participants I discovered that more of a focus could have been on college attainment instead of on-time high school graduation.

For this particular group of students, peer influence was not considered but was a prevalent reoccurring theme that could be expanded in future research. The participants were motivated by each other's performance and used that as a way to help each other. The subtle competition between them was a motivating factor that I did not consider when starting this dissertation. Peer influence on academic achievement is a topic that is worth studying due to the participants identifying this as a motivating factor to their success. Also I learned that there were a high number of African American males that fit into the high achieving status they too could have been a part of this study to gain their perspective. Adding the perspective of African American males along with the females would have added another dynamic to this research.

The impact of high Achieving African American females from a two parent military homes was another prevalent factor I discovered. I did not expect or think that most of the

participants were a part of the military community. The participants did not mention any type of extra support they received from the military or school personnel when it came to achievement. Another important fact I learned was that the teachers and staff members did not have as much of an impact on the high achieving African American females' performance as originally thought. I thought there would have been a greater impact of the teacher's performance in the classroom on the students. Some teachers were mentioned by participants as nice, encouraging, and supportive, but other factors were mentioned more often and were given greater recognition by the participants.

Personal Reflections

During the entire process of writing this dissertation I put myself on ridiculous timelines, and then would get upset when I did not meet them. I continuously had to stop and re-group to gain the right perspective to move forward. Originally I thought the process would move a little faster than it did. But now as I reflect on the journey and how much I found out about my participants as well as myself, it was all on the right schedule. I am often asked about this topic and the process I selected. When asked if I would have done anything differently, I answer absolutely. I would have included African American males from this same graduating class to see if they had the same perspective as the females and I would have picked additional females from another area or school but with similar performances in high school.

I am glad I selected students who had already graduated from high school. They were able to give a good perspective about their performance, and they were able to reflect on their experiences. Meeting the participants and allowing them to talk about themselves made me wish I had the opportunity to teach them. They were smart, excited about learning, inspiring and

encouraging when it came to my research. Most of the participants were familiar with the process, which made it easier for me to explain their role. They were very serious and determined to meet their commitments once they agreed to participate. All of them were prompt and ready to dive in to the interview. As I reflect on the entire process, I look forward to conducting more research in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Virginia Tech IRB Approval Letter

Appendix B Consent Form

Appendix C Open Ended Questionnaire

Appendix D Request for Participation

Appendix E Interview Questions

APPENDIX A IRB APPROVAL LETTER



Office of Research Compliance
 Institutional Review Board
 North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech
 300 Turner Street NW
 Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
 540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959
 email irb@vt.edu
 website <http://www.irb.vt.edu>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 24, 2014
TO: Carol S Cash, Melanie Marshee Patterson
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires April 25, 2018)
PROTOCOL TITLE: A Qualitative Analysis of High Achieving African-American Females' Perceptions on Factors That Impact on Time High School Graduation in Southeastern Virginia
IRB NUMBER: 14-673

Effective June 24, 2014, the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: **Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 5,6,7**
 Protocol Approval Date: **June 24, 2014**
 Protocol Expiration Date: **June 23, 2015**
 Continuing Review Due Date*: **June 9, 2015**

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

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APPENDIX B PARTICIPENT CONSENT FORM

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

After reading the attached letter describing this research, I understand that the purpose of this study is to identify the experiences, attitudes, and successes of a group of high achieving African-American female students that impact their on-time high school graduation. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. No promises or guarantees of benefits have been made to encourage me to participate.

It is possible that Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view this study's collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

- Answer the open ended interview questions
- Be honest
- Agree to be recorded
- Ask questions of the research
- Develop a pseudonym of your own choice

I understand that information from interviews and the open ended questionnaire will be collected on audiotape and through handwritten notes. I also understand that my real name will not be used for the dissertation, in published works, or for professional conferences that may be generated from this study.

I will receive a copy of this form and the letter of invitation to participate in the study at the time of the interview. I will be given the opportunity to read, review, and ask questions about the study before the interview begins.

If I should have any questions about the protection of human research participants regarding this study, I may contact Dr. David Moore, Chair Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, telephone: (540) 231-4991; email: moored@vt.edu:

Participant's Name (print please) _____

Participant's Signature _____

Date _____

Appointment Date, Time, and Location _____

APPENDIX C OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

Open-ended responses for my interview

- I am intelligent because...
- My parents' expectations of me...
- In high school my teachers...
- I can describe my community as...
- My motivation for class participation in high school ...
- My recipe for success in high school....
- My one word to describe myself is...

APPENDIX D REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION

Dear (Perspective Participant):

I am a doctoral student at Virginia Tech and request your participation in this upcoming study. The title of my dissertation is “A Qualitative Analysis of High Achieving African American Females’ Perceptions on Factors That Impact on Time High School Graduation in Southeastern Virginia.” My goal of this study will be to identify the experiences, attitudes, and successes of the group of high achieving African-American female students that impact their on-time high school graduation.

To collect information, I shall visit your residence or school (college) to interview you and gain your perspective on this topic. I plan to schedule interviews with you lasting 45 minutes. The interview will be basic open ended questions. I will have a five sentence completion questions for you to complete. I will record the interviews and write notes as we discuss your answers.

As mentioned earlier, I shall audiotape our conversations. Before recording, I will inform you if for any reason you do not wish for me to either record or take handwritten notes on a particular issue, I will respect your wishes. Please be mindful that all information regarding your identity will be confidential. All information that I collect, whether by audiotape or handwritten notes, will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home until the completion of this study. No one other than me, the primary investigator, will have access to the documentation. If the opportunity arises, I may share the findings of this research in articles for publication and for professional conferences. In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms of your choosing will be used for your name, as well as for the school and city’s identification. At any time, you may review any notes or audiotapes that I have made of you. If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason before its completion, I will erase your voice from the recorded interviews and will destroy the conversations.

If you have any questions about this project, you may call me at (757) 729-1704. General questions about giving consent or your rights as a participant may be answered by Virginia Tech’s Institutional Review Board at (540) 231-4991.

The Virginia Tech (VT) Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study’s data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

If you are willing to participate in this study for my dissertation, please sign and return the attached participants' permission to me and keep a copy for your records. Thank you for providing your time to this project, and I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely with many thanks,

Melanie M. Patterson

***Note:** In some situations, it may be necessary for an investigator to break confidentiality. If a researcher has reason to suspect that a child is abused or neglected, or that a person poses a threat of harm to others or him/herself, the researcher is required by Virginia State law to notify the appropriate authorities. If applicable to this study, the conditions under which the investigator must break confidentiality must be described.*

APPENDIX E Interview Questions

- a. Tell me about your background?
- b. How did you perform in high school? Why?
- c. How did your teachers contribute in your performance? How did they assist you or hinder your performance?
- d. How did your family contribute in your performance? What support did (or did not) you receive?
- e. How did your community contribute in your performance? How were they supportive?