

EXAMINING ADOLESCENTS' PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS: UNDERSTANDING THE
ACADEMIC ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL YOUTH

A Dissertation by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a major in Psychology.

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DEDICATION

To my family and friends who have supported me throughout this arduous and rewarding process, and especially my loving partner, I dedicate this to you

When you take the time to actually listen, with humility, to what people have to say, it's amazing what you can learn. Especially if the people who are doing the talking also happen to be children.

-Greg Mortenson

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ABSTRACT

Educational aspirations and expectations have grown throughout the years, yet discrepancies between the two concepts still exist, especially between Black and White youth. Using Self-Efficacy Theory, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what factors influence youth to want to go to college, strategies youth use to overcome barriers, and steps youth indicate are important to helping them get to their goal of getting to college. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with middle school youth in their school. Based on their responses, a total of twenty-one themes emerged. Motivators included: verbal encouragement, extracurricular activities, social comparison, idol, being supportive, breaking barriers, financial assistance, and being a positive role model. Strategies for overcoming blocks included: having no plan, studying, choosing friends wisely, self-efficacy, and applying for scholarships. Steps needed to fulfill their goals included: taking credits, studying, applying for scholarships, being prepared, saving money, getting good grades, extracurricular activities, and taking upper-level classes.

These findings suggest specific behaviors are needed in students' lives in order for them to have high aspirations and high expectations. Parents, teachers, and friends and peers all play a vital role in influencing students' academic success. Further, these individuals increase students' level of self-efficacy. Students who have higher levels of self-efficacy tend to do better academically and reach their goals. Interventions aimed at increasing academic aspirations and expectations in youth should focus on altering specific behaviors in parents and teachers, so as to increase the level of efficacy in youth.

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LIST OF NOMENCLATURE¹

Academic Aspirations	An individual's desire to want to go to college
Academic Attainment	An individual's success in enrolling in college/attaining the degree they desire
Academic Expectations	An individual's belief that they can be successful in college
Academic Performance	An individual's success in school; usually is in regards to current status or classroom performance
Academic Outcomes	An individual's success at the end of the school year/if they graduate from school

¹ Although these terms have separate meanings, they are used interchangeably throughout the literature. Further, Performance, Outcomes, and Attainment are related to Aspirations and Expectations in that your desires and beliefs ultimately impact and influence your success and enrollment in higher education.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The American Dream; hearing it, most citizens of the United States and people of the world can tell you exactly what that statement means. An ideology that involves the belief that wealth and security are a matter of working hard and playing by the rules and that anyone can achieve financial and economic success; an ideology that 40% of Americans believe (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2009). Unfortunately, the reality is a bit darker; 43% of Americans that are born into poverty remain there and 70% never even make it to the middle class (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2012). The Pew Charitable Trusts (2013), identified three underlying elements that influence social mobility: demographics and human capital (e.g. race, college attainment, and family employment); financial capital (e.g. liquid savings, wealth, and home equity); and wealth mobility (e.g. savings and assets which influence the ability to be mobile). Their findings reveal that being White, college educated, a dual-earner, and having more assets lead to economic mobility.

While an individual cannot alter their race or the amount of wealth or assets they inherit, they can shape their educational attainment. A college education is a gateway to economic and financial success (Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens, 2008). Individuals who obtain a Bachelor's Degree earn 31% more than those with an Associate's Degree and 74% more than those with a high school diploma over their lifetime (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). Getting into college, however, is contingent on doing well in elementary, middle, and high school. Currently, only 40% of 4th graders and 33% of 8th graders are proficient in math, while 36% of 4th graders and 34% of 8th graders are proficient in reading (U.S. Department of Education Nation's Report Card, 2015). These percentages are even lower when comparing Black youth to their White

counterparts. For Black youth during the 2014-2015 school year, only 19% of 4th graders and 13% of 8th graders were proficient in math while 18% of 4th graders and 16% of 8th graders were proficient in reading. White youth fared better, with 51% of 4th graders and 43% of 8th graders proficient in math and 46% of 4th graders and 44% of 8th graders proficient in reading. (U.S. Department of Education Nation's Report Card, 2015). These academic disparities may partially explain discrepancies in college attainment. In 2013, 40% of White adults held a Bachelor's Degree or higher compared to only 20% of Black adults (Casselmann, 2014).

The decline in math and reading proficiency between 4th and 8th grade is a common one in all middle school youth, but specifically in youth of color. As adolescents transition from "kids" to "tweens" the need for autonomy, independence and self-discovery can make youth feel overwhelmed and alone (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2014). Furthermore, in elementary school, students are in smaller classrooms, have more one-on-one time with their teachers, and are nurtured and molded as students. Upon entering middle school, students are introduced to larger classrooms, more independent work, and teachers who don't have the time necessary to dedicate to each student. The result of this swift change in only a few short months has negative impacts on student education (Dauber & Epstein, 1989; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hill & Chao, 2009).

Although there isn't a universal definition regarding what constitutes academic aspirations and expectations in the literature, they are easily differentiated. Aspirations are a student's desire to go to college while expectations are their beliefs that they can make it to college successfully. In the late 90's, Rojewski and Yang (1997), using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS) demonstrated that students' occupational aspirations begin in the 8th grade. Longitudinally, they found that student aspirations remained stable across three time points (8th, 10th, and 12th grade). Furthermore, aspirations reported in the

8th grade predicted successive aspirations, indicating the importance of establishing goals and career objectives early in one's academic trajectory. Research has further shown when aspirations do not align with expectations youth compromise their aspirations to match their expectations (Armstrong & Crombie, 2000). In other words, students give up their academic aspirations, which tend to emphasize college enrollment, in order to fulfill their expectations, which emphasize the self-reported "realistic" and "accessible" options available to them.

Jacob and Wilder (2010) conducted a study in order to better understand the aspiration-expectation gap and if it has changed over time.² Their results indicate that students whose parents have a Bachelor's degree are more likely to expect to go to college; women have consistently had higher expectations than men; an individual's expectations in 10th grade predicted actual attainment, although they have become less predictive over time; expectations have risen since the 1970's yet attainment hasn't kept pace; misinformation about college costs, preparation, and funding, account for a large expectation-attainment gap; and over 60% of students change their expectations at least once between 8th grade and eight years after high school. Based on these findings, it seems that the aspiration-expectation gap has grown over the last 40 years and educational attainment is not seen a viable outcome for many youth.

In order to increase academic achievement in youth, interventions have been created that target middle school students. These interventions have focused on mentoring (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009); families (Fosco et al., 2014; Stormshak, Connell, & Dishion, 2009; Whitaker, Graham, Severston, Furr-Holden, & Latimer, 2012); decreasing violence and substance use (Guo et al., 2015); mindfulness (Mendelson et al., 2010); possible selves

² Jacob and Wilder (2010) refer to aspirations as expectations and expectations as attainment. Because there are not concrete and distinct definitions for aspirations and expectations in the literature, they are used however the author(s) feel most comfortable.

(Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002); and neighborhoods (Whitaker, et al., 2012). Although there are many successful programs that target middle school youth, none specifically look at decreasing the aspiration-expectation gap.

The purpose of this project is to understand the academic aspirations and expectations of 8th grade students. Since middle school is such a pivotal time for students academically, it is important to focus on this grade level since most students start to perform poorly once they enter 6th grade. Interviewing youth and understanding the self-reported risk and protective factors (i.e. what factors motivate and impede academic achievement) in their lives, will expand the current literature by going beyond the use of surveys to offer deep and contextually rich information from the student perspective. Further, developing an understanding of the perceived barriers in Black youth's lives is important, given a number of environmental factors impede Black youth from enrolling or attending college at rates as high as their White peers. For this reason, interviews with both Black and White youth will be conducted to allow for possible variations in youth responses to come to light.

Risk and Protective Factors in Youth

Humans do not exist in isolated bubbles; their beliefs, motivations, and behaviors are influenced by their proximal and distal environments, which have a direct and/or indirect influence on their lives. To understand risk and protective factors as well as predictors in influencing academic achievement, it is important to comprehend the multiple levels that exist in individuals' lives. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory, risk/protective factors and predictors will be explained from the microsystem level (e.g. individual perceptions and contributions); the mesosystem/exosystem (e.g. parents and teachers); and the macrosystem (e.g.

communities, neighborhoods, and discrimination). Ultimately, adolescents choose to go to college based on their level of efficacy, however, understanding these levels of influence allows for a better understanding of what creates high or low levels of efficacy.

Risk Factors

Microsystem. From an individual perspective, academic achievement and attainment is influenced by disidentification in the classroom and student engagement (also known as belongingness) (Cokley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2012; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001; Perry, Liu, & Pabian, 2010; Van Ryzin, 2011; Wang & Holcombe, 2010; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Academic disidentification was originally conceptualized as the disconnect between students' self-esteem and academic outcomes (Osborne, 1999). The most current description focuses on the discrepancy regarding students' perception of their academic abilities and academic outcomes compared to peers (Cokley, et al., 2012). Further, academic disidentification incorporates teacher perceptions of both students' academic achievement as well as cognitive factors (e.g. effort, attitude, and conduct) (Cokley, et al., 2012). In determining how Black males and females differ in their level of disidentification, Cokley and colleagues (2012) found that academic disidentification was present in males but not females. Additionally, he found that as youth transition from middle school to high school, they are more likely to disidentify, regardless of gender, yet with males, the relationship between academic self-concept and grade point average (GPA) decreased more than with females.

Lack of engagement is highly problematic in middle school (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006). To understand the different levels of engagement, researchers have conceptualized it as three separate entities: behavioral (i.e. doing the work

assigned and following the rules); emotional/affective (i.e. interests, values, and emotions); and cognitive (i.e. motivation, strategy, and effort) (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Jimerson, Campos, & Grief, 2003; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Wang and Holcomb (2010) sampled 1,046 students using the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study (MADIC), to determine what aspects of the school, from the student's perspective, best encourage as well as discourage engagement and academic achievement during middle school. They found that competitive learning (performance goals) decreased participation, undermined the development of school belonging, and diminished the value that students placed on school; this ultimately led to lower levels of achievement. Focusing on comparison, competitiveness, and ability is behaviorally and mentally damaging to youth, as students are less eager to learn and engage in more shallow cognitive processes (Wang & Holcomb, 2010).

To understand how engagement changes from middle school to high school, Wang and Eccles (2012) using the behavioral (school compliance, participation in extracurricular activities), emotional (school identification), and cognitive (subjective value of learning) conceptualizations of engagement found that males and females had declines in all forms of engagement as they continued throughout school. Further, Black youth reported lower levels of school compliance compared to their White counterparts, which could have been influenced by the high reported discrimination and school problem behaviors experienced by Black youth. Finally, having peer support was a negative influence on behavioral engagement only when students reported hanging out with antisocial friends.

Having a gap in aspirations and expectations also contributes to youth's disengagement from school. Boxer, Goldstein, DeLorenzo, Savoy, and Mercado (2011) found that students who had high aspirations, but low expectations perceived higher education as unattainable and

reported high levels of social and academic risks. Specifically, they had higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems, test anxiety, and lower levels of school bonding compared to youth who had a smaller aspiration-expectation gap. Kirk, et al. (2012) also found differences in student outcomes based on the aspiration-expectation gap. Youth who indicated an aspiration-expectation gap reported spending less time on schoolwork than non-gap students. Further, youth who had gap were more likely to dislike their classes, have poor relationships with their teachers, and believe their teachers did not care about them.

Mesosystem/Exosystem. Broader factors that play a role in Black youth's desire to succeed academically and attend higher education include family and teachers. The values conveyed to students by teachers and family members become internalized, more so than behavioral characteristics (Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001). In their study examining the relationships that are influential in adolescents' academic achievement, Marchant, et al., (2001) found that students' perceptions of their parents' values about achievement had the strongest relationship with their motivation and competence.

Parental values are important, as they allow for youth to have a clear understanding of their parent's expectations for their education. Frome and Eccles (1998) found that parent perceptions of their child's ability and effort were more strongly related to child self- and task-perception than their grades. Additionally, parents' perceptions partially mediated the relationship between grades and their children's self- and task-perception in math and English. These findings support the notion that parents play a strong role in influencing their children's academic outcomes; if parents do not encourage academic achievement, this can negatively influence a child's academic trajectory.

Parent values regarding education, however, are based on their personal experiences with education and how positively it has affected them. Spera, Wentzel, and Matto (2009) were interested in understanding how parental aspirations varied by demographic factors as well as how parent's perception of the school is related to the aspirations they hold for their children. They found that the parents in their sample, regardless of racial/ethnic background, had high aspirations for their children. The problem was that some parents having few educational experiences to draw from, did not know how to translate their educational aspirations into behaviorally-appropriate activities. Further, parents with lower levels of education who work in jobs that do not have flexible work-family policies, are not able to dedicate as much time to their children's academic endeavors, and as a result, are not instilling as many positive aspirations to their children compared to those with higher levels of education. Spera et al. (2009) found that parental perceptions of the school were weakly associated with parental aspirations for children such that parents can view the school itself negatively, yet still have high aspirations for their children.

Teacher perception and support of the child are also important in influencing academic outcomes in youth. Garrett-Holliday (1985) looked at teacher perceptions on Black children's academic achievement for a sample of 9- and 10-year olds. She found that teacher attitudes regarding their Black students converted student achievement efforts into learned helplessness. This learned helplessness is created by the schools competing demands for academic and interpersonal excellence which requires students to work hard and challenge themselves academically. In order to do this, however, students need help and positive reinforcement from their teachers, which was reported from the students as not available. Thus, as Garret-Holliday

(1985) explains, teacher attitudes along with demands from the institution increased learned helplessness and academic incompetence.

Teacher perceptions on student's past academic performance and attitudes have also been found to account for current and future test score differences between Black and White Youth. Jussim, Eccles, and Madon (1996) found that the impact of teacher perceptions on grades and scores was almost three times as great for Black youth compared to White. Furthermore, effects were greater for students from low-income families and were cumulative, meaning that Black youth from low-income families experienced more negative effects than any other group.

Studies focused on the differential treatment of Black and White youth have consistently found teachers were less supportive of Black than White students (Coates, 1972; Feldman & Orchowsky, 1979; Rubovits & Maehr, 1973; Taylor, 1979). For example, in Coates' (1972) study, White males used more negative statements when training a Black male child compared to a White male child on a discrimination problem. Although the same findings couldn't be drawn from White females, both White males and females judged Black children more negatively than White children. Similarly, Rubovits and Maehr (1973) found that in the classroom, Black students were paid less attention, given less praise yet more criticism, and ignored at a higher rate. Further, when looking at children who were given the label "gifted" versus "not gifted" it was the gifted Black student who was given more negative feedback from his teacher compared to the non-gifted Black peer.

As a result of differential treatment, Black youth report feeling disconnected from their classrooms. Booker (2006) referred to this disconnect as the "identification-connection divide" in which Black youth feel unsupported in the classroom, which leads to lower levels of

belongingness, which then leads to lower academic performance and achievement. This divide is the result of youth reporting negative interactions with teachers as well as being one of very few people of color in their classroom (Booker, 2006). For Black youth who do have a connection to their school, also known as a sense of belonging, their achievement levels are higher and directly influenced by perceptions of teacher support, encouragement, and warmth (Booker, 2006).

Macrosystem. The broadest factors that put Black youth at risk for academic failure are community-level dynamics (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, & Rowley, 2008; Burchinal, et al. 2011; Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Copeland-Linder, Lambert, Chen, & Ialongo, 2011; Evans, Li, & Sepanski Whipple, 2013; Sektnan, McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2010). Society as a whole and community engagement more specifically, influences families in a variety of ways. A few examples include the transmission of information, cultural norms, and effective parenting (Benson et al., 1998). Throughout the years, however, local communities have had less of an influence on the outcomes of youth as a whole because of privatization of families (Benson, et al., 1998). Privatization is the belief that the immediate family is solely responsible for the upbringing, care, and discipline of their children, which limits the possibility of children engaging with non-familial mentors. Mentors have been shown to be positively associated with increasing encouraging beliefs regarding school (Hurd, Sánchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012).

Most individuals have more than one risk factor to contend with. Rutter (1979) and Garnezy, Masten, and Tellegen (1984) were the first group of researchers to introduce a Multiple Risk Model that focused on how multiple risk factors affect outcomes in children. To extend this model to children of color, García Coll, et al., (1996) created a conceptual and integrative framework to understand the developmental competencies in children. The framework

incorporates factors that affect development in all children of color, but was specifically targeted to Black and Puerto Rican youth. The model includes but is not limited to social position variables (e.g. race, social class, ethnicity, and gender), racism, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression, and promoting/inhibiting environments (e.g. schools, neighborhoods, and health care). To understand if timing of risks or the severity of risks were more important in predicting academic achievement in Black youth, Burchinal et al, (2008), conducted a longitudinal analysis of 4th and 6th graders starting when the students were one-year old. Their results concluded that the severity of exposure to multiple risks, more so than the timing of those risks, were related to lower reading and math abilities, lower social skills, and more problem behaviors in grades 4-6. Some of the risk factors they determined to be detrimental to Black youth were racial discrimination and the transition from elementary to middle school.

Severity of risk has also been shown to effect psychological well-being. Sameroff, Seifer, Zax, and Barocas (1987) examined early indicators of schizophrenic outcomes in children, whose mothers were diagnosed with schizophrenia, from birth to four years of age. They found that being exposed to a combination of risk factors resulted in a nearly threefold increase in the magnitude of psychological distress. Moreover, Black children from low SES backgrounds had the worst outcomes including poorer obstetrical status, more difficult temperaments, less responsivity at 12 months, and less adaptive behavior at 30 and 48 months (Sameroff, et al. 1987).

Poverty, discrimination, and neighborhoods also contribute to negative academic outcomes in Black youth. Compared to their White counterparts, Black youth live in more disadvantaged neighborhoods, attend schools with a higher proportion of poor and/or minority students, and live in poorer households (Burchinal, et al. 2011). These factors account for

achievement gaps in reading and math in elementary school and are solidified by age 3. Forty percent of neighborhoods that are considered high-poverty are more than 60% Black (Kingsley & Pettit, 2003). High-poverty neighborhoods traditionally contain single-parent households, parents that are less likely to have a degree, and schools that are underfunded (Sirin, 2005). From an ecological perspective, they lack access to social supports, community services, and employment opportunities (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Since socio-economic status is a predictor of school funding, the majority of high-poverty neighborhoods contain schools that are mediocre, at best, compared to wealthier neighborhoods (Sirin, 2005). Furthermore, high-poverty neighborhoods are oftentimes enmeshed in violence. Youth who have been exposed to firearm violence, for example, tend to be more impulsive and emotional, report using alcohol and drugs, are truant and engage in property crimes, and were more likely to have been abused and corporally punished (Bingenheimer, Brenna, & Earls, 2005). Additionally, youth from high-poverty neighborhoods tend to engage with peers with higher levels of aggression and antisocial behaviors and have lower standardized test scores (Bingenheimer, et al., 2005).

Sektnan and colleagues (2010), using data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, concluded that children who live in poverty are more at risk for poor behavioral regulation and lower achievement outcomes simply because of restricted access to resources and situations that promote positive achievement. In their sample, the majority of Black families were at or below the poverty line for the first 4 ½ years of their child's life, so these results can only be generalized to lower-income families. Minority status, low maternal education, and lower levels of income each had a significant effect on the child's academic achievement in this sample.

Experiences with racial discrimination are also important in influencing academic achievement (Lareau, 1987; Ogbu, 1978). For boys and girls in 8th grade, no reported differences in perceived racial discrimination were noted; however, boys reported more racial discrimination in 11th grade than girls (Chavous, et al. 2008). In addition, boys who reported experiencing racial discrimination in 8th grade had negative academic outcomes in 11th grade, relative to their 11th grade experiences. This was not found in girls. When looking at how discrimination in addition to neighborhood disorder and exposure to violence influenced substance use and aggressive behavior, Copeland-Linder et al. (2011) found that contextual stress in the 8th grade was positively related to aggressive behavior and substance use for boys 2 years later; for girls, it only predicted substance use.

Losen and Skiba (2010) examined suspension rates for Black and White middle youth and found large discrepancies. Twenty-eight percent of Black males were suspended during the academic school year compared to 10% of White males. Similar results were found for Black females (18%) versus White females (4%). Suspensions are associated with youth missing class, failing classes, and being academically behind their peers. Balfanz, Spiridakis, Neild, and Legters (2003) found that for first-time 9th graders who were previously incarcerated, they attended school a mere 58% of the time, failed a quarter of their classes, and read at a 6th grade reading level in the 8th grade. Suspensions as disciplinary tactics create more problems for youth by removing them from the learning environment, thus, increasing their risk for academic failure and limiting their preparedness for adulthood (Losen & Skiba, 2010).

Protective Factors

Microsystem. Black youth who perceive familial support, believe they have a sense of control over their successes and failures in school, and have high feelings of self-worth and emotional security with others, regulate their behaviors and actions in school and have better academic outcomes (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994). From an individual perspective, engagement and belongingness are important in creating positive feelings regarding academics. One way to increase engagement and feelings of belongingness is through career planning and expectations (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003; Perry, 2008; Perry, et al., 2010). Kenny and colleagues (2003), using a longitudinal crossed lagged model, found that for predominately non-White high school students, higher levels of career planning were associated with school engagement. They concluded that planning and career preparation helps increase student resilience and counters many of the risk factors that urban, students of color face. Perry et al. (2010) also found positive relationships between career planning and engagement in that career preparation was found to have a direct effect on engagement which had a direct effect on student grades.

Other forms of engagement pertain to students' perceptions of the school environment. In order to understand the non-achievement aspects of the educational experience, Kirkpatrick Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder Jr. (2001) examined the role of race-ethnicity in the classroom by looking at how attached and engaged students were; they used data from ADDHealth, which sampled students from grades 7-12. They defined attachment as belongingness or feeling like a part of the school and engagement as "playing by the rules," relating it to the social, structural, and peripheral characteristics of the school. Their results indicated that Black and White youth felt less attachment than Hispanic students, yet Black youth were more actively engaged in the

classroom and school activities than other groups. Their measure of attachment focused on the affective ties Black youth have, concluding that even if Black youth feel disconnected from their school from an academic perspective, they still feel a connection socially.

Van Ryzin (2011) used longitudinal data to investigate what factors were responsible for the relationship between experiences in school and engagement in learning, psychological adjustment, and academic achievement. He determined that how students perceived the school environment was related to school engagement in learning, which was also related to academic achievement over time. Having earlier levels of engagement was related to later perceptions of autonomy, teacher and parent support, and mastery and goal orientations (i.e. learning to challenge yourself to become better and competitive learning to be better than other students) (Van Ryzin, 2011).

Since the transition to middle school is such a difficult time for Black youth, feeling personally accepted, respected, included, and supported at school is an important component in supporting academic achievement (Morrison, Gutman & Midgley, 2000). When examining the influences that help Black youth during their transition to middle school, Morrison et al., (2000) found that overall, students experienced a significant decline in GPA, yet students who were more efficacious had higher GPA's during this transitions compared to their peers. They concluded that having confidence in one's capabilities to do well academically was related to academic achievement in middle school. Other researchers have established similar findings in youth such that perceiving acceptance and support and feeling like they are contributing to a group helps maintain feelings of commitment and identification with the school (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995); achievement is considered maximized when students feel competent in their abilities, when they have goals, and when they have perceived control

over their successes and failures (Marchant, et al., 2001); feeling a sense of psychological attachment and belonging in one's school is associated with an increased focus on academic tasks (Anderman, & Anderman 1999); and students who found school meaningful were more likely to have high aspirations (Berzin, 2010).

Lastly, student participation in organized activities has also been shown to positively affect academic adjustment. Fredricks and Eccles (2008) wanted to determine the effects of participation in activities (school clubs, school sports teams, and out-of-school recreational activities) in a sample of Black and White youth. They used the MADICS to examine the connection between 8th grade participation and adjustment in 8th and 11th grade. They found that involvement in middle school clubs was positively related to academic adjustment in 8th and 11th grade. Additionally, psychological benefits, such as associating with prosocial peers in youth from low-SES backgrounds, were associated with participation in sports. Finally, participating in out-of-school recreational activities had positive affects with prosocial peers, but with females only.

Mesosystem/Exosystem. Parent and teacher/school support are the most cited protective factors in the academic literature. They positively influence student conduct, as students are better behaved when they perceive responsiveness and concern from teachers and encouragement from their parents (Sanders, 1998). When looking at how family and school factors played a role in influencing GPA on Black youth, Morrison, et al., (2000) found that adolescents view parental involvement as evidence that parents have high expectations for them and believe that high levels of involvement equate to parental responsibility for their children. In addition, they found that high levels of parental involvement and perceived teacher support were

related to students that had higher GPAs when transitioning to middle school which was related to academic achievement.

Parental involvement, based on Epstein's (1987) framework includes home-based involvement (i.e. engaging in educational activities at home; parent training programs; and the school and community agencies involvement with parents) and school-based involvement (i.e. volunteering at school, parent and teacher communication, and involvement in school policies and meetings). Altschul (2011), using data from the NELS, wanted to examine what type of involvement helped increase academic achievement in Mexican youth. The findings revealed that direct and positive impacts in academics were the result of home-based involvement and not through school-based. When examining home-based involvement, the results indicated that financial investment towards a child's education had the greatest impact. Finally, although parental involvement did have a positive effect on academic achievement, it was not related to changes in students' outcomes between 8th to 10th grade.

In order to determine which form of involvement positively impacted youth consistently as shown through the literature, Hill and Tyson (2009) conducted a meta-analysis on parental involvement in middle school. Their findings revealed that for home-based involvement, some activities such as engaging in educational activities at home, having books and other educational material available at the home, and taking children to educationally-enriching places such as museums and the zoo, were consistently shown to be positively associated with achievement. Homework help, however, did not have a positive impact on academics. In regard to school-based involvement, making school visits, volunteering, and attending school events, was moderately correlated. Interestingly, Hill and Tyson (2009) found a more comprehensive form of involvement which they called academic socialization; it incorporates communicating the

purposes, goals, and meaning of academic performance; translates expectations about involvement; and provides children with academic strategies they may use. Overall, parental involvement is positively associated with achievement.

Fan and Chen (2001) in their meta-analysis of the effects of parental involvement found when academic achievement is represented as a global factor (GPA), rather than a specific indicator (math grade), the relationship between parental involvement and student academic achievement is stronger. Similarly to what Hill and Tyson (2009) found, Fan and Chen (2001) determined that parent supervision has a weak relationship with academic achievement, yet parental aspirations and expectations for their child's achievement has the strongest relationship. Both meta-analyses, then, show how parental involvement is multifaceted and not simply a unidimensional concept.

Involvement is not the only way parents can influence youth to succeed academically. High parental expectations (Seginer, 1983; Thompson, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1988) and the values parent instill about education (Paulson, 1994; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992) are related to students wanting to succeed. In her research on how multiple mechanisms (i.e. theories) are associated with high levels of aspirations in youth, Berzin (2010) found that in the Status Attainment Model a student's home academic environment as well as their school behavior expectations related to aspirations. Further, parents' educational expectations were more important than their education, occupation, or involvement in school. In the Social Support Model, she determined that having more support from parents was associated with higher student aspirations. Taken together, multiple factors are responsible for increasing aspirations in youth and cannot be determined by one specific model.

One way to increase student engagement in the classroom, is having teachers who convey a sense of warmth, inclusiveness, and respect towards their students (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Perry, et al, 2010; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Further, having supportive teachers is associated with adolescents' future aspirations (Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010). In order to test whether school engagement mediates the link between classroom context and academic achievement, Dotterer et al. (2009) used data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD). They found that classroom context (i.e. quality of instruction, socioemotional climate of the classroom, and the relationship between students and teachers) was an important predictor of student engagement. In addition, when students with previous academic difficulties were in a classroom with high instruction and socioemotional learning and low student-teacher conflict, they were more likely to be engaged compared to students in low-quality classrooms.

Academic achievement is also increased when teachers convey learning for intrinsic reasons (i.e. mastery goals) versus when they emphasize grades, competition, and outperforming their peers (performance goals) (Anderman & Anderman, 1999). In considering which features of the school environment influence engagement in the classroom, Wang and Holcomb (2010) focused on five specific school characteristics: promoting performance goals, promoting mastery goals, support of autonomy, encouraging discussion, and teacher social support. They concluded the experiences students have in school directly affect their level of engagement. Further, teachers can influence a student's positive identification with school by promoting mastery goals and avoiding performance goals. Wang and Holcomb (2010) also found when teachers encouraged mastery goals, it made the strongest impact on students' identification and engagement with school. Autonomy, discussion, and teacher support were also related to student

identification and engagement, yet autonomy and teacher support did not show an increase in self-regulation strategies.

In Perry and colleagues (2010) study, they found that not only was teacher support an important factor in increasing student engagement, but that it was actually better than parental support. They determined that teacher support acts as a form of social capital for youth, outside of the immediate family. Teacher support, then, acts as an important protective factor for urban youth, who may not have positive role models in the home.

Macrosystem. From a community-level perspective, SES is one of the best indicators of academic achievement in youth. High SES is related to more capital: financial (material resources), human (nonmaterial resources like education), and social (resources obtained through human connections) (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). In a study conducted by DeGarmo, Forgatch, and Martinez (1999), they found income, parental education, and parental occupation were associated with better parenting, and as a result, affected school achievement in their children. A few studies have shown how neighborhood SES is positively related with indicators of academic achievement in adolescents (math outcomes, basic skills tests, and GPA) and negatively associated with educational risk (Dornbusch, Ritter, & Steinberg, 1991; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olsen, 1994; Halpern-Felsher, et al. 1997). Studies have also shown that for older adolescents, SES and neighborhood affluence was positively associated with youth graduating from high school, enrolling and attending college, and years of schooling completed (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Halpern-Felsher, et al. 1997).

In a meta-analysis looking at SES and academic outcomes, Sirin (2005) concluded that SES is the most widely used variable in educational research. Family SES, he determined, is one

of the strongest predictors of academic performance since it provides various levels of capital to children. Because learning is cumulative, if a student performs poorly in elementary school due to a lack of resources, they are more likely to perform poorly later on and drop out (Sirin, 2005). Family SES, however, was a better predictor in White youth than in Black, suggesting that other indicators, such as neighborhood and school SES, are more influential at effecting Black academic outcomes.

Since SES is not malleable, other indicators need to be accounted for in the community to serve as protective factors for Black youth. One of these factors is church. Barrett (2010) conducted focus groups with seniors in high school and found that within churches, academic efforts and success were recognized publicly; for those youth who did not do as well, they were advised to “reach up” in order to attain academic success similar to their peers. Further, because of the wide range of age groups that attend church, these intergenerational links can serve as sources of information and monitor youth progress while simultaneously holding them accountable for their schoolwork (Barrett, 2010). Church involvement not only has positive effects on a child’s academic self-concept (Sanders, 1998) but it also allows youth to participate in extracurricular activities such as: community service, missions, youth conferences, camps, and retreats (Barrett, 2010), which keeps youth from engaging with antisocial or negative peers.

Another community-level protective factor that is influential in increasing Black youth’s educational attainment is natural mentors (Hurd, et al., 2012). Hurd and colleagues (2012) conducted a longitudinal study, with freshman in high school (and interviewed them every year for the next three years) in order to determine if natural mentors were associated with positive attitudes about school. They found that having a mentor contributed to stronger beliefs in the importance of schooling for future success. This, they hypothesized, may motivate Black youth

to want to continue with the pursuit of an advanced degree. In Barrett's (2010) study, parents, youth, and other adults in the church served as role models and provided sources of information to youth.

Risk and protective factors can both hinder and facilitate academic outcomes in youth as a whole, but in Black youth in particular. Each level, the individual, the parent/teacher, and the community, plays a role in shaping the academic trajectories of youth and are important to consider when looking at why academic disparities exist. Many of these studies surveyed youth and/or their parents/teachers, but did not conduct interviews and develop themes to understand, in a rich and contextual way, what are the most important factors influencing youth today. This gap in the literature is ripe for exploration and will provide a level of depth that has yet to be understood in the academic literature. The next section will focus on the predictors of achievement in order to determine if there are specific indicators that have a more consistent effect on academic outcomes.

Literature Review of the Predictors of Achievement³

Microsystem

Individual-level factors predict achievement in a variety of ways (Honora Adelabu, 2008; Balfanz, Hertzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Beal & Crockett, 2010; Lucio, Rapp-Paglicci, & Rowe, 2011; Ou & Reynolds, 2008; Tiet, Huizinga, & Byrnes, 2010). For example, Honora Adelabu (2008), wanted to examine how Future Time Perspective (FTP), a sense of hope, and

³ Many of the risk and protective factors discussed in the previous sections appear as predictors. This indicates that not only do specific factors impede and help middle school youth, but are actually found to predict achievement in the future. This implies the importance of the middle school experience and the perceptions that youth have regarding their beliefs in their ability to make positive academic gains which sets their trajectory going forward.

identification with one's ethnic group would help to predict academic achievement in Black youth. The results indicated that all three were positively related to academic achievement and that students who were focused on the future, were interested in reaching their goals, and had a sense of belonging to their ethnic group were more likely to achieve compared to their peers. Unfortunately, although these factors predict achievement in the 7th grade, they are less likely to contribute in the 9th and 11th. This separation between middle and high school is alarming, although they do not give a reason for the decline.

Future-oriented cognitions were also the focus of Beal and Crockett's (2010) research. They wanted to determine if adolescents' future-oriented cognitions changed during adolescence and if they predicted their activities. In addition, they wanted to see if aspirations and expectations had an effect on educational attainment and if this was reciprocal. Their results indicated that future-oriented cognitions did have an impact on development such that aspirations and expectations predicted educational attainment eight years later. Academic activities, however, did not predict changes in aspirations nor in expectations, suggesting a unilateral effect.

Balfanz et al. (2007) in a comprehensive study focused on disengagement, wanted to understand how early it occurs and what, if any, indicators existed to predict who would eventually drop out. They focused on the emotional/affective component of engagement, as behavioral reactions and academic struggle have been shown to be the two main reasons why students disengage. To measure disengagement over time, they created a longitudinal database, which followed predominately Black students from the beginning of 6th grade through an 8-year period. Their predictors (flags) were as follows: students had to attend school less than 80% of the time; they needed to fail 6th grade math and English; and have an out-of-school suspension in the 6th grade. The variables they analyzed included: final marks in 5th and 6th grade; end-of-year

behavior marks; in-school and out-of-school suspensions; attendance; special education status; English as a second language (ESL); and 1 or more year's overage for grade level.

Their results indicated that failing a course was a better predictor than having low test scores; in fact, of the 6th graders who failed math and English, 87% and 89% failed to graduate, respectively. Those who were chronically absent were 68% less likely to graduate than their peers and those with an unsatisfactory behavior grade were 56% less likely to graduate. These predictors, together, contributed 34 times more variance in predicting graduation rates than did student race. Differences in how many flags a student had are important to note: of those with zero flags, 56% would graduate on time or within a year; those with one, 36%; with two, 21%; with three, 13%; and with four, 7%. Overall, of the students who had at least one flag, 29% of them were predicted to graduate on time or within one year. This inclusive and wide ranging research showed specific predictors that educators and parents can be aware of in order to determine the likelihood that a student will disengage and eventually, drop out of school.

Other recent predictors focus on academic expectations (Lucio, et al., 2011; Ou and Reynolds, 2008); self-efficacy, attendance, repeated grades, and school behaviors (Lucio, et al. 2011); attendance in selective magnet schools (Ou and Reynolds, 2008); effortful control, conflictual academic relationships and school avoidance which mediate cumulative risk and math and science achievement (Swanson, Valiente, & Lemery-Chalfant, 2012); and resilience (Tiet, et al. 2010). Tiet and colleagues (2010) found that Black youth that had higher levels of functioning, in spite of living in high-risk neighborhoods, were considered resilient given their higher levels of academic achievement, higher self-efficacy, and better psychosocial functioning.

Mesosystem/Exosystem

Parental and teacher influence are also important predictors in determining adolescent achievement. In determining support systems in their lives, youth list female members of their families as giving out emotional, tangible, and informational support and teachers as providing informational support, only. (McMahon, Felix, & Nagarajan, 2011). Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, and Colvin (2011) wanted to explore if parents are influential in shaping their children's educational aspirations. Middle and high school youth who were predominately Black, were interviewed. They found that parents had high levels of aspirations, which predicted adolescent aspirations. This was true even though parents in this sample reported low levels of education, themselves. Furthermore, adolescents whose parents had high expectations had higher GPAs. Even student perceptions of parental expectations, have been shown to be predictive of Black youth's aspirations (Nichols, Kotchick, McNamara Barry, & Haskins, 2010).

In a similar line of research looking at the long-term effects on children's educational and occupational success of their parents, Dubow, Boxer, and Huesmann (2009) wanted to examine if they could predict two adult outcomes at age 48 (i.e. educational and occupational attainment) from parental education levels when the students were in middle school. Data came from the Columbia County Longitudinal Study, which began in 1960. Their results indicated that parental education measured in middle school accounted for educational and occupational attainment at age 48. Additionally, the higher the level of parental education, the higher the educational aspirations and attainment were in adolescence; this led to more prominent occupational status in adulthood. The single and strongest predictor of educational attainment at age 48, however, was educational aspirations at age 19. Assuming that 19-year olds are college sophomores, and that college acceptance and enrollment is based on doing well in middle school and high school, it is

clear that parental levels of education play an important role in predicting student academic success.

Black youth tend to have less positive relationships with their teachers compared to their White peers (Saft & Pianta, 2001). One reason for this could be that Black youth who are from lower-income backgrounds have different views than their teachers, who tend to come from middle-class backgrounds (Barrett, 2010). To understand the quality of student-teacher relationships in a predominately Black sample, Decker, Dona, and Christenson (2007) wanted to determine if it was associated with positive social, behavioral, engagement, and academic outcomes. Their results concluded that students discussed wanting to be closer with their teachers, indicating that a good relationship with teachers is a source of support; teachers, however, tended to view their relationships with students negatively. Given that this relationship was important in predicting socio-emotional functioning and engagement outcomes (Decker, et al., 2007), how a teacher responds to youth is important. There was no relationship found regarding academic outcomes. Furthermore, teacher perceptions of their relationships affected their behaviors towards the students such that the more positively the teachers rated their relationship with their students, the number of suspensions the student received decreased.

Relationships with teachers also predicted lower levels of antisocial behavior for children and adolescents (Tiet, et al. 2010) as well as student engagement, language arts and math grades, and math achievement (Murray, 2009). As positive aspects of relationships with teachers such as closeness increased, student adjustment and functioning improved as well (Murray, 2009). Adjustment and functioning include things like: better social skills, positive behaviors, higher levels of engagement, better academic outcomes, less behavioral referrals, and more time spent

on a task (Decker, et al., 2007). Based on these outcomes, it's clear that a positive student-teacher relationship is essential to increasing academic achievement in Black youth.

Macrosystem

From a broader perspective, discrimination is one mechanism that inhibits academic success in Black youth. Researchers have documented racial and systemic differences that limit Black youths success in school (Ogbu, 1994; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Garmezy, et al. 1984). Neblett Jr., Philip, Cogburn, and Sellers (2006) wanted to determine if Black youth's experiences with discrimination negatively impacted their academic outcomes and examined if positive racial socialization messages helped alleviate these negative experiences. They recruited Black students in grades 7-10 in eleven different middle and high schools. They found that having discriminatory experiences in school were negatively related to academic curiosity, persistence, and performance. Additionally, even when racial socialization messages were conveyed via parents, it did not lessen the impact of discrimination. Having curiosity and persistence was related to higher self-worth (Neblett Jr., et al., 2006) which facilitates learning and efficacy, even when students do poorly.

Discrimination can also affect school engagement among Black youth. When looking at the sociocultural factors that are related to academic achievement in Black middle school students, Dotterer (2009) discovered that reported experiences with discrimination were related to lower school self-esteem and school bonding, which supports the notion that experiencing discrimination puts adolescents at risk for disengagement. Similar to what Neblett Jr. and colleagues found (2006) racial socialization did not buffer the effects of perceived discrimination at school (Dotterer, 2009). Discrimination from teachers was also a negative predictor of

academic achievement in Black youth (Dotterer, 2009), proof that teachers play a large role in the academic success of Black students.

Support systems that exist outside of the home, such as community resources that encourage children to engage in extracurricular activities, or factors that help increase resiliency in at-risk youth, are all positive predictors of attainment (Tiet, et al., 2010; Nichols, et al., 2010). Communities and neighborhoods lacking in resources or in capital, can predict negative outcomes on attainment (Stewart, Stewart, & Simons, 2007; Walker & Sutherland, 1993; Hope, 1995, Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). In Nichols et al. (2010) study, they found no relationship between the number of community resources present and the utilization of those resources in impacting achievement. This, they concluded, could be the result of students not being aware of the resources that do exist in their communities because neighborhoods were reported as unsafe and most children did not leave their homes after school.

In response to youth growing up in environments that lack sufficient levels of human and economic capital, one way to increase achievement is through social capital (Stanton-Salazar, Vásquez, & Mehan, 1996). In looking to explore what forms of capital impact the educational attainment of Black youth, Buttaro, Battle, and Pastrana Jr., (2010) found that economic, rather than social capital, was a better predictor of positive gaps in attainment, however, social capital is contingent on parental economic capital, which means that high levels of social capital are dependent on economic capital. Social capital was also an important contributor in a group of middle school students who were considered at-risk (Woolley & Bowen, 2007). In this study, social capital played an additive role in students' lives, especially when economic and human capital was low.

Based on the existing literature, high aspirations (from the microsystem), parents that have high expectations and teachers that offer a supportive atmosphere (from the mesosystem/exosystem), and social capital and low levels of discrimination (from the macrosystem) are important predictors of academic success in Black youth. All of the above also indicate that youth filter and internalize messages from their surroundings. The next section will focus on introducing a theory that, at its core, focuses on the microsystem factors, yet incorporates the mesosystem/exosystem and macrosystem influences that are responsible for impacting the individual. This theory will guide the research in helping to understanding the aspiration and expectation gap.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy theory is subsumed under the larger social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) which posits three components that influence psychosocial functioning: cognitive and other personal factors, behaviors, and environment. When viewing social-cognitive theory from an agentic perspective, efficacy is the central mechanism of human agency (Bandura, 1997), and can be understood from a personal and collective perspective. Self-efficacy, because of its large influence on agency, has been shown to be a predictor of academic aspirations and attainment in school children (Pajares, 1996; Pajares & Miller, 1994; Schunk, 1989; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992).

Self-efficacy theory can be attributed to Bandura (1977), who conceptualized that efficacy is comprised of two separate parts; an individual first needs to have outcome expectancies, which are defined as the belief that a behavior or set of behaviors will lead to a

specific outcome. Next, they need to have efficacy expectations which are the beliefs that one can successfully implement said behaviors required to produce the outcomes. (Figure 1).

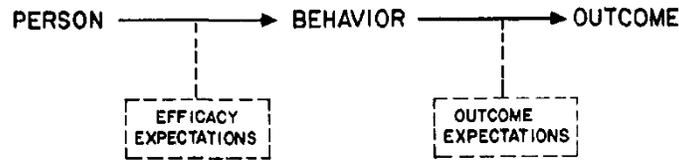


Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of the difference between efficacy expectations and outcome expectations.

Taken from: Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.

Outcome and efficacy expectations are differentiated because an individual can believe that engaging in certain behaviors will lead to specific outcomes (outcome expectations), yet if they have doubts about their abilities to perform the behaviors (efficacy expectations), the information does not influence their behavior (Bandura, 1977). An example might be helpful; say an adolescent in middle school wants to go to college (this is their outcome). In order to get accepted into college, they believe that studying, getting good grades, engaging in extracurricular activities, and volunteering are the behaviors needed to achieve that outcome (outcome expectations). Unfortunately, they do not have appropriate studying habits, they do not believe they can get good grades, they don't want to participate in extracurricular activities/don't have the means/transportation, and have nowhere close by to volunteer (efficacy expectations). Based on their analysis of their resources and capabilities, they determine that a college education is unattainable and do not engage in the appropriate behaviors to achieve their goal.

Avoiding specific behaviors based on personal or environmental inadequacies is a common human trait since individuals tend to participate in activities in which they view themselves as capable (Bandura, 1977). When individuals perceive that they have the appropriate

skills and incentives to complete a goal, efficacy expectations are a major determining factor in how much effort they expend and how long they will continue working toward that goal, even in the face of stressful and complicated situations (Bandura, 1977). These efficacy expectations are based on four sources of information from the individual's environment: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. (Figure 2).

Performance expectations are based on personal mastery experiences; success in a specific action will raise experiences while repeated failures will lower them. Vicarious experience is seeing others perform a threatening or difficult task without problems, which then raises the expectations in the individual that they too can improve and complete a task if they persist in their efforts. Verbal persuasion pertains to individuals being led through suggestion that they can cope successfully with things that have overwhelmed them in the past. Emotional arousal concerns the idea that stressful situations elicit an emotional response, which depending on the task, might be informative concerning an individual's competency.

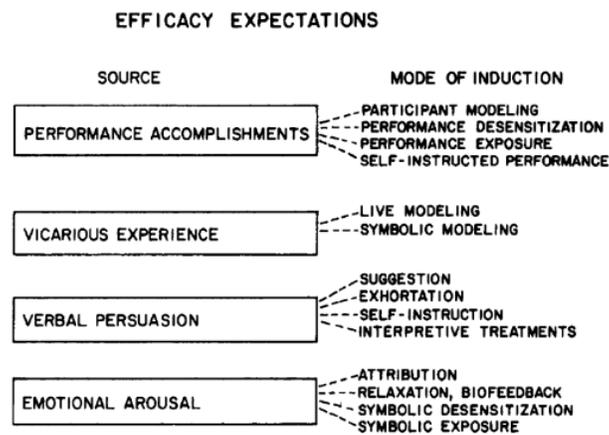


Figure 2. Major sources of efficacy information and the principal sources through which different modes of treatment operate.

Taken from: Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.

In wanting to determine which of the four sources of information impacted students' academic capabilities and self-regulatory strategies, Usher and Pajares (2006) surveyed 6th grade middle schoolers and aimed to explore how the four sources varied by race/ethnicity. They found that all four informational sources predicted self-efficacy, but perceived mastery accounted for the most variance. For students who were below-reading level, they reported fewer mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, and social persuasions as well as higher physiological arousal and lower self-efficacy than students above reading level. Finally, for Black youth, social persuasion was a better predictor of self-efficacy than was mastery experience, indicating the importance of teachers and parents in helping to increase their self-efficacy.

When conducting a review of the literature in order to determine which of the four sources of self-efficacy posited by the social cognitive theory have a positive impact on self-efficacy in higher educational settings, van Dinther, Dochy, & Segers (2011) focused on interventions using different theories. They found that interventions that were based on the social-cognitive theory were more effective in influencing students' self-efficacy than interventions that used other theories (91% compared to 67%). Further, they found that mastery experiences are the most important of the four sources in creating a strong self-efficacy.

Different sources of influence, including parents and the school, are important in shaping adolescents' self-efficacy (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Jiang, Song, Lee, & Bong, 2014; McMahon, Wernsman, & Rose, 2009). In fact, positive parental involvement in their children's education can increase teachers' educational commitment to children (Bandura, et al., 1996) since parents influence teacher perceptions about the child. In families who are economically disadvantaged,

parents with high aspirations and involvement in school activities tend to have children who are academically successful (Kao & Tienda, 1998).

In middle school samples, parents who have high self-efficacy in promoting their children's intellectual development as well as positive educational aspirations for their child were more likely to have children who did better academically (Bandura, et al. 1996). Further, parents high in self-efficacy seek out and create environments that are conducive to their children's academic development and serve as advocates on their behalf (Bandura, et al. 1996). In a similar longitudinal study with 11-15 year old students in the 6th and 7th grade, Bandura, et al. (2001) found that while SES only had a small and indirect effect on students' self-efficacy, parental aspirations were important in influencing student occupational efficacy and career choice. This study found parents who have high aspirations act in ways that increase their child's academic, social, and self-regulatory efficacy, which in turn increases their aspirations and promotes academic success (Bandura, et al. 2001).

Jiang, et al. (2014) wanted to determine how the perceived achievement goals (mastery and performance) would predict Korean students' self-efficacy and personal achievement goals in elementary and middle-school students. They found that the perceived achievement goals that parents and teachers held for students helped predict self-efficacy and achievement goals, which then predicted actual achievement. Further, perceived mastery goals of both parents and teachers predicted students' self-efficacy while perceived performance goals predicted self-efficacy from parents only (Jiang, et al. 2014). As students transitioned from elementary to middle school, however, perceptions of teacher achievement goals dwindled, while parent influence remained relatively stable, indicating the higher predictive power of parental influence compared to teachers (Jiang, et al, 2014). The most importance predictor of student achievement in both

elementary and middle-school students was their own self-efficacy, demonstrating that establishing high levels of self-efficacy early will help youth achieve their own academic goals (Jiang, et al 2014).

In high school samples, self-efficacy has been studied in a variety of ways. Research has looked at self-efficacy and school belonging and aspirations such that feeling encouraged to participate, a subscale, predicted academic self-efficacy in Black males (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008). Additionally, students' academic aspirations predicted their self-efficacy, emphasizing the important relationship between aspirations and self-efficacy in Black male students. Researchers have also looked at self-efficacy and personality in Italian students such that openness at the end of junior high school was related to academic outcomes more so than self-efficacy, yet this switches once students are in senior high school (Caprara, Vecchione, Alessandri, Gerbino, & Barbaranelli, 2011). Further, parental aspirations for their children were also positive predictors for student self-efficacy in math and English and parental involvement in extracurricular activities also increased student self-efficacy (Fan & Williams, 2010). Finally, self-efficacy was related to cognitive and metacognitive strategies such that students who have high levels of self-efficacy are confident in their academic abilities, believe that intelligence is malleable, and believe that doing well is determined by effort (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013).

In determining meta-analytically, how self-efficacy relates positively to academic performance, Multon, Brown, & Lent, (1991) determined that self-efficacy accounted for 14% of the variance in student's academic performance and 12% of the variance in their academic persistence. Low-achieving students were found to have better relationships between self-efficacy and performance than those that were higher achieving, showing how powerful self-efficacy beliefs are in increasing students' academic performance. Lastly, they found age was an

important factor moderating efficacy and performance such that high school and college-age students showed stronger effects than did elementary. There were no results for middle school youth, showing how little research was done on them at this time.

Based on the research conducted with self-efficacy in middle and high-school students, it is clear that a positive and significant relationship exists between self-efficacy, academic aspirations and expectations, and academic achievement. Currently, there are no qualitative studies that use self-efficacy theory to show the gap between students' academic aspirations and their expectations. This project will gather opinions from students about what they feel are barriers and motivators preventing and encouraging them to enroll in college and help flesh out their aspirations and expectations. Because this theory incorporates the individual and the environment, it is ideal in capturing all the influences in a student's life and allows for a clearer picture to be formed when trying understanding why the discrepancy between aspirations and expectations exists.

Purpose of Research

This project is an exploratory study focused on developing a deeper understanding of middle school youth's academic aspirations and expectations. The purpose is to explore factors motivating and inhibiting youth from wanting to go to college. Although there are numerous risk and protective factors related to academic achievement cited in the literature, this study will investigate the fit between scholarly perspectives and youth perspectives by interviewing students directly to learn how they talk about factors influencing their academic lives. Currently, there are no studies that interview youth regarding their academic aspirations and expectations.

Interviews allow for a richer, more contextual portrayal of the academic aspirations and expectations in youth. Of particular interest are the following research questions:

Research Question #1: What are the factors middle school youth identify that motivate their college aspirations and expectations?

Research Question #2: What strategies do youth conceptualize for overcoming potential barriers to college attainment?

Research Question #3: In what ways have youth thought about ways to fulfill their goals?

CHAPTER II

METHOD

Setting and Participants

Setting. Wichita Public Schools (USD 259) is the largest school district in Kansas, which is responsible for educating 11% of school children in the state and more than half of all school-aged children in Sedgwick County (usd259.org). Currently, for the 2015-2016 school year, there are 51,133 students enrolled with a diverse group of ethnic backgrounds represented (Table 1).

Table 1. Student Population by District and Middle School

<u>Ethnic Background</u>	<u>USD 259</u>	<u>Coleman</u>	<u>Brooks</u>
Caucasian	34%	21%	25%
Latino/Hispanic	34%	30%	21%
African American	19%	32%	40%
Multi-Racial	8%	N/A*	N/A
Asian	4%	N/A	N/A
Native American	1%	N/A	N/A

*Note: N/A indicates that there are <20 students that fit this category. The school does not count these students in their running totals.

In conjunction with the USD 259 school district, 8th grade students at two middle schools, Coleman and Brooks, were selected for this project. Both schools have an ethnically and economically diverse student body (Table 1). Inclusion criteria for participation included: students who were between the ages of 13-14, students who were able to read and write in fluent English, and enrollment in one of the aforementioned schools. Exclusion criteria included: non-English speakers, students who were listed under Special Education or IEPs (Individualized Education Plans), and students who were enrolled in programs to advance education i.e. “SUCCESS in the Middle” and “AVID”, respectively. Students in these programs may not represent the norm of middle school perspectives regarding college attainment.

Participants. Eighth grade students were selected for this study because it was hypothesized that youth in this grade level were able to discuss, in greater detail, the process by which they were influenced to attend college. Given the fact that most 8th grade students are imminently preparing for high school, questions regarding college attainment or decisions regarding college aspirations were fairly easy for them to answer. The final sample consisted of thirteen students; the majority were Black (n = 8) and all come from varied economic backgrounds. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to project their identity. Information about each participant can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Pseudonyms	Age	Race	Marital Status of Parents	Level of Parent Education	Family Income ¹	Expectations of Child's Education	Older Child	If YES, did they attend college
Jackson	13	Caucasian	Married	Some College	Not Indicated	Some College	Yes	Not old enough
Aiden	14	African American	Married	Bachelor's Degree	71-80	High School Diploma	Yes	Yes
Penelope	13	Caucasian	Married	Master's Degree	>100	Master's Degree	Yes	Yes
Olivia	14	Not indicated	Not indicated	Some College	21-30	Bachelor's Degree	Yes	No
Sophia	13	African American	Married	GED	10-20	Bachelor's Degree	Yes	No
Lily	14	Caucasian	Married	Some College	41-50	Some College	No	
Emily	14	Caucasian	Single	Some College	21-30	Master's Degree	No	
Amelia	14	African American	Married	Some College	41-50	PhD/MD/JD	Yes	No
Chloe	14	African American	Married	Some College	>100	Master's Degree	No	
Isabelle	13	African American	Married	Some College	31-40	Bachelor's Degree	No	
Mason	14	Caucasian	Married	Bachelor's Degree	>100	Bachelor's Degree	Yes	Not old enough
Ava	13	African American	Single	Some College	41-50	PhD/MD/JD	No	
Carter	14	African American	Single	Master's Degree	31-40	Master's Degree	Yes	Not old enough

¹Numbers represent thousands

Consent and Confidentiality

This study was granted Institutional Review Board approval by Wichita State University as well as Wichita Public Schools (USD 259) (see Appendix A). Since participants were minors, consent to take part in the research project was granted by their legal parent or guardian (see Appendix B). In order to make sure participants were aware of their rights, a brief statement was read to them prior to beginning data collection, indicating they were free to refuse to answer a

question and that they could stop the interview at any time if they were to become uncomfortable. To establish understanding, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions before the study began and were asked to sign and date an assent form, signifying their choice to participate in the study (see Appendix B).

In order to protect participants' confidentiality, all identifying consent and assent forms were separated from data collection forms and participants were assigned a code. Coded data is stored on a password-protected laptop and will be kept there according to Wichita State University's policies and procedures, which indicate that data must be stored for a minimum of three years, after which it will be destroyed. In addition, participants were encouraged to refrain from using names throughout the course of the interview. If names were used, they were bracketed and replaced with [name] to indicate a named was used. Finally, participants were assigned pseudonyms in place of their real names.

Procedure

Recruitment. Qualitative analysis uses purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007) which allows the researcher to select participants in order to pick cases that produce insight and understanding regarding the phenomenon at hand (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research does not need to be random or generalizable (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The sampling strategy used was maximum variation, which selects participants that share a common pattern (e.g. level of education) yet differ on specific criteria (e.g. race). Accounting for differences in the beginning increases the likelihood that findings are a result of different perspectives which is ideal in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Recruitment was conducted by teachers at both schools as they were able to keep track of their

students and make sure they handed in the consent forms in a timely fashion. Teachers selected students who varied in performance level (high achievers and low achievers) and in regard to their SES. Once students were selected, teachers gave them packets containing a letter describing the project, a parent consent form, and a brief demographic questionnaire. Parents signed the consent form and filled out the questionnaire and returned both to school with their child.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face at the school during a class that is similar in nature to study hall (see Appendix C for interview guide). Participants were first given a timeline and were asked to fill out specific goals they wanted to accomplish within the next five years. Goals could have been anything participants wanted, so long as they were important to them. At the end of the timeline, participants were asked to write in a large goal they want to achieve after they graduate from high school. Next, participants engaged in relational space mapping, adapted from Josselson (1996) (see Appendix D). They were instructed to draw themselves in the center of a piece of paper, and then draw the people or organizations that will help them achieve their large goal listed on their timeline. The people or organizations that were the most important were drawn closer to the participants. Both the timeline and the map were used throughout the interview to aid participants in thinking about the people or organizations that may help or impede them in attaining their goals; they were not used in data analysis. Interviews lasted anywhere between ten to twenty-eight minutes and were audiotaped. Once the interview was complete, students were thanked for their time and returned to class. There were no incentives provided for participation.

Supplemental Materials. In addition to the interviews, participants' parents/guardians were asked to fill out a basic demographic questionnaire. Questions included asking parents/guardians to indicate if they've spoken about college to their child, what level of

education they anticipate their child will attain, if they have any older children, and if those children (if old enough) attended college. The purpose of asking these questions was to determine if variations in data exist based on participants' demographics (see Appendix E).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the process of Grounded Theory, which is a type of qualitative analysis developed in 1967 by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Instead of approaching the study of interest with an a priori set of hypotheses, grounded theory is based on data that is “grounded” from the field, especially when it comes to the actions and processes of individuals (Creswell, 2007). There are two approaches to grounded theory: a more systematic approach developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) and a more constructivist approach developed by Charmaz (2005, 2006). This project used the former in guiding the data analysis as it uses a more methodical process compared to the later. With the systematic approach, the researcher usually conducts interviews until saturation of coding categories is reached (i.e. no new information is found) (Creswell, 2007). A category represents a unit of information composed of events, happenings, and instances (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Once the data was collected and transcribed, coding began. Coding was a three step process. First, analyses of the transcripts for important bits of information were scanned. This included reading through the text multiple times and making notes in the margins (memos). The purpose of initial thoughts and memos are to flesh out any preconceived notions the researcher might have as well as note any important statements or phrases made by the participant. Significant statements made by the participant were then pulled and copied into an excel file. Second, two researchers separately coded each significant statement to form initial themes. This

was then followed by the researchers attempting to saturate the codes i.e. using a constant comparative method. The method included comparing codes across data points in order to determine consistency as well as check for additional bits of information. This was done until no new codes were assigned. Third, once an initial set of themes or categories were developed, the researchers came together to compare codes assigned individually and finalize themes specific to each significant statement. Researchers compared codes and created themes with the majority of the interviews.

Credibility. Although qualitative methods differ from quantitative in many ways, establishing validity is still an important step in the process. Validity or better credibility (Patton, 1999) or validation (Creswell, 2007) helps link the methods to empirical questions and issues (Patton, 1999). A variety of validation techniques were used for this project. First, an audit trail was established whereby the researcher documented the inquiry process through memoing, keeping a research log of all activities, and recording all data analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Next, thick description was used in presenting the data evidence which includes discussing the setting, participants, and the themes in detail. This vivid detail allows readers to trust that the research is credible (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Finally, analyst triangulation was used. This included having another individual review and document findings in order to understand different ways that the data might be understood. Disagreements between the researchers tended to be nuanced between similar categories. When disagreements did arise, researchers compared codes to ones previously agreed upon and chose the code that best represented the significant statement.

Reliability among researchers was established by calculating Cohen's Kappa between the two raters. After the final themes were determined, a matrix file was created in excel. Themes

that were agreed upon fell on the diagonal, while the themes researchers disagreed on, fell off the diagonal. After inputting all of the themes, the matrix was copied to a statistical calculator found online (Graphpad.com, QuickCalcs). This calculator automatically analyzes the results and gives an output of the Kappa. After running the analysis, the Kappa = .866, SE = .040 and the strength of agreement was considered “very good”. Creswell (2007) and Miles and Huberman (1994) agree that inter rater reliability should be at least .80 to be considered reliable, and the result lies above the accepted minimum.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

A total of 13 interviews were conducted over the course of four weeks. Twenty-one total themes emerged from all possible questions: eight themes regarding motivators, five themes for strategies to overcome barriers, and eight themes regarding initial steps. In addition, based on their interview data, participants were given a corresponding aspiration and expectation label. All themes and aspirations/expectations categories will be discussed below.

Motivators

Participants discussed a total of four individuals and organizations that positively influence them in achieving their goals. These include: family members, teachers and the school community, friends and peers, and youth organizations. Family members were listed the most frequently and represented an important aspect in participants' lives. Mothers were specifically discussed by the majority of participants, regardless of race or gender. Penelope (White, female) indicated that not only was her mother a source of motivation, but that she aspired to be like her, stating "...and I like, like wanna be like my mom. Wanna be like my mom. And she like, got a Master's degree and uh, so she experienced everything..."

Fathers were rarely mentioned during the interview unless jointly considered with mom i.e. my parents motivate me. There were two exceptions, however, regarding fathers as motivators. Amelia, (Black, female) whose goal is to play college basketball, indicated that her father pushed her to stay on the right track and continue to practice, "He [dad] keeps me in everything, keeps me going so I won't get off [track] and he, I don't know, he just..." Mason (White, male) also discussed how his father supports his college aspirations by answering questions and being an idol, since he wants to grow up to be an engineer, like his father:

Well, of course my dad is practically a prerequisite to be a scient...um to go to college...one thing is, whenever I ask a question that involves like how he [dad] works...he'll give me an answer which helps me....most people would be afraid of asking questions about stuff they didn't know, but the way my dad answers, I'm not...he's made it so I'm not afraid of asking any question.

Both Amelia and Mason discussing their fathers as motivators were linked back to specific goals they have regarding their future, which tended to be stereotypically masculine in nature, i.e. college basketball player and engineer.

Teachers and the school community were also important motivators. Most participants indicated that teachers helped them by being supportive and encouraging them to reach their goals. Isabelle (Black, female) discussed her relationship with her teachers as an important motivator:

Yeah. Teachers. In some of my classes that I like, like um Language Arts or Orchestra or Art, I tend to get pretty close to them like we're actually friends instead of the whole student-teacher relationship that's sort of awkward. So, I know them personally because I had a long talk with my art teacher and my orchestra teacher about at-home things and they motivate...they motivate...they motivate me to get better and stuff and they're like 'oh it's okay, it'll be better', stuff like that. They want to make sure I'm good in life, too.

Participants indicated that their schools were positive places to be. They discussed the school as a place that not only encouraged learning, but that also helped them if they had personal problems that they needed help overcoming. Penelope (White, female) said, "...And then school definitely, because every single time I've had something wrong, they've always come back and supported me..."

A third source of motivation regarding goal attainment was friends and peers.

Participants indicated that friends with similar goals were able to help them stay on track and that they would motivate them to engage in positive behaviors. Aiden (Black, male) talked about how his friends “being smart” encouraged him to strive to be better so that he wouldn’t fall behind:

And um my friends. I see them evolve, they get smarter every day and I don’t want to be the one that just get held back and gets forgot so, I’m a try and keep up. Hope one day get smarter than one of them.

The last source of motivation that participants discussed was youth organizations. These groups aided students by either directly helping them work towards their goal or allowed them to connect to older college students by volunteering their time for a specific cause. Emily (White, female) discussed how getting involved in a local organization could improve her chances of getting into a prestigious university:

Um, I do know that there’s this one organization for singing, um I can’t remember what it’s called but it helps you get into colleges that you want to for singing like [at] New York University and Juillidard [sic], um it helps get those extra credits that you need, um and it also helps you like get your voice into check and like make sure that your voice is ready for it

In sum, most of the motivators discussed were related to specific people that have a direct and positive impact on youth, such as family members and teachers. Only a few participants indicated a specific organization that helps them in achieving their goals. Specific behaviors were probed in order to determine what parents, teachers, and friends and peers do, which encourage participants to reach their goal. The prominent themes found will be discussed next.

Motivator Themes-Behaviors and Factors that Encourage Goal Attainment

A total of eight themes emerged that increase participants' aspirations and expectations for college attainment. They include: verbal encouragement, extracurricular activities, social comparison, idol, being supportive, break barriers, financial assistance, and positive role model (see Appendix F for selected quotes).

Verbal Encouragement. Verbal encouragement was the most widely discussed behavior that participants' parents, teachers, and friends and peers did to increase their aspirations and expectations. Verbal encouragement is defined as receiving positive reinforcement from parents, teachers, and friends and peers regarding going to college. Verbal encouragement was articulated in the form of uplifting and positive statements when participants were feeling down. Penelope (White, female) discussed how her parents encourage her when she is having difficulty with school:

Um, both, they like say encouragement things that just help me keep going even the toughest times...like class...I'm like I'm not gonna go to that class tomorrow and then they'll just say...they'll say something like, they'll talk to the principal and they'll make it all better for me.

It also came across in more subtle ways, especially among friends. Olivia (Black, female) talked about how her friend wanted her to join the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program when they attend the same high school next year:

Well um uh, one of my friends, I'm not gonna say her name, um she's going to East IB Program. And um she, uh she was wanting me to go but I didn't really like want to get straight into the extra AP stuff...

Finally, verbal encouragement was also discussed from an efficacy standpoint. Lily, (White, female) in talking about how her mother was an important motivator for her always tells her to keep persevering, even through the tough times, "Put your mind to it and don't give up. She always says that."

Extracurricular Activities. Extracurricular activities were articulated as a way to connect with friends and peers while also increasing a participant's chance of getting into college. Extracurricular activities are defined as volunteer activities parents, teachers, friends and peers encourage students to do for college. Olivia (Black, female) discussed how her friends would be motivators in getting her to do community service in high school, "Um they can, like we can do things together like that...community service and, so it won't be as boring. And um, I'll probably make some friends when I'm in there and they would help me want to keep doing it..." Parents also encouraged their children to enroll in summer camps as a way to expose them to various careers and allow them to connect with resources in town. Ava (Black, female) described how her parents send her to summer camps at a local university every year, "Um...why they [family] send me to like summer camps and stuff like that and the Project Lead the Way kinda stuff."

Social Comparison. Social comparison was articulated predominately when discussing friends or family members who were the same age as the participant. Social comparison is defined as wanting to be like someone else and using them and their success as motivation. Mason (White, male) discussed how his friends, whom he described as being smarter than him, motivated him to want to learn and be like them:

Yeah. And I talk about other friends I have...nerd sort of stuff and that way that influences...is made...they're normally smarter than me so I want to learn more about that stuff, which in turn makes me more akin to studying things, which will help me in college. So it helps me to introduce myself to the college environment

Lily (White, female) also talked about how being similar to her friend in terms of wanting to achieve her college goals would be easier for both of them, "She pretty much wants to succeed in her dreams and you know, she's, easier if we just have the same things going on." She indicated they would be attending the same high school and had plans to apply to the same college.

Finally, social comparison was also seen from a parental perspective. Ava (Black, female) described how her mother expected her to go to college and that she wanted to live up to her mother's expectations while being just as successful as her mother, "And my mom went to college so I think she's expecting me to do the same thing."

Idol. Idols were individuals who were older than participants and tended to be in a career or completed a goal the participants themselves want to accomplish. Idol is defined as looking up to someone who successfully completed their goals. Aiden, (Black, male) discussing how his idol, a pro-soccer star, persevered through high school, is someone he admires:

And then I see this dude on Youtube, 17 years old, and he plays pro football [soccer] already and he, I seen him talk about it, And he met one of my favorite soccer players, and he said high school is the hardest thing for him to go through. So I, I just try and look up to him

In terms of careers, Mason (White, male), who is interested in pursuing a Master's degree in engineering, looks up to his father as an important motivator since he is also an engineer, "My dad works at Cessna as an air...airplane designer slash engineer and I've just always been

interested in engineering, so he's kind of like my idol. Like that's what I want to be." Career idols can also be people who are pursuing their goals later in life and serve as a motivator to go to college early. Lily (White, female) talked about how her mother is currently enrolled in nursing classes since she didn't go to college right after high school, "Well she also takes classes because she never got the chance to go and she wanted to be a nurse, so I kinda, kinda, wanna follow in her footsteps."

Being Supportive. Being supportive was articulated as really pushing students to do well in getting to their goal. Being supportive is defined as making positive comments about the student, helping them through tough times, and staying on the student in order for them to succeed. Chloe (Black, female) talked about how her teachers motivated her to always try her best and strive to be better the next time, "Well like, teachers like kind of push you to do better..." Similarly, Olivia (Black, female) talked about how her teachers were flexible with her attendance, allowing her to miss class if an opportunity arose that would help her with college in the future:

Like um she influences us to do things that we probably wouldn't do. Like if we have like a bad grade on an assignment she let us re-do it and call it revisions and she wants us to do well so our grades are getting higher. And um, like she lets us do other things like schedule for other classes and she makes us do stuff that will probably help us in the future

Peers were also supportive in influencing college aspirations and expectations. Penelope (White, female) talked about how the students that go to her church and volunteer with her ministry are always talking positively about college and supportive of her decisions regarding college:

Um, well definitely my church cause the children's ministry people, they definitely, like talk to me and stuff, like they're really supportive of everybody in the church and so like I'm friends with everybody in that...that's like [name] is our person, our big person in the children's ministry. And like we've talked and she said how she, liked the experience she had in college, in like all the things she had to go through and stuff and so that's always been on...I'm always like I cannot wait!

Finally, parents were supportive in terms of encouraging their children to go to different camps that would increase their learning as well as pushing them to practice in order to reach their goal. Mason (White, male) talked about his parents going the extra mile, even if it meant spending money and shuttling him around town:

They [parents] completely support any attempts at learning or stuff looking going [buzzer ringing], like going to camps like this summer, I'm going to a KAMS camp to learn more about it and it's about designing stuff and they're completely supporting it. Anything I do that will help my [sorry] my educational career, they do. Like an NL [?] I have to, basically have to donate four hours a week to do it and they have to pick me up and sometimes, ferrying me around for that, so they're amazing

Break Barriers. Breaking barriers was articulated as parents explaining to their children that the opportunity to acquire a good job is dependent on a college degree. Break barriers is defined as wanting to go to college because no one in the family was able to go. Having a college degree, it was stated, would make life easier for them in the future. Chloe (Black, female) had this conversation with her mother many times, "Um well we've talked about it a few times, I think, and um like my mom's, she didn't go to college so she always said like, if I would want a good job then I should go to college..." Breaking barriers was also discussed as wanting to go to

college because of how hard parents work. Isabelle indicated that she didn't want to be like her parents and struggle:

My mom because she doesn't have any college education and neither does my dad and I've seen how hard that she has to work to get where she's at now and I wish that if I had kids that wouldn't be as hard as it would be her

Finally, breaking barriers was also discussed as wanting to prove to parents that even though they didn't go to college or go right away, that they as children would be able to do it. Lily (White female) said, "Because she, she never got the chance to go to college so I kinda, kinda, wanna go for myself and my mom just so I can show her that I can do it."

Financial Assistance. Financial assistance was articulated as family members who were going to help participants pay for a portion of their tuition. Financial assistance is defined as individuals who are willing and able to help participants pay for college. Financial assistance was specific to the White students only. Penelope, (White, female) in discussing how her family positively motivates her to go to college indicated that they are able to pay for things, "They'll probably like fund things..." Similarly, Emily (White female) discussed how her grandmother was consistently been a source of financial support for her and her family and that she anticipates her grandmother will continue to help her when she enrolls and attends college, "And my mom, my grandma, she's been there with financial problems, so she'll help with the financials."

Positive Role Model. While participants had idols they looked up to, they also wanted to be looked at as motivators to younger students. Positive role models were articulated as participants being able to help younger children by being supportive or encouraging. Positive role model is defined as helping others in order to achieve their college goals. Jackson (White, male) talked about how, since no one in his family went to college or left Wichita, he wanted to

be someone his niece could look up to when she got older, "Because most of my family didn't go to college or move out of Wichita, so I'd like to show her that you can, you just gotta try."

Similar to Jackson, Aiden (Black, male) indicated that he was interested in coming back to his middle school after he graduated, in order to help students who might need a tutor, "I'ma I'm gonna like help kids whose younger than me. In 8th grade, come back, like help them, like they do now, be a tutor." He talked about how he wanted people to see him as a good person who is helpful:

And my, I just wanna, I just wanna like I wanna be like a good person and everybody else see me as a good person so like when I go away, they won't say he never helped, he was bad. I...I don't want that. I want to help, be good, be a good student. Help my teachers, like my teachers now...

Lastly, positive role models were also discussed for friends. Isabelle (Black, female) talked about how she tries to help her best friend, who doesn't take school seriously:

Um, my friends right now. My bestest friend, she wakes up late and misses a whole bunch of homework and has a lot of Fs and misses class. And I try really really hard to get her on the right track because I don't want her to mess up in life, I don't want her to be like homeless on the streets, so that sort of motivates me cause I've grown up to know good grades equals good life and if you miss a whole bunch of school, you're not really gonna make it in life

Blocks

Participants discussed a total of four factors that block them from achieving their goals. These include: money, friends and peers, themselves, and family. Money was the most frequently discussed block participants reported, with the majority focusing on money as a block

being Black. When discussing what could block her from going to college, Olivia (Black, female) indicated that her parents didn't save any money for her, which would make it more difficult for her to be able to afford a college education, "Um that's kind of holding me back cause they haven't like saved any money for me so I have to get all my stuff..." Chloe, (Black, female) in talking about her goal of getting into a school with a good medical program, talked about how it might be difficult, as those schools tend to be more costly:

Um like if college is too expensive. Well if I want...like I want to go to a college with a good medical program, but some of those colleges are pretty expensive, so I might have to think of a different job, or career if I wanted to go to college

While naming off different blocks she could potentially encounter, Isabelle (Black, female) named money as the largest in her path towards college, "A potential block... financial issues... Yeah, financial issues is one of the bigger blocks to get into college."

Friends and peers as potential blocks were also discussed among participants. When discussing friends and peers as blocks, participants indicated they could negatively affect them from doing well in high school, although none specified that they had bad friends currently. All participants that discussed friends and peers as blocks were Black. Amelia (Black, female) talked about things that high school friends could make her do:

Ummmmm, who might stop? Ummmm [mumbling] bad friends, I guess. And drugs and stuff. Like, um get you suspended from school, put stuff in your head [mentally] to try to make you not do this and um I don't know I really don't have any bad friends

Isabelle (Black, female) also discussed how high school friends could potentially influence her to get off track by encouraging her to only think about the present, allowing her future goals to become distorted by a need to become popular:

Um, people in high school that [buzzer sound] maybe, like um, if I tend to get, if, in high school if instead I get off track of my future and I just care about the present and I don't care what anyone else says and I just want to be popular, that's gonna get in my way so some psychological things there.

Finally, Carter (Black, male) also discussed how people he associates with (he alluded to the fact that they aren't really his friends), could encourage him to get wrapped up in violence or get in trouble, "Um bad influence. Um get in fights, stuff like that. Yeah, like they're not really my friends but I just call it that. Uh, Just me getting in trouble."

A third block that would prevent participants from getting to college was their own abilities. Specifically, participants indicated they could block themselves from getting to their goal if they didn't study enough or if they intentionally did something to block learning. Aiden (Black, male) discussed how failing a class in college might negatively impact his expectations that he could succeed:

And it might, it might be myself. I might drag my own self down. Like if I get an F now, like, like, I'll think it's nothing to me, but if I know I can get it up in less than a day, I know I'm good, I know I'm smart. But if I go to college, and I get an F, if I have at least four F's, I'm like down on myself and I'm like oh man, I'm dumb. I just dropped out. I'm wasting their time, they don't even have me in class, they know I'm dumb. I don't need to be wasting their time so I might as well go out.

Mason (White, male) talked about how he created problems in the classroom in the past with his teachers because he didn't want to do what his teachers asked him to do:

And also past experiences in elementary school where I was the one who always asked teachers questions and I would, I wanted to do stuff my own way instead of

like...sometimes when they would say count, I would just hum or do stuff in between and I'd get sent out a lot.

Finally, Ava (Black, female) talked about how her goal of becoming a biomedical engineer could be derailed if she didn't study and do well enough on her exams, "Like not doing well on tests and not studying enough. Hmmm maybe just being nervous [when asked about why she would not do well].

The last block that participants discussed was their family members. Although not discussed by many participants, (n = 2) it was worth noting, since family plays such a large motivational role in students' lives. When family members were of a similar age to the participants, they indicated that their family, as a result of their low aspirations in attending college, encouraged them in engaging in risky behaviors. Aiden (Black, male) talked about his cousins:

Uh, I don't I uh, I don't know. I really don't know. It might be my, I don't know. Cause my other family, they all want to be basketball players, none of them plan on going to college... Cousins and stuff like that. And like sometimes, sometimes, I'll say sometimes I'll be with them, sometimes I won't be with them and sometimes I'll say, yeah I wanna do that. And sometimes I'll say no [In discussing what they want him to do that is negative].

When family members were older than participants, they indicated that their family, because of their lack of preparedness, didn't really want their child to jump right into college after high school. Olivia (Black, female) talked about her parents, specifically her mother:

Um, I think probably like, my mom kind of, or my dad cause they didn't go to college, like my mom went to college for a little while, but they're always um kinda more

concerned about money and stuff so they probably wouldn't want me to like jump right into college. Cause they probably like want to help me get the money to go to college.... So she doesn't like put me down but she doesn't exactly make me want to do these things.

No Blocks. A few participants indicated that no blocks existed in their lives that would prevent them from attaining their goals or they discussed extreme scenarios that would have to occur for them to disrupt their plans of attending college. All participants who indicated that they couldn't think of any blocks or used extreme examples were White. Penelope (White, female) talked about how her family is very supportive of her and that the only way she could see a block occurring was if her parents got sick:

Um, probably not, Like I'm always the one that's like here's my goal, now let's go....

There's probably, unless like my parents get cancer or get sick or something, I'd have to stay and do that with them, but anything else... Um, no, not really.

Lily (White, female) also discussed something large having to happen in her family in order for her to not achieve her goals, "Well things, things could happen in my family. Stuff could go down and I could just give up and not wanna do anything anymore. That could be really big. But as far as I go, nothing can really stand in my way..." Finally, when talking about blocks, Mason (White, male) initially confronted with the question, talked about how something very horrible would have to happen to throw him off track, "Well maybe if I'm like traumatized, that could shake me out of as what I think of as a learning mindset, that I have."

Most of the blocks discussed were of specific people that have a direct and negative impact on youth, including themselves. Money, however, played a prominent role in participants' lives, specifically those who were Black. For those participants that did not indicate

a specific block, their responses were high linked with self-efficacy, which will be a strategy discussed next. Specific behaviors were probed in order to determine how participants plan to overcome the blocks they discussed. The prominent strategies found will be discussed next.

Themes-Strategies to Overcome Blocks

A total of five themes emerged that participants discussed as strategies to overcome potential blocks. They include: no plan, study, choose friends wisely, self-efficacy, and save money and apply for scholarships (see Appendix G for selected quotes).

No Plan. Participants who did not have a plan either couldn't think of any strategies or they reported they didn't experience any blocks. No plan is defined as having no concrete strategies in place to overcome reported blocks. When asked about steps for overcoming blocks that she might experience internally, Penelope (White, female) indicated she didn't have any, given the fact that people around her always supported her goals, "Um, no, not really. Cause all the people I know are like saying, do it, you can do it we're here for you, we'll always support you, so just go and do what you want to do." In instances where not having a plan was related to not thinking about strategies, participants articulated that they either weren't sure about ways to overcome it or they simply wouldn't be bothered by the block. Jackson, (White, male) in discussing how not getting his recording studio might block him of getting to his goal of becoming a musician, simply stated, "Don't worry about it." Similarly, Amelia (Black, female) mentioned, "Um, I don't know...don't pay attention to them and...um..." regarding what strategy she would use in avoiding potentially bad friends in high school.

Study. Study was articulated by participants in a mostly preventative sense, and discussed how establishing skills early could help them become better later on. Study is defined as a strategy of not giving up, even if something is challenging. Aiden (Black, male) talked about

how he would try and get work from his teachers over the summer as a way to prepare for high school and prevent failing:

Um, I'ma like...right now I'm in 8th so when I get in high school, I'ma like, first year? I'ma take it serious, no playing. I'm like, I'm like gonna go to the library. And I'm like, get along with my teachers first. Get to know them a little better. I'm gonna ask them for a little extra work, see what I can do over the summer...

In planning for what colleges want in an applicant, participant's felt like studying to get into better classes or enrolling in summer classes would help their chances of getting accepted to the college of their choice. Ava (Black, female) indicated that her science classes would be difficult and talked about advice her mother gave her for staying on track, "Trying really hard, like, not giving up on something, if it seems too hard. Well like my mom says to learn over the summer." Similarly to Aiden (Black, male) both participants agreed that taking summer classes would be helpful to keep up their knowledge and do better in school. Finally, Emily (White, female) discussed how studying to get into honors classes would be important as a way to avoid not getting into a prestigious university:

Um get more like, take extra classes so that I can get into honors so that I know that in the high school that I'm going to, [name] one of those two, that they will let you take extra classes to get into honors. Um I do know that if you don't get into honors, that there is a section where they will put you in a lower rank of it but you have to have at least two honors. So I'm pretty sure that if I have at least, if I have at least two honors, that I will still get in

Choose Friends Wisely. Analogous to Black students indicating that friends were blocks in inhibiting them from achieving their goals, so too did Black students endorse choosing friends

wisely as a strategy to overcome that block. Choose friends wisely is defined as a strategy of making sure other people will not negatively influence your academic trajectory. Choose friends wisely was articulated as making sure that participants hang out with the right people and not get involved in problems that may arise. Aiden (Black, male) when discussing strategies for overcoming blocks, talked about associating with the “right” people. He indicated that he already saw how hanging out with the right people in middle school influenced him to be a better student and not get into trouble, "For college, first thing I need to do is, um hang out with the right people and just like I said, always, always be ready. Never be late, never get in trouble..."

Aligned with Aiden’s comment, Ava (Black, female) talked about how in high school there could be a lot of problems with students who could potentially be negative influences and how she planned on avoiding those situations, "Mmmm just try and stay out of it [drama with friends]. And not find friends that are gonna be bad influences." Finally, Carter (Black, male) discussed how not associating with bad influences or just ignoring what they want would be the best option for staying out of trouble, "Uh, stop hanging around with them. Ignore them."

Self-Efficacy. Self-efficacy was articulated as either never giving up, even in the face of blocks or obstacles, actively doing things on one’s own to avoid a block, or making sure that the goal is complete by working hard and striving for a positive end result. Self-efficacy is defined as being able to control the outcome of your goal and believing that you have the power to make a change. Emily (White, female) talked about how to be able to afford a tutor for vocal and instrument lessons might be expensive. One strategy to overcome this financial issue was using free resources to tutor herself, "Um, tutor myself. Or go on Youtube maybe and look up vocal exercises or flute playing and stuff like that: flute song, flute notes, stuff like that, that will just help me through it." Two participants, Olivia (Black, female) and Chloe, (Black, female)

discussed how their parents, although wanting them to be successful and go to college, didn't really push them so much as they pushed themselves. Olivia indicated that, to overcome her blocks, she would need to really try, "...like she encourages me to get good grades, but I think I could, like, encourage myself more than anything." Making sure that she gets good grades to be able to get into college was a strategy discussed by Chloe, "Well I've always kind of pushed myself, like my, my parents don't really put pressure on me to get good grades. It's more me."

A few participants communicated that once they had a goal set in their minds, even with the potential blocks they could endure, that nothing would stand in their way. Lily (White, female) talked about how it was pretty easy to get to her goal, as long as she stayed focused:

Not really. Like I said if you just put your mind to it, it could be really easy...focus, put your mind to it, and anything...you're gonna have to want something and if you're gonna really want something, then you're gonna have to want it to actually get it. That's exactly how I think...yes, you have to want it in order to get something if you really want it.

Isabelle (Black, female) also talked about how, even with the block she mentioned, that nothing would stop her, "Mmmm I really want to get to college and I'm pretty sure nothing is really going to get in my way and if it is, I'm gonna move it. [Laughs] Make sure I'm on my path."

Finally, when discussing strategies for overcoming his teammates negative reactions to his soccer skills, Aiden (Black, male) talked about how it is important to keep practicing, don't listen to the comments people have to say, and "let his feet do the talking":

Don't listen, actually. Don't listen to 'em and prove 'em wrong. Prove 'em wrong, when it come to the, like the mouth says something off the field. This, this is what I learned from my brother, he's like, he's older than me, he said when the mouth stays off the field,

but when it comes to the field let, let your hand, in basketball he says, let your hand, let your hand talk, let it work. So this is my version: in soccer, let your feet talk...

Scholarships. All participants who indicated that money was a specific block to enrolling in college stated that a strategy for overcoming that block would be to apply for scholarships. Scholarships are defined as applying for aid to offset costs associated with college. Scholarships were articulated as a necessity by participants, in order for them to be able to afford the cost of attending college. Sophia, (Black, female) when discussing why a scholarship was important, talked about how being able to get a scholarship would make her feel like she earned her way to college, “No, I’m not very sure, no, unless I’m getting a shola...I’m trying to get a scholarship because I don’t want, pay everything, I wanna earn it too, so yeah, I want a scholarship, so...basically money.”

Isabelle (Black, female) spoke about how her parents really discouraged her from taking out loans since they were still in debt from loans they acquired, and as a result, were not able to help her with paying for college:

Scholarships...yeah. I’ve had a couple scholarships already, not like financially but like free private lessons to free classes that help...and I don’t know how I’m gonna overcome the financial issues if I don’t get a scholarship because I really can’t afford it and my parents really don’t like student loans cause my dad is still in debt so...I don’t know

Mason (White, male) talked about how seeing his brother, who is currently applying for scholarships and saving money for college, taking the steps necessary to have money for college was a source of inspiration for him:

For the money? Ummmm just scholarships, getting a job soon so I could save up, which my brother is doing right now, so seeing him do that will help me eventually do that.

Ummm getting scholarships and my parents and grandparents are going to help with the college things, that I don't really think it's that big of a deal. Also, having a job during college, throughout it, that way I can...it's not just the money that's been saved up like scholarships, but it's an incoming source of money

Themes-Steps to Fulfill Goals

A total of eight themes emerged that participants discussed as steps to fulfill their goals. They include: credits, study, scholarships, be prepared, save money, get good grades, extracurricular activities, and upper-level classes. (see Appendix H for selected quotes).

Credits. Credits were articulated as not only taking the classes that were required by the students' high schools, but also taking classes that could help them look good to college acceptance committees. Credits are defined as taking enough classes in order to graduate on time. Having enough credits in order to graduate on time was the single most discussed step that participants indicated they needed to do. Penelope (White, female) talked about making sure that she took classes that were similar in nature to college, "This is like....ummmm definitely get some extra credit things in so I can get some things in college or something." Chloe (Black, female) also mentioned taking college credits, as this would help her when she applied for college, "I have to take enough, um like classes with enough college credits." Finally, many of the other students who mentioned having enough credits as an initial step just simply stated it as so, like Olivia, (Black, female) "mmhmmm uhhh college credits."

Study. Study, although mentioned as a strategy for overcoming blocks, was also mentioned as an initial step participants could take to reach their goal. Study is defined as doing well before college in order to have good grades. Study was articulated by participants as trying to either establish a system of when and how to study or securing a tutor in a particular subject

that they needed extra help in. Aiden (Black, male) mentioned going to high school's library in order to not only do his work, but also read and expand his knowledge, "Before I get to college...high school, I plan on like going to the library, staying in the library for at least four hours, studying, studying, reading books..." Mason (White, male) also indicated getting into a habit of studying, since up until now, he's relied on simply remembering facts and not really putting in the time or effort to learn the material, "Well getting into a habit of studying would help, cause normally I just try to remember facts as best I can and I just wing it during tests, I don't really study." Lastly, Ava (Black, female) talked about how getting a tutor would be an important initial step in order to help her with subjects that she struggles in, "Maybe tutoring, just because I need a little extra help. As in like homework and work that needs to be done that I don't understand."

Scholarships. Scholarships, although mentioned as a strategy for overcoming blocks, were also mentioned as an initial step participants could take to reach their goal. Scholarships are defined the same way as in the previous theme that is, applying for aid to offset costs associated with college. Since college is extremely costly, scholarships were articulated as an important initial step, given that most students are not able to afford to pay for college on their own. Olivia, (Black, female) discussing her initial steps, talked about applying for scholarships through local volunteer organizations, "And, um until then I kinda wanted to do uh things that would, uh kinda give me scholarships to get to college.... I probably um, will look up ways to um, get mini scholarships like community service and stuff." Mason (White, male) also spoke about how getting scholarships would help in addition to his parents, as he indicated that they would be helping him with college finances, "not to mention hopefully scholarships will come in." Finally, Carter (Black, male) talked about how, if he maintains his grades, he would be able to get a

scholarship to the college of his choice, “Uh, if you have to get like straight A’s, you can get a scholarship there...”

Be Prepared. Participants articulated being prepared as proactively engaging in activities that would be important and allow them to reach their goal. Be prepared is defined as planning out what you want to do in your future and making sure that you are on the right track. Amelia (Black, female) discussed that always thinking about her objective and not getting sidetracked were important steps she had to take to actualize her goal of playing college basketball, “Stay focused... be on time for, to everything and, just staying focused. You gotta stay focused.” Similarly, Chloe (Black, female) also mentioned staying focused in achieving her goal. She also mentioned that if you take classes or participate in activities that are similar to what you want to do in college, then you’ve already created a level of awareness and are prepared to tackle that goal in college, “Um I feel like, if you’re doing something in high school then if you wanna be a part of something in college, then you’re ready for it...ummmm...staying focused....and... like, like making sure that I have my school stuff first.”

When talking about the importance of participating in activities outside of school or applying for internships surrounding her career interests, Isabelle (Black, female) talked about how being prepared would allow her to become a competitive college applicant, “Um like out-of-school activities like uh internships to jobs to school clubs. Things I have to sign up for or audition to...stuff like that... ..making sure that I look right for the interview, have good manners and vocabulary. Yeah... So I could become the best of the best [Laughs].”

A final step that participants discussed was taking the right classes in order to get into the academic program they wanted to major in. Carter, (Black, male) whose dream it is to be a shoe or video-game designer, mentioned how it was important to select the right classes in high school

to prepare him for the classes we would need to take in college, "And sele...select the right subject to help me wit video game and shoe." Likewise, Mason (White, male) mentioned meeting the minimum requirements necessary to get into an engineering program, "I just, need to do good in school, really and make sure I qualify for what's need to go to WSU for a Bachelor's in engineering."

Save Money. Although similar to scholarships, saving money was articulated as a separate step since getting a job in high school is a feasible task for most students. Saving money was articulated as working as soon as students can in order to start saving money for college. Save money is defined as getting a job in order to help with the financial cost of achieving ones goals. Olivia (Black, female) indicated that getting a job was important, "K. Um, I want to get a job cause I need to like pay for college, at least a little bit...." Further, she discussed becoming financially literate, as this would help her be able to save more effectively and make smart financial decisions:

Um, I'm probably going to need to take some financial classes. Like, um, like how to write a check and how do you cash it and um like how much...you know there's like, those realistic classes that will try to, basically, put you out in the real world mentally but not like physically so you'll be ready.

Saving money was also discussed from a non-college perspective as well. Jackson, (White male) whose dreams and goals are to become a rapper, indicated that he wanted to move out to Los Angeles in order to have a better chance of making it in the music industry. His goal is to open his own studio, yet this is very expensive given all the equipment needed to make music, "Um, making enough money to, like buy a studio and stuff...." Finally, many of the other students who mentioned saving money as an initial step just simply stated it as so, like Emily,

(White, female) "...um have a job, of course, to pay for the college..." and Mason, (White, male) "...and...I also need to save up to get into college..."

Get Good Grades. Get good grades was one of the first factors that participants articulated when discussing their initial steps of going to college. Get good grades was defined as maintaining grades to have a better transcript. Some participants, like Penelope, (White, female) discussed a specific letter grade they wanted to achieve, "Okay, well I...you would definitely need to finish high school and I'm an A student so I...definitely try to get all As. Cause that's me, and ummm..." Likewise, Mason (White, male) also mentioned getting a specific grade, "Well, first I'd like to get A's in all my classes cause that's what I'm always trying to accomplish here, although sometimes I get B's..." Mostly, however, participants just mentioned how getting good grades was an important step, like Sophia, (Black, female) "Well, first I have to have good grades, you know... Well you do have to have good grades and everything else, but that's it."

Extracurricular Activities. Extracurricular activities, although mentioned as motivators that parents and teachers wanted the participants to engage in, was also mentioned as an initial step. Extracurricular activities were articulated as engaging in sports, enrolling in special programs geared toward a specific subject or set of subjects, or other activities. Olivia (Black, female) voiced a lot of extracurricular activities she plans on taking part in:

Um also I need to probably practice many sports cause right now I do um like cross country and track but I don't really want to do those. So when I get older, like in college, or in high school, cause you have to get really good...and I don't really want to do that. So I want to do something um that I kinda like, so um me and my friends, we kind of...we all kind of play volleyball but I...I was going to do this training, this um summer.

Um it's like this um camp kinda thing for a week at Southeast, um where if you go you'll probably like um make the team.... And also I heard about this thing, um, at WATC, you can like take off of your tuition if you pay a \$100.00 and you play it like allll summer.... It's not enrolling really, it's like you know how some people they do summer camps and stuff? That's kinda what it is but with school.... Um, I would have to start doing a lot of extra stuff right after school, like extra activities. Um, like my sister, she does swim and diving and ROTC and drill um and forensics and debate, stuff like that...

She went onto say that, although her grades are good, she wants to do extracurricular activities, as it would push her to do even better:

Cause I have like...I have good grade, grades. And I feel like if I did those things it would kind of push me cause what we do now, cause basically in barely anything. Um if I did extra stuff it would just kinda help. And then also be better for my test scores.

Isabelle (Black, female) talked about how most of her extracurricular activities needed to be comparable to the things she wanted to do in college so that she would be prepared and have a solid understanding of what it is she wants to do:

Um, probably for like experience and my resume, probably um extra activities that I used during that time period or like um things that would help me get better like if I was going to become a chemist I would have to at making sure I put the right chemicals in the place...and like yeah. And um, I'd probably have to practice to get better at whatever I want to do and probably have help from my peers and family. That would help a lot so.... Um like out-of-school activities like uh internships to jobs to school clubs. Things I have to sign up for or audition to....stuff like that... I probably have to pick the right classes.

Like if I want to go into something that's more science-y I probably don't want to pick a cooking class because that really won't help me become...whatever.

Lastly, other participants, like Chloe, (Black, female) simply mentioned doing these extracurricular activities, without much detail, "...like, um activities...Um like participating in sports or clubs."

Upper-Level Classes. Upper-level classes were articulated as taking either Advanced Placement (AP) classes, honors classes, or optional classes within the school that are geared toward a specific major. Most students discussed taking a specific AP or honors class as their initial step. Upper-level classes were defined as taking classes that are similar in nature to a college class or will help students prepare for college. Emily, (White, female) who is interested in attending Juilliard, indicated that having honor classes on her transcript would be important to be considered for acceptance, "Um, I will need to take honor classes, I know that's one of the things...um graduate with some honors..." Olivia, (Black, female) who wants to major in something that is related to science, also stressed the importance of taking upper-level classes, in the form of AP, "...I am going to take AP as soon as possible..."

When a student enters into their senior year of high school, there are options available to take classes that are specific to something they are interested in (i.e. advanced science or math, psychology, etc.). Lily, (White, female) when talking about how her goal was to work in the medical field, discussed a Bio Med class she could take in order to strengthen and develop her science knowledge:

There, there's these classes I can take, like there's this thing called Bio Med and it's at Southeast or something like that, that's kinda something that I really wanna be in to help me succeed and go into college and stuff.

Aspirations and Expectations

Although not asked specifically, gauging a student's aspirations and expectations was based on their responses to interview questions as well as asking them about their ideal and expected careers. Labels were assigned immediately after interviews were transcribed and were completed before data analysis began. The purpose of labeling before coding was to make a non-biased judgment regarding what participants felt. Aspirations are a student's desire to go to college while expectations are their beliefs as to whether or not they would be successful in college. Based on the literature and self-efficacy theory, a determination was made that there would be three separate and distinct categories to describe youth; those with: High Aspirations, High Expectations, Low Aspirations, Low Expectations, and High Aspirations, Low Expectations. The majority of the participants fell under the category of High Aspirations, High Expectations, with only one student falling under the category of High Aspirations, Low Expectations, and no students falling under the category of Low Aspirations, Low Expectations. Interestingly, a fourth group was discovered while conducting interviews, which was labeled as Low Aspirations, High Expectations. These students indicated that although they were intelligent and did well in school, they had goals that did not include a college degree initially. All three groups will be discussed in the following section (see Figure 3).

	High Aspirations	Low Aspirations
High Expectations	Aiden Penelope Lily Amelia Chloe Isabelle Mason Ava Carter	Olivia Sophia Emily
Low Expectations	Jackson

Figure 3. Participant Aspirations and Expectations

High Aspirations, High Expectations. The majority of participants (n= 9) in the study indicated they wanted to go to college and expected to be successful. Sixty-six percent were Black students. Almost all of the participants who were categorized under this label, had made statements that were indicative of high self-efficacy. This makes sense, as expectations are inextricably linked to self-efficacy in achieving ones goals. Penelope, (White, female) for example, talked about how nothing could stop her from achieving her goal, “Not really. I like one of the things that...I wanna get it done. And I definitely want to go to college, and get a job, and have a family and have all my things done.” Similarly, Lily (White, female) mentioned that nothing would get in her way of achieving her goals as long as she put her mind to it, “Not really. Like I said if you just put your mind to it, it could be really easy... yes, you have to want it in order to get something if you really want it.” Finally, even when discussing the potential blocks she would have to overcome, Isabelle (Black, female) indicated that nothing would stop her from getting to her goal of college, “Mmmm I really want to get to college and I’m pretty sure nothing is really going to get in my way and if it is, I’m gonna move it.” [Laughs]

Other similar features this group shared was having specific and concrete initial steps they needed to take in order to fulfill their goal of attending college. Aiden (Black, male)

indicated he needed credits and he always needed to be prepared, “I would need um credits... always study, be prepared. Always be prepared, never um, never slack off. Always be ready for the next thing.”; Amelia (Black, female) indicated she needed to get good grades and stay focused, “Um, I have to have good grades...stay focused, um basketball and training...”; Chloe (Black, female) indicated participating in clubs and extracurricular activities, “Um like participating in sports or clubs... um I feel like, if you’re doing something in high school then if you wanna be a part of something in college, then you’re ready for it.”; and Carter (Black, male) indicated selecting the appropriate classes and working hard, “And sele...select the right subject to help me wit video game and shoe...work hard.” It is important to note that these individuals discussed multiple steps to achieving their goal and there were many overlapping themes found between them.

High Aspirations, Low Expectations. Only one student fell within this category.

Jackson (White, male) specified early in the interview that he had no desire to attend college, but not because he didn’t aspire for a college degree, rather, he felt like school did not come easy to him, “Um, I mean, I always wanted to go to college, but it just seemed too hard and music comes to me easily so I decided to just do music.” Being categorized under this label is indicative of Jackson’s low self-efficacy when it comes to college, and as a result, his desire to pursue a career that doesn’t require a college degree.

Further, Jackson discussed how making it in the entertainment world would not only benefit himself, but would give his niece someone to look up to. He indicated the reason for this was because his parents did not attend college (and therefore, in his eyes, were not successful) and never left the state, “Because most of my family didn’t go to college or move out of Wichita so I’d like to show her that you can, you just gotta try.”

Low Aspirations, High Expectations. A small number (n = 3) of participants fell under this category. Participants in this category had high self-efficacy surrounding education and the educational environment, yet they had other goals they wanted to attempt first before they applied and enrolled in college. These participants often referred to college as their back-up plan in case their original goal did not work out. Emily, (White, female) for example, knew that she wanted to go to Juilliard ever since she heard about it in elementary school:

Um, well the reason that I do want to go to college...Juilldard [sic] is since I was [buzzer ringing]. The reason I want to go to Juillidard [sic] is because it...since I was maybe 7 or 8 I've been hearing about Juillidard [sic] and it being like this wonderful school and so I was like hey this is something that I could do, ya know? So just since I was 7 or 8 I've been wanting to go.

Although acceptance and completion to Juilliard does give the student a Bachelor's degree, none of the "traditional" college courses are offered through the school. When asked about a back-up plan if she didn't get in to Juilliard, Emily stated, that she would like to attend New York University.

Analogous to Emily's description of her goals, Sophia (Black, female) indicated she planned on applying to the Los Angeles Dance Academy in order to become a choreographer. She talked about how she is currently working with a local dance team and indicated that she has worked with different dance teams in the past:

I was in like I was in Pearls, I was in Wichita Steppers, and I was also in, I forgot what it was, team was called. I was um, I forgot what it was called. So I was on like three dance teams but I'm stuck with this one for now so I know them too is gonna help me.

Sophia (Black, female) also discussed how it is important to make sure that a she has a back-up plan in place in case she doesn't make it into dance school:

Well if you don't have like...if you don't, if you wanna succeed in dance you gotta make sure that you have backup, a backup plan and stuff like that. So I'm going to dance school but I'm actually gonna have to take online courses to you know, do something else.

She also stated that if dance school didn't work out, her goal was to get a business degree and work on opening up her own dance studio in order to help other girls achieve their goal of becoming dancers, "Well...um...I haven't really think about that yet. Like I'm going to business though, cause like um own my own dance studio. So, so I can just do business but...yeah....business... Yeah cause if I do dance, like I'm gonna be kind of far from home, but for business, I'm gonna be close to home."

Data Triangulation

At the end of the interview, participants were asked about what their dream job would be, followed by what their actual job would be. This information was compared to the responses their parents/guardians gave in the demographic form, regarding the highest level of education their child would attain (see Table 3).

Table 3. Participant's Ideal and Actual Careers Aligned with Parental Expectations

Pseudonyms	Age	Race	Participants' Ideal Career	Participants' Actual Career	Parental Expectations of Child's Education
Jackson	13	Caucasian	Rapper	Construction	Some College*
Aiden	14	African American	Race Car Driver	Soccer Player	High School Diploma*
Penelope	13	Caucasian	Singer	Music Teacher	Master's Degree*
Olivia	14	Not indicated	Astronomer	Not Sure	Bachelor's Degree
Sophia	13	African American	Choreographer	Music Video Dancer	Bachelor's Degree
Lily	14	Caucasian	EMT/Paramedic	Firefighter	Some College*
Emily	14	Caucasian	Mechanical Engineer	Interior Designer	Master's Degree
Amelia	14	African American	Personal Trainer, WNBA	WNBA Player	PhD/MD/JD
Chloe	14	African American	Forensic Anthropologist	Forensic Anthropologist	Master's Degree*
Isabelle	13	African American	Fashion Designer	New York Symphony	Bachelor's Degree*
Mason	14	Caucasian	Owner of a tech company	Engineer	Bachelor's Degree*
Ava	13	African American	Dietician/Nutritionist	High School Coach	PhD/MD/JD
Carter	14	African American	NBA Player	Shoe Designer	Master's Degree

Note: All parents/guardians endorsed the question, "Have you ever talked to your child about going to college?" and therefore, will not be used in this analysis.

Note: Asterisk indicates participants whose actual career expectations matched with their parent/guardian's expectation regarding their child's highest level of education

About 54% of participants' actual career expectations matched with their parent/guardian's expectations regarding their highest level of education. For example, when looking at Jackson's (White, male) goal of believing he'll work in construction, it aligned well with his parent/guardians expectation of him completing only some college.

There were two exceptions to this graph. In Olivia's case, (Black, female) although she indicated that she intended on enrolling in college, she could not name a specific career she expected to obtain. Second, Sophia (Black, female) discussed in detail how she planned on enrolling in college if dance school did not work out. Although her back-up plan does align with her parent/guardians expectations of her highest level of education, she did not report it in her description of her actual career.

In summary, parents, teachers, friends and peers play a large role in motivating youth to want to go to college. The specific behaviors these individuals do include: verbally encouraging youth, being supportive, being idols, pushing them to get involved in extracurricular activities, and being a form of social comparison. Further, individuals themselves, because of their high

levels of self-efficacy want to do better than their parents by breaking barriers and being positive role models for youth that are younger than them. These positive sources of motivation are imperative for youth to succeed.

Blocks are inevitable. Some strategies participants described in overcoming blocks included: studying, applying for scholarships, choosing friends wisely (specific to Black youth), and having high levels of self-efficacy. Some participants reported not having any blocks (specifically White youth), and could only name tragic events that would prevent them from getting to their goal. Steps participants indicated that would help them achieve their goal of college included: studying, getting good grades, taking enough credits, taking upper-level classes, saving money, applying for scholarships, being prepared, and engaging in extracurricular activities.

The majority of participants in the study were categorized as having High Aspirations, High Expectations. Only one participant fell under the category of High Aspirations, Low Expectations and no participants fell under the category of Low Aspirations, Low Expectations. A fourth category, not predicted, labeled Low Aspirations, High Expectations, included three participants.

Finally, the careers participants reported themselves as actually attaining, aligned positively with their parents' expectations regarding the highest level of education their child would achieve. Next, these results will be discussed in detailing, linking them back to the literature and self-efficacy theory.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Overview of the Project

The purpose of this project was to explore and develop an understanding of middle school youth's academic aspirations and expectations. Risk and protective factors abound in the literature, yet studies have yet to interview youth to determine what factors youth say motivate or inhibit them from achieving their college goals. This addition to the extant literature provides deep and contextually rich information by explaining the behaviors youth and the people that are important to them must do, in order to increase the likelihood of college enrollment.

The results of this study show that there are a number of factors that contribute to the prospect of middle school students attending college as well as a number of barriers that decrease the prospect of attending college. It also specifically includes steps that participants list as important in order to increase their chances of getting into college. In addition, three groups of students were identified: High Aspirations, High Expectations; High Aspirations, Low Expectations; and Low Aspirations, High Expectations.

Many of the themes reported by middle school youth were consistent with the existing literature (Hurd, et al., 2012; García Coll, et al., 1996; Kenny, et al., 2006; Fredricks and Eccles, 2008; Gutman and Midgley, 2000; Fan and Chen, 2001; Wang and Holcomb, 2010; Barrett, 2010; Beal and Crockett, 2010; Bandura, 1977), yet a few new themes also emerged. This could be due to the interview, as students were able to freely discuss people and things that were important to them. This shows the importance of qualitative research, as it can increase the likelihood of new information developing.

Motivators

Individuals that participants reported as being highly influential in their academic trajectories were parents, teachers, and friends and peers. Organizations were also briefly reported as motivators.

Parents. The majority of participants mentioned parents, specifically their mothers, as people who continuously encourage them to succeed. Verbal encouragement and being supportive were common constructs that participants indicated their parents perform when motivating them to want attend college. This is very similar to what Hill and Tyson (2009) found in their creation of a more comprehensive form of involvement they labeled academic socialization. Specifically, this construct incorporates parental communication regarding the purposes, goals, and meaning of academic performance. Academic socialization stresses the importance of positive feedback, alignment with youth's current activities and academic behaviors to their future goals, and establishment of academic preparation and planning as normative. Verbal encouragement and being supportive are considered home-based involvement behaviors, which are found to be more effective than traditional school-based involvement behaviors, such as volunteering in school, communicating with teachers and attendance at school meetings (Altschul, 2011). Not one participant in the current study indicated that their parents motivated them by volunteering or actively engaging with the school. This is significant, as not all parents, due to job or transportation restrictions are able to participate in school activities. Nonetheless, student perspectives imply that asking questions, being supportive, showing interest in a child's academic endeavors, and communicating the importance of academic planning are ways that significant others can increase a child's academic outcomes.

Previous research suggests that verbal encouragement is highly linked with self-efficacy. One of the four sources of information, verbal persuasion, is one way to increase efficacy in individuals (Bandura, 1977). This requires helping people, through suggestion, with things that are overwhelming. Many participants disclosed that their parents were supportive, which allow them to feel more confident about their college decision.

A second way parents motivate their children to succeed is through involvement in extracurricular activities. Participants reported that parents encouraged them to sign up for summer camps, enroll in classes or programs geared toward their academic interests and work with tutors in order to better use and play their instruments. This finding is supported by Hill and Tyson's (2009) meta-analysis regarding home-based versus school-based involvement such that parents who took their children to educationally-enriching places such as museums, were more likely to have children who were academically successful. Participants reported enrolling in summer camps or programs that were dedicated to helping them with a specific academic goal and offered them ways to increase their knowledge around that topic of interest. Since the majority of parents in this sample reported having less than a Bachelor's degree, this shows how parents can motivate and encourage their children to participate in extracurricular activities, even without high levels of education themselves. This is supported by Kirk and colleagues (2011), who found that in a largely Black sample high parental aspirations predicted high child aspirations. Additional research on SES suggest it's not uncommon for parents across racial groups too want their children to do better than them academically. Therefore, level of education doesn't necessarily equate with level of aspirations. In this sample, the majority of parents reporting their highest level of education as some college were Black, yet they still encouraged

their children to seek out opportunities in the form of extracurricular activities to better their chances of getting accepted into college.

A third way that parents were able to motivate their children was through something not currently found in the literature, a construct called idol. Specifically, this captures how youth look up to their parents as people they aspire to be, either because of their career or the steps they took to get to that career. Participants idolized parents who tended to be in a career that they were interested in. Although not specifically discussed in the literature, Dubow and colleagues' (2009) examination of a longitudinal sample of middle school youth shares similar overlap to the construct of parents as idols. Specifically, parental level of education was able to predict student educational and occupational attainment thirty-five years later. Further, parents who had higher levels of education and presumably, better jobs were more likely to have children with high aspirations and a more prestigious occupation in adulthood.

Idol can also be linked with one of the four sources of information from self-efficacy theory. Labeled vicarious experience, this construct includes live modeling as a way to increase efficacy (Bandura, 1977). This involves seeing others perform a difficult task successfully, which increases efficacy in the individuals who are watching them. Although most participants indicated their parents had already completed college, one student discussed how her mother was currently enrolled in classes. This helped her actualize her college goals and made them feasible. Vicarious experiences help students believe that if they work hard, they too can attain a similar level of education to their parents.

A fourth mechanism for motivating participants was through financial assistance. The majority of youth did not discuss financial help from parents, but those that did were White. In addition, those students that did discuss receiving financial help from parents came from families

that were highly educated themselves and had good jobs. One participant indicated that she would most likely receive financial help from a grandparent, so level of education could not be assessed in that example. As stated prior, the majority of participants who came from families with less than a Bachelor's degree were Black. Family SES is one of the strongest predictors of academic performance since it connects youth to various levels of capital (i.e. social, economic, etc.) (Sirin, 2005). Family SES, according to Sirin (2005), is a better predictor in White youth whereas neighborhood and school SES are better predictors in Black youth. This seems to match participants in this study in that even though Black youth tended to have low reported family incomes, they still had high aspirations and expectations for attending college. One reason for this could be various individuals that Black youth noted as being positive influences. Having high levels of social capital offset many of the disadvantages associated with lower levels of economic capital (Woolley & Bowen, 2007) and serve as a protective factor.

When discussing parents as motivators, most participants focused on their mothers. Every parent that filled out the demographic form was in fact, female. This is not surprising, given that youth report women in their families as providing emotional, tangible, and informational support regarding academic attainment (McMahon, et al., 2011). Verbal encouragement and being supportive, two themes that emerged fairly early in the interviews, are predominately emotional in nature. There were two specific instances, however, where fathers were mentioned; this had to do with the stereotypically masculine nature of the participants' goals: one participant, Amelia, (Black, female) wanted to be a college basketball player, another, Mason, (White, male) wanted to be an engineer. In Amelia's (Black, female) example, not only was her father an important source of support, but all the significant people in her life were male, including her coach and trainer. Based on the data, it would seem that traditional forms of motivation, including verbal

encouragement and support are avenues that mothers feel comfortable using with their children. Fathers tend to fulfill the motivator role when their children are preparing for a specific role/career, especially if it's traditionally masculine.

Taken together, parents, and especially mothers, are highly influential in motivating and encouraging youth to succeed in their education. Further, they play an essential role in increasing their children's self-efficacy. By verbally encouraging, creating supporting environments, pushing youth to participate in extracurricular activities, and being idols to their children, parents are the gateway to an academically successful child. It is clear that parents are still the most important individuals in a child's life.

Teachers. Although not as extensively discussed as parents, teachers were also important motivators in students' lives. Analogous to parents, teachers motivated and engaged students by verbally encouraging them and being a source of support. Teachers role in their students' lives went beyond standard teaching. Most students reported teachers who would talk about their future goals with them as well as act as counselors or support systems in their time of need. Creating a warm and inclusive space in the classroom environment encourages students to be engaged (Dotterer, et al., 2009; Patrick, et al., 2007; Perry, et al, 2010; Wang & Eccles, 2012) and helps increase their future aspirations (Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010).

This teacher-as-counselor construct has been found in the literature to be important. Not only does having a good relationship with one's teacher increase a student's motivation to aspire to go to college, but it also helps the student seek out an additional source of support beyond the parents (Decker, et al., 2007). Further, natural mentors, those people who are non-familial, are important, especially in Black youth, for influencing educational attainment (Hurd, et al., 2012).

Participants also talked about how the school community was a positive place to learn. Although it included teachers, the school community was a broad portrayal of the environment and described the setting as warm, hospitable, and inviting. Participants explained how even if they were having a bad day, they could talk to anyone that was willing to listen, including their teachers and the school principal. This made many students feel better, since they were walking into an environment that made them feel safe and respected.

Overall, teachers as well as the larger school community are additional motivators that participants recognized as important in influencing their educational goals. By verbally encouraging their students, teachers play a supporting role in their ability to increase a student's self-efficacy. Since students spend anywhere between six to seven hours a day in a classroom setting, it is important that teachers convey a sense of warmth and acceptance toward their students. This not only helps encourage better academic outcomes, but also increases social skills, positive behaviors, higher levels of engagement, and more time spent on a task (Decker, et al., 2007).

Friends and Peers. Friends and peers were an important source of motivation for participants in this sample. Specifically, friends and peers were verbally encouraging towards the participants by helping them when they felt down and always being there if they needed extra support. Verbal encouragement functioned much the same as it did in parents and teachers: making the participant happy, motivated, and wanting to continue towards their college goals.

An additional construct discovered in this sample was called social comparison. This equates to participants using their friends and peers as motivators in the sense that they strive to want to be equally as smart, and do equally as well as them in school. Further, social comparison was discussed as wanting to take the same steps that friends or peers took or were taking in their

journey toward college. It's important to note that this construct is different than competition, which undermines development and leads to lower levels of achievement (Wang & Holcomb, 2010). Participants in this sample weren't competing with friends and peers, rather they were using them as individuals they could look up to and mirror their success after. This, in turn, made participant's feel more confident in their academic abilities and inadvertently made them better students since they always made sure to be on top of their school work. This is similar to Jiang, and colleagues (2014) study showing that friends or peers' perceived performance goals predicted the students' self-efficacy beliefs surrounding education.

The influence of friends and peers on students' academic outcomes has mostly been studied by looking at how friends and peers negatively influence youth and has rarely studied the positive aspects of how peers can motivate one another to succeed academically (Altermatt, 2011). One way that this study contributes to the literature is that it shows the importance of having prosocial friends and peers, as engaging with these types of students encourages youth to participate in extracurricular activities, identify with their school, and subjectively value learning (Wang, 2012).

Largely, friends and peers not only were verbally supportive of participants, but they also created an environment that challenged them to do well and push themselves beyond their baseline. The constructs of verbal persuasion as well as vicarious experience yet again, play an important role in participants' lives. Since youth spend a great deal of time with their friends, it would make sense that friends and peers can play a role in increasing self-efficacy in students. This social incentive allowed participants to gauge how well they were doing compared to their friends and peers and kept them continually striving for success. Being seen as equivalent to

friends and peers was significant for youth and having a reason to continue moving towards their goal helped them stay on track.

Organizations. The least talked about motivator, organizations, did play a role in some of the participant's lives. A few participants discussed specific programs or places they were a part of or planned on joining. Most of these programs were centered on a participant's academic or career goal and helped them by providing the basic skills they would need. One participant did mention her church and her ministry group were important in influencing her academic trajectory. Church and church-related activities are shown in the literature to be influential in helping youth to be academically successful (Barrett, 2010). Further, they allow children to be exposed to extracurricular activities, such as camps and missions, which were discussed by participants as important steps in getting to college (Barrett, 2010). Being involved in organizations also connected participants to older students, many whom were in college. This not only afforded participants the opportunity to interact with college-aged students, but it gave them the chance to ask questions about what to expect. This, again, shows how important natural mentors can be (Hurd, et al., 2012) in increasing students' academic aspirations and expectations.

Although not discussed in as much detail by participants, interacting and participating in organizations was a positive experience for them. Getting children to join local organizations that help with school work, offer extracurricular activities, and connect them to higher education resources is a great first step in setting them down the path towards college achievement. Further, it helps establish educational aspirations and expectations early and allows for more positive interactions with individuals.

Break Barriers and Positive Role Model. Two constructs that were not found in the literature reviewed involved participants wanting to better themselves and better others. Breaking barriers was a construct that participants identified when their parents had not gone to college and were struggling financially. Participants indicated seeing how difficult it was for their parents to be able to afford the things they needed (and wanted) was a motivator in itself and forced them to keep on striving if they wanted to be financially well off. Wanting to be better than their parents, however, was not the only factor that encouraged youth. Since a large percentage of people born into poverty remain there (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2012), some other construct needs to be interwoven with wanting to be more financially successful. This construct is verbal encouragement. All participants who mentioned wanting to break barriers also discussed how their parents explained to them about the importance of a college degree and how if they wanted to be successful, they should plan on going to college. Further, these youth separately discussed how their parents would always support their goals and provided them with words of reassurance if they were having a difficult time. Together, verbally encouraging students to succeed and focusing on the financial gains that could be made with a college degree, created a drive in participants to break the barriers that their parents experienced.

This is a direct example of how a source of efficacy, verbal persuasion, actually increases a participant's self-efficacy. In this sample, students' desires to attend college, even though their parents didn't, were encouraged by their parents consistently. As a result of this encouragement, students were able to believe in themselves, knowing that a college education is a viable option for them. This might be one way to counter the cycle of poverty that exists in low-income families and does not require additional funds, time, or education.

Another construct, positive role model, was an unanticipated yet optimistic outcome of the interviews. This construct was described by participants as wanting to help younger children (either family or students) achieve their college goals or be an influence for children to look up to. Traditionally, adolescence is a time filled with egocentric thinking (Kail and Cavanaugh, 2014), so the fact that participants in this sample discussed wanting to do something for others was an encouraging finding.

Taken together, breaking barriers and positive role model were specific behaviors participants identified that focused on bettering themselves and others. Having a positive outlook regarding their future and also focusing on the future of others were two concepts that have not been captured in the literature, probably because of the limiting nature of quantitative surveys. These constructs expand the current developmental literature and offer a more expansive look at what motivates youth to want to succeed.

Blocks

Individuals that participants reported as being inhibitory in their academic trajectories were friends, themselves, and family. Money was also reported as a block.

Friends. Friends as inhibitors were the most widely discussed block participants mentioned. All of the participants who discussed friends as blocks were Black. Participants alluded to the fact that friends could make them engage in substance use, participate in violent acts, and derail their plans for college. A common theme mentioned was participants getting involved with high school drama or making poor choices that would benefit them now, but could potentially have bad consequences later. Friends as blocks are reported in the literature such that there is a decreased level of engagement for Black youth who hang out with antisocial friends (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Further, youth who associate with antisocial friends or peers are less

likely to be monitored by parents and have lower levels of bonding with their teachers (Tiet, et al., 2010). Since positive relationships with parents and teachers are imperative for student academic success, associating with antisocial friends and peers is detrimental to youth's academic wellbeing.

A strategy to overcome bad friends and peers was choosing friends wisely. Participants indicated that in high school, making good choices about people they would associate with would prevent bad decision making or being put in a bad situation. Further, making sure to not engage with bad friends or peers in the first place or ignoring them outright was also a common response. One possible explanation for friends and peers being named as blocks in Black youth is the often cited, yet highly debated "acting white" hypothesis. Introduced by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), this concept dictates that certain behaviors such as raising one's hand or enrolling in honors classes, as well as speaking standard English and wearing specific types of clothing contribute to Black youth being ostracized by their peers for being "sell-outs." From an empirical perspective, the data do not support the theory (Fryer & Torelli, 2010), yet the fact that Black youth were the only participants to report friends as blocks is not coincidental. Although explaining that phenomenon is beyond the scope of this project, it is a valid concept that continuously arises throughout the literature and is important to note.

Self. Participants discussed their inability to push themselves or their inability to do well in college as a potential block. Talking about their ineptitude was specific to classes and exams, especially if they knew they wanted to major in a tough field such as science. Some students discussed not trying because of fear of failure and as a result, developing a lack of motivation. Engagement in the classroom is a risk factor for youth, especially if they lose motivation, lack effort, and don't develop strategies for solving problems (Fredricks, et al, 2004; Jimerson, et al.,

2003; Wang & Eccles, 2012). One important theme that emerged when discussing their inability to be successful was that because school is going to get harder, it might be difficult to do well. The progression from middle school to high school is shown to decrease students' level of engagement (Wang & Eccles, 2012), especially for Black youth, so accessing resources early and utilizing them will be a useful step.

A strategy for overcoming self-fear and worry was to study. Many youth talked about preventing failure or falling behind by enrolling in classes the summer prior to beginning high school. Others discussed getting tutors and going to the library as preventative measures. Since all participants in this sample indicated they felt connected to their school and were engaged in their classrooms (Kirkpatrick, et al., 2001), studying and doing well as a strategy is possible for participants. Further, studying increases self-efficacy, as it relates to the performance accomplishment source of information. If students study for an exam and do well, this increases their motivation to continue to study and, as a result, their efficacy surrounding school.

The construct of self-efficacy, although not a strategy per-se, was highly connected to overcoming blocks surrounding the self. Participants who made highly efficacious statements indicated nothing would stand in their way of attaining a college education, no matter what they needed to do. In large part, these students believe that they have the tools necessary to complete their goal and therefore, are willing to expend a significant amount of effort to achieve that goal (Bandura, 1977). These participants viewed achieving their goal as necessary and important, no matter what blocks impeded their path. Efficacy is highly linked with how well a child does in school as well as how much verbal persuasion they are exposed to (Bandura, 1977). Further, being around people who are engaged in activities they aspire to (such as college students) increases the likelihood of developing high self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). The majority of

students in this sample indicated their parents, teachers, and friends were positive influences, causing the students to have unwavering and consistent sources of support. These individuals directly impact self-efficacy.

Overall, youth recognize that they can be barriers in their pathway to college and recognize specific strategies, such as studying as a preventative measure to make sure that failure does not occur. Additionally, some youth who have high levels of self-efficacy are able to circumvent these blocks and keep focused on their goal at hand. Since many of these self-imposed blocks have yet to occur, only time can tell if their efficacy is able to hold up to the blocks of the future.

Family. Family did not come up nearly as much as friends and the self, yet was worth noting. Participants described family members intentionally blocking their goal of college enrollment either because of their jealousy or their lack of preparedness. In the case of not being prepared, it is common for parents who do not have a formal education to want their child to go to college, yet aren't aware of how to translate that desire down to their child (Spera, et al., 2009). In Olivia's (Black, female) case, her parents wanted her to go to college, yet weren't sure it was a good idea to go right after she graduated from high school, since they hadn't saved any money for her. Since parental values are passed down to children, (Frome & Eccles, 1998) consistently discussing college and encouraging youth to enroll will increase a student's desire to attend.

Even though youth in this sample didn't have many negative reactions from their family regarding their desire to attend college, family can and does play a very important role in determining if children go to college. Many of the values families convey to their children

become internalized (Marchant, et al., 2001) so being verbally encouraging and supportive are vital in increasing academic aspirations and expectations.

Money. Money was a large block reported by participants. Sixty-nine percent of the participants came from families who made less than \$50,000 a year and most of the participants in the sample indicated their parents would not be able to afford or even help them with the costs of going to college. Given that college costs have risen significantly over the years, it makes sense that children would start thinking about ways to offset college costs in middle school.

The strategy widely discussed for helping with money-related blocks was applying for scholarships. Participants indicated this was the most effective way to offset costs since they did not have to pay them back like loans. Further, many students discussed not wanting to take out loans because of the amount of debt it could cause for them in the future. The literature regarding aspirations and expectations doesn't account for how college costs play a role in affecting academic outcomes, yet it seems like many youth aren't able to attend college simply because of the cost. Looking at ways to increase college enrollment, Sherraden, Peters Wagner, Guo, and Clancey (2013) conducted qualitative interviews with three different groups, one being elementary school youth. They had them (through an implementing agency) invest money in a children's development account (CDA) in order to determine if that would make a positive difference regarding college enrollment. After following them for four years, they discovered that, although children were motivated to save, barriers such as income, debt, and emergencies still made it difficult to fully plan for college enrollment. This study is just the beginning of what is anticipated to be much more extensive research regarding how cost and current family income contribute to academic aspirations and expectations.

No Plan. A small minority of participants discussed how they didn't feel they had any blocks, and therefore, did not need any strategies to overcome those blocks. All of these participants were White. When pressed to try and think of what could potentially block them from achieving their goals, these participants indicated tragic events: parents getting cancer, family members getting sick, or a non-specific traumatic event. One reason that White youth did not report any blocks could be they have less risk factors than their Black peers. García Coll, et al. (1996), in their Multiple Risk Model, list social position variables, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression as factors that contribute to children of color not doing as well academically. Since White youth are less likely to deal with these factors, their perceived blocks are more internal or related to issues arising within the immediate family.

Steps to Fulfill Goals

The majority of steps participants listed as important for securing a spot at the college of their choice involved behavioral strategies geared at being engaged in their school. These included taking enough credits, studying, getting good grades, and taking upper-level classes. Planning and taking steps early increases students' level of engagement in the classroom, which in turn, increases their academic achievement and leads to better academic outcomes. Specifically, career planning and expectations are positively related to increased engagement and feelings of belongingness, especially for Black youth (Kenny, et al., 2006; Peryy, 2008; Perry, et al., 2010). One reason that the majority of youth had specific steps regarding college enrollment was that their schools were highly invested in their academic careers. Both schools had local university's mascots as names of hallways, had their colors painted on the walls, and did regular college visits for their 8th grade students. This might not be standard across all middle schools across the state or even within the city. These actions on the part of the school resulted in youth

establishing steps that they believe will be important to focus on in high school and is allowing them to lay out a plan before they begin as high school students in the fall.

Behaviors that indicate planning for college are related to self-efficacy. Participants in this sample discussed parents, teachers, and the school environment as important in increasing their motivation. These individuals and environments have been shown to be hugely persuasive in shaping students self-efficacy (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Jiang, Song, Lee, & Bong, 2014; McMahon, Wernsman, & Rose, 2009). As stated earlier, behaviors such as verbal encouragement and vicarious experience are constructs that are directly related to efficacy and were described by many participants in this sample as standard.

Other steps that youth discussed were focused outside of the school environment. Similar to previously discussed constructs, students indicated the need to apply for scholarships and save money as a way to offset costs associated with college. Extracurricular activities were also mentioned as important step, as having a diverse and extensive resume was important in order to stand out on college applications. Not only do extracurricular activities help youth during the application process, but by participating in these activities, youth are more likely to adjust to changes in academic life (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008). This adjustment persists from 8th grade until 11th grade, especially with youth from lower SES background.

The last step youth mentioned was being prepared. Preparation was articulated not only from an academic perspective, but also included preparing for interviews as well as risk prevention strategies. Planning for the future impacts current aspirations and expectations, which predict educational attainment later in life (Beal & Crockett, 2010). Further, in Black youth, Future Time Perspective has been shown to be related to academic achievement, yet decreases its

effectiveness as a predictor in high school. Planning, then, is a great way to ensure success in high school by offering students a way of keeping track of their goals.

Most youth report clear steps that they plan on taking once they begin high school. These steps are largely due to the level of efficacy that students have. Parents and the school environment are supportive of this and could be a driving factor in their preparedness.

Connecting Aspirations and Expectations to Self-Efficacy

High Aspirations, High Expectations. The majority of participants fell under the category of High Aspirations, High Expectations. These students not only want to attend college, but believe that they will be successful once they get there. Most students who fell under this category made highly efficacious statements throughout their interview. Based on the self-efficacy theory, having efficacy expectations (i.e. believing that you can be successful at your desired goal) is based on four specific sources of information. Two of these sources of information were directly related to the individuals in participants' lives. First, to increase efficacy expectations, an individual needs consistent verbal persuasion. Participants in this sample indicated that parents, teachers, and friends always encourage them to be better and never give up. Verbal encouragement was the most mentioned motivating behavior that participants discussed. The second source of information was vicarious experience. Participants named parents, siblings, and older peers as people they saw succeed in college (in the case of parents, saw that college benefited them by their successful career). By seeing people in their lives take on the stress and difficulty of college and coming out successfully, this increased participants' efficacy regarding being able to complete college.

Parental self-efficacy may explain verbal encouragement. Parents who have high levels of self-efficacy create or seek out environments that are beneficial to their children, and as a

result, have children who do better academically (Bandura, et al., 1996). By consistently talking about college, being a solid source of a support, and encouraging engagement in activities surrounding college attainment, parents are fostering high levels of efficacy in their children. Many of the participants who fell under the category of High Aspirations, High Expectations indicated their parents (as well as teachers and friends) communicated the value of a college education by discussing the economic and financial gains associated with a degree. Further, they pushed participants to continue to succeed, even in the face of obstacles. Even though many youth did not come from wealthy backgrounds, high aspirations and expectations from parents were still a consistent theme and prove that level of education and/or wealth does not indicate successful transmission of efficacy regarding education (Bandura, et al., 2001).

The earlier that efficacy is created and solidified, the better the outcomes for youth (Jiang, et al., 2014). Since many youth in this sample indicated they had high levels of efficacy (either by making blatant statements or by indicating they would succeed), this designates that these efficacious beliefs regarding education were established in elementary school and continued to increase as participants navigated their way through middle school. Taken together, the support systems and tools that participants have in their life, coupled by the fact that their self-efficacy was developed early, led to these individuals having high aspirations and expectations regarding college.

High Aspirations, Low Expectations. A category that only one participant fell under, High Aspirations, Low Expectations was indicative of this person's inability to do well in school. This participant had wanted to go to college initially, but in determining how difficult it would be, decided against it. Boxer, et al, (2010) found similar results in their study as well as students reporting high level of social and academic risk. When looking at the four sources of information

that influence a person's level of efficacy, it would make sense that he chose not to go to college. His personal mastery experiences were related to academic failures and the level of verbal persuasion and vicarious experience he was subjected to was also low. Avoiding behaviors that individuals believe they lack skill or ability in are common human traits (Bandura, 1977). By indicating that college would be too hard for him to complete, this participant was also making a statement about his current success in school; specifically, that he wasn't doing well.

Further, this participant also mentioned how his parents and other family members had not gone to college and therefore, did not encourage him to attend college either. This lack of verbal encouragement as well as not seeing anyone succeed in college, led this participant to believe that he could not be successful in a college environment. Although there weren't many examples of participants like this individual, many of his behaviors and decisions regarding college were the result of an absence of support and a belief in low mastery skills. This led the participants to having high aspirations, yet low expectations.

Low Aspirations, High Expectations. A category not thought of before the start of this study, Low Aspirations, High Expectations is described as participants who were not interested in college immediately after high school. Instead, participants who fell under this category had plans to complete a specific goal first and only if that failed, would they choose to go to college as a backup. These participants mentioned that they currently were doing well in school and felt confident in their academic abilities, yet had other goals that they felt were more important to them. What's important to mention is that these goals were not simply "dream jobs," rather they were goals that participants were actively partaking in now, in order to better their chances of being successful later. For example, participants discussed how they actively were taking lessons, practicing, and getting tutors in order to perfect their auditions.

When looking at the four sources of information regarding increasing efficacy expectations, participants indicated that verbal encouragement as well as vicarious experience were consistent mechanisms of support given to them by their families, teachers, and friends and peers. This makes sense, as their efficacy regarding their success in college wasn't low, but their desire to enroll right after high school was. Further, college was considered a back-up plan for many of these youth, who wanted to get a degree if their initial goal did not pan out.

These individuals are unique, not because they did not want to go to college right away, but rather, because their initial goals were so important to them, that they were actively taking steps in middle school to make sure they came true. These early, preventative steps and future career planning strategies have been shown to be related to academic success, especially in Black youth (Honora, et al., 2008). Because their initial goals are not college-directed, yet they still have high-efficacy regarding their college success, these individuals have dual-efficacy pertaining to their goals. This means that not only did they feel they could be successful in their desired goal, but felt that college was an easy backup plan in case their first goal failed.

Triangulation

The majority of participants in this sample had career expectations that aligned with their parents' belief in their academic outcomes. Parental beliefs and values regarding education are highly correlated with children's so much so that they influence student motivation and competence (Seginer, 1983; Thompons, et al., 1988; Paulson, 1994; Steinberg, et al., 1992; Marchant, et al., 2001). Further, parental aspirations and expectations were found to have the strongest relationship regarding children's academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001).

Patterns regarding participants' actual reported career can be found. For instance, every single parent that holds the belief that their child will achieve some college or less, had children

who reported careers that did not require a college education. Another pattern noted was with parents who reported that their child would graduate with a Bachelor's degree or higher. In these instances, even though not all participants matched exactly with their parent's beliefs (i.e. parents indicated a Master's degree and their actual career requires a Bachelor's), all participants at minimum, had careers that would necessitate a Bachelor's degree. These patterns, although not generalizable to a larger population, support what the research shows regarding parental aspirations and expectations translating to their children. Youth internalize what their parents believe and mirror what they do. It is important that parents, knowing how influential they are in their children's lives, create spaces that encourage efficacy regarding educational endeavors, which will ultimately lead to increased aspirations and expectations.

Strengths of the Study

There are a number of strengths in the present study. First, this study is the first of its kind to interview middle school youth in order to determine what factors influence their academic aspirations and expectations. As a result of this study, participants were able to provide specific behaviors that they and other individuals in their lives do that motivate and block their academic goals. This led to the uncovering of new information regarding how aspirations and expectations are formed. Second, differences by race were found in participant responses regarding what motivates and blocks them from college attainment. Although notable differences in race regarding educational attainment exist in the literature, these differences do not account for the "what" or "who" that helps or impedes youth from achieving their goals. These differences can help researchers in the future create prevention programs that are tailored specifically to youth's blocks and help preclude problems before they arise. Lastly, this study showed the important role that parents, teachers, and friends and peers play in influencing

youth's academic trajectories. By discussing the specific behaviors that these individuals do, it allows future interventions to target the negative behaviors and focus on making them more positive.

Limitations

In addition to the strengths of the study, limitations are noted. First, all interviews were conducted at the school. Although this helped recruit participants for involvement in the study, it could have prevented them from discussing the negative aspects of their school environment. The literature indicates differences in how Black and White students view their school, especially surrounding differential treatment by teachers and expulsion rates (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Although participants were told that everything they discussed would be confidential, being in the school setting could have limited their discussion. Second, this study took place in schools that were highly college-focused and exposed their students to many college programs. This could be why so many students reported having High Aspirations, High Expectations and no one reported Low Aspirations, Low Expectations. Although the goal of qualitative research is not generalizability, it's important to note that responses could vary in schools that did not push their students in an academic direction. Third, this study recruited mostly females, yet the males who were interviewed had much to say. Even though females are easier to recruit and participate in research much more frequently, it would have been ideal to have a more equal sample between genders. Fourth, even though students were chosen by non-participation in specific groups (e.g. AVID and Success in the Middle), it was not determined if their schools were part of a TRIO program, which would have accounted for the large amount of students who wanted to attend college. Fifth, there could have been a selection bias of students. Although teachers were told to recruit students from all performance levels, students who do poorly are least likely to

turn in consent forms and be available for an interview. This also could have skewed the data. Lastly, although variations in responses were found between Black and White participants, a larger sample would have been better, in order to make the variations more conclusive.

Future Research

The development of a scale to measure academic aspirations and expectations in middle school youth is a possible next step from the data collected. Currently, aspirations and expectations are measured by asking two questions: “What is the highest level of education you want to achieve?” and “What is the highest level of education you think you will achieve?” Most surveys list levels of education starting with high school and work their way up to a graduate degree or higher. Although this measures a very direct thought process, it doesn’t capture the “why” or the “who” that a validated scale could.

Understanding these concepts is essential because it allows educators to determine what factors impede academic growth, so that they can connect students to appropriate resources. This is especially important in middle school, as larger student-to-teacher ratios hinder teachers’ ability to develop a strong connection compared to elementary school. Large changes such as these result in declines in student academic progress (Dauber & Epstein, 1989; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hill & Chao, 2009).

It is the authors’ sincere hope that having a scale like this in existence may lead to better techniques in targeting youth who have high aspirations but low expectations. Students who fall under this category want to go to college, yet lack the efficacy and skills they need in order to be successful. By intervening early and connecting students to the right resources, it just may be the extra push and support they need to be academically successful.

Future research should also examine why Black youth were more likely to report friends and peers as blocks that impede their educational growth compared to their White counterparts. Although the “acting white” hypothesis has been empirically disproven (Fryer & Torelli, 2010), there should be a concerted effort to discover what makes friends a large influence in Black students’ lives. Time spent with friends and peers increases as student’s transition to high school and become more independent. As a result, friends and peers become large sources of support and guidance. Preventing Black students from being negatively influenced by their friends and peers should be a focus of future interventions gauged at helping youth become educationally successful.

Conclusion

The disproportionate graduation rates between Black and White youth have grown increasingly narrower throughout the last twenty years, yet disparities still exist. The literature has been saturated with risk factors, protective factors, and predictors and explains in great detail the people or things in the environment that need to exist (or not exist) to increase a student’s academic achievement. This study sought to fill a gap in the literature by interviewing students to better understand what behaviors occur that makes wanting to go to college more feasible within a sample of middle school students. The findings indicate the importance of family and close friends as being strong sources of motivation while teachers and organizations played a supporting role. Specifically, verbal encouragement, a behavior that increases academic aspirations and expectations, was also decidedly linked with efficacy. The findings also allude to the importance of making good decisions regarding friends and peers and financial planning to overcome common barriers that might arise. Finally, new constructs not discussed in the literature were found that shine a light on the complexity of youth and why it is important to

support them throughout their primary school years. Based on the findings from this study, targeted interventions aimed at increasing academic aspirations and expectations should be implemented in middle school. One way to understand a student's aspirations and expectations will be to create a scale that may allow teachers to accurately determine what category their students fall under. By taking these steps, the gap between Black and White youth will hopefully increasingly narrow over time, allowing all students to flourish and reach their academic potential.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Date: February 1, 2016

Principal Investigator: Rhonda Lewis

Co-Investigator(s): Jamie LoCurto

Department: Psychology

IRB Number: 3547

Review Category: 6 and 7

The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your research project application entitled, “**Examining Adolescents' Pathways to Success: Understanding the Academic Aspirations and Expectations of Middle-School Youth**”. The IRB approves the project according to the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. As described, the project also complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research.

This approval is for a period of one year from the date of this letter and will require continuation approval if the research project extends beyond **January 31, 2017**.

Please keep in mind the following:

1. Any significant change in the experimental procedure as described should be reviewed by the IRB prior to altering the project.
2. When signed consent documents are required, the principal investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least five years past completion of the research activity.
3. At the completion of the project, the principal investigator is expected to submit a **final report**.

Thank you for your cooperation. If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Administrator at IRB@wichita.edu.

Sincerely,



Michael Rogers, Ph.D.
Chairperson, IRB

APPENDIX A (continued)



*Dr. Lisa Lutz
Alvin E. Morris Administrative Center
Executive Director, Innovation & Evaluation
201 N. Water, Room 410
316.973.4418, fax 316.973.4536
Wichita, Kansas 67202
E-mail llutz@usd259.net*

January 12, 2016

Jamie LoCurto

Wichita State University
1845 Fairmount St.

Wichita KS 67208

Re: Research Proposal dated 1-4-16

Dear Ms. LoCurto,

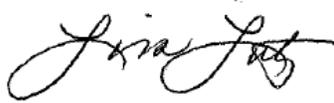
This letter is in response to your research request *Examining Adolescents' Pathways to Success: Understanding the Academic Aspirations and Expectations of Middle-School Youth* in the Wichita Public Schools. At this time I am pleased to inform you that the Research Council has given conditional approval for your project with the following amendments:

- Submit the Parent Demographic Survey
- Payment to participate is marked on the Rights of Human Subjects checklist. Is this correct?
- Strongly recommended that each of the three focus groups be conducted in both of the selected schools.
- Teachers should be directed to randomly select students across all performance levels.

APPENDIX A (continued)

Please resubmit your revisions directly to dhumphrey@usd259.net.

On behalf of the USD 259 Research Council,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lisa Lutz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Lisa" and last name "Lutz" clearly distinguishable.

Dr. Lisa Lutz, Executive
Director Innovation and
Evaluation Wichita Public
Schools, USD 259

Innovation and Evaluation – Wichita Public Schools – USD 259

APPENDIX B

CONSENT AND ASSENT FORMS

Consent Form

Purpose: Your child is invited to participate in a research study focused on understanding the motivators and barriers that exist in influencing their college aspirations and expectations. I hope to learn what factors influence a child's decision to attend college.

Participant Selection: Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because they attend Brooks or Coleman Middle School. Approximately 16 students will be invited to join the study.

Explanation of Procedures: If you decide to have your child participate, you will fill out a brief demographic survey and send it, along with this signed consent form, back to school with your child. The survey should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Once approval of a time and date is obtained from the principal and teachers, interviews will be conducted at Brooks or Coleman Middle School, which will last for no longer than 1 hour. Your child will discuss what influences in their life encourage or prevent them from wanting to attend college. The interview will be audio recorded.

Discomfort/Risks: There are no anticipated risks associated with participating in this study, but your child will be asked a series of questions. If they feel uncomfortable with a question, they may skip it. Further, if the interview causes any undue stress, your child may get up and leave the interview at any time. The interview will be audio recorded; however, the risk in loss of confidentiality is low because all study information will be kept under lock and key. In addition, all information you provide in the demographic survey and all information your child provides during the course of the interview will remain confidential and will not be shared with anyone else except at group level.

Benefits: One of the potential benefits in participating in this study is that your child will contribute their knowledge and opinions about what motivators and barriers influence their decision to attend college. This information will allow researchers to create interventions that allow middle school youth to reach their fullest academic potential.

APPENDIX B (continued)

Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, in order to make sure the study is done properly and safely there may be circumstances where this information must be released. By signing this form, you are giving the research team permission to share information about you with the following groups:

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board;

The researchers may publish the results of the study. If they do, they will only discuss group results. You and your child's name will not be used in any publication or presentation about the study. The interview discussion is confidential and we would ask you to inform your child to not discuss what was talked about in the interview with any friends or family members who were not involved. Interview sessions will be audio recorded and will be stored in a locked office at Wichita State University. They will be kept for a minimum of five years before being destroyed.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University and/or Brooks or Coleman Middle School. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Contact: If you have any questions about this research, you can contact : Rhonda K. Lewis 316-978-3695 and rhonda.lewis@wichita.edu or Jamie LoCurto jamie.locurto@gmail.com. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount Street, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that:

- You have read (or someone has read to you) the information provided above,
- You are aware that this is a research study,
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to your satisfaction, and
- You have voluntarily decided to participate.

You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

APPENDIX B (continued)

Printed Name of Child

Printed Name of Parent

Signature of Parent

Date

Printed Name of Witness

Witness Signature

Date



APPENDIX B (continued)

Child Assent

I have been told that my parents (mom or dad) have given permission for me to participate, if I want to, in a project about my academic dreams and goals. I know that I can stop at any time I want to and it will be okay if I want to stop.

Name

Date

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Thank you for coming today and agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Jamie and I am going to give you this assent form, which you will read and sign, allowing us to begin the study. [Hand out forms, have them sign]. The purpose of today's interview is to learn what your goals and dreams are as well as what motivates or prevents you from wanting to attend college. This interview will be audio taped so speak clearly and loud enough so that I will be able to hear you. If you feel uncomfortable with a question, you may choose not to answer and you are free to stop the interview at any time. Everything you say will be kept confidential, meaning your parents, teachers, and friends will not hear your answers. Please note there is no right or wrong answers; please answer the questions related to how you feel at this moment. Are there any questions before we begin?

1. Okay, so first, I'd like you to think about what your goals or dreams are in the next 5 years. Some examples are: getting a job, graduating middle and/or high school, and going to college. Here is an example of a timeline. I am going to give you a blank timeline; please write down things you would like to accomplish.
2. I see you want to (*name what they want to do*) is this a dream or a goal?
3. Next, you might recall from school, you learned that the solar system looks like this (*Draw a map for each interview*). I'm going to ask you to draw a similar diagram, only you're in the middle and the circles around you are the people or things in your life that will help you achieve the goals you listed on your timeline. You can have as many circles as you like. People or things that are more important to you should be closer to you in the drawing. Please label each circle with the name of the person or thing that belongs there.
4. Based on your goal/dream of becoming/going to (*name their goal/dream*) what are the steps you would need to take to become/go to (*name their goal/dream*)?
5. Based on your goal/dream of (*name the academic goal they wrote on the timeline*) who or what might influence you to get to that goal/dream?
 - a. Prompt: These factors could be you, other people, or environmental influences

APPENDIX C (continued)

9. How would you describe your ideal career/job?
 - a. Prompt: What occupation? What would you become if you could choose anything in the world to be?

10. How would you describe the career/job you think you will have?
 - a. Prompt: What occupation? What is the career/job you enjoy/think you would be good at?

11. Any other things that I didn't ask you about that you would like me to know that will help you in achieving your goals/dreams?

This is the end of the interview. I would like to thank you for participating in this interview. I appreciate you sharing your thoughts and opinions with me.

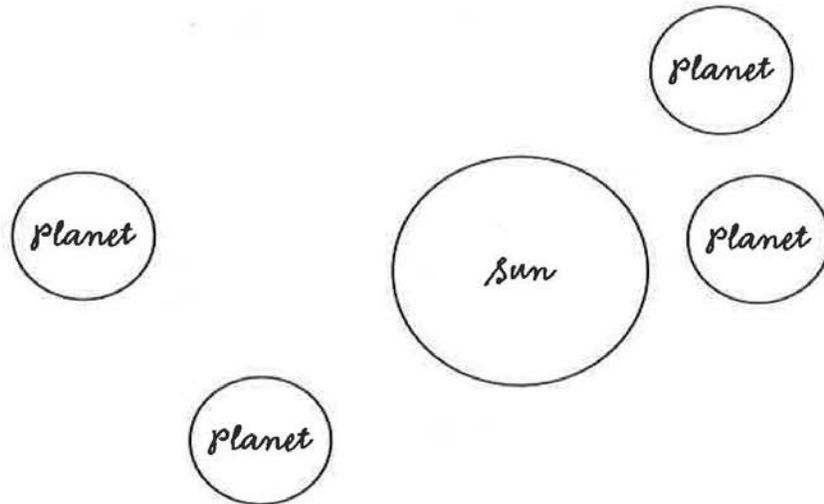
APPENDIX D

RELATIONAL SPACE MAPPING

Relational Space Mapping¹

Instructions to Interviewee

“You might recall that when you were in school, you learned that the solar system looks like this.” (Draw a fresh map for each interview.)



APPENDIX E

DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer these questions to the best of your ability. If you do not want to answer a question, you may leave it blank.

1. What is your age?

2. What is the age of your child participating in this study?

3. What is your gender?
Male _____
Female _____
4. What is the gender of your child participating in this study?
Male _____
Female _____

Caucasian _____
African American/Black _____
Hispanic/Latino _____
Asian/Pacific Islander _____
Other _____
5. What is your race/ethnicity?

Single, never married _____
Married _____
Divorced _____
Widow/Widower _____
Living with a steady partner _____
6. What is your marital status?

High School Diploma _____
GED _____
Some College _____
Bachelor's Degree _____
Master's Degree _____
PhD/MD/JD _____
7. What is the highest level of education you've obtained?

8. What is your current occupation/job title?

9. What is your combined annual household income?
Less than 10,000 _____
10,000-20,000 _____
21,000-30,000 _____

31,000-40,000 _____
41,000-50,000 _____
51,000-60,000 _____
61,000-70,000 _____
71,000-80,000 _____
81,000-90,000 _____
91,000-100,000 _____
Greater than 100,000 _____

10. What level of education do you expect that your child will attain?

High School Diploma _____
GED _____
Some College _____
Bachelor's Degree _____
Master's Degree _____
PhD/MD/JD _____

11. Have you ever talked to your child about going to college?

Yes _____
No _____

12. Do you have an older child?

Yes _____
No _____

13. If YES, did they attend college?

Yes _____
No _____

APPENDIX F

EXEMPLARS OF MOTIVATORS TO ENCOURAGE GOAL ATTAINMENT

Motivators to Encourage Goal Attainment		
Themes	Definition	Quotes (Selected Examples)
Verbal Encouragement	Receiving positive reinforcement from parents, teachers, and friends/peers regarding going to college	<p>"Um, both, they like say encouragement things that just help me keep going even the toughest times...like class...I'm like I'm not gonna go to that class tomorrow and then they'll just say...they'll say something like, they'll talk to the principal and they'll make it all better for me." (Penelope, White female)</p> <p>"Well um uh, one of my friends, I'm not gonna say her name, um she's going to East IB Program. And um she, uh she was wanting me to go but I didn't really like want to get straight into the extra AP stuff..." (Olivia, Black female)</p> <p>"Put your mind to it and don't give up. She always says that." (Lily, White female)</p> <p>"Um, well, my third hour teacher, he supports me, he's like yeah being in the medical is actually pretty fun just don't give up, kinda like my mom says, just don't give up, just succeed in your dream cause if you don't you're not gonna be anywhere in life. There's a lot of supportive people here [laughs]." (Lily, White female)</p> <p>"Yeah. Teachers. In some of my classes that I like, like um Language Arts or Orchestra or Art, I tend to get pretty close to them like we're actually friends instead of the whole student-teacher relationship that's sort of awkward. So, I know them personally because I had a long talk with my art teacher and my orchestra teacher about at-home things and they motivate...they motivate...they motivate me to get better and stuff and they're like oh it's okay, it'll be better, stuff like that. They want to make sure I'm good in life, too." (Isabelle, Black female)</p>
Extracurricular Activities	Volunteering and activities people encourage for college acceptance	<p>"Um they can, like we can do things together like that...community service and uh, so it won't be as boring. And um, I'll probably make some friends when I'm in there and they would help me want to keep doing it..." (Olivia, Black female)</p> <p>"Um...why they [family] send me to like summer camps and stuff like that and the Project Lead the Way kinda stuff." (Ava, Black female)</p>
Social Comparison	Wanting to be like someone else; using them and their success as motivation	<p>"She pretty much wants to succeed in her dreams and you know, she's, easier if we just have the same things going on." (Lily, White female)</p> <p>"I have a cousin right now whose going to high school at Tulsa, he's like basically taking the same steps as my dad and two of my uncles, I have three uncles, who are all in the airplane design and my grandpa was, as well. So that's..." (Mason, White male)</p> <p>Yeah. And I talk about other friends I have...nerd sort of stuff and that way that influences is make...they're normally smarter than me so I want to learn more about that stuff, which in turn makes me more akin to studying things, which will help me in college. So it helps me to introduce myself to the college environment." (Mason, White male)</p> <p>"And my mom went to college so I think she's expecting me to do the same thing." (Ava, Black female)</p>

APPENDIX F (continued)

Motivators to Encourage Goal Attainment		
Themes	Definition	Quotes (Selected Examples)
Idol	Looking up to someone who successfully completed their goals	<p>"And then I see this dude on Youtube, 17 years old, and he plays pro football [soccer] already and he, I seen him talk about it, And he met one of my favorite soccer players, and he said high school is the hardest thing for him to go through. So I, I just try and look up to him." (Aiden, Black male)</p> <p>"Um, they always talk about their experiences in college, and sometimes I'm like oh that'd be fun. And I like, like wanna be like my mom, wanna be like my mom. And she like, got a Master's degree and uh so she experienced everything. And so I want to go like that, too and make sure, like, I'm really focusing on everything. And they did...make me stay focused and do what's best." (Penelope, White female)</p> <p>"Well she also takes classes because she never got the chance to go and she wanted to be a nurse, so I kinda, kinda wanna follow in her footsteps." (Lily, White female)</p> <p>"My dad works at Cessna as a air...airplane designer slash engineer and I've just always been interested in engineering, so he's kind of like my idol. Like that's what I want to be." (Mason, White male)</p>
Being Supportive	Making positive comments about the student, helping them through tough times, staying on student	<p>Um, well definitely my church cause the children's ministry people, they definitely, like talk to me and stuff, like they're really supportive of everybody in the church and so like I'm friends with everybody in that...that's like [name] is our person, our big person in the children's ministry. And like we've talked and she said how she, like the experience she had in college, in like all the things she had to go through and stuff and so that's always been on...I'm always like I cannot wait! And then school definitely, because every single time I've had something wrong, they've always come back and support me and they...like we go talk to the principal and I going to my mom and she's like I've had a terrible day! And she's like ut oh, what's wrong this time? And we just come into the office and we get it all situated and everything is awesome." (Penelope, White female)</p> <p>"Like um she influences us to do things that we probably wouldn't do. Like if we have like a bad grade on an assignment she let us re-do it and call it revisions and she wants us to do well so our grades are getting higher. And um, like she lets us do other things like schedule for other classes and she makes us do stuff that will probably help us in the future." (Olivia, Black female)</p> <p>"He [dad] keeps me in everything, keeps me going so I won't get off and he, I don't know, he just..." (Amelia, Black female)</p> <p>"Well like, teachers like kind of push you to do better and..." (Chloe, Black female)</p> <p>"They [parents] completely support any attempts at learning or stuff looking going [buzzer ringing], like going to camps like this summer, I'm going to a KAMS camp to learn more about it and it's about designing stuff and they're completely supporting it. Anything I do that will help my [sorry] my educational career, they do. Like an NL [?] I have to, basically have to donate four hours a week to do it and they have to pick me up and sometimes, ferrying me around for that, so they're amazing." (Mason, White male)</p>

APPENDIX F (continued)

Motivators to Encourage Goal Attainment		
Themes	Definition	Quotes (Selected Examples)
Break Barriers	Wanting to go to college because no one did; want to make life easier for yourself	<p>"Because she, she never got the chance to go to college so I kinda, kinda, wanna go for myself and my mom just so I can show her that I can do it." (Lily, White female)</p> <p>"Um well we've talked about it a few times, I think, and um like my mom's, she didn't go to college so she always said like, if I would want a good job then I should go to college and..." (Chloe, Black female)</p> <p>"My mom because she doesn't have any college education and neither does my dad and I've seen how hard that she has to work to get where she's at now and I wish that if I had kids that wouldn't be as hard as it would be her." (Isabelle, Black female)</p>
Financial Assistance	Helping to pay for college	<p>"They'll probably like fund things..." (Penelope, White female)</p> <p>"And my mom, my grandma, she's been there with financial problems, so she'll help with the financials." (Emily, White female)</p>
Positive Role Model	Helping others in order to achieve their college goals	<p>"Because most of my family didn't go to college or move out of Wichita so I'd like to show her that you can you just gotta try." (Jackson, White male)</p> <p>"Ima I'm gonna like help kids whose younger than me. In 8th grade, come back, like help them, like they do now, be a tutor." (Aiden, Black male)</p> <p>"And my, I just wanna, I just wanna like I wanna be like a good person and everybody else see me as a good person so like when I go away, they won't say he never helped, he was bad. I...I don't want that. I want to help, be good, be a good student. Help my teachers, like my teachers now..." (Aiden, Black male)</p> <p>"Um, my friends right now. My bestest friend, she wakes up late and misses a whole bunch of homework and has a lot of Fs and misses class. And I try really really hard to get her on the right track because I don't want her to mess up in life, I don't want her to be like homeless on the streets, so that sort of motivates me cause I've grown up to know good grades equals good life and if you miss a whole bunch of school, you're not really gonna make it in life." (Isabelle, Black female)</p>

APPENDIX G

EXEMPLARS OF STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME BLOCKS

Strategies to Overcome Blocks		
Themes	Definition	Quotes (Selected Examples)
No Plan	No concrete plan(s) to overcome reported blocks	"Um, no, not really. Cause all the people I know are like saying, do it, you can do it we're here for you, we'll always support you, so just go and do what you want to do." (Penelope, White female) "Um, I don't know...don't pay attention to them and...um..." (Amelia, Black female) "Don't worry about it" (Jackson, White male)
Study	Not giving up if something is challenging; continue learning in the summer	"Um, I'ma like...right now I'm in 8 th so when I get in high school, I'ma like, first year? I'ma take it serious, no playing. I'm like, I'm like gonna go to the library. And I'm like, get along with my teachers first. Get to know they a little better. I'm gonna ask them for a little extra work, see what I can do over the summer..." (Aiden, Black male) "Trying really hard, like, not giving up on something, if it seems too hard. Well like my mom says to learn over the summer." (Ava, Black female)
Choose Friends Wisely	Making sure other people will not negatively influence your academic trajectory	"Um, picking your friends wisely and...um..." (Amelia, Black female) "mmmm just try and stay out of it [drama with friends]. And not find friends that are gonna be bad influences." (Ava, Black female) "For college, first thing I need to do is, um hang out with the right people and just like I said, always, always be ready. Never be late, never get in trouble..." (Aiden, Black male) "Uh, stop hanging around with them. Ignore them." (Carter, Black male)

APPENDIX G (continued)

Strategies to Overcome Blocks		
Themes	Definition	Quotes (Selected Examples)
Self-Efficacy	Being able to control the outcome of your goal; believing that you have the power to make a change	<p>"Not really. I like one of the things that...I wanna get it done. And I definitely want to go to college, and get a job, and have a family and have all my things done." (Penelope, White female)</p> <p>"Well things, things could happen in my family. Stuff could go down and I could just give up and not wanna do anything anymore. That could be really big. But as far as I go, nothing can really stand in my way, I mean..." (Lily, White female)</p> <p>"Um, tutor myself. Or go on Youtube maybe and look up vocal exercises or flute playing and stuff like that: flute song, flute notes, stuff like that, that will just help me through it." (Emily, White female)</p> <p>"Trying really hard, like, not giving up on something, if it seems too hard." (Ava, Black female)</p>
Scholarships	Applying for aid to offset costs associated with college	<p>"Well if I got a scholarship. [regarding college costs]. Um start saving for college." (Chloe, Black female)</p> <p>"Forrr the money? Ummmm just scholarships, getting a job soon so I could save up, which my brother is doing right now, so seeing him do that will help me eventually do that. Ummm getting scholarships and my parents and grandparents are going to help with the college things, that I don't really think it's that big of a deal. Also, having a job during college, throughout it, that way I can...it's not just the money that's been saved up like scholarships, but it's an incoming source of money." (Mason, White male)</p> <p>"Scholarships...yeah. I've had a couple scholarships already, not like financially but like free private lessons to free classes that help...and I don't know how I'm gonna overcome the financial issues if I don't get a scholarship because I really can't afford it and my parents really don't like student loans cause my dad is still in debt so...I don't know." (Isabelle, Black female)</p>

APPENDIX H

EXEMPLARS OF STEPS TO FULFILL GOALS

Steps to Fulfill Goals		
Themes	Definition	Quotes (Selected Examples)
Credits	Taking enough classes to graduate on time	<p>"I would need um credits." (Aiden, Black male)</p> <p>"This is like...ummmm definitely get some extra credit things in so I can get some things in college or something." (Penelope, White female)</p> <p>"mmhmmm uhuh college credits." (Olivia, Black female)</p> <p>"I have to take enough, um like classes with enough college credits." (Chloe, Black female)</p>
Study	Doing well before college in order to have good grades	<p>"Before I get to college...high school, I plan on like going to the library, staying in the library for at least four hours, studying, studying, reading books..." (Aiden, Black male)</p> <p>"Well getting into a habit of studying would help, cause normally I just try to remember facts as best I can and I just wing it during tests, I don't really study." (Mason, White male)</p> <p>"Maybe tutoring, just because I need a little extra help. As in like homework and work that needs to be done that I don't understand." (Ava, Black female)</p>
Scholarships	Applying for aid to offset costs associated with college	<p>"Um, well I have to find out what I want to...do, so I've been recently thinking about um what I should get, going. And um, I kinda wanna be a psychiatrist but they have to go to school or, like a long time, and I don't want to do that. So I'll probably just go into um do like cosmetology or something and then save up so I can get a bigger degree. And, um until then I kinda wanted to do uh things that would, uh kinda give me scholarships to get to college....and uh, what was the question again?" (Olivia, Black female)</p> <p>"And...I also need to save up to get into college, although my parents will be helping me with that, not to mention hopefully scholarships will come in." (Mason, White male)</p>
Be Prepared	Planning for what you want to do; make sure your're on the right track	<p>"Always study, be prepared. Always be prepared, never um, never slack off. Always be ready for the next thing." (Aiden, Black male)</p> <p>"Um I feel like, if you're doing something in high school then if you wanna be a part of something in college, then you're ready for it." (Chloe, Black female)</p> <p>"...making sure that I look right for the interview, have good manners and vocabulary. Yeah..." (Isabelle, Black female)</p> <p>"And sele...select the right subject to help me wit video game and shoe." (Carter, Black male)</p>

APPENDIX H (continued)

Steps to Fulfill Goals		
Themes	Definition	Quotes (Selected Examples)
Save Money	Getting a job to help with financial cost	"K. Um, I want to get a job cause I need to like pay for college, at least a little bit...." (Olivia, Black female) "...um have a job, of course, to pay for the college..." (Emily, White female) "...And...I also need to save up to get into college..." (Mason, White male) "Um, making enough money to, like buy a studio and stuff..." (Jackson, White male)
Get Good Grades	Maintaining grades to have a better transcript	"Okay, well I...you would definitely need to finish high school and I'm an A student so I...definitely try to get all As. Cause that's me, and ummm..." (Penelope, White female) "Well, first I have to have good grades, you know..." (Sophia, Black female) "Um, fairly good grades..." (Chloe, Black female) "Well having good grades." (Ava, Black female)
Extracurricular Activities	Engaging in activities that will help boost college application	"...And also I heard about this thing, um, at WATC, you can like take off of your tuition if you pay a \$100.00 and you play it like allll summer...um, I would have to start doing a lot of extra stuff right after school, like extra activities." (Olivia, Black female) "...and then like, um activities...Um like participating in sports or clubs." (Chloe, Black female) "Um, probably for like experience and my resume, probably um extra activities that I used during that time period or like um things that would help me get better..." (Isabelle, Black female) "And doing well in other things [indistinguishable] like sports and exploratories." (Ava, Black female)
Upper-Level Classes	Taking classes that are similar in nature to college or will help prepare for college	"...I am going to take AP as soon as possible..." (Olivia, Black female) "Um, I will need to take honor classes, I know that's one of the things...um graduate with some honors..." (Emily, White female) "There, there's these classes I can take, like there's this thing called Bio Med and it's at Southeast or something like that, that's kinda something that I really wanna be in to help me succeed and go into college and stuff." (Lily, White female)