A NARRATIVE INQUIRY: EIGHT URBAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS SHARE ABOUT THEIR LIVES AND EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOL

A Dissertation by

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I dedicate my work and endeavors, first, and foremost to my husband, Fred, and my children, Mandy, Maryann, and Mark. They have patiently stood by me and supported me throughout this process and especially in this last hour of writing and more writing. Second, I dedicate my work in loving memory of my father, Bill Fox, who championed the cause of the underrepresented in society and was always far ahead of his time; and my grandfather, Perry Eash, who taught our family to respect and have compassion for all people.

Third, I dedicate my work to my mother, Shirley Eash Fox, who has always encouraged her children and grandchildren to read, read, and read, and to go to college.

Fourth, I dedicate my work in memory of Scott Holt, an inspiring and dedicated teacher who was willing to scale mountains to help his students learn and achieve.

Fifth, I dedicate my work in remembrance of my dear friend, David Wessling, an impassioned educator and servant leader who encouraged and inspired me.

Sixth, I dedicate my work in honor of inspirational leader and teacher, Riccardo Harris and his family, who lost their beloved child and family member, Robert Ridge, to a senseless act of violence January 5, 2008.

Finally, I dedicate my work to the students who poured their hearts out to me and to each other in the process of this study. Their wisdom, humor, and insight delighted me as well as changed my life.

To all of you, I am forever grateful for the ways you have taught and inspired me.
“The secret message communicated to most young people today by the society around them is that they are not needed, that the society will run itself quite nicely until they - at some distant point in the future - will take over the reigns. Yet the fact is that the society is not running itself nicely... because the rest of us need all the energy, brains, imagination and talent that young people can bring to bear down on our difficulties. For society to attempt to solve its desperate problems without the full participation of even very young people is imbecile.” Alvin Toffler

“People on the outside who don’t know about schools, don’t talk to students, and may not even have been in a school since they went to school make all of these judgments about our lives. I think students are blamed for things they have had no control of in their lives. I would like to tell everyone to stop stereotyping. Look deeper and be willing to listen. This goes for people in and outside of this school.” Jamal

“If schools really wanted to get students motivated and to energize them, they should find out what the student body likes and then corporate it into whatever teachers are teaching, which I know for the most part, schools haven’t even tried to do.” Kevin

“We must view young people not as bottles to be filled, but candles to be lit.”
Robert Schaffer
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focused on what eight urban high school students from varying backgrounds had to say about their lives and experiences in school. Discussions with the students involved multifarious topics such as racism, stereotypes, and discrimination and influences in and outside of school that encourage or hinder their education. The theoretical perspectives of critical theory, critical pedagogy, and critical multiculturalism and the narrative inquiry approach to research provided the foundation for this study. Individual narratives and narratives of the student group discussions are shared. The students provided insightful assessments of their schooling experiences and reported they desire greater forums for them to discuss cultures, race, and other issues important to their lives for purposes of influencing much needed change.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

The cultural landscape of the United States has consisted of diverse groups of people since its inception; however, the rapidly growing population in this country of people from varying backgrounds and ethnicities today is unprecedented (Camarota, 2004; Contreras, 2002; Nieto, 2004). Currently, the rate of students with diverse social, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds in schools is increasing many times the rate of students who comprise the majority White population (Population Reference Bureau, 2006). The Population Reference Bureau projected by 2035 young people of varying ethnicities will make up more than half of the population less than 18 years of age. Demographic data across the country indicate significant increases in children identified as racial and ethnic minorities, English language learners, and students of poverty (Camarota, 2004; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Contreras, 2002; Larson & Ovando, 2001). Given the rapidly changing demographics and social contexts in the United States, responding to the needs of all students regardless of their background is one of the major challenges facing public schools today (Banks, 1997; Contreras, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2002; Shields, 2004).

For several decades, educators recognize that the backgrounds of students are important factors influencing their academic success (Korn & Bursztyn, 2002). One longstanding concern is that despite decades of reform, many students of varying ethnicities, underrepresented backgrounds, and poverty are performing at significantly lower academic levels than their White, wealthier, and privileged peers (Cotton, 2001; Shields, 2004). For example, students of varying ethnicities and poverty are more likely
to be over identified as students requiring special education and to receive a lower tracked curriculum and more discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Nieto, 2004). These challenges are especially great for urban schools in which students of poverty and not of the dominant, White middle class often comprise the majority population (Books, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Sleeter & Grant, 2003). Also, differentials in educational opportunities and outcomes persist not only for students of varying ethnicities and of poverty, but also for other students not of the mainstream such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual students (Macgillivray, 2000) and students with disabilities (Frieden, 2004). Although numerous students from diverse backgrounds do achieve at higher levels, too many students are dropping out of school, leaving without needed skills for employment, higher education, or technical schools (Cotton, 2001), resulting in a lack of preparation for successful transitions from high school to adult life.

Pertinent to this research is that although students have the most to gain or to lose from their educational experiences, their voices are infrequently included in the discussions or decisions made in schools about reform efforts and policies that greatly influence their lives (Cook-Sather, 2002; Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Nieto, 1999b). Recognizing that student perspectives are important to schools (Fine, 1987; Giroux, 1999; Hamovitch, 1996; Nieto, 2004; Otoya-Knapp, 2004; Shor, 1992), this study focused on what eight urban high school students from a variety of backgrounds had to say about urban teens’ lives and experiences in school. The eight students self identified as one Hispanic bisexual male, 17 years of age; one White male, 17 years of age; one White female with a physical disability, 16 years of age; two Black males, 15 years of age; one Vietnamese female, 15 years of age, one Korean male, 15 years of age; and one
Black female, 14 years of age. This study focused on the participants’ perspectives about influences in and outside school that support or hinder students’ academic performance in school. The belief driving this research is that student voices are essential to educational reform efforts and that individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds bring cultural richness and knowledge to schools and communities that must not be ignored (Flecha, 1999; Otoya-Knapp, 2004).

For clarification, key terms pertaining to this study are defined. Urban schools refer to schools located in metropolitan areas of at least 50,000 people (U. S. Census Bureau, 2006). The terms diversity, diverse, and diverse backgrounds are utilized inclusively and refer to a range of characteristics such as race, ethnicity, social class, gender, disability, language, and sexual orientation. Culture is defined inclusively as well, also taking into account these distinctions. Given this perspective, culture encompasses far more than the traditional view, which limits its parameters to race and ethnicity. Additionally, rather than characterizing culture as monolithic or static, culture is depicted as heterogeneous and dynamic, with many individuals negotiating multiple cultures rather than one (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003). Further, culture does “not exist in a vacuum, but is situated in particular historical, social, political, and economic conditions” (Nieto, 2004, p. 11); and culture involves a constantly changing process shared by a group of people bound together by patterns of behavior, beliefs, “values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview” (p. 55). Ethnicity refers to “shared history, ancestry, geography, language, and physical characteristics” (Lindsey, et al., p.15). Finally, race, racial groups, and racial differences refer to terms socially constructed by larger society (not biologically determined), terms serving to categorize
people according to physical features and most often in negative ways (Nieto, 2004; Lindsey et al., 2003).

A clear distinction needs to be made between racial prejudices that all races have towards each other and institutional racism, which involves systematic inequalities supported through historical, political, societal, educational, and economical hierarchies throughout society (Clark & O'Donnell, 1999). Frequently, racism is narrowly defined as individual prejudices and discrimination towards groups of people rather than as a systematic problem, deeply embedded in our society and institutional practices. Nieto (2004) discussed individual and institutional racism as mutually sustaining, and she quoted Weinberg who provided these descriptors: the “silence of institutional racism” and the “ruckus of individual racism” (p. 39). While behaviors of individual prejudice and discrimination are harmful and painful, far greater damage occurs to people due to systematic inequities in institutions such as housing, health care, education, and the criminal justice system (Nieto, 2002). Finally, while racism is directed at racial differences, discrimination refers to a more general term that includes individual and institutional belief systems focused against individuals and groups based on their ethnic group, social class, sexual orientation, disability, language, gender, and other differences.

This section provided a brief introduction to the study, including definitions of a few terms significant to the research. To further describe this study, the background, the nature of the research problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the significance of the study are included in the next sections. Additionally, an overview of the organization of this dissertation is described.
Background of the Study

The background, providing supporting evidence of the research problem, introduces and highlights various societal challenges that influence urban high school students’ educational experiences in a complex and rapidly changing society. Societal tendencies of focusing on students as the problem rather than analyzing structures in society and schools that contribute to the issues are discussed. Further discussions entail societal assumptions of schools as equitable institutions for all students; the influences of standardized assessments on students’ experiences; the potential for cultural clashes in schools; and the exclusion of student voices in school reform. These factors are critical to the examination of some societal and school practices that influence the lives of and present challenges for urban students of diverse backgrounds.

Students are Blamed

Frequently, when the question arises as to why some students are able to benefit from educational settings and some do not, the tendency is to focus on individual characteristics and to hold students solely responsible (Banks, 2004; Giroux, 2003b; Howard, 2006; Maira & Soep, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2005). Maira and Soep reported that students are typically classified into dichotomous categories such as “resilience and delinquency, promise and risk, special talent and mediocrity” (p. 247), and, as a result, students labeled delinquent, at risk, and mediocre are blamed for their problems, while the underlying and larger societal crises such as inequitable social, racial, economic, historical, and political influences on students’ life trajectories are ignored. Maira and Soep (2004) indicated it is easier to place the problems young people face squarely on the
shoulders of the youths themselves and their families rather than to examine inequitable power structures in the larger society contributing to the challenges in students’ lives.

This study posits that while students are influenced by and play a role in social conditions and differences in academic outcomes, they and their families are not to blame for them (Maira & Soep, 2004). Also related to this study is that public schools are embedded in and influenced by the power structures of the larger society which heavily influence what goes on in schools (Haymes, 1999; Hursh, 2006; Nieto, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2005). Established power structures involve tightly formed hierarchies according to social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, and culture, serving to benefit some and to exclude others (Hursh, 2006; Korn & Bursztyn, 2002; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Nieto, 2004). In other words, the dominant and most powerful group in society has shaped political, educational, social, and economical structures for their benefit, while excluding the voices and participation of those outside the mainstream (Larson & Ovando, 2001). A commonly held notion, discussed further in the next section, is that schools equal the playing field for all students regardless of their backgrounds and experiences; however, in actuality, societal influences and hierarchies create considerable barriers for many students (Banks, 2004, Books, 2007; Korn & Bursztyn, 2005).

Assumptions of Schools as Equitable Institutions

Traditionally, public schools are viewed by society as fair and equitable institutions that offset differences in students’ lives; however, continued discrepancies in academic opportunities and outcomes provide evidence otherwise (Banks, 2004; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 1999b). Korn and Bursztyn (2002) indicated that assuming schools equal the
playing field for children with diverse experiences is a simplistic and naïve approach. This commonly held assumption is problematic for many reasons. First, schools may not have the resources to counterbalance significant barriers many students and families encounter in the larger society. Banks stated,

Many members of ethnic minorities in Western societies experience multiple forms of social exclusion, that is, low occupational status, high unemployment rates, poor housing, and concentration in areas with poor amenities, substandard infrastructure, and high crime rates. The education system often lacks the means to compensate for such conditions. (p. 30)

Second, many variables inside the school doors further complicate the issues of equitable education for all students (Banks, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Garcia, 1995; Gay, 2000). For example, students may need additional help, yet overcrowded classrooms particularly in urban schools, and overwhelmed and overworked teachers serve as barriers for students to receive the extra assistance they need (Banks, 2004; Kozol, 1991; Shor, 1992). Additionally, well-meaning teachers who typically are majority White and middle class may have unconscious biases against students in their classrooms (Banks; Delpit; Howard, 2006; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Sleeter & Grant, 2005). Teachers and administrators may place culpability on the students and their families for achievement gaps rather than examine practices in classrooms and schools that may serve as barriers to children’s academic performance (Banks; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Gay; Maira & Soep, 2004). Further, students not of the mainstream group may feel isolated from the dominant culture in school, or if they have assimilated to the dominant culture, isolated from their own families and ethnic group (Banks, 2004; Nieto, 2004). Finally, instruction in the
classroom may have minimal connection to the lived experiences of the students (Sleeter & Grant, 2005).

Third, considering the historical and political struggles for an equitable education for all children before and after Brown v. Topeka Board of Education (Supreme Court of the United States, 1954), it becomes evident despite the efforts and good intentions of educators, schools have had an uneven and problematic record of meeting the needs of students who are not of the mainstream, middle class, and privileged group (Korn & Bursztyn, 2002; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Lawrence, 2004; Macgillivray, 2000). Lawrence stated that the gains in the three decades after Brown have been unrealized, as the disparities in the last ten years have broadened considerably rather than narrowed, “creating a dismal picture of what the future holds” (p.1) for many students from diverse backgrounds.

The courts have certainly had a role in the struggle for equal educational opportunities; however, the significant disparities in funding between urban schools with children who are overwhelmingly poor, of varying ethnicities, and learning English, and suburban schools with largely White, wealthier, and privileged children have remained predictable over time (Books, 2005; Gay, 2000; McUsic, 1999). Kozol (1991) noted that historically students in wealthier suburbs and largely White communities tended to have more modernized buildings, updated text books, various choices of extracurricular activities, and highly qualified teachers, while students in poor urban districts faced dilapidated buildings, uncertified teachers, outdated texts, and minimal if any extracurricular activities.
Finally, McUsic (1999) stated, “despite a great deal of rhetoric about the general failure of the public school system, the problem of inadequate schooling is more often not a statewide, but a local, overwhelmingly urban problem” (p. 29). According to McUsic, the problems are ongoing because states are not willing to fund urban schools at a level that would provide the same quality of education in suburban districts. Books (2005) indicated that these inequities continue to persist and currently the state of affairs for urban schools with high numbers of underrepresented students and students of poverty are so subpar that the focus is less on equitable and adequate funding, but for the bare minimum, particularly qualified teachers and textbooks. Haycock (2001) stated,

We take the students who have less to begin with and then systematically give them less in school. In fact, we give these students less of everything that we believe makes a difference. We do this in hundreds of different ways. (p. 8)

In short, overt forms of racism, discrimination, and exclusion may be less evident today in schools; however, societal and school factors impede equitable education opportunities and perpetuate disparities in outcomes for many students. Frequently, schools simply mirror the inequities in society (Giroux & Shannon, 1997; Kozol, 2005; Nieto, 2004; Tatum, 1997). Ongoing struggles for equitable education opportunities for all students regardless of race and other differences and the persistent differentials in outcomes dissipates illusions that schools are equitable places for students from diverse backgrounds (Korn & Bursztyn, 2002; Books, 2007).

Urban students face challenges of inequitable resources for their schools, limiting their access to equitable educational opportunities. Rather than examining policies, practices, and social conditions that contribute to their difficulties, the students are held
students are faulted for not performing at an expected level (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Maira & Soep, 2004). Students who do not perform according to specific standards are identified as low performing (Cotton, 2001). Further exasperating the situation is that frequently a single test score narrowly defines the success or failure of students, which leads to the discussion in the next section (Cambron-McCabe, 2006; Shields, 2004).

*Era of Federal and State Mandated Assessments*

Currently, a focus on the diverse needs of students recedes to the background in an era of federal and state mandated standardized assessments and test-driven curriculum (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; McNeil, 2005). The focus is driven by results of a test score rather than individual needs. Tremendous pressure is placed on students and educators for students to demonstrate competency on designated standards, which is frequently measured by a single, standardized test (Darling-Hammond, 1994; McNeil, 2005; Shields, 2004). Particularly problematic is that the expectations of standards-driven school organizations may be in direct conflict with the needs and expectations of students and their families (Korn & Bursztyn, 2002; Nieto, 1999a, 2004). Additionally, the rigid demands of assessments may be developmentally inappropriate for many students, creating tensions and stress for students, families, and schools (Nieto, 2004).

Given a high concentration of students from varying ethnicities, backgrounds, and poverty, urban schools are most often identified as low performing schools (Cambron-McCabe, 2006). Throughout the U.S., the greatest challenges of standardized tests have been noted in urban schools. Considering the shrinking tax bases as the wealthier have moved to the suburbs; scarce economic and educational resources; overcrowded classrooms; deteriorating facilities; and fewer teachers who are qualified to teach,
meeting the requirements of standards driven assessments becomes particularly problematic for urban schools (Banks, 2004; Bernstein, McNichol, & Lyons, 2006; Books, 2005; Rong & Brown, 2002). Also, urban schools have encountered considerable difficulties balancing declining resources to educate native born in the United States who are of low SES and a rapidly growing population of English language learners who are typically of low SES as well (Contreras, 2002; Gay, 2000, Larson & Ovando, 2001).

The current pressure and singular focus on schools to boost their students’ performance on mandated and standardized tests has unfortunate consequences (Anyon, 1994). Narrowing the focus in education on assessments and test scores discourages educators from acknowledging students’ backgrounds and experiences and the individual interests, strengths, and needs that emanate from them (Kinchenoe, 2005; McNeil, 2005). Elevating the status of student performance on tests negates valuable talents, knowledge, and experiences students bring to their schools that cannot be measured by a test. Due to a focus on psychometrics and test scores, students are categorized as either winners or losers, and consequently, many students from diverse backgrounds are identified as low performing and “slow” and are often placed in lower tracked or special education classes (Nieto, 2004; Books, 2007). In this process, urban students may find themselves alienated from the school environment, stigmatized, angry, and frustrated by being forced to fit molds designated by others (Kohl, 1991; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Sleeter & Grant, 2005). Considering these factors and unparalleled numbers of urban teens dropping out of school, significant concerns arise regarding equitable educational opportunities particularly for students in urban schools (Contreras, 2002; Larson & Ovando; Rong & Brown, 2002).
Potential for Cultural Clashes in Schools

Further complicating the issues of equitable educational opportunities is that while the population of students in schools is rapidly growing increasingly heterogeneous, the population of teachers educating them remains vastly White and middle class (Baker & Digiovanni, 2005; Howard, 2006; Kailin, 1999; Parsons, 2005; Sleeter & Grant, 2005). Cultural differences among educators and students have the potential of creating cultural clashes within schools. Teachers in public schools are most often products of predominately White neighborhoods and universities and may have experienced minimal preparation for the multicultural world they encounter in their classrooms and schools (Howard; Sleeter & Grant). Living in culturally isolated neighborhoods, teachers naturally behave in ways typical of their life experiences, perspectives, assumptions, and worldviews, which most likely differ considerably from the cultural, class, language, and schooling experiences of their students (Howard, 2006; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Sleeter & Grant, 2005). These differences have the potential of creating a “mismatch” or cultural clash between heterogeneous cultures of students and a largely homogeneous culture of teachers in schools (Baker & Digiovanni, 2005; Cohen, 1993; Deschene, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001).

George and Louise Spindler (1994) explained the relationships among students and between students and teachers, their cultures, and the educational environment in this way:

Teachers carry into the classroom their personal cultural background. They perceive students, all of whom are cultural agents, with inevitable prejudice and preconception. Students likewise come to school with personal cultural
backgrounds that influence their perceptions of teachers, other students, and the school itself. Together students and teachers construct, mostly, without being conscious of doing it, an environment. (p. xii)

These constructed educational environments may create considerable disconnect and tension among various groups of students and between students and educators (Cushner et al., 2000; Rakosi-Rosenbloom, 2004). Looking through the lens and limitations of their dominant White and middle class culture, majority White educators may be unaware that the tension in their schools may be influenced by the variety of cultural differences (Howard, 2006).

Gay (2000) noted that the cultural dissonance and discontinuities students experience at school have the potential of perpetuating barriers to academic success. For example, students who do not feel connected to the school and classroom environment are more likely to have behavior and discipline problems and difficulty focusing on academic tasks (Cushner et al., 2000). Additionally, prior knowledge, experiences, and skills students bring to school as well as their comfort level in the school environment contribute significantly to their school experiences. Inconsistencies between what is required in school and what is required in the students’ cultural and home environments are critical. Gay (2000) stated:

Demonstrating knowledge and skills may be constrained as much by structural and procedural inconsistencies as by lack of intellectual ability. Therefore, teachers need to understand different cultural intersections and incompatibilities, minimize the tensions, and bridge the gaps between different cultural systems.

(p.12)
The understanding, knowledge, and skills needed to mediate cultural differences within schools and classrooms present complexities and considerable challenges for educators (Banks, 2004; Cushner et al, 2000). Teachers not only must be cognizant of social and cultural differences which may be creating tensions in their classrooms, but also need to be equipped to help their students to better adapt to the differences among each other. Additionally, teachers need to be aware of their own culture and the biases inherent within it. In short, multicultural classrooms and schools require skills of “cultural mediators,” yet majority White educators, living in segregated neighborhoods, are without a great deal of experience in or knowledge of cross-cultural relationships (Cushner, et al., 2000, p. 96).

The intent here is not to blame educators for lacking knowledge and expertise in coping with these complex matters. The confounding issues of cultural clashes and dissonance are compounded by the larger societal structures and cultural systems that are affecting schools and classrooms (Giroux, 2003; Nieto, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2005). Frequently, educators are overwhelmed and unprepared to accommodate the demographic shifts and tense social relationships in their rapidly and continuously changing multicultural school communities (Leistyna, 2002). Many teachers have minimal experience in cross-cultural understanding and instinctively behave in ways that are congruent with their own culture, racial identity, experiences, and perspectives of the world, which could be incongruent with the cultural influences, lives, and experiences of their students. Howard (2006) reported that too often educators are placed in complex multicultural environments with nominal training and support, and yet are expected to be “culturally competent professionals” (p. 6).
Further, the purpose here is not to promulgate the belief that cultural clashes among students and staff in schools are sole deterrents of positive academic outcomes, as not every student experiencing cultural dissonance has difficulties in school (Cushner et al., 2000). Differentials in academic outcomes and equitable educational opportunities cannot be reduced to one or two variables. The combination of multiple and complex factors influence student academic success (Cushner et al.; Larson & Ovando, 2001). To focus singularly on cultural dissonance and culturally sensitive teachers in school reform efforts without considering societal forces and injustices is to ignore the complex interplay between schools and the entrenched political influences and hierarchies of the larger society (Nieto, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2005).

**Students: Most Affected by Conundrums and Least Consulted**

As mentioned above, many confounding conundrums in the larger society influence schools and the lives of students. These societal challenges contribute significantly to the inequities of educational opportunities and outcomes among various student groups. Those who have the most to gain or to lose from decisions schools make regarding these issues are students themselves (Nieto, 2004). Although students are the most affected by what goes on in schools, reform efforts have historically and currently been derived from adults’ perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2002). Corbett and Wilson (1995) reviewed the literature on school reform and found that student voices were consistently excluded from both moderate and resolute initiatives: Student input was markedly absent from school reform. Nieto (1999a) stated, “Students are the most affected by school policies and practices, but they tend to be the least consulted about them. Consequently, they are ordinarily the silent recipients of schooling” (p. 191). Cook-Sather (2002)
indicated that building and rebuilding schools without consulting the students that schools are designed for does not make sense. She stated,

> As the pace of life accelerates, the population becomes increasingly diverse, and the media through which we teach, learn, and work become more complex, more than ever before, we educators and educational researchers must seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they learn or what they need to learn in preparation for the decades ahead. It is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education. (p. 3)

In response to their findings that students are excluded from the decision making process in school reform, Corbett and Wilson (1995) petitioned school reformers to change the typical axiom of “make a difference for students” to “make a difference with, not for, students” (p. 12). Furthering this idea of “with, not for,” Leistyna (2005) delineates the difference between the notion of individuals with power “granting voice” to people who already have a voice and the willingness to “create dialogical spaces where all lived experiences and worldviews can be heard and addressed. In other words, will teachers allow youths of all walks of life to reveal, analyze, and act upon the worlds they inhabit?” (p. 68).

Student perspectives should not be accepted unabashedly or received in ways that usurp teacher authority (Kincheloe, 2005). Nevertheless, if students are actively involved, and their views, perspectives, and experiences are genuinely considered, reform activities are more likely to be relevant and worthwhile to them (Fielding, 2004).
In short, schools have had a problematic history in reducing the differentials in educational opportunities and outcomes between students whose social, racial, ability, linguistic, and/or sexual orientation differ from their White, more mainstream, and middle class peers (Cotton, 2001; Macgillivray, 2000; Nieto, 2004). One aspect frequently overlooked is that schools are embedded within the power structures of the larger society, power structures that serve to benefit some and to exclude others (Giroux, 2003; Nieto; Sleeter & Grant, 2005). Rather than examining practices and policies in schools and the larger society that impede equitable educational opportunities and outcomes, frequently, students and their families are blamed (Banks, 2004; Giroux, 1999, 2003; Maira & Soep, 2004). Of most importance to this study, student voices and perspectives are frequently excluded from discussions about these complicated issues and from decisions about schools that have tremendous influence on their lives (Cook-Sather, 2002; Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Nieto, 2004; Otoya-Knapp, 2004). Much may be gained from including the rich knowledge and experiences that students bring to education in discussions and decisions about what goes on in schools.

This section highlighted background information significant to the nature of the research problem. The next section describes the research problem.

**Research Problem**

Historical and ongoing discrepancies in equitable opportunities provide contrasting evidence to the traditional view that schools are equal opportunity institutions for all students (Banks, 2004; Korn, 2002; Kozol, 1991; Macgillivray, 2000). Challenges exist in and outside of schools that influence students’ performance in school (Banks, 2004). Of significant consideration is that schools are not neutral institutions and
students’ experiences are heavily influenced by factors in the larger society such as racism, poverty, bias, and discrimination (Anyon, 2006; Giroux, 2003; Nieto, 2004).

Additional variables of concern are that what goes on in classrooms and schools may be significantly disconnected from students’ life experiences (Garcia, 1995; Gay, 2000; Rakosi-Rosenbloom, 2004: Sleeter, 2005). Also, in an era of federal and state mandated assessments that are singularly focused on results on a standardized test, students’ individual needs, perspectives, and experiences are frequently overlooked (Cambron-McCabe, 2006; McNeil, 2005). Standardized assessments are particularly problematic for urban students and schools, as many urban schools are identified as low performing (Rong & Brown, 2002). Furthermore, rather than examining practices of educational and societal systems and structures that may be harmful to student learning and achievement, students and their families are blamed for students’ lack of performance in school (Maira & Soep 2004; Giroux, 1999). Finally, although students are most affected by what goes on in schools and classrooms, their opinions about educational policies and practices are minimally noticed, consulted, or heeded (Cook-Sather, 2002; Corbitt & Wilson, 1995; Nieto, 2004). Conversely, what students have to say about their lives and experiences in school is significant to informing educational practice (Cook-Sather). Educators, policy makers, and the general public have much to gain by critically considering students’ perspectives, experiences, and stories about their lives.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe what eight urban high school students had to say about their experiences in school and factors that encourage or discourage
students’ success in school. Students’ narratives were gathered for purposes of informing education policies and practices from students’ points of view. Students’ stories about their lives and school experiences may provide educators, policy makers, and the general public greater insight regarding students’ perspectives and what schools can do to better educate them.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do eight urban high school students describe their lives and experiences in school?
2. How do eight urban high school students describe influences in the lives of teens they believe support or hinder their performance in school?

This study provided a forum for students’ voices to be heard and valued. The standpoint of the research is that students’ perspectives are rich sources of data to inform educational policy and practice.

**Significance of this Study**

This study is significant because it contributes to needed literature on urban high school students’ in-depth descriptions of their lives and school experiences and their beliefs about influences that encourage or derail high school students’ performance in school. The majority of the education literature is focused on school reform initiatives, academic achievement, and adult perspectives, while this study focused on the views and experiences of students, informing theory and practice from students’ points of view. Additionally, focusing on student perspectives provided a context in which student voices are heard and valued. Further, this study can inform professional development and
teacher and leadership preparation programs about the diverse needs of urban high school students and the influence of educational practices and social conditions on their lives. Finally, this study has significance because few studies have been conducted in which social and educational influences have been examined through the narratives and shared experiences of students.

Organization of this Dissertation

Chapter one of this paper provided an introduction and brief overview of the study and a description of the background information, research problem, purpose, research questions, and significance of the study. Chapter two includes a discussion of the (a) theoretical perspectives and theoretical framework that provide the foundation and lens for the study and (b) common themes found in the review of research and related literature. Chapter three describes the methodology selected for this study. Chapter four involves narratives of the individual interviews, and chapter five involves narratives of the group discussions with students. Finally, chapter six provides conclusions and implications drawn from the findings and my personal reflections as the researcher and practitioner.
Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical perspectives and framework guiding this study. This discussion is followed by descriptions of common themes found in the literature review that are related to the research problem.

Theoretical Framework

Critical social theory provides the overarching theoretical perspective and foundation for this research. Critical social theory encompasses the theoretical perspectives of critical pedagogy and critical multiculturalism, which were intertwined with critical social theory to form the theoretical framework of this study. These three overlapping theoretical perspectives of critical social theory, critical pedagogy, and critical multiculturalism framed the study and provided a lens for deeper awareness and critique of the issues involved. For purposes of this study, the prominent focus of the theoretical framework was including multiple perspectives in critical conversations, particularly student voices previously excluded from decision-making processes in schools.

The first part of this section describes each of the three theoretical perspectives separately. A plethora of complex and detailed work has been written about the critical theory tradition from a variety of disciplines (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Giroux, 2003a). This account is intended to be a brief overview of the characteristics of the three theoretical perspectives that form the theoretical framework for this study. The discussion of critical social theory, critical pedagogy, and critical multiculturalism is followed by a summary of how these theories were applied to this research.
Critical Social Theory

Critical social theory is the overarching theoretical perspective for this study. Critical social theory typically refers to the theoretical traditions originating from the Frankfort School of Critical Theory formed by a group of scholars, Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, who were associated with the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfort, Germany (Crotty, 2003; Kincheloe, 2005). According to Crotty, these scholars’ varying philosophies emanated from the seminal works of German philosophers, Marx, Kant, Hegel, and Weber. The Frankfort scholars set the stage for a critical social theory to represent heterogeneous ideas and not a formula, blueprint, or singular approach as to how the world is interpreted (Crotty; Darder et al., 2003; Giroux, 1999; Kincheloe). Further, the critical tradition was designed to consistently be in a state of flux, evolving and changing, depending on shifting societal contexts. Kincheloe states: “In this context, critical theorists become detectives of new theoretical insights, perpetually searching for new and interconnected ways of understanding power and oppression and how they shape everyday life and human experience” (p. 49).

Despite the ever-evolving and varied nature of critical theory, the Frankfort scholars identified values central to their theoretical beliefs (Crotty, 2003; Giroux, 2003a; Kincheloe, 2005; Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1999). The Frankfort theorists’ established a critical tradition that serves to connect with and have empathy for human suffering and looks for ways to eradicate it (Crotty, 2003; Kincheloe, 2005). Also, the Frankfort theorists acknowledged that traditional theory merely reflected and described a situation, while the critical tradition sought social justice and to change the situation
(Giroux, 2003a). In other words, the focus of critical social theory is not simply to identify problems, but to seek ways to transform them by challenging the status quo and conventional social structures (Crotty, 2003). The commitments of the critical theorists were buttressed by the belief that awareness is power. By identifying social forces and their effects on human life, efforts may be aimed at dismantling them (Anyon, 2006).

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy emerged primarily from the influence of the impassioned work of Brazilian critical educator Paulo Freire (Darder et al, 2003; Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2005). Critical pedagogy involves a vision of transforming oppressive relationships of power, constructing and reconstructing traditional arrangements of social institutions rather than perpetuating and maintaining them (DuBois, 1973; Greene, 2003; Kincheloe, 2005). Critical pedagogy seeks to energize teachers and vitalize students to make a difference and to push education to new levels of reform (Kincheloe, 2005). Believing schools can be oppressive places for many students by the silencing of their voices and experiences, critical pedagogy encourages students and educators to analyze strategies and practices in schools, rethinking what and why (Freire, 1970). Rather than considering schools as neutral and equitable institutions that serve all students, critical educators do their work passionately so that all children are empowered and not just the privileged few (Kincheloe).

Critical pedagogy aligns its philosophies with John Dewey and Paulo Freire’s premises that curriculum should be based on students’ history, experiences, and culture and that learning is a reciprocal process of learning for teachers and students (Peterson, 2003). The intent is not to usurp teachers’ authority, but for teachers to use their authority
to empower and to support their students (Kincheloe, 2005). Leistyna (2002) eloquently describes critical pedagogy this way:

It is not only what teachers teach that is important but also how they teach. Educators can have very progressive content but an authoritarian style of interaction that excludes the perspectives of students. Regardless of intention, this style represents a pedagogy of imposition rather than exposition. By including all voices in the classroom, and having theory work through students, rather than on them, teachers move away from the traditional relational restraints—that is, the limits of the relation of knowledge imparter to passive recipients. Real dialogue, which demands critical reflection, debate, and negotiation, affords the necessary conditions for everyone, especially students, to act as knowers, learners, and teachers, and to reach beyond their own cultural boundaries. It is extremely important for teachers to also participate as learners if they hope to truly discover who their students are, what they need, and how best to accommodate or demystify those needs. (p. 27)

Critical pedagogy involves a problem-solving, social action approach that raises awareness of hegemony and social injustice. Diverse voices that previously have been excluded from conversations about the issues at hand are emphasized (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2005). Critical pedagogy seeks to connect theory to practice, including multiple perspectives of diverse people as rich data sources to inform change and educational reform (Kincheloe, 2005). Further, critical pedagogy views researchers and participants as one and the same: co-researchers and co-producers in the construction of knowledge, sharing reciprocal roles in teaching and learning (Flecha, 1999).
Critical Multiculturalism

The body of literature in the U.S. on critical multiculturalism has been heavily influenced by early African American scholars such as George Washington Williams, W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and Anna Julia Cooper (Banks, 1996; Garcia, 1995; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; McGee-Banks, 1996). These early African American scholars were social activists and challenged the dominant group hegemony, recognizing that racism is not just the African American problem, but also limits the potential of the oppressor and the oppressed (McGee-Banks). The belief was that the African American struggle represented the universality of human existence and issues of social justice were what tie all people together. Anna J. Cooper (1892/1988) stated, “The cause of freedom is not the cause of a race or a sect, a party or a class. . . it is the cause of human kind, the very birthright of humanity” (p. 120). The traditions and legacy of early African American scholarship to confront societal issues such as racism and social justice have provided the foundation and focus for contemporary critical multiculturalism in building a more just and inclusive society (McGee-Banks, 1996).

The view of critical multiculturalism is that in order for the North American experience to be fully understood, it needs to be viewed from multiple perspectives (Banks, 1996; McGee-Banks, 1996; Nieto, 2004). According to McGee-Banks, “perspective-taking” (p. 51) is central to multiculturalism. For example, the stories typically shared in textbooks of U.S. history of the Westward Movement to North America have been told from the European American perspective and excluded the stories of Native Americans already residing in the West (McGee-Banks). The European American perspective has been portrayed as the singular story of U.S. history; however,
through perspective-taking of multiple and diverse stories, this limited view of history has been challenged. Perspective-taking disputes the notion that knowledge is objective and exposes others to the idea that knowledge is socially constructed (Frank, 2000; McGee-Banks, 1996). Through dialogue and taking the perspective of another, knowledge is reconstructed and an important step is taken in “constructive social change” (Frank, p. 94).

Critical multiculturalism views perspective-taking as imperative in shaping what goes on in schools. Without diverse views included in the discourse in schools, the dominant mores of the larger society are maintained within the school doors, while the values and views of others who are not in the mainstream are excluded (Leistyna, 2002). Without discourse, schools reflect the common culture of society that consists of mores, values, histories, traditions, and ethics that have not been negotiated by multiple groups and perspectives (Leistyna, 1999, 2002). In this context, schools are viewed as equalizing institutions to ‘fix’ societal problems and assimilate cultural differences, ignoring the larger issues in society such as inequities, exclusion, discrimination, and racism (Larson & Ovando, 2001).

Another central focus of critical multiculturalism is that without a critical perspective, multicultural education can be superficial in approach (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Leistyna, 2002; May, 1999; Nieto, 1999a; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). Although changes in pedagogy and affirming students’ diversity may be helpful, by themselves, these may not influence the changes that are needed. The critical multicultural perspective acknowledges that schools are sociopolitical institutions, heavily shaped by historical, political, and power structures within society. Power
structures that perpetuate inequalities and social stratification according to race, gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and other differences present significant challenges to student learning (Giroux, 2003a; Kincheloe & Steinberg; Nieto, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2005). Critical multiculturalism does not downplay factors in and outside schools that affect student learning such as poorly funded schools, bias, discrimination, racism, violence, homelessness, unemployment, poverty, and increasing disparities between the rich and the poor. According to Nieto (1999a), critical multiculturalism takes the following stance:

Social justice cannot single-handedly be achieved even by caring, progressive teachers or by schools committed to multicultural education. What is needed, then, is committed and purposeful political activity, both within the classroom and outside of it, to ensure that the stated ideals of education in a democratic society are realized. (p. 210)

Finally, critical multiculturalism does not view U.S. history and contemporary society with uncomplicated memories or as a common culture, but as a society with a conflicting history and a landscape of discord and pluralism (Leistyna, 2002). Given this view, participatory democracy is seen as the unifying factor in the U.S., a democracy that embraces diverse and multiple perspectives and shared decision-making power. Critical multiculturalism envisions a participatory and inclusive democracy that flourishes on perspective-taking, acknowledging and incorporating diverse and multiple points of view (Kincheloe, 1997; May, 1999).
*Common Threads and the Theoretical Framework*

Descriptions of the theoretical perspectives and framework of critical social theory, critical pedagogy, and critical multiculturalism were reviewed in this section. The following common threads drawn from the overlapping theoretical perspectives were used to interpret student narratives about their lives and experiences in school. First, the most significant focus of the theoretical framework in this study was connecting empathetically to human lives. In the process of conducting this research, the humanity and experiences of each student were embraced; their stories and varying perspectives were heard and valued. Their knowledge, perspectives, and experiences were held in high regard. Second, given the lens of the theoretical framework, the student participants and researcher were considered co-researchers, as one and the same. Student participants and I shared reciprocal roles in constructing and reconstructing knowledge and in the interpretation of what was shared. Additionally, the students and I shared reciprocal roles in deciding what story to tell and how to tell it. Further, the students influenced the direction of the study by determining who should be invited to the study and how the group discussions should be facilitated. In this study, I became the student of the students. The students were considered the experts of their lives and school experiences. Students were encouraged to share their opinions and to examine influences in their lives that affect urban students’ performance in school.

This section provided a description of the theoretical framework and its application to this research. The next section includes a synthesis of the related literature regarding key issues in the larger society that influence the lives of students in urban
schools. A section of prior research on student perspectives about their experiences in school is also included.

Themes in the Literature

In reviewing the literature with a critical perspective, a common theme reflected a premise previously shared in this dissertation: Schools are not neutral institutions, but mirror the social structures and inequities of society at large (Farkas, 2003; Sleeter & Grant, 2005). The literature revealed key factors in societal structures that affect urban high school students’ experiences in schools. First, poverty is highly stratified by race, and as the disparity becomes greater between the (typically White) rich and the poor, the more neighborhoods have become segregated (Delpit, 1995; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Kozol, 2005; Krugman, 2005). Consequently, those with wealth and power are becoming more and more disconnected from the realities of people who are different than they are and from recognizing the importance of supporting public schools and services (Berstein, McNichol, & Lyons, 2006). Second, isolated from diverse groups of people, the dominant culture perceives their values, mores, and traditions as the ‘right’ way to live (Larson & Ovando, 2001). As a result, schools reflect the common culture of a society that consists of norms that have not been negotiated by multiple groups and perspectives (Leistyna, 2002). Students are seldom included in conversations about these issues or practices and policies in their schools (Nieto, 2004). Finally, prior research of student perspectives indicates that students are perceptive observers of their worlds (Books, 2007; Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Davidson, 1999; Otoya-Knapp, 2004; Wilson & Corbett, 2001), giving them much to say about their lives and experiences in school and how schools can better educate them. Given that the people with the most diverse
backgrounds in schools are students, much can be gained from their perspectives and the stories they have to tell (Cook-Sather, 2002; Nieto, 2004).

The literature review further discusses the issues mentioned above and is divided by the following themes:

1. Whites and underrepresented people of varying ethnicities are growing further apart economically and spatially.
2. Schools and the lives of students are heavily influenced by contexts of society.
3. The belief in meritocracy is deeply entrenched.
4. The research on student voices indicates students have much to say about their experiences in school.

The purpose of discussing these themes at greater length in the literature review is to provide further information about fundamental societal issues that influence students’ lives and experiences in school.

_Whites and Underrepresented People Growing Further Apart_

Neighborhoods in the U.S. are becoming more racially segregated (Kozol, 2005; Delpit, 1995; Kincheloe, 1997). The most significant factor facilitating the growth of segregated neighborhoods is that class and race are intertwined. Poverty in the U.S. is highly stratified by race (Larson & Ovando, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). In 2004, the poverty rate was 24.7% for African Americans, 23.2% for Native Americans and Alaska natives, 21.9% for Latinos, 9.8% for Asians, and 8.6% for Whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

Another trend in U.S. society contributing to segregation is the increasing disparities in income (Bernstein et al., 2006; Krugman, 2005). Bernstein et al. reported
that by the early 2000s, the average income of the wealthiest fifth of families was 12 times the average income of the lowest fifth of families. Significant inequalities in income have considerable ramifications for society. As the wealthiest and typically White families have moved further and further away from cities to suburbs, their exposure to and awareness of the needs of the poorest families have diminished. Additionally, since school systems depend on local funding, disparities in resources between suburban and urban schools become significant and poorer children in urban schools do not receive the quality of education equal to their wealthier peers (Bernstein et al.; Books, 2005). Further, wealthier families can send their children to private schools, becoming incognizant of the need to support public schools. As a result, those with the most wealth and power to provide support for social services such as public schools have become more and more disconnected from the realities of people who struggle with poverty, fewer resources, and discrimination (Bernstein, et al., 2006).

For many reasons, segregated neighborhoods in which people of differing backgrounds live in isolation from one another is seriously problematic. Larson and Ovando (2001) discussed that when people live in separate communities, values and patterns of behavior are established which differ from one another. Isolation influences people, albeit, unconsciously, to believe their constructed values and social norms are superior to others; therefore, others are judged according to what are perceived as standards of acceptable behavior (Tatum, 1997). When individuals or groups of people are perceived as behaving in ways that do not match the accepted norms, the behaviors are assumed as unnatural or simply wrong (Larson & Ovando). One of the consequences of this dilemma for urban students in public schools is that if they do not behave or
perform according to the accepted standards, they are often categorized and labeled as deficient (Nieto, 2004).

Further, the dominant mores of the larger society are maintained within school doors and classrooms, reflecting a common culture of society which consists of norms that have not been negotiated by multiple groups and perspectives (Nieto, 2004; Pang, 2001). In this context, schools are viewed as equalizing institutions, ignoring the larger issues in society such as inequities and imbalance of power (Larson & Ovando, 2001).

**Schools Heavily Influenced by Contexts of Society**

The historical and ongoing dilemmas of inequity and imbalance of power in the larger society has far reaching impact on public schools. Public schools are deeply entangled and enmeshed in the historical, political, social, and cultural contexts of society (Lomack, 2004; Nieto, 2004). Schools in the U.S. are heavily influenced by and sustained within the web of the nation’s history. A component of this historical web is that texts and curriculum in schools have virtually left out the voices of women and people of low SES and of varying ethnicities in the telling of the history (Larson & Ovando, 2001). The accounts of the past in textbooks in the U.S. typically gloss over the history of slavery, inequity, and exclusion. Educational textbooks in public schools have minimized the nation’s tragic flaws, portraying White culture in the U.S. in a “universally good light” (Larson & Ovando, p. 110). A narrow depiction of White civilization is old news to those individuals whose voices have been silenced and stories have not been told, but for those who are dominant in society, the one-sided view of history so commonly told in this country is often accepted as truth. Unfortunately, schools do not educate about how the assimilation practices in the inception of this country “created deeply divided
communities along cultural, racial, class, and linguistic lines” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 9) which remain problematic to this day (Banks, 1997).

**Entrenched Belief: Meritocracy**

A singular approach to history and its influence on current ways of behaving leads to many deeply entrenched beliefs that create barriers to much needed changes in society (Goodman, 2001). For example, meritocracy is a deeply held American belief based on the assumption that everyone has equal opportunity and if they work hard and take advantage of their educational opportunities, they can succeed (Bigler, 1999). Meritocracy does not take into account the multiple historic and current barriers experienced by those not in the dominant, middle class group such as fewer social and economic resources, less knowledge of mainstream mores, and blatant and subtle forms of discrimination and exclusion (Goodman, 2001).

Meritocracy has far reaching influences on belief systems in educational institutions (McLaren, 1998). For example, not accounting for sociopolitical, economic, and cultural factors of the larger society, educators may believe schools provide equal educational opportunities and access for all students. Consequently, the logic follows that the academic disparities stem from the students’ deficiencies (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Nieto, 2004). While many variables are involved concerning why some students benefit from their schooling and others do not, historical and entrenched prejudicial and exclusionary traditions of the larger society, which result in similar educational practices in schools, are momentous contributors to the problems in education (Larson & Ovando, 2001; Nieto).
**Including Student Voices: What the Research Says**

In terms of young people and including their voices, researchers have reported that students have much to say about their lives and the educational policies and practices that affect them (Books, 2007; Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Fine, 1987; Jones & Yonezawa, 2002; Kohl, 1991; Nieto, 1999a, 1999b, 2004; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991, 1992; Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994; Poplin & Weeres, 1992). Wilson and Corbett discovered that “good teachers mattered” (p. 118) a great deal to students, and Nieto (1999a) reported that students had much to say about the importance of caring teachers who have high expectations. Similarly, Poplin and Weeres (1992) indicated that students repeatedly emphasized the importance of having caring adults in schools. Additionally, Jones and Yonezawa (2002) found that students valued having positive relationships with teachers who were strict, fair, and reasonable and had high expectations for them.

Lee (1999) investigated the perspectives of low-achieving students and noted that “challenging curriculum and high expectations, interactive learning, and closer relationships” (p. 214) were significant to the students in the study. In a study conducted by Phelan, Davidson, and Cao (1991), high school students from ethnically and academically diverse backgrounds reported they were more likely to thrive when teachers were well acquainted with them, demonstrated care about their needs and their lives, and encouraged sharing of ideas and learning cooperatively in the classroom. Further, Phelan, Yu, and Davidson (1994), found that if students felt support and empathy from their teachers for their difficulties, they expressed more confidence in their ability to learn and in their school experiences.
In a qualitative study conducted by Poplin and Weeres (1992), students from varying ethnicities and cultures reported the following: (a) students bring cultural background and knowledge to school that is frequently ignored; (b) students want more choices available to them in the classroom; and (c) students are bored at school because they view the material presented to them as irrelevant to and disconnected from their lives. A significant conclusion Poplin and Weeres derived from their research was that the more standardized the curriculum in schools, the more disengaged and bored students became. Additionally, the study indicated that the more remedial or lower level the students’ curriculum, the more students described their class work as routine and boring. Further, students reported the more they were encouraged to think for themselves and were allowed to talk with their peers in the learning process, the more they enjoyed the coursework.

Davidson (1999) investigated high school students’ views about negotiating social differences and teacher practices that encouraged them to engage in school. Data gathered from interviews with 49 high school students of varying backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities indicated that if teachers provided personal attention, demonstrated respect for and confidence in students who are of diverse cultures, and encouraged student’s voice and expression, students were more likely to engage in the classroom. Davidson also found that these students strongly disliked lectures and seatwork and preferred curriculum connected to their every day lives. The students in Davidson’s study reported that students respected teachers who had authority, yet maintained friendly relationships; however, obvious misuse of authority caused them to withdraw from activities in the classroom. Davidson reported,
Students are especially critical of disciplinary policies that convey disrespect for their capabilities as young adolescents and communicate that teachers will not permit student input. Blatant manifestations of control negatively affect students’ motivation, sense of efficacy, and willingness to cross social borders. (p. 348)

The students in this study also indicated that if their teachers encouraged interactions and communication in the classroom, promoting student voices and modeling acceptance of multiple perspectives in the classroom, tension due to social differences among students and between students and teachers was minimized, which also helped students to stay engaged. Finally, students in this study preferred democratic classrooms in which student voice and acceptance of multiple perspectives were encouraged. The students also expressed affinity for being actively engaged in the learning process and participating in a curriculum that allowed them to speak of their own lives.

Over a two year period, Phelan et al. (1991) interviewed 55 ethnically and academically diverse adolescents in four urban, desegregated high schools in California regarding pressures they encountered in their different worlds of home, school, and peer relationships. Phelan et al. (1991) and Phelan et al. (1994) examined the students’ responses to questions about how interactions and transitions among these worlds affected their engagement in school. The term ‘world’ was defined in these studies to mean “cultural knowledge and behavior found within the boundaries of students’ families, peer groups, and schools; we presume that each world contains values and beliefs, expectations, actions, and emotional responses familiar to insiders” (Phelan et al., 1991, p. 225). Researchers referred to transitions among the worlds of family, school, and peers as ‘border crossings’ (Phelan et al., 1991; Phelan et al., 1994). Although, the
researchers found considerable variation among student responses about border crossings and school engagement, the following four distinct category types emerged (Phelan et al., 1991, p. 228).

I. Congruent worlds/smooth transitions

II. Different worlds/boundary crossings managed

III. Different worlds/boundary crossings hazardous

IV. Borders impenetrable /boundary crossings insurmountable

Students in the Category Type I (smooth transitions), generally White and middle to upper middle class and high achieving students with few minorities, described considerable congruence between their worlds and generally smooth transitions as they moved among them (Phelan et al., 1991; Phelan et al., 1994). Typically, the values, behaviors, and beliefs were similar among school, family, and friends. Students in this category typically demonstrated value systems of hard work, upward mobility, and academic achievement that fit well into the school environment. Most often students in this category had minimal knowledge about students different from themselves, limiting their views of individuals from diverse backgrounds (Phelan et al., 1991).

The students within Type I indicated that the pressure to perform, excessive competition among their peers, and undue anxiety about their future was so great that the stress sometimes significantly interfered with their concentration and sense of well-being. These students expressed heightened concerns about complying with the teachers’ requests and receiving the grades they needed to achieve, and appeared minimally interested in learning for the sake of learning.
Students in the Type II (managed transitions) reported differences relating to culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, and language in their home, peer, and school worlds, but found ways to adapt and to manage crossing borders (Phelan et al., 1991; Phelan et al., 1994). Generally, Type II included high achieving minority students. These students reported similar concerns as those students in Type I; however, an additional stress was incurred by being one of the few minorities in their higher-tracked classes. Students expressed that isolation from their minority peers created a sense of aloneness and lack of belonging. Although students in this category found strategies to navigate their multiple worlds of home, school, and peers, sometimes these adjustments came at a great cost. For example, by fitting in at school, students felt they needed to devalue critical features of their home and community culture, hiding parts of their identity and experience (Phelan et al., 1991; Phelan et al., 1994). Differences among school, family, and peers were frequently a predominant theme for these students; however, they found ways to cope with the differences.

Category Type III (transitions hazardous) of the Phelan et al., (1991) study represented students who described the differences among their home, school, and peers as significant and distinct, but had not yet learned, mastered, or wanted to learn all of the strategies needed to negotiate the differing expectations of each world. Phelan et al., (1991) reported friction among worlds as common for these students. For example, students may have experienced significant dissonance regarding conflicting cultures and values between their peers and their parents; between their peers; between family and school; and between family, school, and their peers. The research indicated that often the students in Type III were able to do well in some situations and classrooms and
demonstrated difficulties in others. Many of these students performed better in classes with teachers who demonstrated empathy and care, emphasized group work over individual and independent work, and supported classroom climates more reflective of their home and community cultures (Phelan et al., 1991; Phelan et al., 1994).

Students who demonstrated tendencies and characteristics of Type III appeared to worry the most about their ability to comprehend the material and their teacher’s instruction (Phelan et al., 1994). Reasons for comprehension difficulties were multifarious, such as difficulties with the English language, low level skills, lack of individualized help from the teacher, and a disconnect between the curriculum and the student’s every day life outside of school. According to Phelan et al. (1994), for students in Type III, classroom climate and understanding and care from their teachers can make the difference between students choosing to drop out or to remain in school.

In the final and fourth category (transitions impenetrable), students who expressed the most dissonance between their worlds perceived the required transitions as overwhelming and nearly impossible to penetrate. Phelan et al. (1991) described category Type IV this way:

For some students, the values, beliefs, and expectations are so discordant across worlds that boundary crossing is resisted or impossible. When border crossing is attempted, it is frequently so painful that, over time, these students develop reasons and rationales to protect themselves against further distress. In such cases, boundaries are viewed as insurmountable, and students, actively or passively, resist attempts to embrace other worlds. (p. 240)
Rather than transitioning from one world to another, “these students remain constrained by boundaries they perceive as rigid and impenetrable” (p. 241). Some students in Type IV indicated they were disconnected from their families and schools and found solace in and allegiance to their peers; some students demonstrated difficulties with their families, peers, and school; and some were significantly disconnected only with their world of school, which created tension, though, in their family. Students with characteristics of category Type IV were the most likely to have received failing grades and fewer credits toward graduation, and to drop out of high school. The students who were identified as having tendencies of the Type IV category expressed the most despair about finishing high school and anxiety about a tenuous future. Phelan et al. (1994) further described student characteristics of Type IV:

Many appeared to be paralyzed and felt impotent about what to do. Although they knew that they should do well in school, their continued failure served as a reminder that they were incapable of achieving within school-defined parameters of success. (p. 430)

These students’ responses dispute the notion that students who receive low grades and are in danger of dropping out do not care about school. According to Phelan et al. (1994), the students may have given up on school and were disillusioned by their school experiences; however, they still experienced significant anxiety about school and their future. Students identified as having Type IV characteristics indicated they worried about future employment and would like to obtain necessary skills for their lives as adults.

The researchers (Phelan et al., 1994; Phelan et al., 1991) found many differences among students’ reports within each category and between the four category types;
however, they also found commonalities among students’ responses. Most students in the study expressed pressures and stress deriving from navigating multiple worlds of home, school, and peer interactions; however, border crossings were much more difficult for students who experienced significant dissonance between their worlds than those who did not. Students across all category types, ranging from the highest achieving to the lowest achieving students, expressed considerable pressure and worry about their academic performance in school. Additionally, most students described significant worries about their futures. Furthermore, students in the study mentioned repeatedly that adults do not seem to understand the nature of their difficulties, take the time to hear them, and often do not seem to take them seriously or to care.

Significant implications may be drawn from the Phelan et al. (1991; 1994) studies. First, skills in crossing borders vary widely among students, and those with the most difficulty maneuvering borders among their varying worlds demonstrate greater difficulties in school. Second, students’ ability to benefit from their schooling experience cannot be segmented into separate entities. Students’ different worlds are interrelated and have significant influences on students’ engagement in school. Third, skills in crossing borders are crucial to educational opportunities, future education, employment, and independent adult living; however, minimal discussions with students about these transitions occur (Phelan et al., 1991). Finally, while border crossing presents challenges for many students and has extensive influences on their lives and educational experiences, minimal support is available to help them mediate and make sense of their varying and many times challenging worlds (Phelan et al., 1991; Phelan et al., 1994).
The research indicates that students are astute and shrewd observers and articulate in describing what they have experienced, what the barriers are, and what they need to succeed even as they may feel alienated and disenfranchised from the institution of schools, (Books, 2007; Davidson, 1999; Fine, 1987; Kohl, 1991; Leistyna, 2002; Lincoln, 1995; Phelan et al., 1991; Phelan, et al., 1994; Poplin & Weeres, 1991; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). Researchers have found that students from all achievement levels and social backgrounds report they want to do well in school and have strong opinions about school environments that encouraged them to succeed or discouraged them from persevering (Davidson, 1999; Phelan et al., 1994; Phelan et al., 1991). In addition, researchers have reported that despite great despair, set backs, disappointments, and academic failure, students would like to be able to achieve in school (Davidson, 1994; Phelan et al., 1994; Poplin & Weeres, 1991).

Students’ stories about their lives and experiences in school are significant to the examination of social conditions in and outside of school that serve as challenges to equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for all students. This study is important because social and school worlds of the students were explored. Regarding the potential of student narratives, Nieto (1994) noted that student “voices can help us to imagine what it might take to transform entire schools” (p. 424). Educators, policy makers, and the general public have much to gain and to learn from listening to the diverse perspectives, experiences, and stories that students have to tell (Leistyna, 2002).

This chapter discussed the theoretical framework guiding this research and the common themes found in research and related literature. The next chapter provides the methodology that was utilized in this study.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This research considers what eight urban high school students’ from varying backgrounds have to say about their lives and experiences in school. The study focused on students’ perspectives about influences in and outside school that support or hinder students’ academic performance. Students’ rich descriptions in words about their lives and experiences were emphasized, and, further, the qualitative research paradigm and narrative inquiry approach to research was employed, using a critical theoretical perspective. The critical theoretical perspective refers to my intent to include diverse voices that have previously been excluded from critical conversations, and specifically, in this case, the voices of high school students. The next sections discuss the research design of the study, context of the study, participants, data collection strategies, interpretation and analysis of the data, and reflections of the researcher.

Research Design

Recognizing that much of human emotion and existence are difficult to quantify and to describe in a numerical way, the qualitative research tradition is an approach to research that considers personal stories, reflections, perspectives, and experiences of every day lives valuable to understanding the social world (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998). The qualitative research design, using a critical theoretical perspective is important to this study, as the focus was on high school students’ rich descriptions, critical interpretations, and stories of their lived experiences. Through the qualitative nature of this research, greater understanding about students’ experiences and perspectives was an evolving process. Due to the emergent nature of qualitative research, the research design remained flexible. The research was inductive in approach, allowing theory and meaning to evolve as the study progressed (Bogdan
Narrative Inquiry

One qualitative approach to research that seeks to reveal a wide range of human thoughts, emotions, and experiences is that of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Similar to phenomenology, narrative inquiry seeks to understand lived experience and how individuals describe and perceive their experiences (Patton, 2004). Based on the philosophy of John Dewey “who believed that examining experience is the key to education” (Clandinin & Connelly, p. xiii), narrative inquiry is an interactive and dynamic process of telling stories and listening to the stories of others. Reissman (1993) indicated that foremost for human beings “to make sense of their experiences is by casting it in narrative form” (p. 4).

Narrative inquiry is guided by the belief that people are social beings and telling their stories is primary to relating to others (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; McLeod, 2004). McLeod indicated that storytelling is central to being known by self and others and promotes social inclusion. In addition, personal stories of lived realities help transfer extremely complex concepts and the effects of highly embedded traditions in society to more understandable, humane, and personal levels (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). Sharing life stories brings the unknown to the known, allowing individuals to view lived realities through the lens of another and opening their eyes to a new way of seeing and being in the world. Further, empathy may be gained across varying social contexts through storytelling and listening to others share about their lives (Gamson, 2002). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) define narrative inquiry this way:

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their
past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a
person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and
made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in
inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience, then, is first and foremost a way of
thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the
phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative
view of experience as a phenomenon under study. (p. 477)

The critical perspective of narrative inquiry is that life stories are embedded within broad
historical and sociopolitical contexts, providing theory as to the underlying and deeper reasons
why the story occurred in the first place (Chase, 2005). According to Lieblich, McAdams, &
Josselson (2004), stories of individuals shared within the milieu of their social and cultural
worlds form the core of narrative scholarship. An individual’s narrative reflects not only his or
her personal story and experiences, but also reflects the framework of the cultural time and place
where the life story occurred. According to Patton (2004),

The narrative focus of qualitative research honors people’s stories as data that can stand
on their own as pure descriptions of experience worthy of narrative documentary of
experience (the core of phenomenology) or analyzed for connections between the
psychological, sociological, cultural, political, and dramatic dimensions of human
experience. (p. 116)

Finally, a significant goal of the narrative researcher is to understand how people make
sense of their lives in relationship to historical and cultural “discourses, and how they draw on,
resist, and/or transform those discourses as they narrate their selves, experiences, and realities”
(Chase, 2005, p. 659). In other words, narratives of every day people provide counter stories and
contradictions to the stories more commonly told in society (Krumer-Nevo, 2004). For example, dominant narratives about people of poverty have oscillated from a harsh and angry response that blames people for their difficulties due to their weaknesses and failures to a sympathetic approach that views people as unfortunate victims of society of which they have no control. According to Krumer-Nevo, what is absent from dominant and common discourses is a meta-or counter narrative that creates another story, a story that recognizes the power of social conditions without reducing people to helpless victims. Drawn from lived realities and narratives of everyday people, counter-narratives present the larger story about the individual’s agency, strengths, weaknesses, and faculty to transcend the dominant view and status of shame and/or victimization (Krumer-Nevo).

Common stories are told in the dominant discourse about young people, and much attention is given to their problems such as drugs, violence, pregnancies, and gangs (Giroux, 2003; Maira & Soep, 2004). Frequently, assumptions are made about teen behaviors without considering what young people themselves have to say about them. Narratives from the voices of high school students provide another lens and broader perspective in which to view the strengths of young people as well as the challenges they face in and outside of school.

Narrative Multiculturalism

A focus of this narrative inquiry is in-depth interviewing and interactions with individuals in multicultural and diverse social, ability, sexual orientation, racial, ethnic, and linguistic contexts. The specific emphasis on narratives as research and seeking a multicultural perspective has been coined by some researchers as “narrative multiculturalism” (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005, p.9). Consistent with the narrative inquiry tradition, narrative multiculturalism involves a research focus of connecting in relationship with others through storytelling, seeking insight on
the historical and societal contexts in which people live (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Phillion, 2002a, 2002b). The multicultural view of research is inclusive and seeks voices of every day people, individuals and groups typically silenced in society such as people of varying ethnicities, women, children, people with disabilities, people of poverty, and other differences from the mainstream.

Considering the critical perspective, the qualitative research tradition, and the narrative inquiry and multicultural approach to research, the shared experiences of eight urban high school students who volunteered for this study were the focus. This process provided opportunities for greater understanding of students’ perspectives and experiences and a forum for students’ voices to be heard and valued. The next sections discuss the research site or context of the study, the participants and their protection of human rights, data collection strategies, interpretation and analysis of the data, and reflections of the researcher.

Context

The research site was Urban Midwest High School, a large comprehensive public high school with approximately 1,900 students. Urban Midwest is located in the central Midwest in a largely rural state with a population of about three million people. The state is comprised of the following racial characteristics: White 89%, Hispanic or Latino origin 8%, Black or African American 6%, Asian 2%, American Indian and Alaska Native .9%, and Other Pacific Islander .1% (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). The overall public school student population in the state is comprised of the following: White 74%, Hispanic 12%, Black or African American 8%, and other races and ethnicities 6% (Kansas State Department of Education, 2007). Of the state’s student population, 39% are noted as economically disadvantaged, receiving free and reduced lunches (KSDE, 2007).
Urban Midwest is located in a metropolitan area with a population of about 550,000 people (CityRating.com, 2002). The city is the largest in the state and is comprised of the following ethnicities: White 78%, Black or African American 12%, Hispanic or Latino origin 10%, Asian 5%, American Indian or Alaska Native 2%, and multicultural or other races 6% (Hello Wichita, 2004).

Urban Midwest’s school district, the largest between the Mississippi River and Denver, and Dallas and the Canadian border, is a sizable urban district with approximately 49,000 students. The school district has seven comprehensive high schools and one magnet high school. The student population in the district is comprised of the following ethnicities: White 41%, Hispanic 22%, African American 21%, multiracial 8%; Asian 5%, American Indian 3%. Of the students in the district, 67% are identified as economically disadvantaged (Kansas State Department of Education, 2007). Of the 49,000 students, 8,700 students receive special education services and 5,800 students receive extra support as English Language Learners.

Urban Midwest is a high school for 9th to 12th grade students and is one of the largest high schools in the state and the city. Additionally, the school is one of the most diverse comprehensive high schools in the state, with a rich mixture of ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Urban Midwest is comprised of the following race and ethnicities: African American 38%, White 32%, Hispanic 15%, Asian 11%, Native American 2%, and Multicultural 2%. Of the approximately 1,900 students, 58% are noted as economically disadvantaged and 42% as non-economically disadvantaged (Kansas State Department of Education, 2007). Similar to urban districts across the nation, the majority of Urban Midwest High School students are students of varying ethnicities, while the majority of its teaching staff is White. The principal of the school is
an African American male and of the four assistant principals, one is an African American male, two are White males, and one is a White female.

The following table provides a comparison of the overall racial and ethnic makeup of students in the state of Kansas, students in Urban Midwest’s district, and students in Urban Midwest (see Table 1). Table 2 compares the socio economic status of students in the state and in the district, and students attending Urban Midwest.

Table 1

Comparison Table of Race and Ethnicity

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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>78%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>45 %</td>
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<td>5%</td>
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<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multicultural or other races</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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Table 2

Comparison Table of Socioeconomic Status

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Student Population of Economically Disadvantaged in the state</th>
<th>Student Population of Economically Disadvantaged in the school district</th>
<th>Student Population of Economically Disadvantaged in Urban Midwest High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>57%</td>
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Brief History of Urban Midwest Public High School

Opening its doors in 1957, Urban Midwest originally served an elite school population in the city. Often called “The Little Harvard,” Urban Midwest served students largely from privileged White, middle to upper middle, and to upper class families. The student population has changed considerably throughout the years, as many of the upwardly mobile families moved into rapidly burgeoning private and public school districts in the suburbs. Also, in the early 1990s, one of the public high schools in the school district opened an elite International Baccalaureate (IB) Program and many of the students in Urban Midwest’s attendance area identified as gifted and talented as well as of a higher income transferred to the IB Program (Saar, 2007). Also drawing from Urban Midwest’s attendance area are three elite college preparatory private schools in the vicinity.

The immediate area surrounding Urban Midwest High School has deteriorated in the last 10 to 15 years. Once a neatly groomed neighborhood with middle class and single-family housing, the homes appear run down and many have become rental properties. The neighborhood is highly transitory and police reports indicate it is a high crime area for the city (Wichita.gov, 2007).
Identified as a Low Performing School

Urban Midwest is identified as a low performing school as indicated by student performance on state assessments. In the school year 2005 to 2006, of the students assessed by state tests in the Spring of 2006, 54% of the students were identified as proficient in reading and 36.1% were identified as proficient in math. Asian/Pacific Islanders were noted as 85% proficient in reading; White students were noted as 83% proficient; and African American students were noted as 40% proficient. Asian/Pacific Islanders were noted as 56% proficient in math, White students 51%, African American students 25%, and Hispanic students 24% proficient in math. For 2005, the graduation rate for Urban Midwest was 72% (Kansas Department of Education, 2007).

In seeking to reduce the differentials in academic achievement among Urban Midwest high school students, the school has initiated many programs to emphasize ‘relevance, rigor, and relationships’ in teaching instruction and the curriculum. The terms rigor, relationships, and relevance are used frequently in staff and inservice meetings, classrooms, and further professional development opportunities for staff. In other words, high expectations, connectedness, and curriculum relevant to the students lives and futures are seen as integral parts of raising student achievement in the school. Readily apparent by student and staff conversations, increased graduation requirements, and school documents such as the student agenda, Urban Midwest emphasizes that all students need to be college ready even if they have no intention of going to college. The belief is that trade and technical employment call for similar skills needed for college; therefore, the premise follows that a rigorous curriculum is important to all students.
One key component in working to reduce academic differentials is utilizing the Advanced Via Individual Determination (AVID) strategies. In its second year at Urban Midwest, AVID is a national program that offers a four-year college preparatory elective class for approximately forty students identified as demonstrating potential, but have not had prior opportunities to participate in pre-college course work. Enrolled in a more rigorous course of study and a college track curriculum, AVID students are provided lessons in note taking, study and test taking skills, time management, and practice and exposure to college entrance/placement exams, and research skills as well as tutoring and study groups. An AVID parent advisory board meets regularly and students receive help in preparing applications for college and financial aid. Although a small number of students participate in AVID, the program is expanding at Urban Midwest, and teachers throughout the building are trained in many of the AVID strategies in order to use them in their classrooms.

In addition to AVID strategies, Urban Midwest utilizes an ‘Academic First List’ to promote academic achievement. The Academic First List entails seminar (similar to the concept of homeroom or study hall) teachers monitoring student grades each week, and students who receive two Fs or more in their coursework are prohibited from participating in any extracurricular activities for that week.

Also, new positions have been added to Urban Midwest to support rigor, relevance and relationships. For example, a tutor coordinator who hires tutors and organizes tutoring in the library during students’ lunch period and before and after school for those who need additional help; a full time advisor who counsels students about their strengths, interests, and goals for life after high school and helps students access and complete applications for colleges, college
scholarships, technical schools, and jobs; and a full time clinical social worker who provides counseling services for students in need have been hired.

Urban Midwest also offers services for English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and special education programming with accommodations for students with disabilities. Further, the school is on a block schedule, which consists of 90-minute classes with a period scheduled for academic assistance two or three times a week during the school day.

In addition to the above mentioned endeavors, many activities and clubs are available to the student body to support student involvement in the school: Band, orchestra, drama, debate, forensics, athletics, journalism, art, business, photography, occupational family and consumer sciences, woods, auto mechanics, welding, foreign language, JROTC, distinguished scholars or Advanced Placement, honors classes, student government, freshman advisory, learning center (extended school day program), national honors society and various clubs such as Students Against Drunk Driving, Crime Stoppers, Choose Respect, African American Club, Asian Club, and the Middle East club. Also, Urban Midwest has additional support staff at the school to support academic achievement and emotional well being of its students: Five full time counselors and one part time counselor; one full time masters level social worker; one part time transition specialist who supports special education students in transitioning to life after high school; one full time school psychologist; one full time nurse and a part time nurse’s aid, as well as case management through a mental health agency housed within the school.

Urban Midwest High School was selected as the research site due to its status as an urban school and its student population of diverse backgrounds. As was mentioned previously, urban schools are defined in this study as schools located in metropolitan areas of at least 50,000 people (U. S. Census Bureau, 2006). In addition, I am the school psychologist for Urban
Midwest High School; therefore, I selected this site due to my access to the school setting, staff, families, and students. My role as a White middle class female and the school psychologist at Urban Midwest will be discussed later in this chapter.

Participants

Due to the timeframe of this study, the large size of the research site, and the nature of in-depth interviews in narrative inquiry, not all students in the school were or could be interviewed; therefore, purposeful sampling was used for selecting key informants (Miller, 2006; Patton, 2002). Patton refers to purposeful sampling as the process in which individuals are selected due to their unique and important perspectives about central issues important to the study. In this case, counselors at Urban Midwest were asked to nominate students who were considered “information rich” (Patton, p. 46) and interested in participating in the study. In the selection of the students, consideration was given to students’ diverse backgrounds including social, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and ability characteristics, and to their gender. Additionally, consideration was given to students who attend Urban Midwest regularly, who do not have intentions of dropping out of school, and who are on track for high school graduation, despite obstacles they may have encountered.

Initially, five students who expressed interest in discussing the issues and met the criteria were selected to participate in this research. Of these five students, two of the students indicated they would like to invite other students who would have information to share and would want to contribute to the study; therefore, three more students were added to the list of participants. Each of the students indicated that in addition to individual interviews, group discussions about the issues would be important to them and an important dynamic to add to this study.
Each of the eight students reported plans for going to college and are currently on track for graduation. Each expressed significant hindrances that could interfere with their progress in school; however, each student had consistent attendance and passing grades. All of the individuals described considerable concerns about the lives of teenagers in their urban school. Further characteristics of the students will be shared in chapter four and five of this dissertation.

Protection of Human Participants

The permission of the Institutional Review Board of Wichita State University was received before this study began to insure the protection of the participants’ human rights. Before the students participated in the study, they were required to sign an informed assent form along with a written parent consent form (see Appendix A). The consent form informed the students and their parents the purpose and procedures of the study, asked for voluntary participation, informed them they may withdraw from the study at any time, and insured them their identity and all data will be confidential.

Data Collection Methods

In order to address the research questions and objectives of this study, data were gathered through individual interviews; group discussions; review of records and documents, and informal observations and discussions with teachers. These data collection strategies are described next.

Individual Interviews

The individual interviews, conducted in the Spring and Fall of 2007, were informal, conversational, and open-ended in nature to build rapport and to facilitate the comfort and ease of the students to talk freely about the subject at hand (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003). The students were considered coresearchers in the study, coproducers of new knowledge, and the experts of their experiences. The interviews were facilitated as “conversation with a purpose”
(Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to encourage conversations about and descriptions of students’ perceptions and stories about their lives and experiences in school. The interviews were conducted of the high school students for purposes of gaining greater understanding of their perspectives and for providing opportunities for students’ voices to be heard and valued as they described salient issues of their life experience (Nieto, 2004).

The interviews began with some preliminary questions to start the conversations; however, the direction of the conversation followed the lead of the students. Open-ended interviews encouraged students to share elements of their lives that were significant to their feelings and perceptions about school (Phelan et al., 1991).

According to Chase (2005), the goal of in-depth interviewing is to transform the “interviewer-interviewee relationship into one of narrator and listener” (p. 660). The concept of interviewees as narrators contrasts with the traditional view that interviewees have specific answers for the questions researchers ask them. Conversely, the approach of narrative inquiry is that narrators have their own stories to tell in their own voices. Chase indicated that the stories people tell represent empirical material for researchers as they seek to understand how people construe meaning from the experiences of their every day lives.

Eight students participated in this study and were personally interviewed three times for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The first interview entailed building rapport and trust and beginning conversations about the students’ lives and perspectives about their school experiences. The second interview involved an interview guide (see Appendix B); however, the interviews remained open-ended and conversational in nature and the interview guide was followed loosely in the interviews. The third interview provided opportunities to discuss and
examine the data collected and as well as opportunities for students to discuss and review the draft of their individual narratives.

*Group Discussions*

In addition to individual interviews, students participated in approximately five to eight group discussions in the Spring and Fall of 2007. The group discussions were held after at least one individual interview with each student and were conducted during the students’ study hall (called seminar) so as to not to interfere with classroom instruction time. Two of the sessions continued on after seminar into the forty minute lunch period, and food was provided for the students.

The group discussions were useful for generating conversations among the students about a wide range of topics (Patton, 2002), which focused on influences in and outside of school they observed and believed encouraged or discouraged high school students success in school. An interview guide was not used for group discussions. The first group discussion began with students describing things about themselves such as when they were born, their families, and what they would like to do after they graduate. The discussions were student directed in that the students chose the focus of the discussions and asked each other questions. The conversations focused on issues relevant to students’ lives and experiences in school. I facilitated the conversations, seeking to ensure that everyone in the group who wanted to speak up had the opportunity to do so.

According to Eder and Fingerson (2003), in group discussions, students build on the talk of each other’s experiences and are prompted to discuss a wider variety of opinions than in one on one interviews. In interviewing adolescents, Eder and Fingerson noted the importance of establishing a natural context and that interviewing students in focus groups with existing friends
may serve this purpose. When interviews are conducted with young people’s peers, the discussions may be more reflective of conversations in natural settings. Eder and Fingerson also indicated that interviewing students in focus groups serves to minimize the power dynamics between the interviewer and interviewees because of age differences and the adult/student relationship. The purpose of the small groups was to facilitate rich descriptions and in-depth conversation of the students about their lives and experiences in school. The group discussions ranged from approximately 45 to 120 minutes in length.

Ground rules for the discussion groups were for one person to speak at a time and for the conversations to center on factors in and outside of school they believed encourages or discourages students success in school. The students agreed that what was shared in the small group discussions would be kept confidential among the group members. We also agreed that everyone had a right to express their feelings and to have their experiences to be validated even if others did not agree. The group defined validation as active listening, not interrupting, and reflecting back to the person that shared in order to check for understanding. The students were encouraged to share only what they were comfortable in sharing.

*Sensitivity to Student Rights*

The individual and group interview sessions were conducted at convenient and appropriate times for the students during the school day and did not interfere with academic instruction. With students and parents’ permission, the conversations were audiotaped. During and after the interviews, I consulted with students to check for understanding and if what I heard and recorded is what they said and intended to say. The students’ stories and perspectives were treated sensitively and held in high regard. Throughout the interviews, I remained mindful of the power differentials between students and adults. I sought to be sensitive and to relate to students
in a comfortable and warm manner, reiterating they are the experts of their lives and experiences in school. I ensured the students’ right to privacy and reiterated they need only share what they were comfortable sharing. Also, I informed the students that if they shared information with me that I perceived as a threat to themselves or to others, I was obligated to share this with the proper authorities; otherwise, their identity would be held in confidence. They were reminded they could withdraw from the study at any time of no consequence to them.

**Documents and Artifacts**

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), documents and artifacts reveal a great deal about how the people who construct them view their world and experiences. The students were asked to voluntarily share any documents or artifacts such as poetry, journal entries, and compositions that were central and meaningful to them in describing their thoughts and what they would like to convey about their lives and experiences in school. School documents such as grades, attendance, teachers’ comments, and other school records were reviewed to gain a more comprehensive picture of the students and their experiences in school. For two students, special education records were significant to the study; therefore, these records were reviewed as well. As the school psychologist at Urban Midwest, I have legal access to special education files and other school records. As the researcher, I gained informed parent and student consent and assent for reviewing and noting information from school records (see Appendix A).

**Observations**

A significant source for collecting data in narrative inquiry is what people express about their experiences whether through words, documents, and artifacts. Another form of gathering data is through observations of the phenomenon relevant to the study (Patton, 2002). Observations provide the researcher occasions to capture the context of the study by observing
the setting, activities in the setting, and the participants involved in the activities (Miller, 2006; Patton). Through observations there may be opportunities to learn things that were not discussed in the interviews, particularly issues involving sensitive topics (Patton).

Field notes were recorded during my observations throughout this study in the Spring and Fall of 2007. Bogdan & Biklen (2003) stated that field notes provide a “written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study” (p. 111). I recorded informal observations in classrooms, hallways, and in the lunchroom. Recording my observations of every day life at Urban Midwest High School helped me to become more cognizant of the world of the students at Urban Midwest High School, and in particular, the world of the students participating in this study.

This section described the data collection methods. The strategies for collecting research data involved information drawn from individual interviews and group discussions, the review of documents and artifacts, and informal observations. The next section describes the process of analyzing and interpreting the information derived from the data collection strategies.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data analysis involves arranging and organizing the information gathered, and data interpretation seeks to create meaning and make sense of the shared information (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). As was described in the section above, the collected data of this study consisted of audiotaped recordings of student interviews and discussions, records and documents review, and notes from my informal observations. Once the data were gathered, I spent focused time and attention to repeatedly listening to the recordings and rereading transcriptions of the recordings for the purposes of, first, analyzing “narrative threads, tensions, and themes” that developed (Clandinin & Connelly, 2005, p. 113); and then, second, interpreting the information and
constructing meaning of what was recorded and shared. The research questions and theoretical framework guided the process of analyzing and interpreting the gathered data.

In narrative inquiry, the core of the analysis and interpretation is understanding how people think, what they value, and how they have made meaning from or sense of events in their lives (Riley & Hawe, 2005). Narrative inquiry seeks themes and analyzes them as well as “studies the world through the eyes of one storyteller” (Riley & Hawe, p.229). In order to analyze and interpret the described experiences of the students in this study, I actively listened and re-listened to the student’s voice within each interview and sought understanding about how each student appeared to make sense of and created meaning from their experiences (Chase, 2005), and I also searched for the common threads among what was recorded and shared.

In terms of analyzing and interpreting students’ accounts of their experiences and transferring them into a written text, Chase (2005) discussed typologies of narrative strategies in representing and interpreting narrators’ voices. One strategy she described was “the researcher’s supportive voice” (p. 665). In this typology, students’ voices as narrators of their own lives are emphasized. The word voice pertains to what and how the narrator communicates as well as the social contexts from which the narrator speaks. The researcher determines parts of the story to include and how to organize and edit the story that is written; however, the primary goal is for the narrators’ story to be told and heard and for the narrator’s voice to be in the center, while the researchers’ voice recedes to the background. Rather than focusing on facts, the narrators’ depiction of their lives, experiences, and view of their reality are highlighted in the analysis and interpretation of what has been shared.

To ensure students’ narratives were analyzed and interpreted as the students intended, as mentioned previously, students were consulted during and after each interview to check for
understanding and to ask if what I heard reflected what they actually said or meant to say (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Further, once drafts of their narratives were written, these were shared with the students to assess if the interpretation of their stories appropriately portrayed what they intended to say.

A significant factor to data analysis was the consideration of my background as the researcher and school psychologist at Urban Midwest. I provided time for ample reflection throughout the research, which is discussed in the next section.

*Reflections of the Researcher*

Throughout this research, I considered the complex nature of the relationship of the researcher and the narrator, which involves added complexities in this study given that I am a White middle class female researching the perspectives of urban high school students whose social, ethnic, economic, and linguistic backgrounds are different than my own. As much as I struggled against my assumptions and biases as a member of the dominant White class, and as a middle aged woman who has experienced a different time and place in the past and currently than the students at Urban Midwest High School, I recognize that I am with limited understanding (Patterson, Niles, Carlson, & Kelley, 2005). Due to these limitations, I considered the students as coresearchers and teachers and approached this research as the student of the students, listening and learning. The students are the experts of their experiences and how they see the world, and I have much to learn from them.

As I embarked on this journey, first, I remained aware that my thoughts, what I heard and observed, and what I chose to highlight in this research were influenced by the personal and social experiences of my own life. Some of those personal and social experiences include considerable exposure to urban settings and individuals from diverse backgrounds in my
childhood, education, adult life, and profession (Petersen, in press). Second, I remained cognizant of and sensitive to privilege and power relationships and the differentials among the students and between the students and myself as an adult White female. Critical to minimizing these dynamics was maintaining the stance and communicating to the students that I had much to learn from them; they had much to contribute; and they had much to learn from each other as individuals and coresearchers. Throughout the interviews, the importance of listening to and learning from the experiences of others different than ourselves was emphasized, and the process was described as ongoing and lifelong.

Of significance is that I sought engagement with the research and the students who participated in this study, rather than attempted to be an objective bystander or onlooker. Objectivity was not my aim, but engagement was. According to Way (2005), to be an engaged researcher, one must consider the cultural milieu of the participants, the researcher, and the process of the research. My supposition regarding my role as an engaged researcher was summarized by Rabinow and Sullivan (1979):

There is no outside, detached, standpoint from which to gather and present brute data.
When we try to understand the cultural world, we are dealing with interpretations, and interpretations of interpretations. Culture—the shared meanings, practices, and symbols that constitute the human world—does not present itself neutrally or with one voice, it is always multivocal. . . and both the observer and the observed are always enmeshed in it.
(p.6)

As the school psychologist at Urban Midwest, I am engaged and enmeshed with the students in this study and with the world of Urban Midwest. In my every day role as a school psychologist at Urban Midwest, I engage with students, staff, and parents, seeking to be an active
listener and supporter of all students’ well being and academic achievement. My role varies from day to day, depending on the needs of the day. I serve as a consultant to parents, students, and staff particularly regarding issues of special education and emotional and behavioral difficulties for all students at Urban Midwest. In this role, I frequently (a) assist teachers in developing behavioral support plans; (b) conduct professional development sessions with staff members on issues such as the nature of disabilities, stress and anger management for students and staff, and teen mental health; (c) facilitate the child study team, which meets weekly and consists of a social worker, nurse, counselor, special education department chair, speech language pathologist, and assistant principal; (d) support students and staff on issues and questions regarding suicide, teen self-mutilating behaviors, suspicions of student neglect or abuse, and students’ individual education plan or 504 plans; (e) conduct individual counseling for students and student groups focusing on anger and stress management; and (f) provide student behavioral support for teachers in classrooms. Additionally, I may refer students to a mental health agency and a clinical therapist if the needs of the student are beyond the scope of the school. Further, my office is in the same hall and in close proximity to the nurse, clinical social worker, and master’s level social worker, which provides opportunities for frequent collaboration in working with the emotional, behavioral, and health issues of our students. Finally, less frequently, my position as a school psychologist at Urban Midwest also involves conducting comprehensive evaluations of students suspected of having a disability that interferes with their learning and academic performance in the classroom.

In my experiences as a school psychologist, I have copious opportunities on a daily basis to dialogue with people from various walks of life. Urban Midwest is a richly diverse school environment in social class, nationality, and racial backgrounds. I have met students and families
from various countries around the world such as Iran, Tunisia, Nigeria, Kenya, Cambodia, Korea, Vietnam, Germany, and Mexico. I have met many recent immigrants to this country and listened to their journeys. Additionally, within the school community, I have met Black and White families who struggle financially as well as those who are well to do and have listened to their stories as well. Given these experiences and dual role as the school psychologist and researcher at Urban Midwest, I come to this study with biases, passions, and assumptions, some of which are listed below:

1. Individuals and groups from diverse ethnic, social, academic, and linguistic backgrounds bring cultural richness and knowledge to schools and communities from which we have much to learn (Flecha, 1999; Otoya-Knapp, 2004).

2. Challenges in society influence student achievement and opportunities in school.

3. Students want to learn and to experience success in school.

4. School teachers, administrators, and staff are largely well intentioned and want to help students achieve.

5. Listening to and validating individuals’ stories about their life experiences that are different from our own are important for understanding and empathizing with the human condition.

6. My background as a White middle class female school psychologist influences my interpretation of student narratives, resulting in an engaged and passionate stance in which my perspectives and experiences are enmeshed in the research approach and findings in this study.

The most influencing belief I have in this research and approach to methodology is that as an engaged and passionate researcher, I bring my education, personhood, culture, profession, and all
of my background experiences with me, and these cannot be separated from the research.

Regarding engaged research, Way states:

> Shifting the ideal from one of objectivity to one of engagement hopefully encourages quantitatively and qualitatively based researchers to reflect more on how their own biases hinder as well as enhance their ability to see patterns in their data. . . In other words, it will produce a science of adolescence that reveals both the adolescents’ and the researchers’ vitality. (p. 537)

In short, it is not possible or desirable for me to stand off afar and to not be passionate and engaged in this research. As a White middle class female and school psychologist at Urban Midwest, I remain highly aware I bring my beliefs, assumptions, and experiences and all that these influences encompass with me to this research.

The next chapter, chapter four, reveals the findings from the individual interviews conducted with the students. Chapter five will involve the dialogue derived from the students’ group discussions and will conclude with a summary of the findings from the students’ individual and group narratives. Finally, chapter six will include a discussion of conclusions and the theoretical and practical implications that may be drawn from this study to foster further research into the lives of adolescents in urban high schools.
Chapter Four

Findings: Individual Student Narratives

The eight students in this study identified themselves as one Hispanic, bisexual male, 17 years of age; one White male, 17 years of age; one White female who is paraplegic, 16 years of age; two Black males, 15 years of age; one Black female 14 years of age; one Vietnamese female, 15 years of age, and one Korean male, 15 years of age. The following are the students’ pseudonyms: Raul, Kevin, Sasha, Jamal, Jaleel, Sharee, Tam, and Sun, respectively. The students were selected primarily because their backgrounds reflect the diversity desired for this study; they have plans to graduate from high school; and they attend school regularly. Each of the eight students reported plans for going to college and are currently on track for graduation. Additionally, each student reported experiencing considerable obstacles, but persevere in school despite them. The students demonstrated they are critical thinkers, astute observers, and more than competent in providing insightful descriptions of their lives and experiences in school.

From the onset of this study, the eight students and I discussed that we are co researchers and that I needed their help to understand their lives and the lives of teenagers from their perspectives. I asked them to observe their surroundings and take note of what they observed at Urban Midwest. They not only spoke of their own lives and the lives of their friends, but also about their observations of the overall student body and teachers at Urban Midwest. Each of the eight students indicated appreciation of having opportunities to discuss issues significant to the lives of teens and their education.

As mentioned previously, in conducting this research, I do not have a neutral position as the researcher and school psychologist at Urban Midwest. I bring my beliefs, passions, biases, and experiences with me to the research as a White middle class female. I tried as much as
possible to remove those biases and my voice from the narratives of the students. I worked to not provide any value judgments about what they said, but validated each student’s right to say what they thought, believed, and felt by actively listening to what they had to say. I tried to respond by reflecting back to them what they said in my responses. I interpreted their narratives and pulled from them descriptions that appeared most salient to their experiences. Each student read a draft of their individual narratives and narratives for the group discussions and provided suggestions for changes, either additions or deletions. The eight students were highly articulate and expressive and had much to say about their experiences, including hindrances and supports to their education and to the education of their peers. The premise of this research is that listening to the perspectives and individual stories of others whose lives are different than our own is important to better understanding the human condition, and in this case, the lives of urban teenagers. Further, a primary belief is that students are the authorities of their own lives and have much to contribute to society and to schools.

I will begin with descriptions and background information of the eight students as individuals and narratives about their thoughts and lives. The narratives are divided into themes that emerged from the individual interviews.

Raul

*Raul, a Hispanic male, 17 years of age, is a junior at Urban Midwest. Raul’s attire is clean and tidy, and he often wears knit shirts with a collar, khakis, black pants, or blue jeans. He has light skin, dark hair and eyes, wears glasses, and is slightly overweight. An intelligent and articulate young man, he describes himself as a “thinker,” one who does not just accept the status quo, but “will speak up to work to change things.” Raul is an avid fan of creative, thought-provoking movies, such as The House of Flying Daggers or Crash. Regarding Crash, he*
shared, “I really liked that movie. I liked how they showed complex issues of different races intersecting and coming together because of a car accident.”

Raul performs well academically and participates in a college prep curriculum. His grades suffer at times and do not reflect his potential because his attendance is sometimes sporadic and getting to school on time is difficult for him. He works 35 hours a week and frequently has insomnia and difficulties waking up in the morning. Despite these issues, Raul carries a B average in school.

In addition to a heavy work and school schedule, Raul also is involved in many school activities: Drama, choir, orchestra, and French club. He has taken French for four years and is working on his skills to speak French fluently. Additionally, he serves as a mentor in the freshman advisory program at Urban Midwest. For Raul, high school has been a fairly pleasant experience for him, whereas he described middle school as highly traumatic and heart wrenching, which is explained in detail later in Raul’s narrative.

Raul plans on going to college and stated he would like to study film, international businessman, or law. He is unsure at this time, but he indicated that he is passionate about movies and helping behind the scenes in the school plays.

Raul’s narratives revolved around two domains: (a) his perceptions of Mexican culture and his family; and (b) his social experiences in school and his bisexuality (defined as recognizing attractions to males and females). Raul’s story depicts strained family relationships, differences between his and his parents’ approach to education, and minimal connection to and participation in Hispanic culture. His narratives also reveal significant stress and angst regarding his sexual orientation. I conclude Raul’s narrative with his observations and final thoughts about Urban Midwest.
Hispanic Background and Family

Currently, I live with my mother and younger sister. My parents are divorced and my father moved to Texas last year. Both parents speak fluent Spanish. My father was born in the United States, but very close to the border. My mother won’t share much of anything about her childhood. She just rants on about how hard she had it. So, I don’t really know that much about her. Both my parents speak Spanish and that is really all I know. I speak Spanish, but French is my passion. I consider my French teacher my mentor. I admire her so much and she is a great teacher. I can talk to her about most things.

I am not really a reflection of true Hispanic culture. I could walk you out in the hall and find what I consider a true Hispanic. Somebody who is not going to college, is just trying to graduate and then get a job, probably already has a family maybe, and always speaks Spanish. This is not upsetting and it may not even be true, but this is my mindset, and I can say this because this is my race and I can poke fun of my own race because I am part of it, too. It is like we really have low class values, and I am not like that so I don’t really consider myself anything. I consider myself me. I am not a race or a religion. I am just me. I don’t live a true Hispanic life. Some people think I am White, which works fine for me because they may not have that initial prejudice or need to judge me. Being raised Mexican, I can speak freely about these things. To me, the general consensus is that wherever you are at you need to do the best there because you can’t get any better. And for the one’s that do try, they have a chance of being knocked down and they won’t be able to get up again.

Education is not valued really. This is not so much in my family, because of the way I have always been. I have insisted on things being different because I am different from everyone in my family. From what my mother says, if you have a job, you need to keep it at all costs
because if you lose it, you may not be able to get another one. . . And school, I mean, school, well I don’t know, in my family they always said school was important but in their actions that doesn’t seem so much to be the case.

I have only heard my dad say he was proud of me twice. And only because I confronted him about it. I strove to make good grades to see if I could get my parents’ love and acceptance that way. Last year I had As and a few Bs, and I realized they don’t really care about it. I realized I don’t need to be pushing myself for them. I am doing it now just for me.

My mother wants me to go to school, but she would rather me be in working than be in all the concerts I am doing and all of the plays and that stuff. It is always if you have a job, you need to keep it and it feels like the job is more important than my education. I have never cussed directly at my parents. I have too much respect for them. That is a line I would not cross. But the arguments we have had about my job and my extracurricular activities have been difficult.

During our end of the year talent show my mother kept asking me why I was taking so many days off work and she was so sure that I would get fired. I told her that if I lost my job over this so be it because this is the first year that I have been able to do these activities. This is the first year I have grown to be aware of what is out there. The reason I am in so many activities at once is because I have never been able to before. This year I have learned I can live for myself and if I want to do these things, I am going to. Before, every time I wanted to do something since elementary school, it’s always money, transportation, and permission. Now I have the money and the ride. I don’t ask permission, I just tell them what I am doing because I have earned the right to do that. The other day I was telling her something I was going to do and I said, ‘Don’t you think I have earned that right?’ I mean I have kept my grades all throughout. I earn my own
money. She has never wanted me to be involved in anything in school except to go to school. Now I have my own money and transportation, so now I can do all of those activities in school.

I am so sad that I could not be involved in things before now. I have regrets that I could not be in soccer. I love soccer. I signed up for tennis and turned in the physical and everything, but I doubt myself to do it because I never have had the training everyone else has had, so I never played a game. I cried about this in choir as I so badly wanted to make it in to Madrigals, but I am at such a disadvantage because I did not have all of the prior training of the others. I just started this year as a junior, and I have done well for just starting. I don’t have any training. All I know and do is from the heart. It is not from being taught by a teacher. And the teacher told me that during my audition, she knows I have not had the training of the other students. I don’t have the techniques yet. . . I know there is not a place in there for effort level and willingness to work on the techniques. I can take lessons now. I would so be willing to pay for lessons because this is something I really want to do. I am going to take lessons this summer regardless if I get into Madrigals or not. It is because even if I don’t make it into Madrigals next year, I can still do it in college. I realize that even though I have been so slow coming into things like this because of my circumstances, I now can pay to go to a gym and start working out if I want to. I can take lessons to get better in singing.

I wished that I were out on my own. If I could live on my own without financial difficulties, I feel like I would do so well or at least do better than I am now. Because I wouldn’t have the negative stress all of the time. Regardless of that, my parents have always been there. I have always had food, clothing, and shelter. Even though my father lives in Texas now, my parents have always been there for me, but I see them like the brakes or a speed bump in the road. Everything I have expressed that I want to do they are always there with their negative
comments and their bad criticism. It seems like because my parents had bad experiences, they think I will as well or that I need to have those bad experiences also. I have built so many defenses with them I build defenses with other people, too.

My parents have done some things to make me be a good kid. Whenever I went anywhere they always knew where I was and when I would be home and stuff like that. In some ways they have done some really good things. I just wasn’t encouraged the way I needed to pursue another kind of life.

I have always seen myself as being different from the average male. Things like keeping myself really clean, washing my hands a lot, not really being that interested in sports, being interested in music and theater and things like that. I am so much more accepting of all of this now, although I still don’t like talking about it much. So when the situation presented itself that I was different from the average male, bisexual, or whatever, whenever I went anywhere my parents would ask me, “So, is so and so gay?” They would never stop me, but they would always ask. They would always ask and it felt really weird.

The Social World of School and Bisexuality

School, the academic part of school, anyway, has always been pretty easy for me. The social aspect of life has always been a lot, a lot more challenging. I don’t remember much about elementary school and it was pretty much uneventful, but middle school was a different story. Sixth grade was fine. I didn’t know anything, and I was always in the same floor and the same hallway. I had always been an advanced student. In sixth grade, they took me out of advanced classes and then put me back in advanced classes in seventh grade because they saw my progress above other students. Seventh grade was good. I had difficulties with my science teacher because
she kept telling me I needed to get glasses. I knew I needed glasses but I didn’t want to because I figured I already had my weight and I needed braces, too. I just wanted to wait.

I have been self-conscious about my weight and have felt different from other guys as long as I can remember. When I was questioning my sexuality in middle school, I had some big problems. The second week of seventh grade I told my best friend, Carla, that I was bisexual. We were always alone and we were in the library and I told her that I had something important to tell her. I let her know and we grew from there. We would tease each other about liking the same guys. In eighth grade, I was friends with a girl and told her that I liked some guy and then a week later they started going out. She already had known. And I could not take my eyes off that guy. She saw me and didn’t like it, so she told that guy. I didn’t know she had told him. I was getting to know him. Like talking to him at the bus and stuff and I was building a foundation to be friends with him. And then one day, we were all walking to the bus and she moved so that the two guys would be walking together and he got scared and immediately moved away. That is when I figured out that he knew about me. So, I wasn’t sure, but the next day all the rumors about me went out all over the school. And basically everywhere I went, I would hear comments made like he is gay or bi and to this day I still struggle with it. I don’t even know for sure if I am bisexual or gay. And then for someone to judge me because I am for sure when I don’t even know. This was just really hard. So basically what I did was just crawl into a shell and only hung around my friend, Carla. That is when I became Gothic and dressed in black. I was only that for a year. I was in the punk mode and that is when I thought about committing suicide. All of this happened during the middle of my eighth grade year.

I really was suicidal at one point. Nothing seemed like it was good enough for my parents. They weren’t supportive. The kept riding me about my grades, values, beliefs, friends. I
got tired of hearing it. This was in eighth grade and between school, the friend situation, and my parents, I thought my life was over. I live close to the turnpike. I walked to the fence in my backyard and jumped over it, and I was thinking of running into the highway in hopes that someone would hit me. Then I thought about it for about 10 seconds and climbed back over the fence and looked at the highway. I didn’t do it because I decided I am not going to let society judge me for dying this way. I thought about all of my dreams I have and that I owe myself an honest shot to get to where I want to be and I am just not going to take the easy way out. If I had committed suicide at that time, it would have been society winning. It would have meant my parents were right, and I was worth nothing. I think this is why I value life so much today. I am glad I didn’t do it, and I am glad I am here to face all of this stuff and to try to help other people and make it to where I want to be.

I never talked to any adult about any of this and especially not my parents. I found refuge in the “Goth” group of kids for a while who accepted me for who I am. The punk, Goth group was really accepting. I didn’t tell them, but because of the rumors they knew. They didn’t care, and they just let me hang out with them. That is how I know that group accepts everyone because they did that for me. I was not the favorite kid in school because one, my weight and then two, I was different and I was questioning who I was. So, this is why I liked the Goth group and tried to act like them and dressed like them for awhile.

Oh my gosh. My grades went down in eighth grade. Everything went down in eighth grade. You look at my progress and you can tell something happened in eighth grade from the beginning. I think the first month was okay, but then they just went down drastically and that was the year my grades were awful. I couldn’t focus on anything but the social stuff. You can tell something happened by my grades. That was a bad year.
Freshmen year was a relief. It was much better than eighth grade. It was like my sixth grade year really. I was able to start over and I was just getting acquainted with how things are in high school and the new teachers and kids and things like that. Except for one class in science, a girl from my orchestra--I have been in orchestra since fifth grade--was in the science class and like the second day of class, this guy comes up to me and asks me, “Are you gay?” I hate it when people ask me that and then I am okay when they ask me that because I am not lying when I say no. I am not gay. I am bisexual. I told this guy no and I asked, “Why are you asking?” He said, “Because Teresa (the girl from orchestra) told me.” That day was shocking, and I thought eighth grade was going to happen all over again. But freshman year was great because nothing happened like in eighth grade that was so bad. And last year (his sophomore year) was fine and I concentrated on my grades.

Even though things are going better for me, I know that sometimes I put my straight friends in an awkward position. I have seen it before. If I have a friend and he doesn’t know I am bi, then I tell him and he would be like that is cool or whatever, but then if he heard someone making fun of me because I am bi and then he stood up for me and said he was my friend, then he would be questioned, too, if he was bi, and not every male is comfortable even just being accused of being bisexual. Even just being curious about your sexuality—not every male is comfortable with that. When I was put in that situation, I got real ‘clenchy.’ I don’t know what the word is—real shocked. I didn’t know how to face it. I did not know how to handle a social situation like that. I have been put in situations in which I have been asked if I am gay or bi at least five times already and it is so awkward to hear those words because, well, actually, I heard it three days ago and he said, “Why did you say so and so was cute—are you gay?” And I said, “Yes, I am.” And he said, “Yeah, he is cute.” I was saying yes in sarcasm, and I don’t think I got
the point across that it was sarcasm. And I was like, “You know what? So what?” Because I have sort of been thinking about coming out next year. I may or may not.

There is so much to think about with coming out. My friend told me he could never come out because his parents would beat him. I really believe the reason why one friend of mine does not go to the bathroom anymore at school is that he is so out and feminine, and if he were caught in the bathroom, he could get killed or beat up or something like that. There is another guy that is a total pretty guy—that dresses feminine—you can’t miss him, and you could talk to him and he could really tell you some stories. In ninth grade I saw him crying one day. It was the beginning of this year, and I was talking to him, and he told me the reason he was crying that day was because there were a lot of things in his life that were really bad. His parents, well, he told me his parents hit him and all that. And I am pretty sure it was because of the gay thing. He came out when he was a freshman, and he told me it was really hard for him. He said the he reason he came out is because he wanted to know who his true friends were.

I think I am going to be open to more and more people eventually. I don’t mean that when people come up to me and ask me, I am going to disclose it. I think you have to earn the right to know. My sexuality is just one part of me. That is like coming up to me and asking me about my race. . . And I am like (about his sexual orientation), if you really want to know, I will want to judge you and to figure out why you want to know. I have to trust you to confide in you. I do not want to be judged automatically because of my sexual orientation. There is more to me than sexual orientation. That I can’t make friends with you because of your sexuality—this is not right.
Descriptors of Urban Midwest

I like this school so much because you can see everything at the same time. I can see people being teased. I can see homosexuality being out there. I can see racism. I can see all these different races. I can see inter-groupings of all these different people. I can see a lot of life here in this one building. In a seven-hour day, I can see a lot of stuff. I like being here. On top of that, I have always described this school as I hear my friends describe it, too, as one of the most ghetto schools we have. A lot of Black people go here. I like here because I can be with my friends, but also I like it here because we have great programs. . . Our music department, our drama department, all of our advanced placement and honors classes here. . .Whether we are safe or not, I am not sure, but we do have great programs here. . . We have a lot of great students here. That is why I like being here so much. Basically, we are a mini world, and I get to see a lot of what goes on in the world here in this school. That is why I love being here and want to come back next year. . .

Summary

Raul’s negotiation of multiple worlds is quite complex. The disconnect he feels with Hispanic culture and his family due to “being different” is an integral part of his experience. Additionally, for Raul, questioning his sexuality has been a central part of his social experiences at school, and he experienced some difficult years in his schooling due to this questioning. In his eighth grade year, he considered committing suicide because his duress was so great from being bullied, teased, and ostracized by his peers due to his sexual orientation. As he has grown older, he has found ways to compensate for the difficulties; however, he expressed ongoing concerns for his safety if he were to come out and for the safety of his friends who are openly gay. He has not had conversations with adults at home or school about some of his desperate experiences.
regarding his sexuality. He has persevered in school, despite the challenges of not fitting the traditional assumptions, including his own, of what it means to be a Hispanic male. Disconnected from his family and culture, Raul has found refuge in his friends, school activities, and plans for his future.

Kevin

Kevin, a tall, lean, and muscular White male is 17 years of age and in the 11th grade. His hair is short, dark, and neatly groomed. He most often wears black cargo pants, army boots, and a t-shirt to school. He has olive skin, penetrating hazel eyes, and finely sculptured facial features. Kevin is friendly, witty, thoughtful, articulate, and expressive, demonstrating considerable insight about his life and the life of his peers in school. Kevin recognizes the complexities and multifaceted dimensions of human nature and identified himself as “courageous, kind, angry, lustful, loving, and empathetic.” Kevin described what others have said about him: “I have been told I am caring, sweet, compassionate, loving, and serene. I have also been called mean, sin, lustful, hatred, chaotic, and angry.”

Kevin is on track for graduating from high school for Spring of 2008. He has already enlisted in the military and will begin his service the summer after his high school graduation. He shared that serving in the military is a life-long dream for him, as he believes it will be his ticket to financial stability and will pay for his college. Kevin wants to go to college and obtain advanced degrees to become a psychologist for the military.

Significant themes about Kevin’s life involved frequent moves in his childhood, which affected his social and academic experiences, and exposure to violence in his home. His narratives also included his thoughts about discrimination and stereotypes. I share Kevin’s
narratives about these issues, and then I conclude with his descriptions of the current status of young people, and how he believes others can support them.

Frequent Moves and Influences on Social and Academic Experiences

I was born in Florida and lived there until my parents divorce when I was three years old. At that time, my father and I moved to Chicago, and my younger brother and mother stayed in Florida, which is where they continue to live. In my early school years, I moved back and forth from Chicago to Florida. I moved around with my dad in the Chicago area and went to a variety of schools there from kindergarten through second grade. I went to school in Florida for third grade and went back to Chicago for fourth grade. Half of the fifth grade was spent in Chicago and the other half in Florida. Sixth through eight grades were spent in Florida, and then in ninth grade, I moved to Kansas to live with my dad again and began attending Urban Midwest High School.

Moving a lot was hard on my friendships, really, but back then, at that age, kids didn’t have as many prejudices. You make friends and you lose friends and that is how it goes. I make friends easily. I am very verbal and friendly, and I hang out with the outcasts. I have always been seen as an outcast. I don’t feel like an outcast, really, as I am friends with everyone at school, but I do hang out the most with outcasts. I liked hanging out with the outcasts because they are not considered quote unquote normal. I hung out with kids who may not have been considered all there; who may have had problems at home; kids who don’t exactly live the wanted life. I hung out with the kids who lived in the broken down house, if it even was a house, it might have been a trailer. Kids who had really crappy family lives and parents were doing drugs and things like that. I always have seen myself as a stronger person, and everyone needs a stronger person to anchor themselves and to feel loved. I see myself in that role. I have three friends who have
always seen me as their older brother because we have been through some crazy stuff, and I was always there to pull them through.

The first best friend I ever had was in Chicago. I just found about a month ago that he got hit by a car and died. I just found out about it. My dad told me, and I was like, wow, that hurts. I cried, made sense of it, was like stuff happens in life, and you can’t drag it out. I try to handle things myself, but I if I reach a point I can no longer take care of it, then I can reach out to others, but that is not very often. But that my friend died, wow, that really is sad. It has been a long time since I had seen him, but he was my first best friend.

Moving affected my friendships as I was growing up, and it also affected the academic side of things. I know I have some gaps in my learning from all of my moves and interruptions in my education, but I feel like I know enough to go on. The differences in curriculum from school to school were challenging, and sometimes the material had either already been covered in the previous school or had not been covered at all. I found out that when I got here the reason geometry was so easy for me is that I already had the material before. I had already learned it all. And I had already learned Algebra 1, so I could sleep though that class and still maintain I think a B average in the class. I literally slept for an hour, did my work, and then went back to sleep in that class.

Other things about me and my education, and this could be from chaos in my home, all the moves, I don’t know, but if it bores me, I can’t focus. I get bored a lot in school. I definitely, yes, get bored a lot in school. English bores me because it is not literature I like to read. For me to maintain my focus and concentration, it has to be interesting, and a lot of what goes on is just so boring.
Exposure to Violence and Abuse

Other interruptions in my education had to do with some drama with my family situation. After my parents got divorced, my mother was never without a new boyfriend. While I was living in Chicago with my father, one of my mother’s boyfriends in Florida beat my younger brother, Michael, until my mother found out and eventually kicked him out of the house. His name was Peter. How he was able to beat my little brother, I have no idea. I was in Chicago with my dad, so Michael was in Florida by himself.

I have had a lot of violence in my life. One of the most violent events happened when I was in seventh grade and 12 years old. I witnessed my stepfather at the time abuse my mother. His name was Todd. Todd is the reason I don’t do drugs. He was high when he beat up my mother in front of me. I attacked him with anger, of course, and stabbed him with a knife twice in his leg. When the police came, he told the officer I was delusional. The officer looked at him and laughed. He could tell Todd was lying to him and the marks on my mom’s face helped to back up what I told them about what happened. The officer took the wounds to Ted for self defense, so I got away scotch clean. That night I saw the full of rage monster I could become. I went to 18 months of anger management classes after that incident. I guess that is why people consider me angry, chaotic, and lustful, because, well, there is that part of me. This is when I found out just where my rage could take me if I let it.

I missed a great deal of school that year and failed most of my classes. This incident with Todd created significant hindrances to my learning and education. I missed three weeks of school. And during those three weeks they went from pre algebra to algebra and I had never taken math at that level and it was so late in the school year that I couldn’t go back and learn the information. That happened across the board, so I got Fs and failed seventh grade.
Let’s see—other hindrances to my education. . . At the age of 15, I moved to Kansas to live with my dad. I was doing pretty well for the first three months. I lived in a house that I picked out the previous summer. My ex stepmother as of now, was gone. It was just me and my dad living like we used to be. But then Cynthia came back! She came back! I never really had much of a problem with her until she came back. She had two kids, a boy three years old and a girl eight years old, and she never spent time with them. My dad had to always work to support all of us, and Cynthia would go out and get drunk and leave me with the kids. I had more mental breakdowns in the next seven months than I have ever had in my entire life. I would put the kids to bed and be their parental figure. I understood why my dad wasn’t there. He had to work to feed us, but Cynthia had no excuse. Since the Todd problem, my rage had never come out again, but Cynthia had the habit of being the angry drunk. She came home and beat me daily. I called SRS (Social Rehabilitation Services) and told them what was going on, but she is smart and knew what to say. They determined she was a suitable parent and walked away. The abuse went on for seven months, and I had seven months of trying to keep my rage down. I started cutting myself, overdosing on Tylenol, Ibuprofen, Advil, whatever I could get my hand on to try to numb myself from the pain. After about six months, I weaned myself off of that and then one day, I just snapped. She came home and hit me, and I lost control. I became, “him.” That full of rage person. “him” pushed her down the stairs, put a knife to her throat and said, “If you ever fucking touch me again, I will fucking kill you bitch!” Since that day, if I ever see her now, she won’t even look at me in a bad manner. I blame myself for what I did, though. I should have been strong enough, but failed to contain “him.” Yeah. I am told I am an angry person. And all of these things made concentrating on school a bit difficult.
I tried to tell my dad about what Cynthia was doing but at first he did not believe me until he came home one day and saw it for himself. Once he finally accepted and realized what was going on, he left Cynthia for good. My dad is now married to a woman from the Philippines and she is kind and finally a good match. I am lucky now as my family is actually pretty happy. I have an open and supportive relationship with my dad now.

I have worked through a lot. I have had therapy and anger management. I have learned to channel my anger, really, in ways that doesn’t bring harm to others or myself. I have had a long time since I have lost it in terms of my anger. I have learned to meditate and that helps me work through bottled up emotions, especially rage and anger.

*Discrimination and Stereotypes*

With racial discrimination, you have to look at all of the standpoints and why people believe a certain way. Take the Black Panthers for example, I haven’t read much about the Black Panthers, but I know they had something against White people because of the way White people had treated them and segregation and things like that, which is totally understandable from their point of view. Society was saying they couldn’t do certain things or have certain things because of their skin color, which I believe is complete bull with a bleep in their somewhere. Other things about discrimination—racial profiling—just because someone is Black, it doesn’t mean they are a thug or a gang member and are not a respectable person. The images on TV, music, movies and such portrays African Americans and Asians, too, with bandanas and guns in their pockets and focus on gang banging and the same thing is in the Latino culture. Some are in gangs but most are not and most are respectable people. And then there is the Chinese. You see a Chinese person and you think they are going to be really smart and have a really nice car—that is racial profiling, too. Just because one person acts a certain way it doesn’t mean another will.
Everybody is an individual and make who they are. Wow. Here I am ranting about racial profiling.

About my own personal experience with stereotypes, I would say that I don’t fit the stereotype of a White male--the stereotype that a White guy should have a nice car, a nice size house, and a suit--he should be rich, successful, athletic, powerful, and watch football, all of which I am not. I feel the pressure, but I ignore it. It is there, but oh well. It is not how I want to live my life. We don’t have to follow the stereotype of society. We have control of our own lives and not everyone else.

To me, the African American point of view is, he is White. He hangs out with outcasts, the Goths, so he is probably not a very nice person. For those African Americans who don’t know me, they probably don’t have any respect for me. If they show none for me, then I show none to them. That goes for any person regardless of what group they are in.

We rarely discuss this stuff in school. The teachers would never talk about these issues as they would be afraid we would all get in arguments over it—that we would all go postal or something.

*Descriptions of the Status of Young People*

The main factor here is that I admit we are immature at times, but we can think like anyone else. We have our voice. We have problems and every now and then we really do need help. I don’t practice the whole we need help thing because I do my best to not really get any, as I believe if I can deal with it, I can become a stronger person. But we do need help sometimes, but most of the time, people don’t really listen, so we don’t reach out anyway to adults.

Now something else. I think we have been called the lazy generation. There is a song on the video game, Burn Out 3, called “We are the Lazy Generation,” which is the song by the F-
Ups. They call us the lazy generation because all we do is sit on our butts and play video games and let life pass us by—smoke pot, drink alcohol and that sort of thing. They scream over and over to the older generation, “We will not be there for you!” It is pretty crazy, but I think it says a lot about the way some teenagers feel.

Now for me, I don’t smoke pot or cigarettes because I had an aunt who died of cancer due to smoking, and my dad would freak out, if I did. I also don’t drink alcohol too much because I do not like the feeling of not being in control and my dad would not approve of that either.

But I do play a lot of video games. Kids are into video games because you can have just as much fun sitting down racing people and blowing people up in a video game than you can just running around outside. I know I have played some really, really violent video games. My roommate, Patrick, who rents a room in our house, picked up a new one called Manhunt. It is a really fun game. It is a really, really sick game, though, but a fun game nevertheless. I know that in real life I couldn’t do any of it because 10 counts of manslaughter would get me put in jail for life. Well, one count of manslaughter could get me thrown in jail for life.

But really, we need to get off our butts and do something. We are getting so many conveniences. You don’t actually have to go outside to learn something; you can watch TV for an hour. Not that watching Discovery Channel is a bad thing as I have learned quite a bit from it, but it doesn’t give you a lot of motivation to do other things. I am sure if we went out and actually did something and used our physical abilities as much as our mental abilities, we would be nowhere near as obese as our country is. And kids wouldn’t be as stressed out, too, because physical activity is good for mental health. Gotta love endorphins.
If schools really wanted to get students motivated and to energize them, they should find out what the student body likes and then corporate it into whatever teachers are teaching, which I know for the most part, schools haven’t even tried to do. The most positive experience I have had in my education is JROTC because it teaches you discipline and skills for life.

Summary

Despite the many challenging and traumatic disruptions to his schooling, difficulties focusing and concentrating, and being bored in school, Kevin is on track for graduation. He has enlisted in the army and will serve after he graduates from high school. Kevin has felt stereotyped at times as a White male, the stereotype that as a White male he should be successful and powerful. Violence and abuse are significant themes in his life. Kevin attributes being able to receive therapy to work through his painful past, his current relationship with his father, strong friendships with some of his peers, and his involvement in JROTC as significant supports to his ability to persevere in school despite his many, many difficulties. He reflected on the importance of listening to and learning from young people, and helping them, too, when they need it. He recommended that schools begin with students’ interests, which is something he perceives they have not tried.

Sasha

Sasha, a spunky and vivacious 16-year-old White female, is a sophomore at Urban Midwest. At age four, she was in a serious car accident, and as a result of the accident, she is paraplegic. Her grandmother was the driver, and Sasha and her great grandmother were passengers in the car; her great grandmother died in the accident. Sasha spent a year in the hospital recovering from her injuries and since the accident she has encountered ongoing medical complications involving multiple hospital stays, surgeries, and doctor visits.
Sasha has one younger brother and two older adult brothers, who no longer live in the home. Sasha currently lives with her mother, father, and younger brother.

Despite seeming setbacks in Sasha’s young life, she remains full of vim and vigor, and as she described herself, “With more personality than the whole cast of Rent put together!” Sasha is expressive, comical at times, and a young woman of great strength. She experiences severe and ongoing headaches and other health issues; however, she attends school as regularly as she can, determined to participate in academic activities and in a full social life at school.

Sasha has bright eyes and an attractive face. Her skin is light and her hair, long, shiny, and smooth, changes color depending on the week. Sasha’s hair colors vary in shades of black with occasional burgundy and even green streaks (during Halloween). She typically dresses in black jeans or black cargo pants and black shirts mixed with some red, turquoise, or white. She likes clothes, jewelry, shopping, makeup, and to laugh a lot. Functioning similar to an event planner, Sasha tends to arrange various fun-filled activities on the weekends with her friends. She lives in a sleek, lightweight, and blue wheelchair that transports her to the many places she wants to go. Sasha plans on going to college after she graduates from high school and would like to become a psychologist.

Sasha is articulate and descriptive and had much to say about life, teenagers, her disability, and education. Her narratives are divided in two sections: (a) life at school as the ‘Goth Wheelchair Girl;’ and (b) hindrances for students in the world of Urban Midwest. I conclude this section about Sasha with her descriptive thoughts she wrote about herself.
The Goth Wheelchair Girl

When people look at me, they see my wheelchair, and are like, “Oh my god! Wheelchair Girl! She can’t do anything by herself!” And really I am one of the most independent persons I know, and I know a lot of people, so that is saying something.

People are scared of change and differences in others. So it kind of worries them when they see me interacting with people who are quote unquote normal. They kind of get worried I guess that somebody could be friends with someone who is so different. They are like, “Oh my gosh! How can you like her? I mean, she dresses in black! Oh my gosh! She has wheels!” And after awhile—it has been 11 years—that is a lot. I have gotten used to the comments and everything cause the accident happened right before I got into kindergarten, so it was me dealing with it and dealing with it.

People are scared. Why are they scared of me? I don’t know why, but they are. I don’t know if it is because they don’t know me, but people don’t let go of grudges. Like in the hallway—like in the main Urban Midwest hallway—M hall! Death Hall! There are hundreds of people going one way and then hundreds of people trying to go another way. So if someone like me accidentally runs over a foot, people are like, “Oh my god! I hate that wheel chair! Argh! Oh my god! I hate that wheel chair girl!” Actually, it gets more obscene as you go along in the day.

In the hall, one girl was like, “You better not, bitch!” I was talking to one of my friends, and she was pushing my wheelchair, and I was looking at these girls, and we kept stopping the wheelchair so we wouldn’t run over them. We were paying attention, but one of the girls looked at her friends and said, “Look! That wheelchair girl is riding your ass!” And the other girl turned around and said, “You better not, bitch!”
It is just so funny to me now, as some students will approach me and ask, “Are you in a wheelchair?” I just laugh and say, “I don’t know. You tell me!” Because I dress in black and hang with mainly the Goth group at Urban Midwest, other students have asked me, “Are you a skater? And I will say, “Do you think I can get on a board?”

My main group is the “Goths.” The stereotypes of Goths are, well, let’s see. . . . When people look at you, they will judge you by whatever you have that covers you. One of the quote unquote characteristics of a Goths is that they don’t give a damn. We are supposedly the emo (slang for emotional) loners. We are the ones that supposedly don’t like the people unless they are exactly like us, which isn’t really true because we’re the ones that will go out and talk with other people and will get along with other people. But it (being loners) is not how a lot of us are. The quote and unquote Goths in my group are different as everyone can be. You have me. One of the things is that if you’re a Goth, you supposedly are a loner, and I’m not. Most of us are not. I have like people surrounding me. People think that Goths and really skaters are always on drugs. Yeah, we’re on drugs! We’re like high on friends or soda—really that is the best drug ever! Mountain Dew! Mountain Dew! I gotta have it.

Everyone thinks of us as something, and we are the exact opposite. I have had people who will look at me, and they will think something and then when they find out that is not how it is, they will completely change their whole view on me. Mary used to think I was the scariest person she had ever met, and now we are best friends.

And another thing, most of the schools in the district—no matter how much they say they are for the handicapped—they are lying to me. Cause elevators—one of the things that they told me when I was switching from middle school to high school—was that, yes, the high school we want you to go to has three levels, and if the elevator does not work, you will be escorted by the
football team. And I am like, “The Wheelchair Girl does not want to be escorted by the football team!” They tried to get me into a place where it would be the most efficient and useful for me, but they had not even thought about Urban Midwest. They were being idiots. I wanted to go to Urban Midwest. I like Urban Midwest. My brothers went here. Urban Midwest is all one level, except for that other part (five social studies classrooms and the mezzanine to the library are upstairs), and I don’t go up there. I don’t need to go up there. My parents did not want me to go to Urban Midwest because they don’t like the neighborhood, but really my main case to my parents was that in case of an emergency, if there was a problem, I couldn’t get out of those other schools. If there was a fire, and I am not saying this against the school board or anything, but their first idea is to get the rest of the kids out. In fire drills it has always been get the rest of the kids out, and then we will worry about the little wheelchair girl. Because I am one, and there are thousands. It’s just the way they do it. I just want to address the outside world and not just schools. I want to tell everyone, “Think before you build an expensive building! Think before you try to build a city and then have to fix things to make them accessible!”

Hindrances Influencing Students’ School Experiences

Hindrances? I think the greatest hindrance to student’s willingness to persevere in school is that adults tell students over and over again and in multiple ways they are failures. Hindrances are the people who tell them they cannot do it. Half the little people in this school have been told by someone they are failing. That they are going to fail and that all they will ever be is a failure. And really that is not healthy. I think tons of people just say it flat out. They will tell you straight out that you are a failure and that you will never be able to accomplish this. They say it in all kinds of ways. If they don’t say it straight out, they say it in snide little remarks that are sarcastic, too.
Well, like my drivers education teacher for instance, called us failures with weapons. He said, “That is all you are when you are driving—failures with weapons! That is all sixteen year olds are when they are driving—failures with weapons!” But we are not all failures! I haven’t crashed into anything yet! And they set you up to fail. That is the way they do it. They tell you you are going to fail and then in your mind, you’re thinking this person is older than me and knows more than me, so he or she probably knows I am going to fail. Which leads to—oh my gosh—oh my gosh, mental breakdown. And then they do fail. And then they get mad, and they just give up, and say, “I will never be able to do this!” Rarrh! (Sasha’s exclamation of frustration.)

And I have more. If you have a friend who has failed and has been told over and over they are going to fail and will continue to fail, they will believe it and think “Oh well. That is how I am going end up!” And then they have a mental roadblock! I think we should take them down with jackhammers! Not the people, but the mental roadblocks!

Even family, relatives, its not just your actual peers, but people who are older than you give you the messages of failure. What people demonstrate, too, like someone close to you who is in jail, you think that is how you will be, too, because that is what you see. As much as you might hate that and are set against it and hard as you may try to be something else because of what you have seen, you may, too, end up in jail. You want to make the right decisions, but you make all the wrong ones.

Influences students get from anybody or anything creates mental roadblocks, because even the television will tell you that you are going to fail. The music, and, I am trying not to sound prejudiced here, but the music some Black people listen to such as Hip Hop or Rap
constantly talks about how everything should be and that is not how things should be. “Gotta get some gangsters and some hos!” Ugh!

Really, somebody’s mind is the worst hindrance they can ever have because they can always choose just to ignore everything and anything that comes. I don’t listen to people when they say you’re going to fail because I know if I put my mind to it, I am not going to fail!

It is always somebody’s choice on whether they are stupid or not. It is not that they are stupid; it’s just they have given up, and they don’t care. Anyone can be brighter than somebody else. They just have to put actual effort into it.

Instead of giving up, you can harden your head to that, and think, “I am not going to fail! I am not going to fail! I am not going to fail!” But no! They choose to take the easy way out because this is America! And the stupider people of our generation say, “Oh no! They hate me! Oh no! I am going to be emo and go slit my wrists, cut, cut, cut.” Oh sorry. That was bitchy! It is just that I have been through so much, watching people give up is difficult to understand.

As far as my personal experiences with people telling me I would fail, well, I have had tons of people tell me that I am not going to be able to do anything. But because I am a rather stubborn person, I had to do it. If someone tells me I can’t do something, my first goal in life is to do that something and go rub it in their face. When I got out of the hospital, somebody told me that I would never be able to live a normal life.

Some doctors told me I would never live a normal life and that I would never ever be able to even have enough breath to blow up a balloon. I spent four hours at my little brother’s birthday party blowing up balloons, so we could fill the floor with them and so we could kick them around. I think there were over a 100 balloons and I did all but 25 of them. They told me I would never have enough breath support, and I can hold my breath under water for a minute and
a half! They also said I would not be able to feel from here up (she motioned from her waist up), and I can feel when people grab me. I can feel when people try to tickle me.

You know what else about me? I think my actual body, all my cells and everything, are going against them. All of me is stubborn, down to my little pinky toe. We’re all stubborn! It was never encouragement. It was always you are not going to be able to do this. It was, “NOT, NOT, NOT! No! Bad! You don’t get any candy, you little girl!”

Hmmm. I have no idea where I got my drive to survive and persevere. I just think it is my stubbornness. I have been stubborn since I was a little bitty kid. When somebody tells me I can’t do something, I just know I can do it!

When I was in about the second or third grade, my parents started working a lot. They got jobs, and then they got more jobs, and more responsibilities at those jobs. They worked longer and longer hours, left earlier in the morning, and got home later at night. I had to take on more and more responsibility. It was tough, very tough, but I did it. I had my little brother. I did everything. I got him up, got him dressed, fed him, made sure he took his medicine because he is a little ADHD boy. I had to make sure he had his medicine so he could go to school. I would call in prescriptions, make grocery lists, keep the house clean, keep the animals, which we always had tons of them, kept them fed and watered, kept the yard up, so that we wouldn’t get the city called on us again by the stupid neighbor behind us. I was doing everything. I was tired all of the time. I was kind of forced into being the maternal unit along with being a parent in general to my little brother. I had to take care of myself as well. I taught myself a lot of things in that time.

And another thing about thing about hindrances--this place (Urban Midwest) is hostile--people are idiots, too! I am not kidding! One girl came into class high on Ecstasy. She was bouncing around and laughing and dancing. This is a hostile place. I mean the fights! Really, the
fights are about insulting people for no apparent reason. My friends and me, we make fun of it! Like some of the Black people will go up to each other, and they will smack each other, and will be like, “Hey, Bitch, you stole my cookie!” And so in our hall during lunch I will go up to somebody (one of her friends) and I will poke them, and I will be like, “Hey, Bitch, can I have that cookie?” And it’s just fun. It is all so insane. The fights are over something stupid. Like a boy! I have heard people cause fights over boys, over earrings, over a pair of shoes! “Oh, my gosh, she is wearing my shirt!” People have seizures like over the most awkwardest things. And it is really stupid and quite pointless.

A final hindrance, I think, for students is that no one listens, notices, or pays attention to what we really have to say. Because I am sixteen years old, nobody listens so me. I have this conversation a lot with my dad. I am sixteen; I am a minor; and nobody cares what I say. Nobody is going to listen. No one is going to take what I have to say with actual seriousness. They are just going to brush it off their shoulder just as if a two year old said it to them. And no matter how mature you may act, you are still just a minor. It does not matter what you say. It does not matter how much thought you put into it or how much evidence you shove out there, you are a minor. Which is how people treat you, too. Wow. I am sounding kind of bitchy again, but this is how it seems.

Sasha Writes about Herself

I love... Who I am now. This black haired blue eyed girl. With more personality than the whole cast of Rent put together. I like being happy, perky, an awkwardly amazing ball of joy. I love the friends I have, and how they make me feel. Even more so, I love the boy I found, and how he makes me enjoy life so much more.
But sometimes... I wish I was blonde again. I wish I could take pictures like some of the girls I know. I wish I could walk. I wish I could look good in clothes. I wish I could dance. I wish I could be more independent than I am right now. I wish I could sleep. I wish I would stop crying. I wish I could write stories, songs, poems. I wish I could... be someone else. Some place else.

I wish I could be eighteen. Living in a house with the only guy I think I could stand for over a week of being with everyday. Having a happy family. With loads of pets and a pretty backyard.

I wish I could be the girl I’ve always wanted. I wish I wasn’t such a god damned inconvenience. I wish... I could do everything he wants. I wish I wasn’t so scared. I wish I...

I wish I wouldn’t have so many things wrong with me. Because I know the most awesome people. And they all love me. Every little bit of me. And I love them.

Summary

Sasha had much to say about her life and experiences in school. She has demonstrated tremendous courage, spunk, perseverance, wisdom, and critical thinking in her young life. She continues to battle with health issues, trouble sleeping, severe headaches, and off and on hospital stays and doctor visits and yet she perseveres and is at school every day her health allows. In addition to physical impairments and resulting health issues, she has experienced considerable discrimination in life and in school. She expressed concerns about her peers giving up, fighting over seemingly frivolous things, being told by many people they are failures, and being treated as if what they have to say is of no value. Sasha plans on going to college after she graduates from high school. She is so much more than her wheelchair. She is a vibrant young woman with a great sense of humor and perspective on life.
Jamal

Jamal, an African American male, is fifteen years of age and a freshman at Urban Midwest. Muscular and athletic, Jamal plays football, basketball, and baseball at school. His attire is immaculate and stylish and he has bright eyes and a ready smile. He has dark skin, eyes, and hair. Jamal converses warmly and easily and is quite pleasant and polite in one-on-one situations with adults. He is social and has many friends at school. Jamal plans on graduating from high school and college and wants to be an architect when he graduates from college. He enjoys laughing a lot and having fun at school, but he also is contemplative and has much to say about the issues regarding urban teenagers, particularly the Black male experience in school. He shared that he had “some really good teaching” that will help him “never forget where he has come from and experiences for Blacks less fortunate than I am.”

In his narratives, Jamal demonstrated considerable empathy and concern for other students, remaining cognizant of his family’s early struggles and his grandmother’s teaching about racism. Being a Black male permeated his descriptions about his schooling experiences and hindrances to and encouragement of students’ academic success in school. Themes in his narratives involved schooling experiences with teachers and factors that he believes hinder or encourage students’ success in school. Jamal’s narratives are divided by descriptions of his memories of his early years and schooling experiences; his experiences with and observations of teachers and education; his thoughts about activities, attitudes, and actions that support and encourage students to pursue their education; and factors he believes hinder students’ academic performance in school.
Early Years and Schooling Experiences

I was born in Houston, Texas, and at age three, my family moved to Missouri, to Chicago for a short time, and then when I was six years of age, we moved to Kansas. I live at home with my mom and dad, and I have an older brother and sister who no longer live with us. My sister has a child and is going to college to become a teacher and my brother attended college and now works in an aircraft company here in town. I am close to my family. I have a lot of respect for my parents because they worked very hard to move up from being very poor and living in bad neighborhoods to living in nice neighborhoods where we live now.

My earlier years, well, it was bad. I will say that. Sometimes you go home and there was nothing in the refrigerator. Sometimes your parents aren’t home. That is why I have so much respect for my brother because up until the age I am now, he was really a big help to my parents and helped take care of me. Because they both worked and worked really hard to be successful and to be where they are now, and so at an early age, he had to step up and be the man for me sometimes.

I have lived in apartments and stuff. I have had a pretty experienced life. I will put it like that. That is why I will never forget where I have come from. I lived by my grandmother. She would tell me stories and stuff about slavery and how things were and made sure I never forget where we come from.

Up until my grandmother died she had a great impact on me. We talked about anything. It was like my conversations with you. We could talk about anything. I could tell her anything. Either she would teach me or she would let me learn and then she would teach me later. It was like a parenting experience from her. I had a lot of parenting from her and my parents. I have to say I had real good teaching.
My early schooling experiences were mixed with good and bad. My grades were good, but behavior was bad. I got in trouble a lot in elementary school. I was a real energetic student and did not like to listen at that age. I was angry and immature. I didn’t hang with the right people either. During conferences, teachers would always tell my parents, “He is a good student, but he can’t sit down and he talks a lot.” When we got home my parents would tell me I needed to settle down and do my work.

The school environment is hard for a Black male. Every other thing I did I was sent to office. Some teachers were just not so good. Some teachers stereotype you and think they already know what you are before you get into the classroom. Once you are in the classroom and they see what you are, they want to change you to what they thought you were. You’re a good student, but you are to them still that person they thought was bad. That was not encouraging, but rather discouraging.

On the other hand, some teachers in elementary school really helped me grow up; helped me calm down. Pulled me to the side, and talked to me like a parent would. I had a teacher named Mrs. Winters. That was a great experience. She didn’t stereotype me as a bad student. She took me as I was. If I talked a lot, she would then do show and tell. She provided a lot of opportunities to talk, and I got in trouble much less in her class.

I first really thought about racism in the third grade. There was an experience where another student, a White girl, who had sexually harassed me. I figured if I had done to her what she did to me, I would have been expelled. But she just got suspended and it wasn’t even for five days, it was only like for a day or two. She was in the same grade as me, and in the classroom in front of everyone, she pulled my pants down. She pulled my pants down in front of the whole class. Everyone laughed and I got teased a lot for that. The teasing was so bad that my parents
took me out of the school. And then when I went back the next year, there was still a lot of teasing and that is when all of the trouble began with me fighting and stuff. I fought a lot in elementary school because of all of the teasing.

I didn’t feel supported by the teachers or administrators at the time. The girl did not get the punishment she deserved, and certainly not the punishment I would have received if the situation had been reversed. Even like now if you touch a girl or look at her in any certain way, all of the teachers look at you different, just based off the girl’s word. But if the girl touched you in an inappropriate way, the teachers just laugh it off like, “Ha, ha, he is a guy. He isn’t going to care.” That is what it seems like. I am really talking about race and males and females here, too. This experience was humiliating, but I pretty much laugh it off now.

Elementary school was pretty painful for me socially, but middle school was okay. I didn’t really get into too much trouble. I got in trouble a few times. Every student gets in trouble sometimes, but for me it was nothing ever big. I had a few detentions, but nothing major. In middle school you know you have to step up and grow up more. In elementary school you are still a kid, but in middle school you just have to be more mature. Middle school was a really a pretty good experience for me. I got along with most of the teachers and better with my peers. I have always been kind of an off to myself kind of person, though, and when people get too close to my space or to into my circle of space, I used to try to fight to get them out, so I did get into some fights. I only got into three or four fights throughout middle school, though. Those fights were in my sixth and seventh grade years, but I didn’t get in much trouble, though. Maybe sometimes for talking too much but that was all.
Thoughts about Teachers

I feel like to be a good teacher you have to be a good parent. You should be able to talk to the student like a parent, such as, “Jamal, now you know that is not right.” Instead, teachers will write you up, if they don’t want to deal with you. And it shouldn’t be that way. They should always want to deal with you first because they are here doing their job to teach you to be a better person and a better student. Some do their job. But it seems like some are here just because of what they know; what they know they can teach you. But they need to also help you to be a better person, and sometimes they are not trying to do to that. And you have those teachers who are mean and strict and straight to the point and sometimes it would be better to be versatile. You have to be able to be many things. Sometimes you can to be nice. Sometimes you can be strict. And sometimes you can be in between. And sometimes you can push that student to be better. But here at Urban Midwest a lot of teachers, they are not versatile. They are here to tell what they know and that is it. But there are some who can relate to students, but not a lot.

Some teachers are not even comfortable talking to students and they call parents for stupid reasons rather than talking to the students first. Talk and relate to the student first instead of going straight to the parent. Some of the parents don’t care. Like on the phone the parent will be like, yeah, yeah, I will talk to him when I get home, but when the student gets home they are gone and they don’t care. Too, a lot of teachers here—they don’t know who goes home and has to live with roaches. They just teach and that is all they want to do.

Teachers need to be aware that not all students have an environment for learning at home. Many students do not have a place to go home to study, which makes school really difficult. They may have a home, but they have so much going on. Arguments, loud music, siblings, having to take care of siblings, and stuff like that makes it tough for some.
Some educators tell us what they have been through. Well, if you have been through the same, then you should know how to react to a student saying they weren’t able to do an assignment because they had to take care of their sisters or take care of the house or something. Teachers should be more lenient to students in some cases. They are teaching students not grown people. I do like the fact they treat us as more grown up, but in some instances they don’t. Like not being able to sit where you choose that is elementary and middle school stuff. We are in high school now. We should be able to choose people who we want to be around. Maybe some people will say you won’t learn that way but sometimes that is how I learn. I learn by being around the people I like to be around.

I really think that I am a good student. I have never been suspended or received detentions or been in any trouble here at this school, but sometimes even I wonder why I am in school. Some teachers, well, it seems like they are racist. Like when there are Blacks in the classroom, they will call attention to their color rather than to the student or me as a person, as Jamal. I hate it when they refer to “that Black kid over there,” rather than calling them by name.

These situations create reasons for a lot of students to not care. There are a lot reasons why students don’t care, but one thing is the teaching experiences in class. No fun. No field trips. No game activities. We might do a game every now and then. The teachers should be here to make learning fun for students and for themselves. We should get on the computer more. The computer is one of the reasons why most people know what they know. We should go and see more outside of school. It is more than just coming to school and learning how to do math and algebra. Anybody can learn that when they put their mind to it. There is more to school than that.

In elementary school there really is not that much where you can say, well, she’s racist, because you are young. But I think that over Black students whole experience of middle school
and high school, you can tell when a teacher is pushing you away and pulling another student forward, and you think about that the older you get. And I guess from my past experiences teachers have pushed me away and pulled another student forward, and then after they are done with that student, they will try to pull me forward but by that time you don’t even want to listen to them. You basically just learn to learn on your own. That is really how it has felt in a lot of my classes. Yes, there are teachers who can teach me, but I keep my guard up a lot. It is more like me going home and learning myself.

Teachers need to know you have different types of Black people first of all. I think some teachers look at you and how you dress and how you talk and that becomes their observation and judgment of you. Most teachers don’t get to talk to you or to know you. They teach the class and give you the work and that is it. If they talked to us more, even pulled students aside to talk to them, they would know more why students are how they are. I had a problem with one teacher because I couldn’t understand her English and how she taught math. I was frustrated with the situation, but she pulled me to the side sometimes and told me that she didn’t like how I was acting. Actually, that helped me. She told me I needed to stop talking in class and that she knew I want to do something with my life and should hang around the right people. Although I was frustrated with the class, I appreciated that she took the time to talk to me. A lot of teachers won’t do that. With her, my problems were the teaching methods. I just couldn’t understand how she taught. It was so different from the teachers I had been doing math with before. But I appreciated how she treated me. I had nothing against her. I am just in this for me. I gotta graduate. I gotta learn to do math. I want to go to college. She has already done all that, so for me to ask to move out of her class, that was not going to hurt her. This education is for me, so
when I asked to get out of her class, it was purely because I have to learn to do math. It was nothing personal at all.

Teachers who are versatile make great teachers. They can have fun; they can be strict; they are really good teachers; and they can relate to us. Also, they want to help students. When you ask them for help, they want to help you. I like to come to school and tell them hi. I have had several teachers who have believed in me, supported me, and given me opportunities to learn at higher levels. I have teachers who give me reasons to care about school.

*Activities, Actions, and Attitudes that Encourage Students*

Relationships with teachers and other things encourage students to stay in school. Doing sports really helps us Blacks. Because if it wasn’t for sports, I don’t think a lot of us would be in school. Without sports, I think we wouldn’t care about school. Having fun for us is really important. It makes our days go better, but some students want to do sports but cannot because they don’t have the money to. I really would like to help those kids who just don’t have enough, but I don’t work, and I gotta survive myself.

Sports are a good reason for me to keep my grades up, but sports and keeping my grades also creates stress. Sometimes we worry about sports too much. We beat ourselves up too much. We beat ourselves up for our grades and sports. I have been guilty of beating myself up for my grades and wondering if I will play in this game or not. We beat ourselves up too much. School should be an experience where you can come and be happy and then go home. After school activities should be fun and not so much pressure. You should go to school and be able to be happy. Most people come to school and they want to go home and they want to gyp.

Students’ lives are stressful, but I have ways to cope with the stress I feels at times.
I have to make school fun. I have to make it fun for myself. Because when you are beating up on yourself all you are going to do is keep going down the drain, down the wrong directions that you don’t want to go down. I make it fun for me. People may think this is weird but I talk to myself all throughout the day to help myself get through the day. You just have to really pump yourself up to go through school, sometimes, really. People may think this is weird, too, but you have to talk to the people in class others might think are weird because they are the one’s who are trying to do things with their lives. You gotta talk to people who are making it and that is what I do.

Church is helpful in supporting me and teaching me how to cope with life and how to deal with stuff that goes on. Church is good for you. It keeps you respectable, respecting yourself and others. The people there teach you a lot about a lot of things. I go to a youth group every Tuesday night. We all get together for an hour or two. We talk about situations and go through the Bible and stuff like that. We do an activity at the end. They talk to you about what they have been through. We have heard people talk about being raped and about being in gangs and stuff like that. These are people who have come out of some hard things and they teach you about life. I like my church and I try to go whenever I can. It is a help to me.

I am also learning that if we are going to be successful, then we have to speak up for ourselves. I am seeing that talking and speaking up for myself gets me better classes, gets my grades up better, and helps me be more successful. There would have been a time I would have just went through the motions and took the bad grade and not ask to change a class or to ask for help. But now that I am in high school, I am maturing and I see that I can either get in trouble or I can get out of trouble.
I had a lot of feelings and resentments about race, racism, and discrimination when I first came to Urban Midwest. It was difficult to see all of the Blacks fighting and the gang activity, Blacks in the office for discipline problems, and some of the teachers’ attitudes about Blacks. I feel that no matter how I dress or act, I will still be judged because I am a Black male and by how some Black males act. So these are all frustrations, too. I just try to ignore a lot and focus on what I need to do. I have grown up a lot this year. I would like to tell other students that you just can’t let it get you down. I could be like, well, they don’t like me so then I am not going to try or go to school, but that doesn’t hurt anyone but me.

It is frustrating that a lot of students in school try to trip up other students who are doing well. Sometimes they want you to join in gang activity and stuff like that but you just have to push it to the side. I am trying to get my grades. I am trying to do something with my life. I am not trying to be like other people so this helps.

Sometimes students want to be pressured and overpowered. No matter what anyone says, you do have a choice. You can choose the good side or the bad side. Most people it seems like choose the bad side. But you do have a choice. You choose the bad and make a few bad choices, and you go down so fast.

*Hindrances to Students’ Experiences in School*

One thing that hurts us a lot is that here we just had Black History month and no one in the school said anything about it, anything about it at all. And I know we have to learn about all of the history, but I think Black History month should be cared about. We didn’t even have a poster up for Black History month. We don’t even get a field trip to see something. It hurt a lot of us. We wondered why we can’t learn about us? We didn’t even learn about Martin Luther King this year. And he is why we are where we are today. Black history month wasn’t cared
about or even mentioned by anyone except us Blacks. We would talk about it, but we already
know about the importance of Black history. Our history teachers may know but it seems like
they don’t care if they are not teaching us about it. We were thinking that maybe we should have
a speaker come. We mentioned it but no one ever put it forth. It upset me a lot for us to not even
talk about it (Black history) at all. And it seems like our principal doesn’t care either. I am not
trying to talk about anyone or anything, but it seems like he is just here for the money. Even
though he is of the race, it seems like he doesn’t know where he came from.

I think most of my peers don’t think about anything except being hip to today. I think
they only care about today. But, me, I want to learn about anything and everything I can before I
die. I want to know everything I can about everyone. I think everybody’s cultures should be
learned about. I think everyone’s culture should be included.

I feel like we are real quiet. We don’t try. Back in my parents day, if they weren’t getting
something, they would protest or something. But now most of us don’t care. We will come to
school, do our day, and just go home. We should care more about learning. But most of the
students here don’t even care.

There are a lot of barriers out there for teenagers in terms of caring about learning and
getting their education. For some of us, I say we get off task for lots of different reasons. Girls
get in the way sometimes, and boys get in the way for girls.

I think girls do have a better chance of making it, though. It doesn’t seem like girls are
into smoking and drinking and rough stuff as much as the guys. I mean you have those few, but
the girls also are not into the gangs much either. They are not selling drugs and stuff. Guys think
they have to be tough and have an image to live up to. They gotta look like they are doing well
and to be all tough. It really is all about living up to an image. I am not saying it is easy for girls,
but I think the image it seems like boys are supposed to live up to makes it really tough. Boys are supposed to be strong, tough, and have the best of stuff, cars, clothes and things like that.

I am really concerned about gangs. The gang activity harms us. People are getting killed and losing their lives over gang stuff and who wears what color. My father’s brothers are gang members and some are gang lords, living in Chicago. My dad pulled away from all of that, and I have had to stay away from my cousins because of all of the gang trouble. I try not to think about it. The business in Chicago does not affect me too much. I don’t go there and try to stay out of it. The rest of my family is good. It is just my uncles and his kids that have those troubles. I am just trying to do my best to stay out of trouble and to get my education.

Summary

Jamal had much to say about factors in and outside of school that influence students’ experiences in school and willingness to learn. As a Black male, Jamal has had many experiences with racism, discrimination, and effective teaching and not so effective teaching. He expressed many concerns regarding gangs; some of his seemingly uncaring peers and peers that do not have the funds or support to do what he has been able to do; difficulties for males in living up to an image promoted in society; his culture being overlooked at school; and some teachers’ lack of sensitivity to students’ experiences. He finds support through his church and family. Jamal is inquisitive and perceptive and has much to say about education and despite the stress and varying hindrances he has encountered, he is persevering, maintaining his grades, and using his skills at school.

Jaleel

Jaleel is a 15 year old, Black male who is a freshman at Urban Midwest. He is athletic and participates in high school sports, playing football, basketball, and baseball. He has dark
skin, eyes, and hair. His face is handsome and his physique is lithe and strong. Similar to Jamal, he dresses nicely and is immaculate in his appearance. He frequently wears pressed button down shirts with blue jeans. He is a warm individual, conversing easily and readily, and he has a bright and engaging smile. Every time he sees me in the hallways at Urban Midwest, he greets me with warmth and a hug. He is witty and utilizes his sense of humor to cope with some of his stressors in life. He shared, “I have learned to not take myself or others too seriously. Way too many students take things too seriously, but, for me, I try to find the humor and fun in life.”

Jaleel appears happy-go-lucky, yet in quiet moments when he is given opportunities to share his thoughts about experiences significant to him, he demonstrates a wise and pensive approach to life. Jaleel plans on going to college after he graduates from high school and would like to learn technical skills such as working on cars or doing something in which he will work with his hands. Jaleel’s narratives centered on (a) his family and neighborhood experiences, including his thoughts about his family, male family members in prison, and violence in neighborhoods; and (b) his schooling experiences, including exposure to fights in middle school, experiences with teachers, and other thoughts about education.

**Family and Neighborhood Experiences**

I was born in Kansas and live with my mother, an uncle, and an older brother, who is getting ready to go into the Air Force. I have another older brother who works in the area, and an older sister who graduated from college and is also getting ready to go into the Air Force. I am close to my mother and to my whole family. My biological father and my stepfather spend time with me. My stepfather no longer lives with us, but I am still pretty close to him.

We don’t have older people around because they are all in prison. We, my family, we learn from all their mistakes. I talk to my stepfather a lot about life. He has been in prison and
tells us what not to do and how to live and things. He used to be a big time drug dealer and had
to serve a lot of time for it. He tells us the right way to go and not do what he did. He is from
Philadelphia. He’s been in a lot of fights and all that. He played sports and switched into gang
banging and stuff like that. When he got out of prison, he really changed. He has a little business
now and is doing all right. Basically what he told us is that he had to go through a lot to get
where he is now. My stepfather told us, “I should have been like I am now when I was 25. I was
supposed to be making money like this when I was 25, but I got locked up and that took away a
lot of my time. Everything is changing on the outside and you are just in there.”

There are not that many men out there. On my mom’s side, there is just her and her
sisters. Most of the men are locked up on my mom’s side of the family, or been locked up and
are probably going to get locked up again because of what they are doing. One of my uncle’s has
been locked up off and on since the age of 15 and by the time he gets out, he knows he will just
go back again. When you just get out of the penitentiary, there is no way you can get a job. It is
just real hard. No way you can get a good job. When people see that you have been in the
penitentiary, they don’t want to give you a job. So you go back in the streets again and do drugs
and then get locked up again.

All of my relatives are either from California and Chicago, and some are in Denver. My
mother’s family is from Chicago and lived in the projects. I am making good choices so I don’t
end up in that kind of situation. When I was about seven years old, we drove to Chicago because
my grandmother died, and we went to her funeral. I never saw my grandmother until I saw her in
her casket, so I couldn’t even cry. She had her own problems and was addicted to drugs and
stuff. When we drove to my mother’s old neighborhood in Chicago and to her childhood home
where her mother lived, it was crazy. It was the first time I saw mice everywhere. There were
crack heads everywhere; dealers everywhere. Police just drive down the streets and ignore the
drug deals. We went to my grandmother’s old house and went through her things. It was a big
house, but it was real raggedy. If you stepped in the wrong place, you might fall all the way
down to the bottom floor. There were mice and roaches everywhere. Every step you took made a
creak and you thought you really might fall through the floor. My mom was like, “You all think
you have seen and gone through things, well, look at this.” I was like, “I haven’t seen anything.”

Most of my family has been able to stay out of the gangs and violence and stuff, but I had
some relatives that got mixed into it. I have a lot of relatives in prison. My uncle did some crazy
stuff. He was in the news because he killed my auntie’s about to be husband. They were about to
move from Chicago to New York, and I don’t know what all happened except that my uncle shot
them and ran them over. That happened when I was in sixth or seventh grade. He is my mother’s
brother.

So many people just don’t have a clue about this stuff. People see me and think they
know me because I am happy and stuff, but they just wouldn’t know the things I have seen and
the things my mother has suffered. My mother is amazing. My mom is healthy. She is a big over
comer. She has two jobs and she is doing alright. My mother did move herself from the lowest of
the low into a middle class situation. My sister is the first one in the family to graduate from
college.

My father lives here and I see him everyday. My stepmother recently passed away, which
was hard, but my father is doing okay. He actually is a pretty good role model. He was a great
athlete. He played baseball in college and stuff, and he was going to go pro and play for the
Dodgers until he messed up his knee. He had a few kids and had to stay here in town. He works
at some automotive place. He didn’t have to mess with racism too much because he is so light skinned that people always thought he was mixed.

I do have people to talk to and to look up to, but really I am just my own person. I decided it is not that hard, though. All you gotta do is stay focused. People focus on cars and houses and stuff and forget the main thing. The whole main objective is to leave and to make it. Some people who are still 40 years old still live with their mom, which is ridiculous. That is ridiculous.

Some kids get support from their church, but not me. I go to church and everybody in that church does things that seem impossible. They make 4.0s and have full ride scholarships. I can’t live up to that. That is impossible to me. To focus that long and do that well. I can’t do that. I try my best, but I can’t do all of that.

When I was younger, I first started in a good neighborhood, and then we moved to a rougher neighborhood. There was a lot of violence. You could never go outside at night. Maybe you could go to your neighbors but that was it. You stayed inside. There were a lot of fights and gunshots. Gunshots. I have heard so many, seen so many, so many have been shot or murdered. It becomes normal. You think it is normal. There will be a gunshot here and a gunshot there. Things build up and then things just happen. People get shot. People you would never even think of. There was a house in my neighborhood that I thought was empty and someone got shot in it. You gotta lay low, keep quiet, and just don’t talk wrong to the wrong person. Keep to yourself, really. Keep focused on what you want to do with your life. I know more how to deal with stress now. My mom would always say there is no reason to sit around and cry about something if you can’t change it. If you lost some money, don’t sit there and mourn about it. It is someone else’s now.
I recognize that my family has made a lot of sacrifices for me to be where I am now. My mother has worked really hard so we can be in a safe neighborhood now and move up from where we were. I try my best to stay out of trouble and keep focused on my goals and education.

School Experiences

I have always done all right in school. I have enjoyed school, but as you get older, it gets more stressful. It is a big stress when you hear all of the time, plan for your future, plan for your future, and plan for your future. It is a lot of stress. I do plan for the future, but when I hear about it constantly, I stress out and worry about it too much. I had fewer worries in elementary school. Elementary school was easy, and I really liked school then. My favorite teacher in elementary school was my fourth grade teacher who was strict, but not too strict. She was nice and strict at the same time. I learned a lot. She taught us things above our level like middle school stuff.

Now middle school, it was different. It had more people and you had to get used to it. I had more friends, but I switched schools in seventh grade. When I went to the new middle school, they took me out of advanced classes, and they didn’t put me back in. I got really bored and stopped paying attention. It felt like they were doing stuff I did in fourth grade. I would do my work and then just lay down, and then I would get in trouble for laying my head down because everyone else would still be working. I have no idea why they took me out of my honors classes. It could have been because of my behavior, as I was off task a lot. I am enrolled in some honors classes at Urban Midwest, which is better.

As far as middle school goes, I played football, basketball, and baseball, and I kept really busy to stay out of trouble. But, there was a really bad situation for me in my first week of my new middle school when I changed schools. I got in a huge fight that I wanted to avoid, but the students at the new school had to show they were tougher than me. When they tested me, I didn’t
back down. I just beat them up. After I beat them, they left me alone. I was upset I had to do that, though. For one fight, I was locked up and had to fill out paper work in JIAC (Juvenile Intake Assessment Center). But I got out a couple hours later. I was suspended for three days. The school knew it wasn’t my fault because the student I fought with was always doing that kind of stuff. They found out that he was on drugs when he was messing with me. His tongue was brown and he was on meth. He got sent back to California because he was living with someone who wasn’t 18. He was living with his big sister who was only 17. They thought he was part of some sort of gang, too, because he had some kind of tattoo on his arm that was affiliated with gangs. I haven’t seen him since. I always had my guard up in middle school, but I had no further trouble with fighting after that one big fight.

I used to always get in trouble for talking in middle school. I still get in trouble some but not too much. When I first got to the new middle school, I got sent out of the classroom every day. I was used to being able to talk some in the classroom. The teachers rather than saying, “Jaleel would you please be quiet,” they would yell at me, “Shut up!” And I wasn’t used to people talking to me like that, and I would say something back and one teacher would send me out in the hallway or to the office. That dropped my grade. But then toward the end of the year I became cool with her. And I worked really hard to not get ticked off, and I started to do better. I just started working to shake things off.

A sense of humor really helps me to get past stuff that goes on. Every time I hear a couple of jokes, I forget all about it. A sense of humor and laughter just really helps me shrug things off. Some students take things just too seriously and too much to the heart. That is how they get into so many fights, too.
There is just so much fighting and stuff that goes on. For me, I just walk away from it. I have really grown up and realize the craziness of it all. I have a lot of opportunities to beat people up. I just don’t do it. There are kids that just say smart little comments all of the time, trying to pick fights. They say stuff like, “You weak! You weak!” They want to see if they have someone they can bully, as it makes them seem tough. But it is so dumb, I just ignore it and walk on.

When I was little, I learned boxing from my older brother. I put the gloves on and practiced with him. People think because I am skinnier and shorter than some they can demolish me, but they don’t know what I can do to them. They have no clue. My friends know. But I just stay out of it. I have fought enough times to know fighting doesn’t change anything. If you fight and even if they lose, they are just going to want to fight again. They are going to keep in that pattern. They lose, but then they keep trying and then they may bring weapons because they know they can’t beat you up. If you fight outside of school, people will talk about it in school, and you can’t get away from fighting if you do it that way. So, really it all has no purpose, so you walk away from it. So, when people try to say stuff, I just laugh.

I usually get along pretty well with my teachers and most of my teachers really like me, but I am an easygoing person. Things are good for me, but other students, a lot of students are going through a lot, and the interactions with other students and teachers, it is frustrating to watch, really. It just seems like when students are going through stuff, the teachers don’t really care. If you don’t do just what they want you to do, then they don’t really seem to care. Students can be having problems in the home and start crying about it in the classroom and they just don’t care. They tell them to quit talking, and they aren’t even talking. I wouldn’t know a lot of the problem stuff, because my home life is good, but it is something I have seen.
Another thing—kids sell and do drugs—they sell drugs, so they can get clothes and things they need so they look like everyone else. It doesn’t make it right, but they do it to fit in and not be teased. If teenagers had jobs and ways of supporting themselves and their families, they probably would not be into drugs so much or be in all of the fights.

I try to keep a really good attitude, but sometimes it irritates me when they (teachers) are surprised I do well. It seems like they always expect others to do better than you. If you get an A on the test, it seems they are like, “Oh, I am surprised. Keep it up.”

I don’t notice racism so much at school as I do on the streets with policeman. It seems like sometimes things are not quite right, though, at school. I kind of question, if teachers treat us differently. It seems like they do, but I don’t know. Like if a student has and 89.5 it seems like the White student would get an A and the Black student would not. I don’t know if that is true or not, but it is something I wonder about. We don’t ever talk about these issues at school, but it would probably be helpful if we did. It is hard to always have to wonder what people are thinking.

Summary

Jaleel is an athletic, witty, and intelligent Black male who has observed a great deal about life in and outside of school. He is well liked by his teachers and his peers. His narratives focused on his relationships with his family, concerns with male family members in prison, and violence in neighborhoods; and his interactions with and observations of his peers and teachers. He questioned his experiences with race and racism, but he has not talked to others in the school about it. His mother, father, and stepfather are important influences in his life. He plans on graduating from high school and has goals of going to college. He seemed determined to learn
from the mistakes of others and to stay focused on his goals. He had perceptive questions and
observations to make about many aspects of schooling experiences for urban young people.

Sharee

Sharee is a fourteen-year-old outspoken Black female in the ninth grade at Urban Midwest. She is strong, athletic, and intelligent, and she has a great sense of humor. She enjoys basketball and plays ball for Urban Midwest. Sharee shares that her teachers describe her as “smart, makes good grades, and talks too much.” She said that her friends describe her as a person who “is smart and speaks her mind.” She shared about herself: I make good grades. I just talk too much and I am too loud. Ever since I started school at parent teacher conferences they would always say, “She is makes good grades; she just is loud and talks too much.”

Sharee has dark skin, hair, and eyes, and wears jeans and colorful t-shirts with matching jewelry, hair accessories, and purses. She laughs a lot and has a bright smile. Sharee lives with her mother. She has an older brother with six children who live in the area and often visit her home. She takes care of her nephews often when she is not in school. Sharee described them as significant highlights in her life and indicated that she likes children a great deal.

Sharee’s father lives and works in Michigan. She visits him in the summer and plans on moving there to go to college after she graduates from high school. Her mother’s longstanding boyfriend, who Sharee refers to as her stepfather, is also in her life and has been since she was in the fifth grade. Sharee speaks quite fondly of him and said he spends time with her and helps her with basketball and her homework.

Sharee typically makes As and Bs in school on her report card. She reported that she is generally very confident about her academic skills and in asking teachers for help when she needs it. Sharee’s narratives revolved largely around her social experiences in school, including
early school experiences, stress with peers and fights at school, and thoughts and questions she has about racism, discrimination, and stereotypes about being Black.

Family and School Experiences

I have really good memories when I was a young kid and I had a lot of fun in the neighborhood we lived in. It was an all Black neighborhood, and we used to have all kinds of parties there. But now it is really raggedy. My brother still lives in that neighborhood with his kids and it worries me that he still lives there. My mother moved to a nicer neighborhood that has Black and White people, and I feel safe there.

A very sad time for me was when I lost my grandmother when I was in the fifth grade. That same year my uncle died, too. It was just really hard. My mother works long hours, and I hardly see her, and when I do see her, we seem to have fights. I don’t feel so close to my mom. When my grandmother and uncle died, it just seemed like the family fell apart. It just hasn’t been the same since.

I went to a majority Black elementary school, which I really liked. There was a lot of Black people there. Most of the time I was comfortable, but it was really loud. My fifth grade teacher was nice and she did not give us a bad grade over little things, and she would talk to us. And she was our friend and she wasn’t mean. She didn’t take her job serious all of the time. She kept good control over the class and everyone liked her. She understood what we were going through. She was Black. She didn’t act like a child, but she acted like us. It was a great experience. I also made a friend there who I am a still friend with to this day.

Middle school was difficult. Not academically, but socially. The social aspect was so tough. There were so many Black girls fighting like there are here. That is when I got in my first fights at school. I got in my first fight in sixth grade. This Black girl threw perfume in my face,
and I got really mad. That was my first fight ever. I could not believe myself. But with this girl, who I got in a fight with, she was a lesbian. She was mad because she liked me, and I said I didn’t like her, and I stopped talking to her and she got really mad. She threw perfume in my face, and I got really mad back. The school and my parents didn’t know why I got in a fight at school. I just told them she threw perfume in my face. And no one knew the real story. I didn’t want my momma to know, as then she would not want me to have friends.

After that everybody was scared of me. I didn’t want people to be scared of me, but they were. I got in fights in seventh and eighth grade, too. The teachers started picking on me more, too. It felt like they wanted a reason to write me up. They wanted to write me up because I talked too much and also because I told the truth and I said what I think and feel. I don’t think they like the truth or it doesn’t seem that way. So they wrote me up. I got in trouble and they told on me and some of them wanted me out of their classrooms.

Since I had a reputation for fighting, it seems like I had to fight a lot to protect myself in middle school. Other people had relatives and friends to cover their backs, and I didn’t have any relatives and all of my friends went to another middle school. I had several big fights in middle school. One fight was so bad in seventh grade, I was arrested and sent to JIAC. This fight was with the same girl I was in a fight with before. I think they were scared because we were both so big. When the police came, they threw us up against the lockers. They arrested us, and I got sent to JIAC. I was there for a day. They took my picture and then I waited for my mother to come. My mother was really mad, but she didn’t say anything. I told the people that I had this anger problem and they told me to go to these classes, but my mother never took me. I really wanted to go.
There was another thing that happened in middle school. One of my friends and I were walking down the hall to go to detention. And some teacher told us to go to detention, which was where we were going. He said something about the way we were walking, and said we were idiots, which really offended me. He said it loud and like he really meant it. If he would have said it in a different way, I would have acted different, but I said, “Don’t talk to me like that. How would you like it if I talked to you like that? How would you like it if someone called your daughter and idiot?” So, he wrote me up and I told my stepfather, and he went up there and there was a big argument with my parents and the teacher. First, the teacher tried to deny it. But then he apologized, but I don’t think he really meant it. My stepfather said, “You don’t talk to no child like that because they will take it to their heads and believe it.” Even though I had all the stress of fights and troubles with teachers, I managed to maintain good grades in middle school.

I get along well with some teachers at Urban Midwest and not with others. I get along with some because some are not so serious about stuff. They are more light-hearted about their jobs, too. I don’t like to be serious all of the time. I like to have fun. My favorite teacher is one who keeps a sense humor and always laughs about things. He knows to not take what we said or did personally because he realizes we could have had a really bad day before we even went into his class. He knew it wasn’t about him, but the stress we are under.

I haven’t gotten in trouble with teachers this year. When I am talking to an adult, I will say something like, “I don’t mean to be rude but this is what I am thinking.” I want teachers to know that I am not trying to be rude. What really bothers me is teachers ignoring me. I will be like, “I am not trying to be rude or anything, but you are helping all of these other students, and I need help.” The teacher will sit down and talk to me and explain things to me. This approach is working pretty well for me. I pretty much make all As and Bs at Urban Midwest. I have always
made good grades, but I have never taken honors or advanced placement classes because I think they would be too difficult for me.

*Continued Stress with Peers*

I wish students would come to school learn. I wish they would come to school to learn! It irritates me a lot when a student disrupts the learning and teaching. In my math class, an older student, a senior, was talking bad about the teacher. He was mocking the teacher, making fun of him. I tell him to grow up, and he changes the subject, and then it turns into an argument. I hate that so much, students who won’t be quiet so the rest of us can learn.

Other stress I have is that there are just always fights and stuff to deal with at school. The fights are so bad. Other Black girls, they are so jealous. They don’t like that me and my friends are doing well. They try to bring us down. People think I am a fighter because I learned to be aggressive because I needed to be in middle school. In middle school a lot of people had relatives to cover their backs, but I didn’t. I had to let them know I wasn’t scared, and that is when all of the trouble started and why I got into so many fights to defend myself. I don’t like fighting at all. I have not been in a fight in high school. But then at the beginning of the year I was suspended for what they call ‘verbal fighting.’ I felt I was just talking loud to get my point across and they called it verbal fighting. I caught everyone’s attention, though, and the principal explained that he was suspending me for verbal fighting. I had a close call another time at school. There is this one girl who is a senior. Her sister and I were arguing over something and her sister was talking stuff to me. She told her sister, and then the next thing I know the senior got on the bus and threatened me. I was like, whatever, “I don’t want to fight you or your sister.” She got up and acted like she was going to hit me. So, I got up and everyone was holding us back. And that was
the end of it. I thought I was going to get in trouble over it, but I didn’t. It was a substitute bus
driver, otherwise, we both might have gotten in trouble.

I have stress because these Black guys know I have an anger problem from last year and
was always getting mad, and these guys are not used to me being nice. When I try to be nice,
they keep pushing me and pushing me and talking stuff. They keep talking stuff to try to get me
mad and react like I used to, and I finally did get mad yesterday, I just went off on them. I yelled
at them and got in trouble for it. They are not used to me being nice and quiet and not worrying
about what other people are saying. They deliberately try to push my buttons and bother me. My
parents tell me to go tell the teachers, but they don’t help. They don’t do anything about it. I tell
the teachers and nothing happens. I don’t talk to administrators either because they won’t do
anything either.

Tons of Black girls are in trouble because they fight at school. It is all about peer pressure
and the rumors start. Everyone believes it and round and round it goes. I think Black girls fight
because no one listens to them. No one listens, and they want more attention. For me, I don’t like
fighting any more and I don’t need it any more. I want to play basketball and basketball brings
good discipline. When I play basketball I have to run every time I get in trouble, and then when I
get home, my phone is taken away. That is good for me. I just want to stay out of trouble.

People constantly talk stuff on each other, and it is cruel and stupid most of the time. It is
all about attention. They want to use somebody to get more friends. They think by talking about
people, they will get more friends for them, but it does not work that way.

I think it would really help if they would have us in the same room and talk to both of us.
Hear both sides of the story so we can get everything cleared up. But they don’t even do that. I
think we should have more group discussions. Different grade levels and guest speakers and stuff and let us ask some questions and have communication going on between students.

It doesn’t feel like the school is doing anything about all of the hostility at this school because whatever they are doing isn’t working. All of the drama makes for a lot of stress and makes focusing on school difficult. For me, the stress of the drama and fights stay mainly inside school, because outside of school I am just with my family. I love little kids, and I am around my little nephews all of the time at home. I stay out of all the drama that goes on outside of school, but that I did go to a party at the Boys and Girls Club not too long ago, and there was a fight there. It was really fun until the fight. I don’t think they will have parties anymore there. It was gang related.

Gangs are so stupid. Everyone is going to have to stand before God one day. So you shouldn’t have all of these different sets or cliques. I always say if you are going to be on a set it should be on God’s set. Everyone is going to bow down to him one day anyway. I have friends in gangs doing it for attention. They go to school and act all hard and a fighter whatever and everything, and then I see them at church acting totally different. They act different around their parent than they do at school. I have some family members in gangs, which scares me because you never know if you will get a bullet because gangs are trying to retaliate.

So many students don’t know how to deal and cope with their stuff. A lot of students are under stress. Stress builds up and we don’t know what to do with it. It keeps building and then one day someone pushes our buttons, and we just go off. It doesn’t make it right, but this is how I see it. A lot of them are smoking weed. They leave school and go smoke, and they sell it, too. If you don’t have money or jobs and have to have something to buy clothes and stuff with that is what they do. But it isn’t right. They should rise above that. But then there are other people who
sell weed who just want what they want. It’s like people who have money still sell because they want it all. People who have money sell it because they want more. They want more than what they have. They think, “I gotta have what I gotta have and have it right now.” People need patience. Patience is so important.

Race and Stereotypes

I don’t like it when a White teacher does Black History. This makes me uncomfortable because I don’t feel they really understand. We didn’t even do Black History this year, though. We didn’t even talk about it. We should talk about Black leaders and how they changed and helped the world, too.

It seems like teachers show more warmth toward White students, and that makes me mad. They don’t smile as much at the Black students. Other things make me uncomfortable at school, too. During the pep assemblies the cheerleaders dressed up like Black people—boys—and dressed in baggy clothes and things like that. It is like they think that all Black people are thugs and gang members and stuff like that. And that is all that is shown on television, too, and it makes me mad.

But it is mostly the Black kids in classes that are creating all of the problems and disrupting the classrooms at school. It seems like all of the White people who go here never get in trouble. Or that is what everybody thinks. It makes me think that White people are good and Black people are bad. And then we feel like we get picked on because they know we will get mad and they can write us up. We have short tempers. All Black people have bad tempers, or it seems like that. It seems like we get the message over and over that Black is bad. Also, some of the music is so bad. We get mad when they call us the N word, but we do it ourselves. It all makes me so mad.
I never really talk to adults or anyone about this stuff at school. At church, though, they talk about things and how to help you do better. In my church I am encouraged to stay prayerful, to pray for your enemies, and to think about what you want to be remembered for when you die. I want to have good things and not bad things said about me when I die. I try my best to do my best. I think everybody shouldn’t be afraid to say what is on their mind because if you hold stuff back, then nobody would ever know. Just be real to people and real to yourself. That is all.

Summary
Sharee is a bright and capable young woman who communicated significant concerns about relationships with peers, teachers, stereotypes, and racism. Despite carrying a great deal of stress, she has managed to maintain her perspective on the importance of her schooling and education. She has ideas about how things could be better and that is by talking about the issues and for students to be able to discuss things together. She deals with many conflicting issues about being Black and indicated she has not discussed this a great deal with adults, particularly at school. Sharee reported that her church is important to her and that she draws upon her church for support and strength.

Tam
Tam is a 15-year-old Vietnamese female and a freshman at Urban Midwest. She is tiny and petite and has long, sleek brown hair. She has expressive brown eyes and a warm smile. She dresses simply, typically in jeans and t-shirts, and wears simple, delicate jewelry. She is kind, quiet, and sensitive, yet she was also more than willing to speak up as she shared her heart, life, and experiences in school. She described her self in this way:

I don’t fit the Asian girl stereotype. I am not a straight A student. I will never, ever be that straight A student. I will never be great in math either. But my friends say I am a
nice person and I am easy to talk to. I can be quiet. I can be nice, but I can be mean, too.

I am a good person and most of the time I am nice. I hang out the most with Asian and Vietnamese people, but I also have other friends, too. I like to be friendly and nice to everyone.

Tam plans on graduating from high school and college. She is unsure of what she wants to do, but has thought of becoming a pediatrician or a nurse. She shared that she enjoys working with children.

Tam’s narratives involved her thoughts about (a) Vietnamese culture and the strain she feels because of differences between her worlds at home and at school; (b) early educational experiences, particularly when she was placed in special education; (c) segregation, bullying, and discrimination at school; and (d) attitudes and practices of teachers. Although she expressed anxiety about the dissonance between home and school, she is respectful and appreciative of Vietnamese culture and traditions.

Negotiating the Worlds of Home and School

My parents were born in Vietnam. Most all of my other relatives still live there. I have an aunt that lives in Seattle, but everyone else lives in Vietnam. I do not have the whole story about my parent’s lives in Vietnam. I do know my father was in the military and fought for the United States and had to leave the country. I also know they left Vietnam in a really small boat that was overcrowded. I think my parents’ stories would be very painful, if they shared them, but they don’t talk about it too much. I want to know more about my parents’ past and Vietnam, but I just think it is too painful for them to really talk about. One of these days, I would really like to talk to them about it. But I am not sure my parents want to talk about it. I am waiting for them, for when they want to talk about their past. I know it was hard for them, everything that went on.
I visited Vietnam twice and we have another trip planned this summer.

I am the youngest of three girls in my family. My oldest sister was born in a refugee camp in Indonesia, but my other sister and I were born in Kansas. My oldest sister goes to college. She still lives at home with us. My other sister dropped out of high school and doesn’t live with us anymore. She lives with her boyfriend. Her choices have created a lot of stress and problems in my house. She does a lot of stuff my parents are not happy about. She doesn’t go to school. My parents worry about her all of the time. I am always being compared to both of my sisters. They are completely different, so I am compared to either the one or the other and am not valued for me—for just being me.

At home it is totally different. It is like I live in two totally different worlds. It is like my house and then school, and they are totally different cultures. At home we always talk in Vietnamese. At home I speak Vietnamese. If you speak a different language, you should speak it at home. You don’t want to lose your second language. There are a lot of students that lose it, but I don’t want to lose it. I can tell I am losing my language because when I talk to my parents, I stutter. But I always speak Vet at home. I want to keep my base language. I don’t want to lose it because it is really important. My parents are like, “you should never lose your base language, the language you learn first.” When I was little I learned Vietnamese at home first and then when I went to school, I learned English. We kept English for school and kept Vietnamese for home. I don’t want to lose my Vietnamese, but I am scared I will. At home it is Vietnamese, Vietnamese, Vietnamese, and at school, well, it is school.

At home our parents expect us to get straight As, straight As, straight As. But then they don’t understand what we go through at school, too. They don’t know. They haven’t been here. They just think that school is so easy and all you have to do is study and get As. It is not all that.
We have drama and pressures to deal with. And sometimes we don’t understand our teachers and sometimes our teachers are mean and don’t understand how much pressure they put on us. And then my parents think it is so easy. I don’t know about other students, but my parents think school is so easy. For them, it is all about keeping your grades up, keeping your grades up.

There are two different types of people in my family. My oldest sister is the smart one and the model Asian student. She has always stayed in school and was the straight A student all through high school. She is the smart one and then there is my other sister. She is like the bad one who got on the wrong track and got with the wrong friends. And there is me. I don’t know what I am. They are like that, but then is there any room for me? Sometimes I think my parents forget about me.

I think a lot about my friends and I also think about my family. I want my family and me to be closer. But I don’t know. It is kind of weird because every time I try to talk to my parents it is always like about, “Are you making good grades?” or “Have you seen your sister? Have you talked to her?” I can’t really get the type of relationship with my parents I would like. Even though I want it, I can’t get it. Because my parents only think about my sister dropping out of school, leaving home, and moving in with her boyfriend.

It seems like they are always worried about her, and every time they see me, they are always like, ”Have you talked to your sister? Have you called her? Does she pick up?” Like every single time. And they are always saying how much she made our family go down and how much sadness and anger we have because of her. I am like, “Okay, what am I? Am I just a person you yell at whenever stuff happens?” I don’t know sometimes it feels like they forget about me. I mean I am still here and stuff.
My sister was good til she hit Urban Midwest. This school changes a lot of people. Like my sister used to go to another school, but she met a friend—her boyfriend—he went to Urban Midwest, and she transferred to here from the other school, and so she turned bad. She started gypping. This is all my parents think about.

My parents’ conversation with me is basically about school and my sister. Because ever since my sister left, my mom is always like, “Don’t be like your sister!” I am like, “I am not her! Leave me alone!” Everybody makes mistakes. If I make mistakes or do something wrong, it is always like, “See, now you are going to be like your sister now.” And I am not her. I make mistakes, but I fix my mistakes. It is constantly! It is always like, “Please, I beg you, don’t be like her.” It is always the same thing over and over. They will always talk about my sister and say, “Don’t be like her. She made her life go down the drain. So don’t be like her.” And I am like, “OK, I get the point!”

Asking once or twice about homework is good enough, but constantly asking, “Have you done your homework yet?” I am like I did it already. And then they ask again, “Did you do it? Where is your homework?” Asking is good, but just not constantly.

I know my parents have had it really tough at times. They have a lot of family left behind in Vietnam. I have brothers and sisters in Vietnam. My parents had a different wife and husband before my sisters and me. I am only full blood with my sisters. My parents had a lot kids in Vietnam before they had us. One of my mother’s sons was in a motorcycle accident in Vietnam last year, and he died just before he was going to bring his wife and children to live with us. Now they can’t come here. That was really, really hard.

I am proud of my Asian culture. My parents instilled this in me. There are traditions we do that are comforting. Like when someone dies, we have a big party even when they are gone.
We have a big table of food and we have incense and we pray for them and invite them back to
the house to be with us and to eat dinner with us. We invite them back to the house to talk to us
and hang out with us. Even if we can’t see them, we know they are there. We talk to them. One
time it was kind of scary, as I thought I saw my grandmother, but the whole thing is comforting.
We have our Buddha, too. I am Buddhist, so I worship Buddha, and we go to the temple. We
have a picture of Buddha in a frame and put it on a wall and it will protect our house from
strangers coming in and stuff.

We are going to Vietnam this summer again. Vietnam is kind of different. This summer I
am finally meeting the brothers and sisters I never knew I had. It is different and being there is
quite an experience. I have been there twice before. It is so hard in Vietnam. I don’t know if I
could live there. I don’t think I could live in Vietnam. It is so hard and sad. We have so much
over here and they have so little over there. And we don’t appreciate what we have.

I think everybody in America should go to Vietnam. Go to Vietnam. Go to Asia. Go to
Africa. Go to all those countries. And then maybe they will appreciate what they have now.
Cause if you go over there—it is so sad—you will just cry. Cause you will be walking down the
roads and stuff, and there will be kids and grown ups asking for money and begging for food and
stuff. It is so sad.

My parents have instilled in me the importance of maintaining the Vietnamese language
and culture. I appreciate that but sometimes it is so difficult. Because of my friends at school and
all of the pressure at home, a lot of times I feel more comfortable at school than I do at home.

School Experiences

My most memorable experience in elementary school was in the fourth grade when I was
placed in special education. I was so confused and did not understand why that happened.
I hate special education! I think that brought me down, way down. Because if I had been in regular education classes, I think I would be more up there. I have been in special education I think ever since I was in the fourth grade. That is when I started. I was in the fourth grade and they told me to go to this special room, and I went in there. It did not help me at all. It brought me way, way down because we were learning the same thing over and over and over. And then they kept giving me papers and I would have to correct them until they were completely correct. I couldn’t move on until it was completely correct. Then in fifth grade I did the exact same thing I did in the fourth grade. And then in sixth grade I was doing the same thing over and over and then finally one teacher realized what I was going through. This was in seventh grade. She was my favorite teacher. She finally realized that I was doing well. She moved me up to regular classes and from then on I was in regular education classes. But those years brought me down.

It all started in the fourth grade. I was in ESOL, too. I was in there, too! I was like, “Why was I in this, too? I speak English!” And I was pulled out of the classroom too much. I also had one-on-one stuff, and I was confused because my English was good! I had a lisp when I was little so some of it was about that. I don’t know. I was good with English and I didn’t understand. It was all so hard when I was so little. It was so hard. And no one would listen to me when I was little. So I was like, well, I must be wrong, so I have to listen to you guys. You guys are the professionals.

I talked to my sister more about this than my parents because she understands English better. My dad speaks more English than my mom. My dad understands English better than he speaks it. He can listen and understand but speaking it is more difficult for him. But then we felt we couldn’t do anything about it because the teachers wouldn’t listen to you and would just push you away. I wonder if I was in that grade again and in regular education would it make a
difference now? Would it make me smarter? Would it make me understand math more? There are all these ifs and wonders.

I have felt behind academically since then, especially in math, but once I was placed in regular education classes in middle school with class within a class (regular education classroom with a regular education teacher and a special education teacher). I was much happier in school. Last year in middle school was so fun. I loved middle school, even though there were a few bumps and bruises, I loved all of my teachers. I loved all of the teachers and all of the students. I didn’t have any grudges with any students. (Tam was exited from special education completely this year in her freshman year of high school.)

In middle school there were some mean students, too, but most everybody got along. Most everybody got along. Last year in middle school, I knew everyone in my grade and I talked to everyone. I could say everyone’s name in my classes and grade. I talked to everyone and was cool with everyone.

In high school, I walk down the halls, and I don’t know anyone. I don’t know everyone’s names in my classrooms. In my classrooms, I know like maybe a couple of people. I don’t even know everybody in my classroom. I liked a smaller school so much better. Knowing people, rather than being so distant, I think would improve the atmosphere at Urban Midwest.

**Segregation, Bullying, and Discrimination**

Urban Midwest is segregated. At lunchtime you can see the groups. The Black students are mainly in G Hall. The White students are by the vending machines by the main office. The Goth people, the people who dress in Black, are by the vending machines in M hall. Then most of the Asians are in the lunchroom, and then after all that there are random people walking around.
The classrooms may not be so bad as in the hallways and at lunch. In classrooms it can be different. It depends on the person. I can talk to a kid in the classroom and then outside of class in the hallways it is like, “I don’t know you at all.” So, in the hallways around other people, I can’t talk to them at all. It is more like, “Do I know you?” I like classrooms better than being out there in the hall. In the classrooms everyone talks, but it is so different in the hallways. When kids are around their friends in the halls they act different than when we’re one-on-one. I have been one-on-one with a kid and he is my friend, but when he is around his friends, he is different. When they are around their friends they act different and act like they don’t know you.

There is so much tension in the halls! Yes! So much tension! There are people that come by and it is like, “I am big and bad. I can do whatever I want. I can push people around.” Because I am really small compared to everyone else. I have to look up to them literally, and they are like, “I am big and bad and I can push you around and step all over you.” I have experienced this in the hallways. There are some people who say excuse me and other people who just push you out of the way. It is hard.

There are a lot of types of people, but there are the two most types of people. There are the people who think they are cool and all big and bad who think they can push you around because you are small and then there are the nicer people, who are like, “Whatever, I don’t care about you, so go away.” Those are the two main people that I see. There is also a type of people who are scared and think, “I can’t do anything because I am scared,” and they let people push them around. There are a lot of types of people.

A lot of people are scared. In the halls, you can see it. You walk out of the office and by the vending machines there is a group of students, if you keep going down a little bit there are couples, and then keep going and on to the left there are the students who are shy and keep to
themselves and just stand and look around. There are a lot of students walking around by themselves. There are just a lot of different types of people. I don’t know where I am in all of this.

Sometimes I am afraid at school because the people are mean. There are people who are just so mean. I don’t want to be mean or racist or anything, but most of the mean people are Black. The Black people can be mean. Both Black boys and girls can just be so mean. They put the mean names, labels, like that bad word/name/label, they put them on themselves. I think they put it all on themselves. If they were to do something else and go to school and not get in fights, we would think of them differently.

I have Black friends. I have met a lot of good and nice Black people and have changed that whole thing and changed the bad label in my head. I have no problems with them. I have a lot of Black friends. I am not saying I don’t like them. I am not saying all Black people. I have no problem with them at all. It is just all the mean ones. There are a lot of mean ones that would step all over you. I don’t understand how people can be that mean. I understand that sometimes you have a bad day and will be mean to others, but constantly being mean to people?

They will push you around. Literally, they will PUSH you around! They will push you around! I don’t understand how they can do that. Don’t they have a conscience? If I pushed someone around, I would be like, “I feel bad,” and would say I am sorry. They don’t even turn around and say sorry. It is just like so mean.

There is a lot of pushing and shoving, and picking on others. Someone will just be walking around, and they will be like laughing at them. And I am thinking, “What is there to laugh about? Why don’t you say hi to the person?” And you can see it. In the hallways and stuff. You can see it. Like in the beginning of the year, I was a new kid, and I didn’t know anyone. At
lunchtime, I would walk around, and I would look around and see it. After that, though, I made friends here, but this was at the beginning of the year.

There are the fights, too. Talking stuff on people is what gets the fights going. It is kind of hard to explain. Talking about people behind their backs, calling them bad names, and people get mad. Usually the behavior is better in the classrooms, depending on the teacher and the classroom. I am all right in most of my classes except in PE (physical education). There is this girl in PE that makes me so mad. She is so mean and rude. I am like how can someone be so mean and that rude?

Once in PE we were all playing volleyball. I love volleyball. It is my favorite and main sport, but I don’t play it to be competitive. I play it for fun. When someone misses a ball, it is like, yea, you missed the ball and we laugh about it, but she was so competitive, if I missed the ball, she would be like, “Why did you miss the ball? You are supposed to hit it!” And I am like I know I am supposed to hit it. And then once we were playing and there were these four girls that were so competitive and they put all of the girls in one court and that was sexist for putting all the girls in one court. That made me mad for one, and then the girls made me even madder and my friends didn’t feel like playing anymore because those girls were so competitive. My friends play for fun and laugh a lot and everything. These girls got so competitive—they were like ROAR—like they were going to kill someone with the ball. And this girl looked straight at my eyes and yelled at me, like “Why didn’t you hit the ball!!” She made me so mad, I just wanted to hurt her.

Every culture has nice people and mean people. But I think that the Black culture is the meanest culture. They can be so rude. Not all, but quite a few. I have a lot of Black friends, I
really do, and I am not racist. And they are really nice, and that is why I love them so much. They are so different from the other people.

Some of the Black students will come up to me and ask me if I am Chinese, then they follow me and talk ‘jibberish’ and pretend like they are talking Vietnamese and make fun of me. At first, it made me so mad, but then you just have to ignore it and you get used to it. This happens to me at the mall all of time, too. People will say, “Oh look at that Japanese girl.” And I will think, “there are more cultures than just Chinese and Japanese!” There just are a lot of people that are still racist. I go to the mall and people say stuff about me. And I wonder, ‘Why can’t they just get a long? We are human, too.”

Minimal Conversations at School and Behaviors of Teachers

They don’t talk about cultures at school. We hear some about African Americans and slavery, but isn’t there so much more to African American culture than slavery? We may hear a little about Black History and some Hispanic stuff, but I have never heard them talk about Asian culture or history in class. Sometimes it makes me mad when they don’t talk about it. I can’t just stand up and be like, “Talk about culture; it is important!”

Talk about all cultures and not just like one culture. Because out of all the years I have been in school—every time they would ever bring up Asian culture—I am really happy when they bring it up because it’s like finally they are talking about more than just one culture. Or the two cultures they seem to talk about the most--White and Black. They forget about us Asians, Mexicans, and Muslims. Basically, Muslims, I would be offended if I were Muslim because they don’t talk about it. Nobody talks about Muslims. I want to learn about Muslims. The outfits and the things they wear over their faces. That is so cool. And how they fast and stuff, and I want to know about it.
Discussing different cultures would benefit schools. For sure it would help teachers understand students more. I think it is important for them to know who we are and some of what we go through. Too, students need to know each other. Without ever talking about cultures and stuff, there are assumptions made about people that may not be right at all.

I had a teacher in PE who would tell us to be in a circle and then he will make us learn every single name of the person in the class. I think that helps. It is a start, anyway. I have a teacher who comes in and just teaches. He just comes in and teaches and then after he teaches, he goes to sit down. I like the teachers who get to know the students rather than just teach the information.

I think teachers would be surprised by what goes on in our homes and in different cultures. It is important for teachers to have more understanding of their students and if they knew more about their cultures and lives, they would know more about them and how to teach them.

I have teachers like the other day with Mr. J. My friend was literally crying her eyes out because of all the things she had going on, and I wanted to comfort her. So, I went up to him and quietly asked, “Can we go to the restroom? So I can wipe her tears and tell her everything will be okay, and so I can help her feel better?” I wanted to go help her, and he would not let me go. He was like, “Is it important? Why don’t you go after class?” And I was like, “Hello, can you not see that she is in tears?” She was bawling, and he would not let me go with her to help her wash her face and help her. It kind of made me mad because she needed me, and he would not let me go with her. I don’t know. I want the teachers to understand their students more because it is not just about school and schoolwork. I know the work is important, but we have a lot of other things going on, too.
It is little stupid stuff, but it is big, too. Because it affects our concentration. Because like when we are working, we will be working for a little bit, but it is in the back of our minds, and it is difficult to just forget about it and to just focus on school. It is just that little things make things big. Even though we think it is stupid and dumb, we still have to deal with it. We have to deal with the stuff. We know it is stupid. We all know it is stupid, and we are tired of it all, but we still have to figure it out and deal with it. We know we have to do our work. We can’t just make work go away. I just think the teachers should be more sensitive to what is happening and what is going on.

One of my teachers is just an excellent teacher and sensitive, too. Ms. C. is sensitive, but she still gives projects and a ton of work. She is such a good teacher. She gives us a lot to do, but she is understanding. I have a poster and a book report due tomorrow. She gives us projects and a lot of projects to do, but she is caring. She is nice and if you need help, she will help you. She keeps things moving. I love Ms. C. She is interesting and fun and helps us, and she understands that we go through a lot.

There are so many things that are stressful. Family, friends, grades, boys, what I am going to wear tomorrow, violence, fighting, everything. It all can build up and make it hard. Teachers can help a lot, though, by understanding us better and being sensitive.

Summary

Tam has a great deal to say about her schooling experiences and negotiating multiple worlds. She experienced early frustration in elementary school with her placement in special education, which was quite confusing to her, and from her perspective, detrimental to her education. Describing considerable tension and hostility in the hallways at Urban Midwest, she reported experiences of bullying and being afraid at school and has observed similar experience
for others at the school. She communicated considerable dissonance between her home and school experiences, although, she displayed interest in and respect for her Vietnamese culture. In order for teachers to understand their students better and for students to understand each other better as well, Tam expressed that schools need to provide opportunities for discussions about multiple cultures. She reported that teachers could do more to better support and encourage students in their schooling experiences, despite the many obstacles they encounter in their lives.

Sun

Sun, a freshman at Urban Midwest, is a fifteen-year-old male who emigrated with his mother to the U.S. from Korea two years ago. Sun was born in Los Angeles, CA and lived in the States with his family until they moved back to Korea when he was four years old. Sun attended preschool through the seventh grade in Seoul, Korea. Sun and his mother moved to Kansas when Sun was in the middle of his seventh grade year. Sun’s parents are divorced, and his father lives and works in Korea. Sun’s extended family lives in Korea, and he and his mother are the only family members residing in Kansas. He does not have siblings. Sun’s mother retired as an airline stewardess in Korea, and now she is a small business owner. Sun plans on going to college after he graduates from high school and would like to study engineering. He would like to be an inventor and invent alternative forms of fuel. He also expressed interest in designing cars and airplanes.

Sun is a congenial, thoughtful, expressive, and kind soul who has a quick and warm smile. He is well groomed and dresses typically in jeans, t-shirts, and tennis shoes. He is a tall young man (over six feet tall) and has dark eyes and hair.

Sun’s narratives revolved around his adjustment to his life in the U.S. Differences in his schooling experiences and changes in his everyday life have at times been bewildering and
anxiety producing for Sun. The narratives drawn from the interviews related to his differing experiences attending Korean schools and Urban Midwest; his perceptions of and adjustments to the differences in daily living activities; and supports at Urban Midwest that are encouraging to him.

School Experiences

Leaving Korea and coming to USA is a mixed thing for me. I have been stressed and sad about changes. So many changes! I miss friends, grandparents, father, memories, and stuff. I miss the mountains in Korea. And I used to spend time bow and arrow hunting with my father in mountains.

The biggest difference for me between schools in Korea and here is discipline and behaviors of students. In Korea, school gets harder and harder each year in school. And if you are doing something not right, you get caught by teacher, and you go to office. If you don’t get your homework, you get hit. You get hit with piece of wood. Korean education is—they hit on people because they need to pay attention. But the USA, thing is, people here think that is stupid. Here, teacher hitting student, you go to jail. In Korean education if you are sleeping, you wake up because you get hit. You have to pay attention because you don’t want to be hit by teacher. In Korea, if teachers don’t hit students, they are fired from teaching.

I never wanted to get hit, so I paid attention. Classrooms were quiet. It was quiet! There, if you whispered or wrote letters, if teachers saw it, you go to office or you get hit. The classrooms were really quiet, really quiet. There are more students there than here, but it was more polite, more quiet. Teachers, they were everywhere watching students. But at times it was awful. One of my best friends in school was beaten so badly he had to go hospital, and no one cared. No one cared!
But in USA, they don’t hit. In Korea, it is okay, but here it is not. And students are so loud. So in my eighth hour, Mr. M., he is very, very nice guy, and sometimes it is like the PE room. It’s horrible! I can’t concentration! And if I am doing homework and everybody is talking and sometimes Black people use N word and White people, too. It is disgusting stuff. Loud stuff.

I don’t see a lot of good students. All I see are bad things and bad people it seems like. Everywhere, gangsters. They have gangsters in school. They don’t care about school. I have seen people with cuts on their arms and stuff. Their clothes, like their clothes, like gangster clothes, baggy pants and stuff. In here, some Black peoples are good, smart, and nice, and some are gangsters, but they only plan really bad stuff for after school. Or it seems like that.

I can’t say all gangsters don’t care about school. It just seems like they don’t. The gangsters could be really bad people at this school. I have heard some people use the N word and they are Black. I hear stuff all the time, about talks of shooting and killing and stuff. I am scared. I thought the U.S. was peaceful? I did not know it was so violence. I thought it was peaceful. We live, though, in peaceful, security place outside the city, and there are not very many people. It is a nice place. So, it is a lot different where we live. So, here it scary. I hear peoples talk about violent things. You know this thing it says worry is not healthy for children or anybody. Well, violence is not healthy for children, teenagers, or anybody.

I talked to principal about all the violence, and the principal talked to my mom, but seems like they could not do anything, or like I am wimp or something. I have been bullied, but not too bad. I think principals think it my fault. I try to ignore it all and do my work. One guy said, “Give me your homework or I will get your bag pack and take it.” I just ignore it. I get my backpack and hold it tight, and he left me alone. Some guys pushed me in PE, and I jammed two fingers. The principal knew about it. One time walking down the hall, they throw milk in my
hair. That happened. The main thing is talking and being disrespectful. They do that all the time. It bothers me.

Another thing. Students always want to hang out with their friends! They don’t care anything else about school. All they know is hanging out with friends. That is all. Only thing is they are texting all of the time! In sixth hour, they don’t work, everybody texts. They just talk back to teachers, and teachers cannot do anything. And kids have IPODS and use their phones to text.

I see kids kissing. Yuck! Students next to each other in their desks and lean down to pick something up and kiss each other. My eyes are burning. Why don’t they do it at home instead of here? I am trying to concentrate and a lot of things get in the way of that. I am seriously telling you (he uses his hands like a megaphone) Urban Midwest students do not care about their education! Eighty percent of students do not want to learn. They don’t care, and they don’t want to learn! I want to ask principal, “Mr. Principal, can you put a camera in every classroom to see what goes on?” Thing is they text a lot! And it seems like they cheat a lot, too, but I saw cheating every day in Korea.

Seriously! A thousand, million percent the stuff is distracting! Like when I go to the next class I will get a headache because of the noise! The bullying, stealing, some talk about violence. And they talk all of the time.

And it seems like teachers can’t do anything. Like Mr. M. He is very nice, but the students don’t care about it. He cares a lot about students, but they are mean to him. Mr. M. gives them like five chances, and then they finally go to office.

I see a lot of anger here. They get mad at teachers. Teachers are really polite to students. And students say things like I hate this and blah, blah, blah. And after school they talk about
teachers and what they could do to them. They don’t like teachers saying to them, “Pay attention, please.” Teachers can be polite but sometimes they are not because students don’t pay attention, and don’t have pencils and stuff. When teachers try to do things and make kids pay attention, some kids will finally get mad, like steam is coming out of their head or something.

This just all makes me feel stressful and bad. Can’t we just be quiet and keep going? And can’t you (referring to student) go to the office and talk to counselor or something? The teacher says something and you are giggling and are like “Ha, ha, ha” and then teacher gets upset because you are not paying attention. And yesterday it really happened. One of my teachers—she almost feel like crying--her face was all red. I don’t know what happened. I was drawing a picture and listening and this Black student, a noisy girl made a loud noise, and she said, “Sun did it,” and everyone started laughing and the teacher was really upset. I don’t know what to think. It is stressful! I just try to ignore them and do my work.

Taking practice ACT nearly caused me to go out of my mind! It was very, very stressful! I took the practice ACT last semester. I didn’t know what I was taking when I took it. I didn’t understand. I just guessed at everything and I didn’t even know it was ACT. I thought it was just some stupid test. But after the test, I found out what it was. It was test for college. It is so embarrassing. Shame on me! I got a really, really low score. I didn’t even know what ACT was. I signed up for AVID after they started talking about ACT. So I didn’t know. Oh my gosh, after I was in AVID for one week and I take some stupid test and then I find out it was ACT! One week I signed up for an AVID class, then after one week, we took the A—C—T test! Wow! Bad score! I was so upset! This was stress on top of everything else. I need to do really well, and I can’t get good score. My English is just not good. I am some stupid person. I can’t go to college, if I cannot get good score. I want to do good, but my English is bad.
Something more. The language thing makes my head hurt. I am pretty good, but it is so hard. If I ever have to speak in class, I get really, really nervous, and I think they will laugh. Some do laugh.

I was in ESOL classes, but I didn’t like it. My mother helped me get out of ESOL classes. I don’t think it helped and I feel uncomfortable. ESOL is not so great for me. Most students speak Spanish. The teachers speak Spanish.

Another thing, I don’t have friendships with other students from Korea. For me, is different. They have been in U.S. for long time. They always want to talk Korean. They want to talk about Korea all the time, and I want to learn more English. I want to learn about U.S. I need to have better English! They get mad because I don’t want to talk Korean with them.

More Adjustments to Differences in Everyday Life

In Korea, I walk from my house to school in one minute. In USA, you can’t walk anywhere. Every trip takes 30 minutes! In Korea, supermarket next to my house. In Korea, shopping is not so confusing. Say, if you need pencil or paper or something, you could walk and get it; go buy it. There was not lots and lots of stuff. It was simple. It was simple! If I go to Target, they have everything! They have everything! Like Walmart! It is big! They have everything! But Korea is simple. Much more simple. Here it is a big headache with all the stuff. Another thing, I see that here money and government is all about oil. In Korea, it is the land, the land. Here land is everywhere. USA culture is cool, but so confusing, so confusing!

We don’t need car in Korea. And the train. We don’t have a train here. In Korea, we go everywhere in train. Taxis everywhere, too. We owned car in Korea, but didn’t use it much. We walked, ran, or had a bicycle. Here, stress is always having to ride in car. Riding in car gives me headache! I need fresh air and can’t get fresh air! So much stress, I can’t think of it.
In Korea, I can’t trust anyone else because they tell everything. I don’t trust them, but one friend, my best friend. He was my friend, my best friend from eleven years ago. I can trust people here more. Because when I see their face I can see more here if the people is nice or bad. I can see peoples talking when the mouth is happy. It seems more honest. They show more on their face here.

In Korean culture, the man is head of everything. He works and then comes home and smokes cigarettes, sits down, and orders everyone around. The woman is nothing and has to do everything, like a slave or something. My father beat my mother and in Korean that was okay. That is why they divorce. I am very close to my mother, and I am very proud of her. She started learning English not that long ago, and she is doing great. I spend time alone because she works long hours to manage her fast food restaurant. When I am not at school, I sometimes help her at work. I also study with tutor twice a week to improve English and academic skills. Sometimes I play golf, too, when it is not winter and if weather is nice. It is all okay, but it is stressful.

*Supports for Sun at Urban Midwest*

There are things going on at Urban Midwest that help students. Urban Midwest has games, assemblies, activities, clubs like for animation, science, golf, baseball, AVID, and everything. I play on the golf team. I like to play golf.

Too, the teachers are nice and that makes me happy! Here they care in true meaning. Teachers are nice. They are nice to person. Some teachers don’t care, but most do. The secretaries at Urban Midwest are nice, too. People being nice is really good thing and this makes me happy.

I am in AVID and that helps me, too. AVID is about talking about college and stuff like that. And talking about ACT. They teach you how to take notes and stuff and they have tutors.
And if you don’t understand, you write a question and they will help you with it. You write a question you have from any class. You learn to give speeches; you learn about giving presentations and getting admissions to colleges. They talk about college and financial aid. They help you. They talk about your future and what you want to do. AVID is good.

I would like to invent things, but thing is I don’t need a lot of money. I just want a good life. Sometimes it is a bad life, but I would like to have a good life and have a job and be happy. Thing is, I just want to have my own life that is all, a simple life. Thing is, though, I am teenager, so I have to be careful a lot and rely on my mom a lot.

Summary

Sun is an intelligent, thoughtful young man who has had many changes in his life in the last several years. His parents are divorced, and he and his mother left behind their country and family to start a new life in Kansas. In addition to missing his family, friends, and memories from Korea, Sun has had many adjustments to make. Adapting to differences in cultures is understandably a significant part of his story. The discipline at school, student behaviors, including violence, bullying, inappropriate language, and off task behaviors overwhelm Sun at times, creating difficulties in his concentration. The language, transportation, shopping, and many other aspects of changing continents have been challenging for Sun. One of the many stressors he described is that as a new immigrant to this country, he does not feel that he fits in with immigrants who have lived in this country for longer periods of time. In addition to feeling uneasy with English only speaking peers, he also described discomfort with English speakers of other languages. Sun has understandable and considerable anxiety in his life as he continues to persevere with his education at Urban Midwest. He has become involved in activities at school
that have been helpful to him such as AVID, playing on the golf team, and developing relationships with adults at Urban Midwest.

This chapter included the individual narratives of the eight student participants in this study. The students shared poignantly about their lives and experiences in school and influences that hinder and encourage students’ educational pursuits. The next chapter includes narratives from the group discussions and concludes with a summary and synthesis of the student narratives.
Chapter Five

Findings: Group Discussions

The group discussions involved multifarious and complex dynamics as a diverse group of people sat together to discuss and learn more about each other’s differences, similarities, and experiences in school. The common thread for all of the students is that they are urban teenagers experiencing and persevering through daily life in the world of Urban Midwest. From the onset, the group appeared ready to discuss issues together and recognized they had reasons to talk together. Sasha stated in the first group session: “We all have a lot in common. We go to the same school. We have all encountered discrimination. We’re trying to move on with our lives.” Sun shyly explained, “I was in Korea in elementary and middle school. I came to U.S. in seventh grade to learn English. It has been hard. I want to talk about stress that we have. I want to learn about different cultures.” Jamal reported, “I want to talk about how we can make this school better. I want to learn about cultures, too. What makes everybody why they are the way they are.” Students expressed eagerness to meet, and attendance in the group sessions was not an issue. Although they were not prompted to do so, when students could not make the sessions, they communicated and let me know when they would not be there and why.

The first session was a getting acquainted session in which I explained again the focus of the research, which was to learn more about the lives and experiences of urban teenagers from their perspectives and as coresearchers, I wanted the students to help me paint a picture of Urban Midwest and important aspects of their lives within the school environment.

We established ground rules for the discussion, and as I described earlier, the rules involved (a) one person speaks at a time; (b) every person’s shared experience is important and valid, regardless of how different it might seem or how much we might disagree; and (c) each
person shares only what they are comfortable sharing. In addition to establishing the purpose of
the group and codes of conduct for validation and active listening, the first group interview
involved informal discussions to become more acquainted with each other. Initially, students
talked about their families, teachers, thoughts they had about careers, and the different groups at
Urban Midwest. After the first group discussions, conversations centered on influences in and
outside of school that hinder or encourage students’ success in school.

The group discussions with the students involved dialogue regarding varied topics such
as family backgrounds; peer relationships and peer pressure, including peers use of illicit drugs,
folks among peers, male and female relationships, sexual harassment of females to males and
males to females, and bullying; violence in neighborhoods and at school; gang activity;
standardized tests; teacher behaviors; suicide; sexual orientation; social class and social mobility;
goals and dreams for the future; religion; disabilities; tension among cultural groups and between
varying groups; racism; and discrimination. The students were eager and animated in all of their
discussions and appeared willing to talk about whatever any student wanted to talk about. They
were excellent in how they interacted with each other and encouraged one another to speak up.

Narrative threads emerged from the many areas discussed about the students’ lives and
experiences in schools. The following themes emerged from the students’ narratives: 1) The All
American Family Life Equals Stress; 2) Suicide: A Permanent Solution to Temporary Problems,
So Don’t Do It; 3) Weed, Weed, and More Weed; 4) Anger, Violence, and Gangs Seem Normal
to Our World; 5) This is How it Works: The Rich are Getting Richer; 6) This is Our Experience:
Racism, Stereotypes, and Discrimination; 7) Male and Female Relationships: It’s All About the
Drama; 9) School Practices and Policies: Are Tests Scores and Rules All They Care About?
The following sections are written in the form of dialogue derived from the group discussions. Each of the students received a copy of the rough draft of the group discussions and provided feedback for the final draft. I limited my voice as the researcher as much as possible and pulled from the group discussions the most noteworthy aspects of the conversations among the students. An overarching theme in the students’ descriptions of their lives is that they experience considerable stress in their every day lives: Stress at home; stress at school; and stress from what they observe in the lives of their peers. Despite their many stressful experiences, these students remain engaged in and concerned about their education. The students want teachers and other people to care about them and their education. Further, they have important things to say and would like people to listen to them.

_The All American Family Equals Stress_

_The first theme involves the students’ conversations about stress in their families and the influence this has had on their experiences. The students reported that stress and conflict in their families are what comprises family life as they know and observe it. They discussed poverty, conflict that families encounter, and described the status of the “all American family” as “broken down.” The following is a dialogue about students’ discussions about their families._

Tam: I am the youngest child in my family. The oldest is very smart and fits the stereotype of an Asian student and my middle sister is in trouble all of the time. I am just there.

Raul: So what is going on?
Tam: My home is very different than school. People at home are different than the people at school. The language is different. At home I am constantly cleaning. At school I can actually be me and at home I have to be something my mom, dad, or sister wants me to be. They want me to be this smart, neat girl, who gets straight As, and obeys their parents. The typical stereotype of an Asian girl that everyone thinks we are.

Kevin: So what happens when you are uniquely you and you don’t fit the stereotype?

Tam: I sure don’t fit the Asian girl stereotype. I hate the Asian girl stereotype. I am not a straight A student and I will never ever be that straight A student. My family expects too much of me. Things I can’t give. Things I can’t do. And I am always being compared to both of my sisters. They are completely different, so I am compared to either the one or the other and am not valued for me—for just being me. It is sad because my sister is always in trouble. She is supposed to graduate from school this year and she is not going to school. My mom constantly asks me if I have seen her. She is living with her boyfriend. And I am the one stuck at home with my parents always talking about her and asking me if I know where she is and telling me, “Don’t be like your sister!” That is all I ever hear.

Kevin: How about you tell your parents that you are not your sister’s parent and you are not responsible for her?

Tam: I can’t really talk to my parents about anything really right now.

Kevin: Yeah, well, parents have their own stuff to deal with. The problem is when parents take their problems out on their kids. My mother’s mother was bipolar and had horrible mood swings. She made my mother’s life miserable and my mother kind of then had trouble with her own kids.

Tam: So, Kevin, what all have you been through?
Kevin: Quite a bit, really. My parents were divorced when I was three, which brought a lot of complications with stepparents. For the first set of months I was here, my stepmother beat me every day. It happened a year and a half ago. I tried to call SRS (social rehabilitation services), and they came out, but she was smart and knew all of the right things to say. I figured out, too, that I could be the one to be removed from my home and not her. I told my dad and he didn’t believe me until he came home one day and found out for himself. He had to work two jobs to keep food on the table, and she was beating me while he was gone. She is not in our lives anymore, thank god. I have been through emotional and physical battery. I have had family members die; family members abuse drugs, stuff like that. I am sorry to say this, but I am from a normal American household. What is the normal American family? Broke and broken down is how I describe it.

Tam: Wow. Yeah. Family stuff is so crazy.

Kevin: The most memorable moment was when I went after my stepdad when I was twelve because he was beating my mother. The cops came, but they saw I was doing it to protect her, so they didn’t haul me off. That was one of the worst things that happened. The juvenile system would not have done anything to help anyway. It is about punishment, when what is needed is support. Kids need support, their families are so screwed up, but we just dole out the punishment.

Tam: Yeah. I feel like part of the reason my sister is gone is because she needed support and my parents and older sister would not give it to her. I knew she was having a really hard time, and I tried to support her but I am just her little sister. She needed a big sister that she could talk to and turn to, but she didn’t have that. I think they way they acted made her want to go away and she finally did.
Kevin: Everyone has their own stress in their families. I don’t know what people expect, though. The stress of poverty takes its toil. Parents are trying to survive, and then there is so much conflict because everyone is under so much stress. Everyone gets so angry with the kids and the way they act at school, but what about what goes on in their homes?

Jamal: Family life can bring so much stress. Some kids work a lot of hours so they can help their brothers and sisters, but some work so they can have clothes to wear so others won’t make fun of them at school. In some homes there is so much chaos and stress and no quiet place that it is impossible to do homework—loud music, arguments, younger siblings—there is no where to go. And they are supposed to be able to do school at home. It just doesn’t work that way for a lot of people. I have heard students say that this is the safest part of their day, which isn’t right, because this isn’t so great either.

Raul: A lot of kids don’t want to go home. They want to come to school because their home life or their relationships with their parents are so bad.

Tam: School can be a comforting place to be because you can be with your friends and you may have some teachers that care about you. And at home sometimes you have nobody.

Raul: I think it is weird to go to a house where everyone gets a long and everyone is happy. The kids get along with their parents and things are going well. I am so used to families in conflict and arguing.

Kevin: Well, you would think my family is weird then because now that my insane stepmother is gone for good, everyone gets along well.

Raul: So, does anyone else have family problems they want to share about? You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.
Sasha: Both my brothers are potheads. I love them to death but they are both potheads. My brother, Bob, a role model of what not to do, really, has been in jail multiple times for different stupid things.

Jamal: What does that make you think?

Sasha: I am so much better than he is. (This response provokes laughter from the group.)

Jamal: Way to go. That is a great attitude.

Jaleel: That’s right. Lots of people have people on drugs in their families. Like you see your relatives who are on drugs and how they live. And you don’t want to live like that.

Jamal: Watching them fight to get off and go cold turkey and stuff like that. You decide you just don’t want to be like that.

Jaleel: We helped one of our relatives get an apartment and car and made payments for him to set him up and everything. And then he went right back to drugs. He couldn’t get off them or stop. We gave them all this stuff, but he started stealing from us.

Raul: That kind of stuff is great motivation of what not to do. That is why I don’t want to be like my father and want to strive for more. We have talked in English class about role models and how everyone has role models. I have the opposite of role models. My role model is my dad because he didn’t go to college and I am going to go to college. I am going to be the first one in my family to go to college. For some people they see others in their families do drugs and stuff like that and that is their motivation to do something different with their lives, to do something better, and go to college instead.

Sasha: That is my idea, too, and my motivation. I am going to be the only one in my family that goes to college. I am going to be the only one of my parents’ kids who is actually going to walk across the stage with my class and graduate. It took Bob three years after his class graduated to
get his diploma and it took my brother Peter two years after his class to get his diploma. They both went into the army and both dropped out which was really stupid. In my family, my father’s mother, my grandmother is crazy. She has disowned one of my brothers and yelled at me for even talking to him. She made me promise to never turn out like him. She is about to disown me because I talk with my brother. She has laughed at my dreams about going to college.

Tam: That is just mean of her.

Kevin: Agreed.

Tam: I wish I had someone to look up to in my family but I don’t.

Sharee: Yeah, me too. I just try to learn from other people’s mistakes. For me, since I am older, I have more family problems. My brother is in a gang and he has children. He has six kids already! I love my nephews, but I worry about them. It stresses me out. My grandmother was the glue of our family and when she died everything changed. My mother is so stressed, and she yells at me for no reason. I stay home all of the time and then she yells at me and asks, “Why don’t you go out with your cousins?” And then when I leave, I get in trouble and she yells at me for leaving. I clean up all the time. And then when I am not even home and my brother and my nephew mess up the kitchen, she expects me to clean it up. Something is going on with her.

Jamal: My parents sometimes go through the same thing. I just ignore them.

Raul: My parents, too.

Tam: Mine, too.

Kevin: I have the easiest family life here. Wow. That is weird for me.

Tam: Well you paid your dues with rough stuff in your past. No doubt about it.

Kevin: The all American family is broken down. There is just too much stress and too much poverty.
Jamal: That is how it is.

_Suicide: A Permanent Solution to Temporary Problems, So Don’t Do It!_

This section includes students’ discussions on thoughts about stress and suicide. Several students talked about their experiences with suicide and events that led to the belief that their lives were not worth living. The students collectively concluded that suicide is not the answer and that it is a permanent solution to problems that are simply temporary.

Sasha: There was a time in my life when my parents could not control me, and I threatened suicide a time or two. I was angry for a lot of reasons, but people thought I wasn’t listening to them. They were used to their kids listening to every word they said. They just couldn’t deal with me in general. People don’t like that I am so independent. It scares them.

Raul: People hate that. They don’t like it when we are different or independent and stand on our own two feet.

Sasha: People thought I wasn’t listening to them. I was listening just not to the point they thought I should. I was pretty out of control because I was so angry, so my parents sent me to my aunt and uncle’s house for the summer. They should not have sent me there because that was during my suicidal time and my cousin had committed suicide in their garage. So, it wasn’t good. I have been suicidal several times in my life, but not now. I have learned and continue to learn to deal with life as it comes. I have been in this wheelchair since age four, so I am kind of used to all of it now.

Sharee: How did it happen, if you don’t mind talking about it?

Sasha: It was a four-car pile up on the north part of town. My grandmother was driving. She had minor injuries in comparison to my great grandmother, who was also in the car, and to me. My great grandmother was dead on arrival. I was sitting in the back seat and was wearing my seat
belt and the back seat, with me in it, was thrown out of the front of the car. My spinal cord was
severed.

Raul: I was going to ask that but I didn’t know how to.

Sasha: I don’t mind. I will answer any question.

Sharee: Will you always be in a wheel chair?

Sasha: Yes. Unless they find some medical miracle.

Raul: I am glad you are still here. At one point in my life I was suicidal. Nothing I did seemed to
measure up to what my parents wanted. I had issues at school, with friends and stuff, too. It
doesn’t compare at all with what you have been through, but when you are under tremendous
stress, it makes you want to do things you wouldn’t normally do.

Sun: Wow. I was so stressed after I took ACT and scored terrible that I thought my life was over.
I thought I could not go to college. I really thought it was the end of my life. I would not end my
life, but sometimes stress is just a lot.

Raul: Yeah. Stress. It makes you think crazy things sometimes. You don’t want to end your life.
It is good that you are here. And you can take the ACT several times if you want to and you can
increase your score. A problem at the time can seem so huge, but, really, an answer comes
eventually.

Tam: My sister tried to commit suicide. She is having such a hard time.

Kevin: Sounds like most of us have had some kind of experience with suicide. I have had one
suicide attempt. It was when all this crazy stuff was happening with my stepfather who abused
my mother. All the aunts on my mother’s side of the family except one have committed suicide.
One of them shot herself in the face with a magnum; one of them jumped off a bridge and hung
herself. I wanted to commit suicide because I wanted to stop hurting people, and I didn’t think I could stop.

Raul: So, you wanted to die to stop hurting others. I wanted to die so others would stop hurting me.

Kevin: Hmm. Interesting.

Raul: I heard someone say that suicide is a long-term solution to what was just a temporary problem.

Kevin: Yeah. Suicide. Permanent. Problems. Temporary. So, agreed, we don’t do it!

*Weed, Weed, and More Weed!*

*A common concern and problem students discussed in the group dialogues was the prevalence of marijuana use in the youth culture at Urban Midwest. The students described their experiences and loss of friends due to the overwhelming use of illicit drugs in the form of smoking weed. Encountering peer pressure and seeking ways to fit in, some students at Urban Midwest turn to substance abuse to help them cope with their lives, which in turn, brought stress and concern to their friends who are watching and are concerned for their well being.*

Jaleel: When we left middle school and went to high school, we lost a lot of friends. We lost friends to smoking weed and stuff like that. We have probably lost over twenty friends, really.

Jamal: We are still cool with them, but it is really hard, and you can’t hang out with them as much. All they seem to think about is smoke, smoke, and smoke. Smoking weed is all they talk about. Inside of school, outside of school, around school.

Sasha: It is pretty easy to bring weed or whatever inside the school. It is not like they check you at the door.

Raul: Even if they did, kids would find their away around it.
Jamal: I don’t do weed and a lot of students don’t do drugs, but for sure some do. I think those that do smoke a lot of weed, it is because of peer pressure, but also their lives are so stressful they do it to relax. It seems really like a lot of people are using.

Raul: Yeah. I would think at least 30% of this school is drug influenced. From every race and all different reasons—some for money, some for escape, some out of boredom, some do it because they can do it to rebel against the law, their friends, their parents, the school system.

Jaleel: A lot of it is peer pressure. They end up messed up from it.

Jamal: Messed up. It is messed up.

Raul: Just to fit in.

Jaleel: Probably that. Just to fit in or to find a way to deal with their lives.

Jamal: Most of the time that is what it usually is. But then they might stop a couple of weeks after because it wasn’t what they thought it was.

Jaleel: When people have to try so hard to be cool it is weird. A lot of people smoking weed is about people trying too hard to fit in. It is just weird when you have to try so hard to be cool. I know someone who just tries so hard to be cool and talks about weed all of the time, and he just doesn’t get it at all.

Jamal: We have this friend that never smoked weed last year at all. He was all about basketball and grades, but this year he changed and he is more about smoking and hanging out with the wrong people.

Jaleel: I don’t really care if they smoke or not to tell you the truth, but to try to get me to do it that is when it becomes my business. We could still be cool and be friends, but we won’t be as close as we used to be. If they pressure me and want me to do what they are doing and for me to be on the same low level that they are, then the friendship changes.
Jamal: People change. First they are athletes and they are cool and they don’t mess with drugs, and then you find out a couple weeks later they are smoking all the time. They hang out with the wrong people. I shouldn’t say the wrong people really because I have hung out with them before, too, but they didn’t influence me like they did other people.

Jaleel: Yeah. Well, I would say they hang out with the wrong people. They start hanging out with more people, and there are more people in high school to influence you in wrong ways. In high school, there are more bad influences all the way around, and students give into the pressure and start doing other things like drugs and stuff.

Jamal: Sometimes older people, too, influence you to do drugs.

Sharee: It is hard to watch people getting sucked in. It seems like it is a lot more guys than girls. Some sell drugs, too, because they want what they want when they want it.

Tam: It just doesn’t take a lot for someone to get pulled in. You can just do it once and then people expect you to do it all of the time. And then all the people make you want to do it more and more.

Jaleel: Yeah. You can just be hanging out and then they start smoking around you and before you know it you are surrounded by people smoking and you could start smoking, too. They can be your friends for a long time and then they still try to pull you in and press you into smoking. You don’t know if they really are your friends or not when they are trying to press you into doing something you don’t want to do or is not good for you.

Jamal: Every other sentence is like let’s go roll up or let’s go gyp school.

Jaleel: Or they say, “Let’s go do this!” And we are like how about we be in school to learn. It is tough and a lot of pressure. They always skip that whole part about the need to be in school, and then they notice their grades are dropping. They act like they don’t care anymore.
Jamal: Oh Yeah. Jaleel is like my only best friend now. I have a couple of other friends, but not a lot. In middle school, I was cool with everybody.

Jaleel: In middle school, most people didn’t smoke. Everybody wasn’t into it so much then. There was like a few people, but not that many. It is a vicious cycle. First one person smokes, then he pressures his other friends to smoke, then a small group smokes and then they pressure other friends to smoke and then it keeps going around. And it keeps on going around and around and then once it comes to you and you say no, but then they keep doing it and keep doing it and it becomes hard to resist the pressure.

Jamal: They still try to do sports, but they are not at their peak performance anymore.

Jaleel: Yeah. They don’t know once you smoke it likes messes up your body. It stops your growth and all that.

Jamal: It affects your brain, and you can’t think as well sometimes.

Jaleel: I know some who used drugs in elementary and they would come to school high and stuff—like that is cool or something—even back then. I would just shake my head and say that is not cool. Jamal and I talk to each other about it. We talk about how we won’t do it, and we sit back and watch it all. We said we have to leave it alone if we are going to be athletes. You either smoke or you go to college. Basically, we know that if you smoke, then you won’t go to college. It will be a rare chance that you will go to college if you are smoking weed.

Jamal: We know some people who didn’t smoke until they got to college. And they got kicked out of college because they smoked weed all of the time. We know people who lost their athletic scholarships in college because they smoked weed. One of my friend’s brothers lost his college opportunity because of weed. It is going to the gutter, if you ask me. There are so many people
smoking. Too, if you see a parent smoking when you are younger you will think there is nothing wrong with it.

Jaleel: When I was a baby, my mother used to smoke. It was a long time ago. My big brother and them cried about it and asked my mom to stop. And she did. I don’t know how she did it, but she just stopped, and she is healthy now.

Jamal: Some of our friends’ parents or their older brothers smoked, so they started smoking.

Jaleel: Like the neighborhoods I used to live in, everyone smoked. All the kids, they were little, I know kids younger than me who used to smoke. I know little kids that were walking around smoking weed, cigarettes, and everything.

Jaleel: It is so crazy. So many get drawn into it, but I am not going to smoke.

Tam: It is so easy to get sucked into it. But this group does not have any potheads.

Kevin: Yeah. My dad would literally go nuts if I smoked cigarettes or pot, since we have cancer in my family. I don’t worry about peer pressure, anyway, really, especially now that I am older. But, peer pressure for some is an enticing thing. You give in to try to make the stress and pressure of your lives to go away. But then people try to pressure you into doing other things and more things you don’t want to do, so the best thing is to just walk away in the first place.

Anger, Violence, and Gangs Seem Normal to Our World

In this dialogue, the students expressed their views about the anger, violence, and gang activity they observe in their youth culture. Young people being murdered and gun downed and anger and fighting in and outside of school are significant events in their lives and experiences. Students discussed these factors as integral parts of their lives and the world in which they live. Male aggression, violence, and fighting are experienced as normative solutions to conflict. The
Tam: Actually, I wanted to hit someone this year. Yes me. It takes a long time for me to get that mad to want to hit someone. It was in PE and there was this girl and she kept bugging me, and I literally wanted to hit her.

Raul: But you didn’t. You had self-control, and a lot of people don’t have that. Kids are faced with something and they do not know how to react to it. Most people are short tempered and they just hit somebody.

Kevin: I am really good at keeping everything in and keeping all of my problems from everyone else. I don’t want to push my problems on other people, so I work things out in my head, and sometimes the stress just builds up and you break. You are no longer yourself, you resort to that animal instinct and you try to take out whatever is causing that kind of stress in your life. And you can snap and you can take it out on anyone who gets in your way or happens to be there at the time. For some kids, this kind of response is all they know.

Raul: What about violent video games and the attraction for kids? How do you think this influences kids to be violent?

Kevin: Oh yeah. A lot of my attraction to violence comes from video games. I am not saying video games cause violent tendencies. I know the difference between video games and real life, but I wonder for some kids who like really violent video games if they do know the difference.

Raul: Sounds like you used to have a lot of rage. How did you get yourself out of that?

Kevin: For me, anger is triggered when one of my friends or someone in my family is getting hurt or abused and I can do something about that. I know I can do something about that. I have learned a lot from my psychologists, though, in the past as to how to control my anger. I have
been doing much better for a long time. When I feel that rage coming on, I know how to bring myself out of it or at least I have been able to for a long time. I have learned to recognize the signs and back off from it.

Tam: There are way too many students who don’t know how to do that. They just go off for what it seems like for no reason.

Raul: When I think of anger and violence, I think of fights at school, although there are other types of violence to talk about. I don’t understand the fights and what they are about. I just know that when the girls fight, we all watch because it is entertaining. The security guards say the only fights we have had this year are between the girls. The guys fight more outside of school.

Kevin: Some fights, though, with guys are all about male aggression and it is about power. Every human is greedy and they want power. The more power you have the more power you want. For some, it is a programmed mindset.

Raul: I think some of it is pride. I don’t know. It is the history of males. Like my dad, he always said if you had a problem just go fight and take care of it. Why do males always face situations by fighting? Really, we are taught to face situations by fighting. And for the ones who would rather speak about things and talk it out rather than fight, they are considered weak, or not as strong, or not as masculine, or weird, or gay. That is how those who want to talk it out rather than fight are labeled. But it pretty much all goes to how we are taught. We are not taught to sit down and talk about stuff and think about it. We are taught to fight.

Kevin: My mom has told me if someone tries to pick a fight with you, to kick their ass. It is definitely environmental. I get that kind of stuff from my mom’s side, but then my dad is the one who says talk it out first. But if diplomacy fails, do what comes natural and aggression is natural along with every other emotion we feel.
Raul: There is another thing. When you get permission from your parents—a friend of mine said her mother told her that if somebody punches you go ahead and fight because they started it. When you get permission you don’t have to fight the urge to fight because you are allowed to. You are like, “Well, my parents told me I could do this, so I can go ahead if I want.”

Kevin: My thought is that it is so much better to talk it out and if you can’t talk it out, go to an adult. Because the students see adults as having more influence on other students and more respect.

Sharee: A lot of times adults don’t do anything, though, and you think what is the point talking to them.

Jamal: I don’t think kids really think of turning to adults as it doesn’t help or really turn out right either when they do get involved.

Sharee: I think the Black girls’ fights are about respect and attention. When you feel like you are low on the totem pole and no one is paying attention or listening to you, the fighting is one way to get the attention you crave. Not having a voice and feeling like people are not listening has an impact. Kids see so much violence in their homes, too. Everybody is fighting everybody. Just talking about the problems—not many people seem to know how to do that, including adults.

Raul: I know Black girls that they totally have a mindset of “if some guy hits me, I am not afraid of him and will fight back.” There is an attitude that is, “I will go down fighting!” I am like that, and I think more and more girls are getting like that. If you hit me, I am not going to take it.

Kevin: If girls hit me playfully I will hit them back. If they hit me out of anger, I will not hit them back because I know I could really hurt them. I will tell them to stop and will make them stop.
Tam: People are cruel at this school, really, and are constantly trying to stir up trouble, fighting, and drama.

Jaleel: That is one reason why I have a temper. My temper is not as bad as it used to be. But like my first week at my middle school some dude just tried to push me and bumped my shoulders and started calling me names. He pushed me as I was walking off and then continued to call me all of these names. And I was like, “You better watch out!” And he was like, “What are you going to do!” and he took off his hoodie, and then swung at me. I used to box so I dodged it and punched him, and he kept coming at me, and I kept hitting him. Administration was just watching! I kept telling him to stop coming at me, but he kept coming and it kept getting worse. The librarian just kept watching, too. The situation got bad for him. I broke his nose and there was blood everywhere. I didn’t want to be a fighter, but there I was. My anger was more of an issue in middle school. It was like a problem. I don’t know. I avoid anything like that now. People just don’t really mess with me either.

Jamal: I have had some anger and fighting issues, too. Now, though, Jaleel talks me out of beating people up sometimes. People here just try and try to test you.

Jaleel: When it was freshman hell week (freshman hell week—a term used by students to describe the first week of school for freshman—unsanctioned and unsupervised by adults), I got jumped by the biggest people in the school. I was walking in gym class when no adults were around. It was before class, and most everyone was in the locker room already. These guys just snatched me, and then they got mats and hit me with them. It wasn’t that bad but still.

Jamal: They tried to get me in the bathroom and I splashed water on them, and I started punching them. They found out I was stronger than they thought I was and they left me alone.
Jaleel: Yeah. As I have handled myself, they have backed off. But people keep testing you. I haven’t fought anyone at this school, though. I am trying not to.

Tam: People step on me on purpose because I am smaller.

Jaleel: That is so bad. This is high school. Grow up is what I am trying to say to those people.

Jamal: Fights are not just in school. The major ones are outside of school.

Jaleel: Yeah there have been fights, and the fights between guys are not at school usually but a couple blocks down from here.

Jamal: We have had to fight a lot to stay out of gangs on the streets. We moved, but in my old neighborhood there were fights all of the time. Any kind of fights.

Jaleel: My old neighborhood had a lot of gangs, a lot of shootings. Probably a shooting like every other week. If we saw a car without its lights on, we would go in the house. That is basically what it was. They go shoot up someone’s house and then they come right back and do the same thing. Probably shoot up the wrong person’s house. Then in drive bys, gang signs are thrown and people hop out of the car and fight, they leave, and the police finally come like an hour afterwards. The police always come super late. It seems like they are scared. It seems like that. There are a lot of guns. Like a lot. A lot of guns.

Tam: They just drive by. Are there any reasons?

Jamal: They have reasons or maybe they don’t have reasons and they do it just because. My brother and I should never go down 13th street. We might get shot, and it would be for no reason.

Jaleel: Sometimes it is retaliation for something. It could be any thing. There are certain houses on the block that were like gang houses. Like a couple of houses down there was a gang house. Violence and gangs are so commonplace now, it can seem normal. My brother had one of his best friends shot and killed by gang members when he was just taking out the trash. A car drove
by and they just shot and killed him. His older brother was a gang member, and my brother’s friend was shot and murdered. I know a lot of people locked up for gang banging and stuff. There are a lot of fights from it all.

Raul: Two months ago a person I know—an acquaintance not a good friend--was killed in a fight. The fight got real violent and the other person pulled out a gun and shot him. That stuff happens for whatever reason. I just knew him as an acquaintance, so it didn’t impact me too much.

Jaleel: It is just crazy. Guns everywhere. People getting shot all of the time. Gangs are getting bigger and more and more dangerous.

Jamal: I have older relatives in my family who are big time drug lords and gang bangers and they passed it down to us, but we moved from Chicago all the way to Kansas to get out of it. My brother was always checked up on because people assumed he was a part of it. We had to move here to get away.

Jaleel: Some kids are born into gangs. Like say their dad was probably gang banging and they give their baby a gang name and then the little kid becomes a part of it. It keeps going in a cycle until one of them gets hurt. Some people do it because they think it is cool to be a gang member. And really it is not. They don’t really know what it is all about and what gang bangers go through. Most of them who are in it really want to get out of it, most of them, but they can’t. And then you have the others who think they want to be apart of it—it is crazy—they want to be a part of something they just don’t even know yet what it is about.

Jamal: Bunch of people getting shot--that is what it is about.

Jaleel: A bunch of their friends are dying and getting shot.
Jamal: They don’t even know why their friends are dying. They can be talking to them one day and the next day they ask where they are. Oh, they are dead. They are dead because they got shot.

Jaleel: Most fight within their own racial groups. Even the gangs are more about killing each other off. I heard in California about the Bloods and Crips. They finally put an end to it and the violence and all and shook on it and then once someone got shot again it started all over again. It is a big war spreading around the whole U.S. This is just crazy. It is all about retaliation. I guess everyone is turning against each other because nothing is going like they planned.

Jamal: Well, really, it can be difficult to get out of a gang. My family had to move to a completely different state. Some do make it out, and get out, though. But many don’t want to get out and just keep on with it. I knew about one guy whose parents moved him all the way to Wyoming, they were so concerned about him getting shot.

Raul: The whole thing is if someone makes it out of the gangs or are just even trying to get into a better life style, someone else will get jealous and want to pull them back in. And they are afraid to strive or they don’t want to and so for those people who are close to making it out, don’t make it because others fight so hard to pull them back in. They bring them down because they themselves can’t get out. It is like the crabs in a bucket idea. If one tries to get out, the other pulls it down. This applies to the gangs, but it really applies to life. Somebody tries to get out and they get pulled down. Changing status, changing what you’ve had and how you’ve lived is not easy.

This section provides dialogue on students’ views about differences in socioeconomic status among students and the difficulties in obtaining upward social mobility. Their conclusions are that it takes money to make money and the rich are simply getting richer.
Raul: Remember when Oprah talked about kids of today and she opened up a school in Africa rather than here because she didn’t think kids here really cared about education. She thinks kids here care more about the kind of tennis shoes they wear. I kind of agree with what Oprah said—not completely—but I kind of agree with her about kids mostly caring about fashion and style and stuff like that. Most of the kids here seem to have it made, and it is usually the kids, no offense to them, but the White rich kids who usually have the most expensive stuff and the other races want to compete with that. And for the ones who do try to compete, they might finally realize like me that all that stuff doesn’t really matter. It is more about how are we going to get into a college; how are we going to get to our jobs; how are we going to afford things for ourselves and for our families and children. But there are some kids who only focus on the material, but when you are thrown into high school, the first thing you see is the fashion and you just want to blend in and mix in or whatever. A lot of times kids get made fun of if you don’t fit the right class.

Sasha: Or the right clique.

Raul: Right. The right clothing, attitude, or don’t speak up enough or speak up too much, or whatever.

Kevin: Yeah, but what do you think got kids to this place of only seemingly caring about their brand name shoes and stuff like that?

Jamal: Their parents not caring about them or their education.

Raul: Yeah, but probably even more so, the propaganda, the media, music and stuff like that.

Sasha: Other peers.

Jaleel: Comfort.
Raul: Comfort. Well, that makes sense. It is more comfortable to stay in one kind of social class than switching to another. One way of style of dressing and being is more comfortable than to try to change into something else.

Jaleel: There is a lot of jealousy, too. It is like say I am in the hall and I have some money and others see that money. They just will want it and want to take it. They won’t care how hard I worked to get the money or how I got it in the first place. They just want what they want.

Kevin: Yeah. Not many people will admire that you have money. Most people would be jealous. Most people won’t ask or see how hard you worked to get that money. They will just go after it rather than work for it themselves.

Raul: I have to admit, especially last year, I got real jealous about people who had money, but then I just figured that even if I did have money it would not help me get to a job that I am going to love or an adult life that I actually want to get to. Seeing all the money is a catalyst, though, for me to strive to do better and to get a better education and to find something that I am good at and actually enjoy having as a job and occupation.

Jaleel: Yeah, but they say go to college; go to college and you will make the big bucks, but that just isn’t how it is. People who already have money will continue to make the big bucks. They are the ones who have the opportunities to keep their money, to keep reinvesting their money, and to make more money.

Jamal: And another thing, I have a lot of older friends—or friends who have older siblings—who want to go to college, but they can’t afford it. They have to work to have a place to live, food to eat, and a car payment to make. All they can do is work at Raytheon or some place like that. If they were in my situation they would go to college and take care of their business but they can’t afford to go to college right now.
Raul: Like you were talking about, Jaleel. Most of the time you have to have money to get more money. Like to get into a better college and go to a topnotch school such as Harvard you have to have money to do that. You might be smart enough but if you don’t have the money or scholarships you are not going to be able to go to that school.

Jamal: I want to say that sometimes I think America is more about money than they are about education. They put on a good front that they are about education, but I don’t think they are for it as much as they say. If they really cared about it, they would fund it and make sure everyone had a good education and be able to go to college.

Raul: I don’t get that you can go to the war at 18 but you can’t drink a beer. If you are old enough to die in a war you should be old enough to drink or smoke and do whatever you need to do to cope with all of that. Somebody fighting in the war may be dead before they turn 21. It seems like the government, too, is more interested in fighting about politics and what goes on in other countries than they are about protecting our rights and supporting our schools.

Jaleel: What I don’t get is the Iraq war and all of the money we are losing and spending on that instead of education. We still don’t know why we are there, and they keep changing why we are still there. The rich oilmen should be paying for this war and their children are the ones that should be fighting it for them and not the rest of us.

Raul: Really, it is the rich getting richer, as their children are the ones who will have the connections and the money to go to the best colleges and get the highest paying jobs.

Racism, Stereotypes, Discrimination, and Bullying: This is Our Experience

All of the students had comments to make about racism, stereotypes, discrimination, and bullying. This discussion generated questioning back and forth and considerable feedback for each other as students listened to what each other had to say. The students described experiences
of people making assumptions of them according to external characteristics and their frustrations in trying to cope with this aspect of their lives. Support was given to Sun, especially.

As a newcomer to the U.S. and to the youth culture of Urban Midwest, he seemed to struggle the most with bullying. The students demonstrated empathy and concern for him as he described some of his difficulties. These discussions were the most animated of all the dialogues among the students. The students described their school as segregated among the varying groups in their school. They would like to see more discussions in school about culture and race and to learn more about one another.

Sharee: Here is what I want to know: What do you guys really think about Black people?

Raul: There are a lot of opinions and judgments out there. People see a group of Black guys, and think, “Oh they are cool. They either have money or the best songs.” If they dress a certain way or if they dress really nice and look like they have a lot of money, people make assumptions and say, “Oh they must deal drugs. Their parents must sell drugs.” I judge. Everyone does. I am biased. Everyone is. I do judge everyone, but I give people a chance to show me who you are. I wait till I learn about someone before I really decide about them. I do judge, but I see who you are before I decide I do or don’t like you.

Tam: I have a lot of respect for you, Sharee. In math you stand up for yourself and I have a lot respect for you doing that. There are people who are so rude, and for them, I have no respect for that. If they are rude, then why would I respect them no matter what the color of their skin? Why should I be nice to them when they are so mean and rude? I try hard to be nice to people, but sometimes I don’t get the respect back. It is not all Black people, but so many are rude and mean. Asians are the same way, too, though. All races are the same, though. Some can be nice and some can be mean. If you are nice, I will be nice too. I treat people the way I want to be treated.
Raul: Sharee, I like the fact that you straight out asked us what we think. This showed you think and care. Some people never ask and just judge and then act on hatred. People think we can’t talk about these things, but I think we can.

Sharee: It is hard to not know what people are thinking. Like I have seen White people walking in the stores and they move to the other side when they see me or me and my family or friends walking. Maybe they aren’t thinking anything at all, but then maybe they are. It would be helpful to know more what people really do think of each other.

Tam: So, when you see Asian people what do you think of first?

Kevin: Smart people.

Raul: Good in math.

Sasha: Smart people.

Kevin: Smart people with fast cars.

Tam: So that is the stereotype you think?

Everyone in unison: Yeah!

Kevin: But what about those who don’t fit that stereotype?

Tam: You deal with it. But I don’t fit the mold, which brings on pressure. I am just me and not a stereotype, and I am not good in math. I wish I was, but I just am not.

Jamal: We are not stereotypes, but sometimes that is what you feel reduced to. A lot of times discrimination goes on for every Black male because you can’t always tell who is a gang banger and who isn’t sometimes. Some gang members dress real nice so you don’t even know.

Raul: Yeah. They dress nice and match their clothes and all and look really nice.

Jaleel: It doesn’t matter how you try to make yourself look. One day I left a party with a friend, and we were on my way home and we had on real nice clothes. I had a nice collar shirt, button
up and looked real nice. The police pulled us over for no reason and said we were going over the speed limit, and we knew we were not speeding. They had me and my friend get out of the car. The police officer said, “What gang are you in? We said, “We aren’t in a gang.” He said, “Yes you are.” We said, “No we aren’t.” “I can tell you are!” he said, “because you have on some red!” So my friend said, “Well, that is racist! Just because he is wearing red and he is Black, he is in a gang?” The officer said, “Shut up, or you are going down.” They let us go and did not give us a ticket or anything. Another time my brother was pulled over and jerked out of his car and thrown down on the ground for no reason, and then they let him go. They didn’t give him a ticket or anything and they had no reason to pull him over.

Kevin: Now that is a clear example of racial profiling.

Jaleel: You got that right.

Jamal: We here about this stuff all of the time.

Jaleel: Yeah. Here is another thing. I guess teachers see other Black kids gyp, and the other day I was just walking to the office. I was just walking, and the teacher monitoring the halls skips two White kids that were walking and were gypping because I had just talked to them, and she goes straight to me and says, “Where are you going?” I say, “I am going to the office.” She asks, “Who are you going to go see?” I say, “My administrator, and she says, “Alright,” and she keeps walking with me. She followed me all the way there, which was just down the hall—like just one door down from where I was, and she says, “Alright now, go to the office,” and I am thinking, “That is where I was planning on going. That is where I said I was going.” She says, “Now don’t go off gypping!” I am thinking to myself, “Gypping, who said anything about that?” And she says again, “Don’t walk out those doors and go gypping!” So, I am like to myself, “Man I don’t
even gyp!” That still irritated me a lot. She was assuming things about me that are not even close to being how I am.

Jamal: We dress really nice, but it doesn’t matter what we wear. That shows something right there. They go straight to Jaleel and bypass two White kids that really are gypping.

Jaleel: One of my memories that sticks out was when I was in second grade. I wanted to get a drink and the teacher let all these other kids go first. She let five other kids go, and she held me back. I was thirsty and that irritated me for a long time. That is something I will never forget. It may not even be because I was Black, but you always wonder.

Raul: You do wonder. And about discrimination. For me being Mexican, people constantly underestimate me. They think I won’t speak up or say anything and just accept what is going on. Now when I feel like I am experiencing discrimination I speak up and if something happens that I am uncomfortable with, I let people know.

Sharee: I feel discriminated against sometimes. I still feel awkward with some teachers. It feels like they are being forced to treat us the same. They are doing it because they have to. Still in the back of their minds they have attitudes. There are some White teachers I can trust, but others, well, I don’t know. The ones I trust they don’t act funny; they don’t act different around us as they do other people. But the other teachers that I don’t trust acted funny from day one. I think it is that they overlook me and other Black students. We ask questions and if we don’t get it, they move on to other people. They don’t smile at us. And the minute you walk in the room it is uncomfortable because they give you these looks, and they do not smile.

Raul: This makes me think of Mr. C. Now, Mr. C. is interesting. I think he cares about students, but he just doesn’t really know how to act on things sometimes. I just don’t think he knows how to teach in this kind of setting and situation. There are a lot of teachers like that who actually do
care but just don’t know how to handle this type of social situation. He is from a small town.
And he has had one kind of experience and I think this is a hard world for him.
Jamal: I really don’t think he is a good teacher, well, not really, and I am not sure he cares,
either. It is just seems like he treats the Blacks different than the Whites. I am not saying he is
racist or anything. It is just the way he seems to care about the White students and does not seem
to show us the same interest.
Raul: It seems like he has good intentions he just doesn’t know how to do it.
Jamal: I think it is just the way he was brought up. And saying the word boy, calling me boy!
You can’t say that to a Black male. I can’t believe he doesn’t know that.
Jaleel: That is what the slave owners used to call slaves.
Jamal: It doesn’t bother me so much now, but at the beginning of the year, it bothered and upset
me so much I didn’t even want to go to his class.
Raul: I am thinking it is really about a lack of experience and he may be more comfortable with
people who are like him, but, yeah, that is an example of discrimination, treating people even
unintentionally different because they don’t look like you. Underestimating me or other students
because of our race is also a form of discrimination.
Sharee: And something else, I feel kind of weird if I am the only Black person in a class or in a
group. If I am the only Black person, it makes me feel uncomfortable. I don’t know. It seems like
everyone looks at me. I feel like I can’t be me. I feel like White people expect Black people to
say the wrong things. I felt like I can hardly talk because I would probably say the wrong thing
and then it would be like “Oops, she is like all of the other ones.” That is what I feel like
sometimes.
Sasha: Wow. I would not have thought that at all.
Tam: Yeah. I would not have known that either. I hope you don’t feel that way here. I feel anyone could say anything in this group.

Sasha: You should always speak up.

Tam: You shouldn’t be afraid in this group even if it is the stupidest thing in the world.

Sharee: Yeah. And I do speak up most of the time. It is like when we are working on projects in a class and I felt like my opinion didn’t count when I have been in a group with all White people.

When I feel that way, I just let them do their work and don’t say anything.

Kevin: Well, this may seem odd, but sometimes I am the only White male in class, like now in my foods class, and I feel like people at first don’t want to be around me because they assume I will be a jerk. There is the stereotype of the White male: Rich, privileged, and powerful all of which I am not. I grew up poor, physically and emotionally abused, changing schools a lot, and had it generally pretty tough, like most kids in American families. Once people get to know me, though, they usually think I am okay. I will always hang out with the Asians first because they seem more comfortable around me initially.

Jaleel: Yeah. It is all pretty strained sometimes. For us, we have to always have our guard up. No matter how we dress or act or try to be different, we will be judged not on who we are but how some African American males may act. This is how I feel.

Sharee: Yep. That’s it. I just know that when I am around people like me, I feel more comfortable. I am not saying I don’t feel comfortable around White people because I have a White auntie, but I feel more comfortable being around people like me because they understand and have been through the same thing. They know where I am coming from when I talk. I just think it would be helpful to have more Black teachers and Black teachers teaching Black history.

And not just any Black teachers, but Black teachers that understand how it really is for a lot of
Blacks. There are Black people out there who forget who they are and don’t know where they come from. That doesn’t help either.

Tam: You said you feel left out and stuff when you are in a group who is different than you. Well, I feel the same way when I am in a group of I guess, well, really a group of Blacks. I feel I have to let them do whatever, and I can’t speak up at all either. I am like the quiet type, so I just let them do it or whatever. It is either I do it all or they do it all. In a group project and the teacher picks the group and we don’t get to pick it is never that we all do it. So, I mean I know how you feel as I am in that situation, too. Another thing, when I go to the mall sometimes people will follow me and my friends and walk behind us and talk gibberish and act like they are talking Vietnamese.

Sun: I have that, too. People at school do that to me sometimes.

Sharee: That is just so stupid. I think it is great when people speak more than one language.

Sasha: People saying things about other races, calling people names--names that should not even be repeated anywhere and especially not inside a school, and making fun of you because of your language--the best thing we can do is ignore it.

Tam: Just because you ignore it doesn’t mean that you don’t hear it.

Sasha: If somebody is dumb and idiotic enough to go up and call you the N word or any other derogatory name about race or anything else for that matter, they don’t matter. You can hear it and it can offend you, but if you don’t let it get to you, they will stop. They are doing it to try to get to you and get a reaction from you. I just deal with it all of the time. I ignore it. People judge all the time. And we just have to get over that. The ones we should care about what they say are the ones that have sat there and had a conversation with you and tried to get to know you. I get
comments about my race, the clothes I wear, my disability, they way I speak, and the way I think. And, really, I have learned to ignore it.

Tam: Sasha, how do you feel you are discriminated against?

Sasha: People assume because I am in a wheelchair, I can’t think or do anything for myself. They think they have to think and do for me. Some people are just plain scared and run away; others in the hallways are just plain mean. The other day some girl said, “There goes the wheelchair girl! I hate that wheelchair! She better stay out of the way, that Bitch!”

Sharee: When people are mean like that, calling you names, putting people down, it is all about attention. When they feel like nobody cares about them, then why should they care about how they act and how they treat other people? But it is, too, what they see at home and on the videos and music and stuff. They don’t know how else to act. But they do want attention, too, and they try to get it in all kinds of ways, whether it is a bad way or a good way. They put others down to try to make themselves feel better.

Sun: I can think of discrimination. When that guy shot everybody at Virginia Tech, when I came to school, people teased me and asked me, “Is that your brother?”

Jaleel: That’s bad. Oh dude. They were dogging you out.

Tam: That makes me so mad. That upsets me so much. You are going though such a cultural shock. The language is hard enough and then everything about your environment is different. And people are so mean.

Sun: I am already stressed. Trying to learn the language and people. It is hard. People make fun of me for my accent. That is why I hate talking in classroom.

Tam: Your English is good! You are learning so much!

Raul: Are you still getting teased?
Sun: Yeah. They are making fun again.

Sasha: You are just being thrown into to all of this. Welcome to life in America.

Raul: You are having to adapt to all of this. A lot of it is kid’s cruelty, and they do it because they want to and they can. You will learn that people will do things to see what their limits are. They will poke you, for example, until you say stop. They want to see how far they can go.

Sasha: They will keep pushing and pushing until you finally snap. They want to see people snap.

Jamal: Are these the same guys that pushed you before?

Sun: No. It is a different guy.

Jamal: Have you talked to your administrator about it?

Sun: Yeah.

Jamal: What does he say?

Sun: Not much.

Raul: It might be hard to talk to a man. He is just going to say just blow it off or what did you do to cause it or blah, blah, blah, or something like that.

Tam: Well, you have about survived your first year in high school in the U.S. That is a pretty big wow.

Sasha: It can only get better. And, really, you can always hang around us, if people are giving you trouble. We will be your bodyguards.

Kevin: Yeah.

Raul: And make sure you are in close proximity with adults in the building, too.

Sun: Thanks.

Sharee: It is all just so stressful. And they expect us to concentrate on our education! I try! But sometimes it is just so hard. Some guy in class was talking about how all Black people are poor
and shop at the Dollar Store and that is why they are all dumb and he also used the N word.  
When I confronted him he laughed and then denied he said it. I don’t know if the teacher heard it. It still goes on.  
Tam: That is cruel. The teacher needs to stop it. I just think things would be so much better if there was more education on cultures, all cultures. It is not just Black and White, but Asian, Muslim, Hispanic, Native American. We are all here, but nobody really knows anything about anybody. Nobody knows like how hard it has been for Sun to move here and what the rest of us go through, too. We don’t seem to care, I guess.  
Kevin: It is so segregated here. The preps stay with the preps and the jocks stay with the jocks. There is segregation according to color, but a lot of it, too, is according to the lifestyle you lead.  
Raul: Gangsters and thugs hang out together and sometimes it does not matter what color they are. But then you have the Hispanic gangs, the African American gangs, and White people who may fit into either one of those gangs. Either way, you can walk through this school at any time and see how segregated it is.  
Kevin: Here is another thing: A lot of people discriminate against other people because they are homosexual or bisexual. I just want to say to people, “Don’t be afraid. Just because someone is bisexual does not mean they are going to try to make you one!”  
Raul: I have had a lot of people who I thought were my friends, and once they found out who I really am, they stopped talking to me. I was shut out. They ran away.  
Sasha: They are scared.  
Kevin: People are afraid of the unknown.  
Raul: I have a friend who has a friend that is really out. I have another friend who said that he could never be gay because his father would kill him.
Tam: The biggest thing to me is for people to treat people better and nicer no matter what. Don’t act like differences do not exist, because they do. See color and culture, how we are alike and different, and treat each other with respect. Get to know people and really find out about them.

Jamal: People on the outside that don’t know about schools, don’t talk to students, may not even have been in a school since they went to school, make all of these judgments about our lives. I think students are blamed for things they have had no control of in their lives. I would like to tell everyone to stop stereotyping. Look deeper and be willing to listen. That goes for people in and outside of this school.

Male and Female Relationships: It’s All About the Drama

In this section, the students’ discussion of male and female relationships is shared. The males in the group discussion described the harassment they experienced by some females in the school and that they felt there was nothing they could do about it, particularly, turning to adults was not seen as an option. They were afraid they would be laughed at, if they told about their experiences. The girls talked about disrespect from males and also that girls allowed their lives to revolve solely around their boyfriends, frequently excluding their girlfriends from their lives. Ultimately, relationships among males and females create “drama” and distractions to the students’ learning environment and students seem unsure as to what to do about it.

Jamal: There is a lot of sexual harassment at this school. This is probably the first you have heard of this, but girls harass us, too.

Jaleel: Girls you don’t even know will grab you between your legs.

Jamal: And they will grab your butt.

Jaleel: I don’t even like someone to even touch my face.
Jamal: They say things like, “Come here baby” and “I am about to rape this freshman.” The girls know they can get away with it. What guy is going to go to an administrator and tell them that some girl is harassing him? They would be laughed at! We would be laughed out of the school.

Tam: Girls really do that. I don’t do it, but I have seen it. I think they do it just for fun.

Jaleel: It ain’t fun!

Jamal: TV influences it, and it has happened to them. They have been harassed and it is all they know. It makes me mad sometimes. They are just mimicking bad behavior of the guys.

Jaleel: Its people you don’t even know. Seriously, I don’t even know the people that try to do it. And it makes me really mad.

Jamal: It happens every day. Like just when I was walking to class today, some girl I don’t know said, “You have a big booty!” That is so frustrating. I was like who are you? If I harassed someone I would be expelled. It would be on the news. We could go to jail. It is not always just the girls. Some of these guys harass girls a lot, too. The guys harass the girls. The girls could tell someone, but they know it won’t go anywhere if they tell. Guys can just talk their way out of situations. Some girls seem to like that stuff though. I don’t know why.

Jaleel: I don’t know why either. It is disgusting.

Tam: Not all boys, but most boys are mean. They just don’t treat girls right. They don’t care about them. They are rough and don’t really care, it seems like. Also, I have two friends and their lives revolve around the guy. It is all about the guy. They walk with them, talk with them, talk about them, and think about them. It is all guy, guy, guy. guy. And I am like don’t you have friends? What are you going to do when your boyfriend breaks your heart? Aren’t you going to go to your friends? You can have a boyfriend, but then don’t push your friends away. Your
friends will have your back. When the guy is gone, they might come back, but then they might not. I mean for me, I don’t base my life around my boyfriend.

Sharee: I like this text message that is going around that says, “Don’t make a boy your main priority because you are just an option.” That is what girls do. They make boys everything and then you just are another girl to them. But the big problem is that boys just seem like they don’t care any more.

Tam: There is so much disrespect towards females.

Sharee: They get these behaviors from their parents and what they have seen and experienced. From the media, rap songs, MTV, movies, Black songs, rap songs that have the N word or the B word and they don’t have a father figure, and the streets and the music becomes their daddy or whatever. And they start acting like the movie videos. And they start calling all females Bs and that is what they think about us. The movie videos are really bad. If you hear messages over and over again people start believing them and acting like them.

Tam: We watch this stuff everyday on television and at school.

Sharee: I get so mad because in math, these boys constantly call these girls all of these names for no reason. The teacher is from the Philippines and he doesn’t understand English, let alone this kind of stuff that goes on in the classroom.

Tam: Well, it isn’t encouraging the learning environment that is for sure.

Jamal: What learning environment? This seems to get ignored at times.

Tam: There is just so much drama everywhere! How are we supposed to focus on learning with all of this stuff?
School Practices and Policies: Are the Test Scores and Rules all They Care About?

Students expressed significant distaste for all of the assessments in school and for policies and practices that do not make sense to them. According to the students’ perceptions, rules are disseminated without much explanation or rationale to provide them understanding and motivation for following them. Students are often expected to comply and follow the rules without their participation in establishing them, which, in turn, builds resentment and students’ questioning of the school policies. The rules may make sense to the adults, but make little to no sense to the students. The students shared their many frustrations about all of the district and state assessments they have to take and the many rules they have to follow.

Raul: Now here is some ridiculous stress at school. There are too many standardized tests! They are stupid!

Jamal: Unnecessary!

Tam: They are annoying! They don’t work. They just don’t show what you have learned.

Kevin: A perfect excuse to sleep for 45 minutes.

Tam: Tests make you so nervous that you forget a lot of stuff. It doesn’t really show what you have learned because you are nervous.

Sasha: They bring it out of nowhere and say okay here is a test today.

Kevin: The teachers are like, “I think I never told you guys about this, but here it is on the test anyway.” Mr. L. has done that several times. In my last math class, he pulled a DCA (District Common Assessments) out of nowhere and this stuff was on it, and we were like, “Have we ever even seen this material before?” We had never seen the material!

Raul: Every time I take a test and find a question I don’t understand, I just wish they could reword it. I wish tests were different because I hate writing period. If they were oral and if
teachers could audiotape our answers, that would be so much better for me. That would be hard
to do in math, but in like English or history and if they asked an essay question and we could do
it orally, they would get so much more about what I know about the topic. And you then could
fully explain what you were thinking and your thought process. And if you didn’t understand the
question, they could ask it in a different way. Because tests are different than what your teachers
are teaching and a lot times the tests are so different from the way the teachers teach, that the
teachers wouldn’t even know how to ask the question in a different way.

Kevin: Here is what I think. I think some 60-year-old person up at the state offices is writing
those tests right now. They do not know what they are doing; what the teacher is teaching; or
what the student is actually learning or thinking! They write it in a way we are not used to and
can’t really understand.

Sasha: The whole testing thing is tough on teachers, too. Like Ms. D. tries to help you
understand even though she can’t really do it or understand what they are asking either.

Raul: Did you take the English test on the computer?

Kevin: Yeah, I actually got it done in about 15 minutes.

Raul: Oh. I am a slow reader and it took me all hour. It asked questions like why was the uncle’s
garage important to the girl. I was like, “I don’t know. I don’t follow stuff like that.” Now, why
was that important? (The entire group laughs.)

Kevin: That was the story about the uncle who owned a car garage.

Raul: Yeah. Stuff like that. Now, really, how is that important? What would make me care about
that? You can have a whole different mindset about something—you may pick up on something
else that seems more important to you. So they don’t get what you did learn. They just get what
you can’t answer on the test!
Kevin: That was for the state reading test. I forgot what they were. It is like it is so irrelevant. It is important to somebody, but it sure is worthless to us.

Jamal: Well, the teachers I think are just as stressed. We all know it gets in the way of their teaching us.

Sharee: I sure don’t like the state assessments. They ask us about stuff that we learned a long time ago. They should test us over what we just learned and not something ten lessons ago. I just don’t understand why they are doing this.

Sun: We might have learned the stuff, but then you are tested long after you heard about it.

Sasha: It is just a big plastic mess that has nothing really to do with true education. Lots of people are making money on all these stupid tests! People who make all the damn tests get the money, and the teachers and students get nothing but stress!

Sharee: Oh yeah.

Raul: Okay. Now what about Sweep and Keep (S&K)? (S&K is a policy at Urban Midwest in which students who are not in their classrooms on time have to go the commons areas and sit in a chair and are not allowed to do work or to sleep.) I don’t believe in it! I consider myself a higher student, but I am always late. I am not an early morning person. I have trouble sleeping and I work late hours. It is hard for me to get up to go to school. Every time a teacher sends me to S&K I don’t go. I go to another classroom or leave the building and walk outside. You just go in there and if you can’t do work in there you should at least be able to sleep. Me, I want to be in class. I want to learn! I just have trouble with sleep issues. I never get in trouble. I just have a hard time getting to my morning classes. I heard teachers say S&K keeps students from walking into class late, but it doesn’t help those who want to be in class. Really good students can be late sometimes and they miss their entire class. A lot of teachers don’t give you S&K because they
know you are doing the best you can, and they let you in class. They know we want to be in class to learn.

Jamal: Some just go straight to S&K because they don’t want to go to class. Others really want to be in class but something has come up for them and they are late. Sometimes things out of their control happen, but they are sent to S&K and lose their grade for that day. They can’t take a test or turn in an assignment.

Sasha: You just have a bunch of kids sitting in a room doing nothing.

Tam: I still don’t get S&K stuff. Because why do you have to keep students in there doing nothing? It takes all of the class time. How are you supposed to learn when you have to stay in a room and just sit there? It is not going to help us to not be late. Because sometimes things just happen. S&K just keeps you from your learning and I think they should just ban that. I have never had to go, but sometime something may happen. Things just do sometimes.

Jaleel: That messed up my grades in my social studies class. We had a big project due. I can’t remember what I was doing, but I made it straight to the door probably five seconds after the bell rang. I had my project, and she said go to sweep. I had my project that was due and she wouldn’t let me turn it in. I couldn’t go after school because I had to go to practice. So I tried to turn it in the next day, and she wouldn’t take it. She said it is late because it was not school related. I didn’t get any credit for it. That made me real mad because it was a big project that determined my grade. I was depressed for a whole week.

Tam: Did you see all those kids in S&K this morning? If it were working, why would there be all those kids? All they are checking out there are our IDs and stuff. Are they trying to say that our IDs, our agendas, and our passes are more important than our education? The message is that all of the rules are more important than us as people and more important than our education.
Raul: They wouldn’t ask kids for what they think should be a solution. I don’t want to make fun of this school, but this is not a good way or a good solution. At 18 we can go fight in a war in Iraq, but we have so little control over our lives here. We need to be prepared for adulthood. How is this helping?

Jamal: We do make our own choices. If we don’t want to go to class we are not going to go, and if we do want to go, we do. If something doesn’t make sense in school, we really don’t support it that much.

Sasha: They just don’t get that when we are forced to do something, we won’t do it or want to do it.

Sun: Sometimes you can’t go to the bathroom or go out when you want to or get a drink. My 2nd hour teacher she won’t write a pass to go to bathroom. You cannot use any passes for a drink or bathroom in this classroom.

Jaleel: Yeah. And the rule about IPODs was random and came out of nowhere. They did it right at the end of the year. Right at the end of the year they said, “You can’t have any music.” They say, “Here is a new rule: Don’t bring your IPODs anymore or ever again.” They think that this will be effective to just tell us there is a new rule with no reasoning, and they expect us to just follow it.

Jamal: They want us to be responsible, yet in many ways they don’t give us chances to be responsible.

Jaleel: Yeah. A responsible person will know if they listen to music while the teacher is teaching their grades on tests will suffer. Eventually you will catch on you should only listen to music when you are studying and not when the teacher is teaching. Your grades will suffer if you are
not responsible about your IPOD. Just showing up one day and saying the rule is changed
without giving a reason really doesn’t teach about responsibility.

Raul: I want to comment on the music thing, too. I thought the rule was not a good idea also.
Many of us have discovered music as therapy or whatever, and we listen to music in every class
to cope with this weird system we are in. One of my friends is always listening to her IPOD, and
she is one of the national merit scholar nominees. I think that is a weird rule to not let us listen to
music in class. A lot of teachers understand this and let us listen to music but then when we have
to take a test we don’t. But sometimes you just really need the music. And music can be a way of
helping you with your stress at school.

Jamal: Yeah. Sometimes this school seems like a prison more than a school. The rules, the rules,
the rules. At least we get out at the end of the day and can leave here. There is just so much
craziness to deal with.

Tam: I just think the message is that the rules are more important than us as human beings.
Seems like it is more about rules than teaching and learning.

Teacher Practices: Sometimes They Just Aren’t That Helpful

In this section, students discuss teacher practices that are perceived as uncaring and
unhelpful. Students expressed frustration when they did not understand what they were being
taught and the teacher seemed unwilling to listen to them or to vary their instruction to help
them learn. From the students’ perspectives, when they tried to speak up to some teachers about
not understanding the instruction or the concepts, it did not help them, as typically they would
get reprimanded by the teacher, written up, and/or served a detention or sent to their
administrator. The students expressed frustration that they have minimal voice or power to
change things within the classroom to improve their ability to learn.
Jaleel: Another thing to bring up is that if the teacher is not teaching in a way in that you can understand--you are not trying to make like they are a bad teacher--but if you are not learning from them and try to tell them, they just act like they don’t care. Like in math, I am usually good in math, but I don’t understand how my current teacher teaches, and when I try to tell her, she seems like she doesn’t care. If they don’t care, it makes me not want to care.

Tam: Teachers have to care before students care.

Jaleel: Some teachers teach in all kinds of ways to help us remember what is being taught. And then there are other teachers like my current history teacher who doesn’t really teach. She tells you, “Just read it and get the work sheet done.” She is cool and everything, and I am not saying she doesn’t care. It is nothing personal, but it is a different way of teaching and learning. I still haven’t adjusted to it. It being worksheets. Worksheets are so boring!

Jamal: In some classes it is just so boring because all we get are worksheets and they tell us to just read the book. All I feel we do is just look at papers all day. Then when I am done I just sit there. This makes me want to sleep.

Jaleel: Some teachers just give you a book and say page 371 and then we start talking in class because we are bored and can’t talk in class and then we are sent to the office for disrupting class. Then you aren’t in class at all.

Jamal: It starts a cycle and keeps on going in that cycle.

Jaleel: It seems that teachers don’t care sometimes. I can tell if they care. If I tell them I do not understand something and they say, “What can I do about that?” and act like it is your problem, well, this is telling me they don’t really care, even if they say they do. I really wanted to get out of a class because I couldn’t understand how the teacher was teaching math or what she was saying. It was really difficult for me to understand her English and the way she taught. Nobody
seemed to care, and I felt blamed for it. I saw other kids be able to get out of her class, but I couldn’t get out of it. Teachers complain that we don’t want to learn. Well, I want to learn, but when I express that I need to be taught in a different way, some teachers get mad and take offense. I don’t understand that. It is not personal. I just want to learn. I have to graduate and I want to learn so I can do well in college!

Jamal: If we talk or speak up, we will get in trouble and kicked out of the class. We both have gotten in trouble for trying to speak up and for talking too much in class. It is so boring sometimes and it is hard to stay awake and hard to just sit there. All the girls do in my history class is talk about themselves and giggle and laugh. If you are not going to be mature enough to talk about something else, I am just going to sleep. And Mr. C. doesn’t do anything about the girls laughing and giggling. He is more likely to send me out of class than them if I talk, so I just sleep. I just wish he would teach in a way that makes things interesting. All we get is worksheets and it is so boring! I wish I could speak up about this and have somebody do something about it.

Jaleel: When you speak up it does not change anything. In one of my classes, none of the students in class felt prepared for a test. No one seemed to know there was going to even be a test. We tried to tell that we didn’t know and were not prepared, but she did not listen and gave us the test anyway. Here it is a little better than it was in middle school. Some of the administrators here listen to what you have to say. But you still have to suffer the detentions when you spoke up in class about something that did not make sense such as giving a test when no one understood the material or that there was even going to be a test.

Raul: We just don’t see it as rebellion when we speak up about something that does not make sense, but many of the adults obviously do.
Sharee: We want to learn more than they give us credit for sometimes. There are just too many other students in this school who really don’t want to learn, and we all suffer from that. Teachers just get so frustrated with it, just like we do.

*Caring Teachers with High Expectations Make A Difference*

In addition to sharing about teachers who do not seem to care about them and appear defensive when students gave input or asked questions about their instruction, students also described teacher practices that helped them to grow and to learn and teachers who demonstrated care for them. The students like teachers who are nice, but strict, challenging with high expectations, but also caring and respectful, and teachers who build relationships with them rather than just teach the content. Students shared they want to be prepared for life after high school and for college, and some teachers helped them a great deal with these goals.

Jaleel: Mr. W. cares. One of the reasons I am passing math is because he helps me during seminar. He lets me in his seminar to help me in math. He is not even a math teacher. He teaches science, so that isn’t even his job, but he is helping me. I have him for science, but he knows I want to go to college and I have to learn math, so he takes time to teach, when it is not even his job. Mr. H. cares, too, but he is not working here anymore, because he has cancer. I had an A in his class because he taught in a way I could learn. He taught in a way I could learn really well. I did really well on his tests. He actually talked to the class about everything that happened in history. He talked to the class and showed stuff on a projector. And sometimes he would show movies throughout the whole thing so it is not just reading and writing. He talked to us and we talked with him about what we were learning, too. Teaching in different kind of ways really helped me retain the information.
Jamal: Now Ms. C. she teaches like that, too. She cares and knows how to discipline. I like teachers like her who mother me and father me and treat me like their son and teach me things they would want their kids to know. Most teachers are not that committed and they only know how to be that strict person or that nice person. Either they let people run over them or they are too strict.

Jaleel: Ms. C., well, she is so great! She knows how to teach the class. She teaches the class! She is flexible, yet she keeps us moving and helps us stay on track, too. If people are talking too much, she does not humiliate them in class and talks to them just outside the class.

Jamal: She gives us chances. She just really is interested in helping us learn. She might give us an extra day sometimes if we are late with a project. She is more understanding, yet she helps us learn. Teachers like Ms. C. really helped me grow up and calmed me down. They pulled me to the side and talked to me like a parent would. That is what she does.

Tam: Some teachers, like Ms. C., know how stressful our lives are and really care about what happens to us. She understands what we are going through. She connects with who you are and what you go though, but she still expects you to learn. She keeps good control over the class and everyone likes her.

Sasha: Mr. H. is another teacher who understands things in our lives. He listens to us and understands. His sense of humor is the greatest thing about Mr. H. He does not take things personally and seems to laugh a lot and enjoy what he does. His class helps me to forget about my problems. And Mr. R., he is a teacher that students talk about how much they like his class. He is helpful and wants us to learn. His big secret is that he’s got a sense of humor and does not take himself too seriously. He doesn’t take what students say or do personally. He gets that they could have had a really bad day before they ever walked into his class. He gets that it is not about
him. It is about the stress we are under and the things we face outside his classroom. He makes it fun and we want to learn from him.

Sun: I like how Ms L. says we are a family and we are all in this together. She cares and she expects us to learn.

Sharee: Ms. A. helps us to think and stretch our minds, but does not stress us out so much with all of the busy work that seems pointless. She gives us time to breathe and think things through. I don’t feel so rushed and stressed in her class. She seems to get that our lives are difficult and makes allowances for that, but she still expects us to do what we need to do to learn in her class.

Jamal: Ms. B. didn’t stereotype me as a bad student. She took me as I was. In my family we talk a lot—we talk a lot! I am used to talking a lot. Rather than getting me in trouble for talking, she provided a lot of opportunities for us to talk and to express ourselves.

Raul: My favorite teacher encourages us to express our opinions in class. We do get to talk about all kinds of things that are interesting. Even though he is a really hard teacher, I really like his class. With everything we read he asks questions of what we think about it. His goal is to get us involved in the material and find out what we think and feel. He lets the class discuss the issues and when you talk and argue about it you are actually thinking about it. This is why I really like his class. His goal is to get us connected with the material and to learn. In the process of learning, I can forget about my problems.

Jaleel: The best teachers will get students to talk to them. They let you talk to them. They start talking with us. They will start up a conversation with us and are not so obsessed with the rules.

Sharee: When I was having trouble talking too much in class, one of my teachers would call me to the side and talk to me. She never said anything in front of the whole class. I appreciated that. This alone made me want to work for her.
Jamal: My favorite teachers are those that let us talk, and they also teach us more than just the material. They teach us about life.

Kevin: Yeah. My favorite classes are those that we talk about real life. We learn a lot about life in JROTC and that is why I like it.

Tam: Some teachers just know you can’t make somebody want to mature and grow up.

Kevin: They guide and influence and create conditions for students to grow. They talk to us about life, but then let it go and let us choose. They don’t get into power struggles and know they can’t force it.

*Please Listen to Us and Give Us Opportunities to Communicate*

Listening to students and allowing time for them to communicate in their school day emerged as an important factor in the students’ discussions. The students indicated that open dialogue in classrooms in which they are able to communicate and talk about issues significant to current events and to their lives provide engaging learning environments. They reported they learn the most in their classrooms when there are group discussions, when multiple points of view are encouraged, and when they feel comfortable in their classrooms. The students shared they don’t have many opportunities in a school day to talk about what they think and feel, but when they do, they believe these conversations help them to engage and to learn. They would like to have more open discussions about culture, race, and current, local, and world events. Also, they believed the more they know about each other, the more the tension among them would be reduced.

Jaleel: One thing I am thinking about is that when students are opening up to teachers, teachers need to listen. Like Rachael’s Challenge, for example, with the Columbine shootings in Colorado. There is no way that out of nowhere someone is going to start shooting up people and
setting off bombs without anyone having some kind of idea that something was wrong with those kids. They surely talked to somebody and it seemed like nobody cared about them. And they just went psycho, which was all so stupid and tragic. I can’t help but think that if teachers are willing to listen, students will talk to them.

Jamal: Most kids are scared to talk to adults. I mean to talk to them about anything that’s important. Kids may be rude and stuff in class and talk out of turn, but I mean like really talk to an adult. That does not happen much. But if any adult would stand up where we could talk to them about how we feel, I would be the first to talk to them. If the teachers set the right environment, I think kids would talk and think about things more. I just don’t like how some of the teachers act and how they care. They care for the way they care and don’t care in the way they should.

Tam: I think teachers should listen to us more, too. Even though we are the kids, we are the learners. We are the ones here learning, and we have to feel comfortable to learn. If they don’t help us to feel comfortable like letting us ask questions and listening to us, how do they expect us to learn?

Jaleel: I am not sure if anyone really cares whether students are comfortable or not in school or the classroom. They just want to teach what they want to teach. I think that a lot of administrators and teachers think that if the environment is quiet, everyone is paying attention and is learning. That is not how it is for me. If it is always quiet, I get really sleepy. I can’t stay awake and focus if the classroom is totally quiet. It is boring, so boring, when you can’t talk or move or do anything, really.

Jamal: We rarely get opportunities to actually really talk or communicate in a school day. This makes things more boring than they should be.
Raul: In most classes they teach what they teach and get it over with. But in two of my classes we talk about stuff and things that go on in the world and those are two of my favorite classes. We are getting more of an education in those classes because we are learning about how the world goes around.

Sasha: Ms. F. does make things comfortable. She always lets us talk for the first five or ten minutes about topics we want to talk about, and she lets us unwind a little as long as we do not get out of hand. This just makes me really happy. All day it is stress, stress, stress, and school, school, school, and then it is happy time and you actually get to communicate in her class. Other than in her class, the only time I really get to talk is during lunch.

Raul: It is interesting and fun when teachers allow group discussions and conversations in the classroom. When they get the whole class going about something about what is going on in the world, it is so interesting and exciting to hear people share their thoughts and point of view and try to convince others of yours. You learn so much. Most people keep things to themselves and don’t have the bravery to speak up, but when it goes on in classrooms you always learn so much more.

Jaleel: When you are arguing and having discussions in class it is like you learn more. Like in history if you agree about something and then other students disagree you can keep arguing about it until you come up with more facts. And then this can cause you to think about your whole argument.

Raul: In those few classes that we talk about what is going on and current events and what involves us and have a class discussion and debate, it is real exciting because it is something different and something you don’t know about and something you can actually participate in.
Tam: It is interesting and you learn a lot when you hear how others think. I enjoy hearing how others think.

Jaleel: It just doesn’t happen much.

Sun: It doesn’t.

Jamal: No, it doesn’t, but we should be talking about all kinds of things. We gotta be learning how to make life decisions and to talk about stuff.

Sasha: In my math class we do talk about things like racism and stuff. Mr. H. lets us talk first and then we do math. He makes it fun and talks about all kinds of things. It helps to talk, unwind, and then to focus on our math.

Sharee: In half of my classes people can’t talk about stuff like that. There would be too many arguments. But if we could learn to just listen to each other, it could go better. We could learn how to talk to each other, if they let us. It is just helpful to know more stuff about how people think. It is interesting to know more about cultures and understand why people act the way they do and how people live in their situations. It is interesting to find out, well, like I don’t like guessing, especially when I am around White people, but when I hear how they really feel maybe I won’t feel so uncomfortable when I get around them, unless they truly are racists.

Tam: I just think talking about who we are and our cultures and stuff can help us get a long and know each other better and would reduce the tension. I think a lot of the tension comes from just not knowing why we are the way we are. When you look at me, you just see another Asian girl and not all of this stuff behind what you see.

Kevin: Yeah. Until you know someone and hear what they have been through, you don’t know them and it is just wrong to judge them.
Jamal: I think these conversations are important. We need to do this more. They need to get us to talk. Talk about it. Talk about life.

Raul: How many chances do we ever get to say what we feel or think? I like this so much as it is practice for public speaking. We just don’t get that much practice speaking at all.

Jamal: I really would like to know about other people’s cultures. Sometimes people put up walls, though, and are nervous about talking.

Tam: Well, some get teased so much. There is a line they may not want to cross and maybe they think if they crossed the line something might happen. And they may wonder if someone will tease them some more. Someone may misunderstand. If there is a language barrier, they really could be too nervous to talk about it.

Jamal: For some, it just may be easier to talk more openly if they talk with you one on one. So much of the barrier is language. Students, especially, like you, Sun, have a lot to say about culture shock and moving over here. I would like to hear about Korea and your schooling in Korea.

Sun: It is hard to talk because of English and some kids. They don’t understand, and I have already been teased.

Jamal: I think everyone talks more when they are one-on-one.

Jaleel: Well, sure, groups can be tough.

Kevin: You have the fear of being judged.

Raul: Or you are afraid of not having their acceptance.

Jamal: And not everybody is trustworthy. There are certain environments where you are safe to talk just about everything, but there are others that are not. This group was good because everyone tried to listen and everyone knows what it feels like to be discriminated against. This
would have been a different experience probably if we would have had some preppy kids in here.

Maybe not, but probably.

Kevin: One of the problems is as students we segregate ourselves. Most of the African Americans hang out in G hall and most of the Goth kids and White people hang on in M hall. There are a few Asians and Black students down there, but it is mostly White.

Raul: I have thought about taking pictures of all of the segregation and showing students what it looks like at school and talking about it. Just thought about it, though.

Kevin: To bring more connectedness in this multicultural environment, we need more multicultural interactions. Have an event that will bring different cultures together.

Raul: We just need more events in which multiculturalism is the focus.

Kevin: I would like to say in general to adults in this building that we have a voice and to please listen to us. Wow that is the first time I have said that to an adult.

Tam: They don’t listen to us. They think we are young and have nothing to say and that we don’t know anything.

Raul: I would say to all of the adults is to help students grow.

Kevin: Help us to think. Give us space and time to think things through.

Jamal: Help students mature. We need to know what is going on in the world and to function in the world. We need to know about each other. We need to know how to solve problems and make decisions.

Tam: Really hearing what people say is so important. We aren’t taught to listen or to, really, talk.

Raul: Soaking in what people are saying and thinking about, well, it doesn’t happen too much.

Jaleel: I do enjoy hearing how others think. I think it is important.

Jamal: We need to do this more.
Raul: That is exactly what I was going to say. Do this more. Do exactly what we are doing and do it more.

Jamal: We have our futures to think about and how we are going to live and make decisions in this world. We need to learn to think and to talk to each other, especially when we are different from one another. We have things in common, too, and we need to not ignore that or our differences. We just need to be able to at least find out about each other and what makes each others’ world go around.

Summary of Findings

Students’ thoughts, feelings, experiences, and observations about life at Urban Midwest were described in their individual and group narratives. The students shared their perspectives and concerns about their experiences and the experiences of their peers. While these students’ lives cannot be generalized to the experiences of all urban students or all students at Urban Midwest, their individual lives and perspectives are important to providing greater understanding of the diverse world of urban teens. From the critical perspective, it is important for students’ descriptions of their diverse educational experiences, lives, observations, and voices to be heard, validated, valued, and legitimized. Additionally, given the narrative inquiry approach to research in multicultural contexts, greater understanding of how urban students perceive and derive meaning from their lives and educational experiences are significant as well. The students’ narratives reveal the many complexities of their lives and their astute capabilities in providing critiques of their multiple worlds.

The next and final chapter involves a discussion of the conclusions and implications derived from this study. I will conclude with my reflections as an engaged and passionate researcher and the influence of this study on my view of the world of school.
Chapter Six
Conclusions, Implications, and Researcher Reflections

This chapter includes the conclusions, implications, and my personal reflections drawn from this narrative inquiry research about the lives and views of eight urban high school students. This study supports prior research that the social and emotional experiences of students in school cannot be separated from their learning environments (Phelan et al., 1991). The social worlds of the students such as their culture, neighborhoods, family life, and peer interactions stood out as important and connected to their educational experiences and ability to focus in school. Cultural differences; varying backgrounds; poverty; abuse; disabilities; violence; gangs; drug use; loss; discrimination; pressure from their relationships with parents, families, peers, and adults at school; class; race; homophobia; and other personal and societal issues are rarely discussed within their school doors, yet these factors loomed large in the lives of these students. This study also supports previous research that when given opportunities, students are quite capable of demonstrating wisdom, insight, and critical analyses of their lives (Phelan et al; Nieto, 2004). In this narrative inquiry, eight students from varying backgrounds provided rich sources of information and critically engaged in conversations and assessments about hindrances and supports to their education. Conclusively, we have a great deal to learn from our young people.

Conclusions

Given the lens of critical theory and prior research reflected in the review of literature, this research supports the premises that (a) schools are not neutral institutions where the playing field is equal; (b) schools are stressful and contested sites that students simultaneously resist and embrace; (c) students’ experiences are shaped and influenced by the inequities and power differentials according to race, ability, language, sexual orientation, and other differences in
society; and (d) voices of the underrepresented in society, and in this case adolescents, provide multiple perspectives and important ways of looking at the world.

*Schools Are Not Neutral Institutions*

One of the significant standpoints of this research is that schools are not neutral institutions and are heavily influenced by societal contexts, which, in turn, influence students’ experiences and opportunities in school. In this study, the tension that students described among students of varying backgrounds and between students and teachers mirrors the tension in society reflected by differences among people such as class, disability, sexual orientation, and race. These factors were significant to the lives of these students; however, conversations about the problems were described as nonexistent in schools. The students were left to their own devices to discover coping strategies, such as developing a sense of humor, suppressing their anger, and walking away from bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

Experiences in their neighborhoods, parents working multiple jobs to survive, friends and family members participating in violence and gangs, prison sentences of family members, drug use of their peers and family members were some of the issues in which students expressed significant concern. Negotiating female and male relationships and the “drama” these relationships present created pressures for students as well. The social and emotional experiences of students were a consistent theme in their expressions, experiences all of which are issues reflected in the larger society. These experiences cannot be separated from the learning environment and certainly were a large focus of what students discussed in this study.

*Schools as Stressful and Contested Sites Students Simultaneously Resist and Embrace*

Another theme that emerged from the research is that students described schools as stressful and contested sites they simultaneously resist and embrace. They contested the
stereotypes, rules, and continuous assessments, sensing these were deemed more important than they are as individuals. On the other hand, they recognized teacher practices that supported and helped them.

Overall, the students depicted high school as a hostile place in which they are constantly on guard, needing to protect themselves from the harshness around them. They recognized that although school is a highly stressful environment, for some students, school is emotionally and physically safer than their homes. The students expressed significant concerns about young people and the stress they encounter in their lives and that not much about the stress or how to cope with it is talked about or understood at home or at school. They reported that most students do not have many role models or examples that teach them how to cope with stress or to solve problems peaceably without resorting to fighting and violence.

The students viewed school as a place where rules, confinement, and test scores appeared more important to the adults than what students are actually feeling, learning, thinking, and experiencing. They expressed significant aversion to all of the tests, assessments, policies, and rules in school and viewed these more as distractions to their education rather than helpful. They described disconnections between the lives of students and teachers and the lack of sensitivity and empathy to student’s lives outside the classroom. Additionally, there appears to be minimal communication between the students and adults in their lives, particularly of matters that are significant to the students.

Each student in this study shared that negotiating relationships with teachers and diverse groups of students presents challenges for them. They expressed that more time needs to be provided at school for dialogue across cultures, for critiquing issues important to their lives, and for more adults to pay attention to what students have to say about their experiences. The
students indicated they have very few opportunities to actually communicate and to freely talk about ideas or to have “real dialogue” (Leistyna, 2002, p. 27) in which they are able to explore their cultural boundaries and critically reflect on their own and others’ approach to the world as well as the issues in and outside of school that interfere with their pursuit of their education. They expressed the hope that if students and teachers were given more opportunities to communicate with each other and to get to know and understand each other and their backgrounds, the tension among students and between students and their teachers and administrators may be reduced, resulting in a school environment more conducive to learning.

- The students had a great deal to say about teacher and school practices that support and encourage them, which is consistent with prior research reflected in the literature about students perspectives about supportive teachers (Davidson, 1999; Phelan et al., 1994; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). The students liked teachers who are nice, respectful, and flexible, yet who can be strict when necessary and who have high expectations for their students; teachers who do not just teach, but who are willing to build relationships with their students; teachers who listen to them and pay attention to their emotional and learning needs and adjust their teaching practices accordingly. These students expressed that the more teachers understand the lives of their students, the more effective they are in teaching them.

- Despite their stressors in school, these students persevere and recognize school is what they need to do to move on with their lives and to pursue college educations after they graduate from high school. The hostility and harshness they encounter discourages them, while caring teachers with high expectations encourage them.
Students’ Experiences Shaped by Inequities and Power Differentials

- Another premise of this study is that students’ experiences in school are shaped and influenced by the inequities and power differentials according to race, ability, language, sexual orientation, and other differences in the larger society (Nieto, 2004). Each one of the students had encountered significant discrimination and stereotyping according to the color of their skin, the language they spoke, or the disability they have. The discrimination they described was sometimes overt and other times quite subtle. For example, despite demonstrating they are articulate, capable, and college bound, of the eight students, only two (Raul and Jaleel) had ever been placed in honors or advanced placement classes and those two had been placed in and taken out of honors classes. Raul and Jaleel did not know why they were taken out of the honors classes. Raul is now taking a college prep curriculum, and it is obvious he is quite capable of doing the work. Sharee makes all A and B grades in school, and yet she participates in the general education curriculum. She demonstrates she is capable of performing at a higher level. All of the students demonstrated they could perform at a higher level than what they were actually challenged to do in their course work.

- Additionally, the bullying, harassment, and racism these students encounter at school is a part of the fabric of their every day life, yet they don’t talk to adults about it much at school, as they indicated they don’t think adults can help or do anything constructive about it. In fact, the perception seems to be that adults make it worse. In some instances, the adults appeared to be a large part of the discrimination and racism students experienced.

- Further, the students recognized the inequities in society according to class. They verbalized that it takes money to make money; it takes money to get into the best colleges; and while it is not impossible to change one’s social status, it is difficult to do so. These students
engaged in critical conversations about power differentials, examining issues such as race, class, disability, and discrimination with minimal difficulty.

*Underrepresented Voices Provide Multiple Ways to Look at the World*

In accordance with the traditions of critical theory, critical pedagogy, and critical multiculturalism which value inclusive perspective taking of people most often overlooked in society, this research focused on underrepresented voices in society. Voices of the underrepresented, and in this case, voices of adolescents, provide multiple perspectives and differing and important ways of looking at the world. The students demonstrated that when given opportunities to speak, they have much to say and are more than capable of analyzing and critiquing their lives, societal influences, and schooling experiences that have encouraged or hindered them.

The students in this study spoke about complex learning environments throughout their schooling. For example, Tam suffered quietly in special education classrooms that were well below her capabilities as well as bullying from her peers. Raul suffered profusely when his peers harassed him due to his sexual questioning. Sun described significant anxiety adjusting to another culture and also being teased and harassed by his peers. Kevin, Sasha, Jamal, Jaleel, and Sharee all expressed anxiety and stress in coping with discrimination and stereotypes. All of the students had encountered difficulties that significantly affected their performance in school. The violence they witnessed and heard about; students distracting the learning environment in the classrooms and hallways; family problems; teacher misunderstandings; boring classrooms; the bullying and harassment; and the minimizing of their individuality and voice all converge to complicate their learning environment in high school. They negotiated and coped with the complexities and stress virtually on their own, with minimal, if any input from adults.
The stress students are under affects their lives and their ability to focus, to learn, and to perform in school. Inevitably, learning and social/emotional well-being are intertwined. It is critical to listen and understand from adolescents’ point of view social and emotional factors and learning environments that interfere or support their ability to perform and learn in school.

Unfortunately, rather than embracing what students have to say and making changes to address their genuine learning needs from their point of view, all too often their concerns are either dismissed or not given space to be listened to in the first place. Conversely, by considering their diverse and rich perspectives and experiences, much can be learned from what young people have to say. By listening to young people, we will be able to better address their emotional and learning needs and build schools that are more positive and equitable learning environments for them.

Finally, the process of allowing space for students to discuss issues and concerns significant to their lives, consistent with critical pedagogy, is empowering to them. The students in this study were engaged in the process and indicated they would like more opportunities to be able to dialogue with students and teachers about culture, race, differences and similarities, and issues that encourage or hinder their learning experiences in school. The most significant aspects of this research are that students’ narratives are critical to understanding and challenging barriers to young people’s pursuit of knowledge and education, and student voices are essential for school reform in the 21st century.

**Implications**

What goes on in schools is complicated business in which there are no simple solutions. Despite decades of educational reform, academic achievement differentials between groups of students continue to persist (Cotton, 2001). Frequently, students and their families are blamed for
the problems (Banks, 2004), while the societal contexts in which the difficulties have emerged over time and throughout the history of our country are ignored (Nieto, 2004). Additionally, teachers are frequently blamed as well if their students do not perform according to specific standards (Howard, 2006). In this environment, blaming becomes the focus and autocratic methods and rigid policies are initiated, frequently without the input from teachers or students (Vavrus, 2002) and, as a result, any significant or enduring changes are minimal (Sizer, 2004). According to Leistyna (2002),

If silenced voices are never heard from, then oppressive institutions and identities remain virtually unchallenged. It is crucial that multiculturalism gets beyond the politeness muzzle of solely affirming diversity, which discourages individuals from intellectually rigorous discussions. This is not intended to be an argument against acknowledging where people come from, being sensitive to the plight of others, or creating a safe environment to dialogue. Rather, it’s simply a contention that without critical engagement, sensitivity alone cannot adequately address what needs to be changed in schools and society (p. 22).

Considering the theoretical framework of critical theory, critical pedagogy, and critical multiculturalism, rather than ignoring or silencing student voices, this study focused on what students from varying backgrounds had to say about their lives and schooling experiences that have influenced them. Their perspectives and what they had to say about their experiences were front and center to the focus of this study. From their narratives, implications for practice in classrooms and schools can be made: (a) First and foremost, we need to stop the rhetoric of blame and, instead, forge relationships and partnerships with young people; (b) we need to provide ongoing opportunities for students to dialogue about issues relevant to their lives; and (c)
we need to establish student centered (as opposed to authoritarian classrooms on one end of the spectrum and permissive or self-indulgent classrooms on the other end), democratic, and empowering classrooms in their schools.

Rather than Blaming, Build Relationships and Partnerships with Students

Students may be embroiled in issues of the world such as violence, materialism, prejudice, racism, drug abuse, despair, and disengagement; however, they did not create this world (Leistyna, 2002). Rather than blaming students for a world with difficulties they did not create, we need to forge partnerships and build caring relationships with them. Building relationships with young people that demonstrate genuine care for them may provide the support they need to rise above their challenging circumstances (Stessman, 2006). Stessman found that low-income students in a small rural high school performed at a higher academic level when the school staff placed caring relationships at the center of their school reform. The students in this study perceived their school as a caring place for them. Some of the teacher and administrator characteristics students identified as caring were when staff provided emotional support for them, engaged students in dialogue, held students accountable for their work without blaming them, and placed students at the center of their concerns. Stessman and others (Jones & Yonezawa; Noddin, 1992; Poplin & Weeres, 1992), postulate that caring for students (caring behaviors the students perceive as caring) promotes their academic achievement as well as their emotional well-being.

Forging inclusive and caring partnerships with students in which their ideas, opinions, and needs are respected is empowering in many ways (Leistyna, 2002; Noddings, 1992; Shor, 1992). Relationships and partnerships can be formed with students in order to interrogate societal forces such as racism, poverty, discrimination, power differentials, and inequity that have
influenced them and presented challenges to them. Understanding the historical and current challenges of these societal issues are important to students’ sense of autonomy, empowerment, and agency to overcome and resist the barriers and to influence much needed change (Shor, 1992). According to Shor, forming partnerships can encourage “habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change” (p. 15).

Leistyna (2002) indicated that by stressing the importance of forging partnerships and relationships with young people and listening to what they have to say is not to suggest that student voices should be simply affirmed, romanticized, and accepted at face value without critical analysis. Underrepresented voices and multiple perspectives need to be incorporated into the problem solving process of creating better schools; and all voices must be given equal time and respect; however, at the same time, all voices and perspectives need to be questioned for the strengths and weakness of their suppositions. This is a truly democratic process in which inclusion, participation, and critical analysis are the focus. Including students in the process is imperative.

**Provide Opportunities for Students to Dialogue About Issues Important to Them**

Nodding (1992) defined dialogue in the following way:

Dialogue is a common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation. It can be playful or serious, logical or imaginative, goal or process oriented, but it is always a genuine quest for something undetermined at the beginning. Dialogue permits us to talk about what we try to show. It gives learners opportunities to question “why,” and it helps both parties to arrive at well-informed decisions. (p. 23)

Nodding also indicated that dialogue is to attend and listen fully to another, letting go of our own predetermined ideas of what is.
The students in this study reported that dialogue and animated discussion in class provide engaging learning environments. They also reported that the more teachers showed interest in them and knew about their lives, the better they could teach them. Further, they wanted to know more about their peers and their cultures and why they are the way they are and felt the tensions among them could be reduced by having time to talk to each other in facilitated ways. Also, the students expressed they wanted to do more of what they were able to do in this study, to be able to dialogue more with adults and a diverse group of students. The dialogue was engaging and empowering to the students.

The ability to dialogue about the issues in school is important for many reasons. Dialogue serves the purpose of informing others about each other and providing knowledge of one another. Knowing what people need from their point of view, rather than assuming we know what they need places us in a position to better understand them and to meet those needs. Additionally, Nodding (1992) stated that not all decisions that are harmful to self or others can be attributed to ignorance, but many times, and often in the case of young people, poor choices are a result of “ill-informed decisions” (p. 23). Dialogue is important as it can provide greater information and teach habits of seeking appropriate information before making a decision.

Further, according to Vavrus (2002), providing time in schools for students to dialogue with each other about their similarities and differences and world events is important for them to prepare for their futures in an ever changing, diverse, intercultural, and global world. Vavrus stated, “all students need to acquire knowledge, attitude, and skills needed to participate in cross cultural interactions and in personal social, and civic action that will help make our nation more democratic and just” (p. 17).
Finally, the social and emotional aspects of students’ lives cannot be detached from their ability to learn and focus in school and the students in this current study found very little of their school day attending to these needs. They found minimal help from adults in their lives in negotiating their hostile and troubling experiences in school. An entire subculture goes on in the lives of students, much of which most adults may be unaware. Dialogue may serve multiple purposes in attending to these issues: True dialogue can help adults better understand the world of young people; help young people gain additional information, support, and perspective from adults; and guide young people in better understanding the multiple worlds of one another.

**Insist on Student Centered, Democratic, and Empowering Classrooms**

According to Shor (1992), what goes on in the classroom is either “critical or uncritical, democratic or authoritarian” (p. 14). He stated,

People are naturally curious. They are born learners. Education can either develop or stifle their inclination to ask why and to learn. A curriculum that avoids questioning school and society is not, as commonly supposed, politically neutral. It cuts off the students’ development as critical thinkers about their world. If the students’ task is to memorize rules and existing knowledge, without questioning the subject matter or the learning process, their potential for critical thought and action will be restricted.

Shor indicated that in order for classrooms to be democratic and empowering, the teacher encourages questioning of what defines knowledge, conditions in society, the curriculum, and the status quo rather than unilaterally transferring information to students. A curriculum that does not allow students to question tacitly teaches the message that society is immutable; it is fine the way it is; and students are not needed to change or transform it.
As Shor (1992) indicated, children are naturally inquisitive and explorers of their worlds. But year after year in lifeless classrooms in which teachers feed information to them that is disconnected from their cultures, interests, and lives, they evolve into passive learners. And whether it is recognized or not, students actually do decide how much of the curriculum they will engage in. If they are bored and uninterested in what is taught and see no connection of what goes on in the classroom to their lives, they may disengage and withdraw in their classrooms, giving minimal effort; be identified as students with “behavioral problems;” or drop out completely from school.

On the other hand, in the Dewey tradition, Shor (1992) reported that democratic and empowering schools need to be participatory first and foremost, capturing the interests, strengths, curiosity, and cultural backgrounds students bring with them to their classrooms. Teachers and students become coproducers of the learning environment, rather than students being passive recipients of what teachers tell them. To reverse student inertia in their learning experiences, classroom instruction needs to be student focused and student centered; however, this does not mean permissive or self-indulgent. Shor describes democratic and empowering education this way:

Empowerment here does not mean students can do whatever they like in the classroom. Neither can the teacher do whatever she or he likes. The learning process is negotiated, requiring leadership by the teacher and mutual teacher-student authority. In addition, empowerment as I describe it here is not individualistic. The empowering class does not teach students to seek self-centered gain while ignoring public welfare. . . The teacher leads and directs this curriculum, but does so democratically with the participation of the students, balancing the need for structure with the need for openness. (p.16)
In summary, students’ educational experiences need to be transformed in order for students to maximize their potential and be truly engaged and active participants in their education. Listening to the voices of young people and involving them in reform and transformation efforts is critical to influencing much needed change in our schools. Refusing to blame students; reaching out to them in meaningful and caring relationships and partnerships; creating opportunities for dialogue about issues meaningful and important to their lives; and creating democratic and empowering learning environments in which they can gain a sense of autonomy and agency are significant factors in creating schools that better serve their needs.

**Personal Reflections**

As a highly verbal person, it is not often I find myself struggling to find words to express my reflections, but I find expressing myself difficult as I try to process my experiences in this research. This work has involved my passions, emotions, and my very life as an engaged researcher and practitioner. I am immersed in life as a school psychologist and in that role I have listened to many stories of the plight, heartbreak, trauma, courage, and successes of students and their families in an urban school district in the Midwest. I feel compelled to provide a moral witness to the stories of young people and to be willing to stand in their corner, believing in them and rooting for them.

Although I have been a school psychologist for many years, last year was my first year at Urban Midwest. It has been a unique experience for me. In the first two weeks of school, one of our special education students was murdered by gunshot at a social event in the city, but nothing much was said about it at school. A few weeks later one of my good friends, a principal at one of our high schools, under severe stress, committed suicide in his car in his garage, but not much was said about it in school either. At the end of the year last spring, at varying times, I talked to
three different African American mothers who were traumatized and grieving because two of them had sons who were on trial for murders and the other mother’s son had been murdered by gunshots. One of them asked me, “How many more mothers will be smothered by their tears in their bed at night because one more son is dead or locked up and no one seems to care?”

This school year, many of our students at Urban Midwest were impacted by the murder of a student who had just graduated last year from another high school in the area and had stood up against gangs. I talked with many of our students who were at the party in which he was murdered and were standing right next to him when he was shot by gunfire. This year, too, one of our students committed suicide and one of our beloved teachers died of leukemia. Another beloved teacher and coach lost his young adult son to a needless and random act of violence when he was murdered by gunshots. His son was another young man who was trying to make a difference in his community by standing against gangs and violence in our city. The tragedies that I hear on a daily basis are ongoing. Yet, I am inspired by the courage I see in young people and their families in their resiliency and willingness to keep on keeping on in the face of heartbreaking and troubling circumstances. Every day, though, I think there has to be alternatives and better ways of educating, encouraging, and supporting them.

As I daily walk the halls at Urban Midwest, I see some good things going on in classrooms and in the school. I do see engaging teachers and students, but I also see real tragedies. Angry students, bored students, bullied studies, students who are bullies, bystanders, and disengaged and resisting students and then along with these issues come the rhetoric of blame; people blaming people; people blaming students, parents, and teachers. While individual responsibility and accountability cannot be discounted, it is easier to blame than to examine and critique our practices and the underlying reasons, factors, and societal influences that have
contributed to the dilemmas and current circumstances in the first place. As a result, we just do more of the same of what we have always done. We just try harder it seems to do more of the same.

My concerns are grave regarding our society and how we value or do not value the lives and education of our young people, which is reflected by the statistics on factors such as academic differentials between student groups, young men imprisoned, drop out rates, children in foster care, children in poverty, and other societal ills (Banks, 2004), as well as by what I see on a daily basis. I become enraged at times over the fact that we have a society that allows children to experience others violating them, exposing them to violence, abuse, and neglect, a society that allows inequitable opportunities to persist and turns the other way.

I also become disturbed when I consistently hear conversations and rhetoric of blame in which we find students solely culpable for who, what, and where they are. For example, I will never forget a situation when a student came to us from another state and had lived in over 35 foster homes in his 17 years of life. He was understandably upset and trying to adjust to another school, another home, another city, another state, and more troubling circumstances. As school staff and this young man sat at a table to discuss his choices and situation, his administrator, obviously overwhelmed by the student’s dilemmas and not knowing what to do, pointed and shook her finger at him, and proclaimed, “Young man, if you would just learn to comply. If you would just learn to comply, your life would go well; you would do well! You wouldn’t be having these problems, if you would comply!” None of the rest of us at that table understood where the administrator was coming from, and to the young man’s credit, he politely stated, “Thanks for that piece of advice.” After that meeting, this bright and articulate young man came up to me and
said, “Ms. Petersen, if I had learned to comply, if I had simply complied and not learned to fight for my very life on the streets and in abusive foster homes, I would be dead right now!”

This example brings me to my favorite quote by Abraham Maslow: “If the only tool we own is a hammer, then we see every problem as a nail.” And this is how I perceive where we are in education. The solutions thus far in education are not working, as academic success for students in this country diminishes for students in public school who are not of the mainstream and as more and more students are dropping out, disengaged and disenfranchised (Cotton, 2004). In a nutshell, I believe we simply have been applying hammers, when right in front of our very eyes are other ways to look at the problems. I see that bringing students (and teachers, which is another research topic worthy of study for another day) into the equation and problem solving process has possibilities of opening up new avenues of dialogue as well as new avenues of change. We have to be willing to truly listen, though, and to step back from our own answers and biases.

It seems to me that we don’t want to know or to acknowledge the rage students experience is a normal human reaction to the violence, trauma, powerlessness, and abuse they have known. When many students see the adults respond in a violent matter, why would they not do the same? When students encounter great amounts of stress and have very few adults if any, helping them negotiate these stressors, what do we expect? We say to our students, “Just check your feelings and experiences at the door, and concentrate here on your work!” Now to me and to the students in this study, this makes as much sense as asking them to stop breathing. We just cannot divorce our feelings, emotions, and experiences from our ability to learn. In my view, we need to help students cope and process through their difficulties, helping them to rise above their circumstances, but asking them to ignore them is not working. The students in this study are
persevering despite the stressors in their lives, but how much better could they be doing and excelling if these stressors especially in school were extracted from their lives? So, what are the answers? There are no simple answers, but beginning with the students who have the most at stake is one choice we have, but have not often utilized.

Similar to the students in this study, I experience some days at Urban Midwest as a hostile place. The crowded hallways, the too large classrooms, the bureaucracy, the rules for staff and students, the lack of resources, and the politics all seem to work together as obstacles to supporting excellence in student achievement and student and staff well being. There are many talented, caring, and phenomenal teachers, yet I see them oppressed as their wisdom, expertise, and perspectives are overlooked by an autocratic, top down model of schooling that frequently just does not make a great deal of sense to teachers, students, and families. I feel oppressed as well, as often I feel like I am a voice crying out in the wilderness by calling attention to the fact that blaming our teachers, students, and their families does not get us anywhere. This really is not a popular stance. We just like to keep on doing what we have been doing by pulling out our hammers and hammering away. We keep doing what we have been doing because it is all we know.

This study is compelling evidence that schools are not neutral institutions and reflect the contextual historical, social, racial, and power relationships of our society, which highly influence students’ opportunities and education in school. The stories and narratives of the students in this study are also persuasive evidence that we need to include young people in our efforts to discover the challenges they face in their educational endeavors and in our efforts to reform education. It is my hope that we can all challenge ourselves to rethink how we view and
do education and to listen to the voices of the many young people that have potential of leading us into a new society and world.
REFERENCES
References


APPENDICES
Appendix A

March 2007

Dear Urban Midwest Parent and Student:

As part of the requirements of completing my doctoral degree in Educational Leadership in the College of Education at Wichita State University, I am working on my dissertation and am conducting research at Urban Midwest High School, USD 259. The purpose of this study is to include the voices of students from diverse racial, ethnic, social, and linguistic backgrounds in terms of what they think about influences in and outside of school that support or hinder their performance in school. Student voices are important to informing the school community as to what it can do to better support students in their pursuit of their education. The overarching research question is what do urban high school students want educators, policy makers, and the general public to know about their lives and experiences in school?

Your student has been asked to participate in this study due to being nominated by counselors, teachers, or myself, as the school psychologist at Urban Midwest High School, and due to having rich information to share that is important to the study. Approximately five to eight students from Urban Midwest High School will be included in approximately three to five individual and five to eight group interviews that will last about 45 to 60 minutes each. The interviews will be conducted at a convenient and appropriate time for students during the school day and will not interrupt classroom instruction. With each student's help and input, the data collected from interviews will be examined to determine how students perceive their experiences in school and what schools can do to better educate them.

Given your and your student's permission, attendance records, grades, transcripts, discipline referrals, and other school records will be reviewed. Also, your student may voluntarily share artifacts or products that he or she perceives as important to the study such as journals, poetry, and pictures.

The results of this study will be used to identify factors in and outside of school that encourage or impede students’ success in school and what schools can do to better educate them. It is possible many schools may benefit from what is learned as a result of this study and as such, findings from this research may result in publication in academic journals or shared at a national conference.
As a participant in this study, your student’s identity will be kept confidential and your student will not be personally identified from the comments made during their participation in interviews. Your student’s identity will not be revealed anywhere throughout the final report. With your and your student’s permission, I would like to tape record the interviews, which will be transcribed so that I may examine your student’s comments more carefully. You and your student will be given an opportunity to review a summary of the findings to check for accuracy before the final report is complete.

Your student is under no obligation to participate in this study. Your student’s participation is entirely voluntary. A decision not to participate will not affect your or your student’s relationship with Urban Midwest High School, USD 259, or Wichita State University in any way.

If you have questions or concerns about the study or your confidentiality please contact Dr. Jean Patterson at WSU at 316-978-3325 or Jan L. Petersen, EdS at Urban Midwest High School at 973-2712. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

Your signature below indicates you have read the information above and consent to your student’s participation in the interviews. Please keep a copy of this form for your records. Your student may also withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or fear of reprisal. Thank you for assisting us in this important study.

Sincerely,

Jan L. Petersen, EdS
School Psychologist, Urban Midwest High School

________________________________________________________________________

I agree to allow my child to participate in personal and group interviews with Ms. Petersen, Urban Midwest School Psychologist, in the months of March, April, May, and September of 2007. Ms. Petersen also has my permission to review and take notes from the following documents relating to my child’s performance in school:

___ Transcript
___ Attendance Records
___ Discipline Referrals
___ Special Education Records
___ Current Grades

________________________________________________________________________

Parent/Guardian Signature Date
Student Assent

I have been informed that my parent(s) have given permission for me to participate, if I want to, in a study to investigate student perceptions of their life and school experiences and factors that support or hinder their performance in school. My participation in this project is voluntary and I have been told that I may stop my participation in this study at any time. If I choose not to participate, it will not affect my grades in any way. I also agree to allow Ms. Petersen to review and take notes from the documents mentioned above.

_________________________  ________________________
Student Signature                      Date
Appendix B

Student Interview Protocol

1. Please introduce yourself and tell me a little about yourself.

2. How do you describe your experiences in school, including elementary school, middle school, and high school?

3. What have you enjoyed the most about school?

4. What have you enjoyed the least?

5. What have been some of your greatest successes? Greatest challenges in school?

6. What stands out the most about your favorite teachers? Least favorite?

7. Tell me about your experiences at Urban Midwest high school?

8. What are things that go on in school that most support urban high school students’ performance in school? What do you believe goes on in school that most hinders students’ academic performance in school?

9. What would you like others to know about how schools can better educate students from a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities?