The purpose of this study was to understand a middle school Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males, and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the program. This qualitative case study sought to understand the Men’s Group in light of the program’s influence on its members. A social constructionist approach was used to discover the perspectives of the Men’s Group student members in addition to the adults involved with the program.

Data collection methods included individual interviews, participant observation, written artifact analysis, ethnographic journaling, and supplemental quantitative data. Data was organized and interpreted to understand the strongest influences on the choices of the adolescent male participants. Profiles of 10 student members and an in-depth description of the program were provided. Thematic analysis uncovered six themes related to the influence of the Men’s Group as compared to the previously established influences on student choices. Three themes surrounding this case study included: the necessity of building a positive peer community, the appropriate habits and practices of schooling, and the importance of developing a more realistic understanding of the future. Three more themes made up the philosophy of the Men’s Group:
The various experiences of the Men’s Group served as the avenue to implicitly communicate messages, or values of the program, to student members, and student members better understood Men’s Group messages when group values mirrored student members’ family values, and through offering opportunities to develop positive relationships with adults.

Findings have implications for further research, particularly as a need for a more longitudinal study that follows program members as they enter and complete high school. Implications for practitioners include the necessity for developing and sustaining programs to improve outcomes for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males. Practitioners are encouraged to prioritize the creation and implementation of programs like the Men’s Group.

INDEX WORDS: Programs for at-risk middle school students; Drop-out prevention for African-American and Hispanic males; Educational outcomes; Adolescent males; Middle School drop-out prevention programs
CALCULATED RISK, CONSIDERING RESPONSE: A CASE STUDY OF AT-RISK ADOLESCENT MALES IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL MEN’S GROUP

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by

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May 2014
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the students and teachers I have had the pleasure of working with as an educator, and especially to those who were participants in this study. May each of your futures be blessed with positive outcomes.
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My career and the pursuit of my educational interests would not have occurred without the help of so many who have been there along the way. First, I want to thank God for creating in me a purpose and for continuously helping me to discover and to fulfill that purpose. No part of my success is possible without Him. There are numerous others who deserve more credit than words can express for any success I have experienced.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

President John F. Kennedy once said, “Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. The human mind is our fundamental resource” (cited in Peters & Woolley, 1961, p. 1). Much debate looms as to whether that nation has tapped into that resource for making progress in educating all students (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). Certain populations of students attending schools in the United States are at-risk for poor educational, community, and subsequent adult outcomes (Barbarin, 2010; Clark, Flower, Walton, & Oakley, 2008; Guiberson, 2009; Howell & Tavakolian, 2012; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Rothstein, 2008; Simmons, 2010; Togut, 2011). Among those at-risk populations are low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males (Barbarin, 2010; Bishaw, 2012; Clark et al., 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2010; Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2010).

The experiences of adolescent African-American and Hispanic males in the educational setting have been discouraging (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Clark et al., 2008; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Ford, 2010; Howell & Tavakolian, 2012; Machtinter, 2007; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Rothstein, 2008; Simmons, 2010; Togut, 2011; Ushomirsky, 2011; Williams, 2011). African-American and Hispanic males living in poverty have experienced gaps in academic achievement as compared to their peers of different backgrounds (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Clark et al., 2008; Machtinter, 2007; Rothstein, 2008; Simmons, 2010; Ushomirsky, 2011; Williams, 2011). Olszewski-Kubilius (2006) noted this problem is pervasive:
Study after study has demonstrated that children from disadvantaged households perform less well in school on average than those from more advantaged households. This empirical relationship shows up in studies using observations at the levels of the individual student, the school, the district, the state, the country. (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006, p. 28)

Both locally and nationally, at-risk students have faired worse in school than their counterparts. The poor educational outcomes for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males do not end there.

African-American and Hispanic males have been underrepresented in gifted and advanced courses in school while they are typically overrepresented in special education programs (Artiles et al., 2002; Barbarin, 2010; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Ford, 2010; Ford, Moore, & Scott, 2011; Garda, 2005; Guiberson, 2009). Togut (2011) noted, “minority and low income students are much more likely to be grouped into average or low-ability courses, as compared to predominantly white, higher income schools, which offer average, above average, and honors courses” (p. 168). Low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males are disproportionately referred to administrative offices for discipline infractions and subsequently suspended and expelled from school (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Skiba et al., 2010).

Continuing the cycle of failure, students who are suspended or expelled from school are likely to end up in prison, entrapped in a system known as the “school to prison pipeline” (Hancock, 2011; Hatt, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Simmons, 2010). Barbarin (2010) noted, “Expulsion and dropping out from school give boys much unsupervised time that facilitates risky behavior that leave many African-American boys on the wrong side of the law” (p. 84). Achievement gaps, misrepresentation in educational programs, and disproportionate discipline treatment are only the start of the problem.
Perhaps most unfortunate is the likelihood that these factors will contribute to African-American and Hispanic male students leaving or dropping out of school, missing out on the resources of education (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Barbarin, 2010; Carpenter & Ramirez, 2007; Howell & Tavakolian, 2012; Machtinger, 2007; Skiba et al., 2010; Whiting, 2009). Dropping out of school results in poor community and adult outcomes. Low- socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males are not only subject to the “school to prison pipeline” but also they experience higher levels of unemployment, low quality to non-existent healthcare, and lower life expectancy (Barbarin, 2010; Bishaw, 2012; Couch & Fairlie, 2010; Hill & Torres, 2010). These adult males may have children, and a cycle of risk often ensues to the next generation (Barbarin, 2010; Jensen, 2009; Mackey & Mackey, 2012).

In a complex system like public education, there are numerous role-players who make or influence policy, practice, and research. There are those that make policy at the federal, state, and local levels. There are parents, teachers and other practitioners, and students themselves, only to name a few who hold responsibility in the education of young people. Rather than placing blame for poor outcomes on any one of these persons or groups, a solution-oriented approach makes sense. For the everyday practitioner, influence often is constrained by locus of control. As such, much of the seminal research is aimed at what can be done by the practitioner at the local school level to improve outcomes for these at-risk students (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Clark et al., 2008; Ford et al., 2011; Machtinger, 2007; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Rothstein, 2008; Simmons, 2010; Skiba et al., 2010; Togut, 2011; Ushomirsky, 2011; Williams, 2011).

In light of the research surrounding the discouraging outcomes for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males and the practitioner-focused approaches to
combating these outcomes, this study was designed to better understand such approaches. There exists a need to look below the surface to examine programs designed to combat the discouraging educational and subsequent personal outcomes for African-American and Hispanic males. Wolk (2004) stated, “Perhaps more than any other indicator, school dropouts represent public education's most dramatic and costly failure” (p. 4). The risks for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males have been calculated. Practical responses should be considered closely, as results could yield development of new programs or improvement to existing programs in an effort to help these at-risk populations fair better in and complete school.

**Background of the Study**

Experts have suggested practices for teachers and administrators and developed programs for students to decrease the achievement gap, to increase representation in gifted courses, to decrease representation in special education programs, and to decrease disproportionality in discipline for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Clark et al., 2008; Ford et al., 2011; Machtinger, 2007; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Rothstein, 2008; Simmons, 2010; Skiba et al., 2010; Togut, 2011; Ushomirsky, 2011; Williams, 2011). Many of these programs to support African-American and Hispanic males have seen some success in isolation, usually targeting one risk factor at a time (Artiles et al., 2002; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Ford, 2010; Ford et al., 2011; Guiberson, 2009; Ladd, 2012; Machtinger, 2007; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Rothstein, 2008; Shernoff, 2010; Simmons, 2010; Skiba et al., 2010; Solari & Balshaw, 2007; Togut, 2011; Williams, 2011). Although it is important to show improvements in certain risk factor areas, such as decreasing the achievement gap, the overall goal of school should be a quality education for all. Thus, the
focus on programs serving African-America and Hispanic males becomes a necessary step to ensure they complete school.

Studies have shown that student school completion rates are positively associated with certain factors. These factors include providing opportunities for students to engage in school, helping students to avoid deviant behavior, and allowing opportunities for students to develop positive social relationships with both peers and adults (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Basch, 2011; Charmaraman & Hall, 2011; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Newcomb et al., 2002; Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Programs that have attempted to incorporate these practices have demonstrated some success (Charmaraman & Hall, 2011; Ladd, 2012; Martin, Gibson, & Wilkins, 2007; Rothstein, 2008; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Several programs designed to prevent students from dropping out of school have incorporated elements of mentoring and tutoring (Featherston, 2010; Lunenburg, 2000; Travis & Ausbrooks, 2012; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). All of these programs took place outside of the regularly-scheduled school day as extracurricular activities.

Although at-risk students do not leave high school until later years, it is important to intervene early, although there have been few programs focusing on intervening in the early years (Blount, 2012; Clark et al., 2008; Henry et al., 2012; Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008; Orthner et al., 2010). Intervention is needed much earlier to make significant progress at reducing the dropout rates at the high school level, and Henry et al. (2012) noted:

Thus, it seems prudent not to wait until students are dropping out, or have dropped out, of school to intervene. Factors, especially multiple school risk factors, during the middle school years are prime candidates for interventions designed to enhance school engagement. (pp. 164-165)
Working to ensure school completion, then, begins with intervention even in the middle school years. Intervening early is an important first step in decreasing the dropout rate, but further answers to assisting students with high school completion may lie with the students themselves.

Low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males are at-risk for poor educational outcomes. These outcomes increase the likelihood that these students will drop out of school, missing out on the resource of education, and leading to a life at the margins, in prison, or quite possibly an early death (Barbarin, 2010; Bishaw, 2012; Couch & Fairlie, 2010; Hill & Torres, 2010; Jensen, 2009; Jones, 2004; Mackey & Mackey, 2012). Interventions have been initiated, yet crisis continues, and statistics remain pessimistic about completion rates for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males. Rightly so, these interventions have been aimed at the practitioner, but perhaps, the over-focus on the adult practitioners—teachers and not the subjects—students, needs to be examined as the impetus for addressing African-American and Hispanic males at-risk and their educational attainment.

Rowley and Bowman (2009) amplified the need to shift our focus as the first step in addressing at-risk populations, pointing out:

Therefore, it is not enough to study Black males and to create policies to alter their plight. It is equally important that we see them for the diverse group that they are and more importantly that we listen to what they are telling us about who they are, what they think, and what they hope to achieve. Now is the time to move forward. (p. 318)

Too often, adults make rules, design programs, create interventions, and conduct research, rarely taking the time to ask the students for their perspectives. Perspectives can provide great insight for practice with at-risk youth (Bethell, 2012; Brown, Higgins, Pierce, Hong, & Thoma, 2003; Cokley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2011; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Hughes et al., 2007; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; West-Olatunji, Baker, & Brooks, 2006; Whiting, 2009). Yet, there are very few studies that seek the perspectives of
African-American and Hispanic males to gain insight on their experiences of being involved in a program that serves as an intervention to deter dropping out of school.

When trying to make sense of students’ perspectives, it is important to examine how students view themselves. Cokley et al. (2011) coined the term “academic disidentification” which concerns student self-perceptions as a part of their perspectives. Whiting (2009) believed that self-perception has an impact on whether or not students stay in school. Another part of studying student perspective examines how adult perception influences student self-perception. Rocque and Paternoster (2011) found, “Psychological research has indicated youths are likely to disengage from school and academic pursuits if they perceive negative information about themselves or their racial group within the school environment” (p. 636). Cultural differences between adults and students can shape student perspective and self-perception, as well. Racial identity has had an impact on the perspectives of minority students (Bethell, 2012; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Cokley et al., 2011; West-Olatunji et al., 2006).

Clearly, there exists a need for early intervention for decreasing the dropout rate and ensuring the completion of school for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males (Blount, 2012; Clark et al., 2008; Henry et al., 2012; Hickman et al., 2008; Orthner et al., 2010). Interventions, designed as programs, are most effective when they include elements to help these at-risk populations to avoid deviant behavior, allow them opportunities to engage in school, provide mentoring and tutoring, and allow chances to develop positive social relationships with both peers and adults (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Basch, 2011; Charmaraman & Hall, 2011; Henry et al., 2012; Newcomb et al., 2002; Ream & Rumberger, 2008).

Perhaps most crucial is examining how these programs affect the students who participate in these unique and emerging programs. One way to examine the impact of any program,
regardless of its purpose, is to gain and study the perspectives of the members. Much can be learned to improve interventions for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males from understanding the perspectives of the students themselves (Bethell, 2012; Brown et al., 2003; Cokley et al., 2011; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Hughes et al., 2007; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; West-Olatunji et al., 2006; Whiting, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

Low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic male students are at-risk for poor educational outcomes, which increases the likelihood they will leave school early or dropout, often resulting in poor personal, community, and adult outcomes (Barbarin, 2010; Carpenter & Ramirez, 2007; Whiting, 2009). The high dropout rate among low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males have largely been attributed to a correlation with their disengagement in school, representative deviant behavior, and lack of positive social relationships with adults and peers at school (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Davis & Dupper, 2004; Newcomb et al., 2002). Interventions have existed, but have mainly occurred outside of the school day, are designed for high school populations, and are characterized by mentoring and tutoring programs (Blount, 2012; Charmaraman & Hall, 2011; Featherston, 2010).

Some research has shown that student perspectives can shed much light on the nature and effectiveness of the programs designed for the students themselves (West-Olatunji et al., 2006; Whiting, 2009). Studies have shown programs which encourage student engagement in school, allow opportunities for members to develop positive behaviors and relationships, and promote avoidance of student deviant behavior positively impact school completion rates (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Davis & Dupper, 2004). However, first such a program needs to be examined
through a qualitative lens that allows the perspectives of the students and adults most closely associated with it to be examined within the context of the school and its community.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group\(^1\) as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males, and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the program. The program was established in 2009 by an eighth grade English Language Arts teacher. The founding faculty mentor still runs the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, which serves only male students in the eighth grade.

The present study is an important one as there are no known programs exactly like the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, and very few have similar characteristics. Although there are numerous studies that investigate drop-out prevention programs for African-American and Hispanic males, no study at the time of this research could be located that examined the perspectives of middle-aged students involved in a program focusing on building character, fostering relationships with peers and adults, and structured with activities during the day and after school.

Bailey and Paisley (2004) described a program entitled, “Gentlemen on the Move,” which was an extracurricular program focusing on academic and social responsibility for at-risk African-American and Hispanic males. Wyatt (2009) described an all-male group called the “Brotherhood” for high school African-American males. The group was characterized mostly by group members participating in small group counseling sessions, and findings provided implications for counseling professionals. Both studies, however, provided promising results for

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\(^1\) All names and places are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants and to maintain ethical reporting considerations as established by the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board.
all male groups, but brought attention for the need for more research focusing on earlier interventions that reach out to middle-aged Africa-American and Hispanic males.

There have been very few studies looking at dropout intervention programs for early adolescents (Blount, 2012; Clark et al., 2008; Henry et al., 2012; Hickman et al., 2008; Orthner et al., 2010). Most intervention programs reviewed in the literature occur after school hours and do not function as a part of the school. Although these programs have suggested effective components in isolation, they have never been used as a lens for examining other programs (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Basch, 2011; Charmaraman & Hall, 2011; Featherston, 2010; Henry et al., 2012; Ladd, 2012; Lunenburg, 2000; Martin et al., 2007; Newcomb et al., 2002; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Rothstein, 2008; Somers et al., 2009; Travis & Ausbrooks, 2012; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). Finally, only two empirical studies that examined both the perceptions of at-risk students and the drop-out issue were found in the research. Brown et al. (2003) examined high school student perceptions and the dropout rate, and Hughes et al. (2007) looked at high school student perceptions of barriers to finishing high school.

Through direct observations and interactions with the participants, the present study examined the perspectives of a group of low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males participating in an all-boys middle school program. The program was unique in that it occurred both during and after the school day, and this program included multiple components. As an early intervention, this group structure offered the researcher the opportunity to observe and interview African-American and Hispanic males to focus on their perspectives about being a member of such a group. The school’s principal and the founder of this program who still serves as the “teacher leader” were also interviewed to capture their perspectives about
the program. Past participants of the group, now juniors in high school were interviewed to gain additional perspectives about their involvement in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

**Research Questions**

Because there is a need to take an in-depth look at the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, numerous questions exist. First, how did such a group come about? What are the components of the group, and how do they compare with those that have been examined in the research? What can the perspectives of those involved with the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group contribute to the improvement and possible replication of this program? Finally, what perspectives do the middle-aged participants, African-American and Hispanic males, hold about their involvement in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group? These burning questions guided the researcher in further framing and refining the study. The study asked the following research questions:

1. What is the history of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group and how does it operate now? What norms, values, or innovative interventions are embedded in the Men’s Group?

2. What do the involved professionals perceive as the impact of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s group on the academic and personal lives of the students?

3. How do the involved students see the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in relation to their academic and personal lives?

4. Does the program have an influence on the students academically and/or personally?

The overall research questions are designed to seek out and to discover two sets of perspectives. The first set of perspectives will come from the students. The second set of perspectives will
come from the two adults who oversee and have a vested interest in the outcomes of the program. This methodological approach enabled the researcher to link the overall research questions in such a way to examine further the commonalities and differences between the two groups.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this research study was a social constructionist theory of knowledge rooted in the interpretive tradition. The research was built on the notion that gaining knowledge comes from interpretation of the social world. Prasad (2005) clearly defined the interpretive tradition like this:

> Interpretive traditions emerge from a scholarly position that takes human interpretation as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world…, [and] reality exists not in some tangible, identifiable outside world, but in human consciousness itself. In other words, what is of paramount importance is how we order, classify, structure, and interpret our world, and then act on our interpretations. (p. 13)

The interpretive tradition, thus, is rooted in the idea that one gains knowledge through the interpretation of social experience. This study attempted to answer research questions through the interpretation of data gleaned from the participants to enable the researcher and the participants to construct meanings based on the experiences of being in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

Crotty (1998) argued that the epistemology of social constructivism is a major part of the theoretical framework, and he defined epistemology as the “theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (p. 3). It is difficult to interpret any reality unless it is socially constructed. Patton (2002) pointed out:

> Because human beings have evolved the capacity to interpret and construct reality—indeed, they cannot do otherwise— the world of human perception is not real in an absolute sense, as the sun is real, but is ‘made up’ and shaped by cultural and linguistic concepts. (p. 96)
Unless social interaction takes place, perhaps there is no interpretation of knowledge. Patton (2002) argued this point unequivocally—“All reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed. There is no exception” (p. 97). To understand the components of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, the perspectives of those involved, or the influence of the program, social interaction needed to be examined to interpret meaning. Social construction was the theory of knowledge embedded in the interpretive conceptual framework of this study.

Using a social constructionist theory of knowledge rooted in the interpretive tradition as theoretical framework, this study employed qualitative approaches to the research. Meriam (2009) shared, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). Since qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the social world through interpretation, such an approach was an adequate one. Meriam (2009) also emphasized the importance of gaining knowledge through induction rather than deduction. An inductive research process is also characteristic to qualitative research.

Given that reality is socially constructed, the researcher looked for knowledge, or data, from the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group by examining their social interactions. To answer the research questions, the researcher needed to be close to the research and the participants. By becoming an integral part of the research process, the researcher found meaning in social interaction with the participants and through the direct observation of participants socially constructing meaning with each other. As social constructionism is embedded in the interpretive tradition, the researcher gained knowledge through interpretation of social interactions. Through examining perspectives of participants themselves, participants also constructed meaning through their own social construction and interpretations they held about
the group, the program, and themselves as a part of the group. The methods employed in this study were chosen so that the researcher could create meaning through social construction and interpretation of the data as each occurred in the context of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

One must define a conceptual framework, theory of knowledge, and research approach before selecting appropriate methods for any research study, and as Meriam (2009) explained, “A central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds” (Meriam, 2009, p. 22). This qualitative research study is grounded in an interpretive theoretical framework and uses a social constructionist epistemology.

**Overview of the Methods**

The methodology used in this research was a case study. Case study as a methodology has been acknowledged as a strong method in qualitative research (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Hays, 2004; Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995). Flyvbjerg (2006) argued for the use of case study as a methodology in qualitative research because:

> . . . the case study is a necessary and sufficient method for certain important research tasks in the social sciences, and it is a method that holds up well when compared to other methods in the gamut of social science research methodology. (p. 241)

A case study is also an adequate methodology for research grounded in the interpretive tradition and social constructionist epistemology (Simons, 2009). The use of case study as a methodology allowed the researcher to become an integral part of the research, and allowed for methods that encouraged social interaction where meaning could be constructed.

The type of case study used in this research can be categorized most closely as what Stake (1995) called intrinsic and instrumental. The case of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group is studied for the intrinsic interest in the group itself in addition to attempt to gain
instrumental insight on how the study can inform other interventions for at-risk populations. The case study can also be described as what Simons (2009) called ethnographic—understanding a program in its “socio-cultural context” (p. 10).

The case study of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group implored the following research methods inherent in qualitative case study research—individual interviewing (Magana, 2002; Roulston, 2010; Simons, 2009), participant observation (Magana, 2002; Mason, 2002; Simons, 2009), document analysis (Prior, 2003; Simons, 2009), ethnographic journaling (Fetterman, 2010; Prasad, 2005; Simons, 2009), and the use of supplemental qualitative and quantitative data (Simons, 2009). All of these methods worked to provide data in an effort to answer the research questions and to work toward the purposes to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the program.

Data generation was built on an interpretive theoretical framework with a social constructionist epistemology. Individual interviewing allowed for social interactions between the researcher and participants in addition to participants with each other. Through participant observation and ethnographic journaling, the researcher was able to the field where the social interactions unfolded. Document analysis allowed for interaction between the researcher, the text, and thus, the participant as author. Meaning was constructed through these social interactions, and interpreted by the researcher, which is a reflected the theoretical framework of the study. Data for this study were collected using qualitative methods that included:

1. Two individual interviews were conducted with each of the 10 student member participants at the beginning and end of the data collection period.
2. Brief follow-up interviews with each of the 10 student member participants after the longer individual interviews.

3. One interview with the principal of Robinlee Middle School and two interviews with the faculty mentor of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group were conducted at the beginning and end of the data collection period.

4. Observations of four regularly scheduled meetings, an observation of one field trip, observations of three after school service projects, and one observation of a school service project were conducted with the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

5. Document analyses of six written reflections of each of the same 10 student member participants were conducted.

6. Ethnographic journaling by the researcher of the interactions with the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group member participants was conducted. The researcher engaged in journaling of the total research experience.

7. Supplemental quantitative standardized testing scores and discipline data were collected to explore further the context of the study site and to examine trends in data of the members throughout the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

8. Other data sources to assist with triangulation were consulted such as three high school students who participated in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. Their perspectives were used to help clarify and confirm hunches about the data collected from the 10 student participants in the Men’s Group.

Using a variety of qualitative methods allowed the researcher to collect ample data aimed at answering the research questions. After collecting data, the research process moved to the data analysis phase.
Data analysis in this case study was inductive and included thematic analysis. Guest et al. (2012) described exploratory data analysis where, “the researcher carefully reads and rereads the data, looking for key words, trends, themes, or ideas that will help outline the analysis before any analysis takes place” (Guest et al., 2012, pp. 7-8). This process is inductive, rather than deductive, or confirmatory. Guest et al. (2012) defined thematic analysis in this manner:

Thematic analyses…require more involvement and interpretation from the researcher. Thematic analyses move beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes. Codes are then typically developed to represent the identified themes and applied or linked to raw data as summary markers for later analysis. (Guest et al., 2012, p. 10)

Through exploring the data to locate themes, data analysis in this research study was characterized as inductive thematic analysis. Rather than testing preconceived ideas, the researcher looked for recurring themes among embedded values, perspectives, and influences found within the members of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

Data analysis went through three phases during this study. Simons (2009) described these phases as the “descriptive,” “analysis,” and “generalization” phases (pp. 105-106). Here, the researcher selected that data which was most fitting to gather data to support answering research questions, and to help tell the story, and then moved to identifying themes in the data. Finally, the researcher attempted to tell the story of the case. Simons (2009) stated, “Every institution or program has a story to tell about its origin, its development, its achievements at a particular time. Case study documents and interprets the complexity of that experience in its specific socio-political context” (p. xi). The researcher attempted to answer research questions by locating themes in the data and then interpreting meaning in those themes to tell the story of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in context.
Data were read literally, interpretively, and reflexively. Mason (2002) described literal reading as consisting of seeing the data as it are, while interpretive reading involves looking for thematic relevance. Reflexively reading data involves researchers seeing themselves in the data. Thus, data analysis in this study was marked by what Mason (2002) described as a holistic approach to searching for themes from an interpretive framework. The case study of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group used various procedures and practices to ensure trust, honesty, and transparency in an ethical and trustworthy research process.

**Significance of the Study**

Longitudinal studies to examine the components of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group and then correlate the relationship of involvement in the Men’s Group to success in high school and subsequent high school completion should be a long-term research goal. However, the first step was to examine the components of the Men’s Group and the perspectives about these activities held by the young men who were participating in this program. Such a case study could yield several promising results at the school and district levels and in the general field of educational research.

At the end of the 2008-2009 school year, Robinlee Middle School was labeled a Needs Improvement-5 year status school under the Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) component of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (Georgia Department of Education, 2008). In 2002, NCLB was signed into law in an effort to improve academic achievement and close the achievement gap. Per the requirements of the law, students were to make adequate academic progress each year regardless of race or economic status as determined by a published formula and measured by standardized achievement tests (The Education Trust, 2003).
As a Needs Improvement school, Robinlee Middle School was under state direction for improvement largely due to the achievement gap, or low academic performance on state standardized tests demonstrated by African-American Students, Students with Disabilities, and Economically Disadvantaged Students. That year, 52.2% of African-American students met or exceeded the target score, while 54.3% of economically disadvantaged students met the target score. Nineteen percent of Students with Disabilities met or exceeded the target score. To make AYP, 59.5% of these students needed to meet or to exceed the target score (Georgia Department of Education, 2008).

In the 2010-2011 and the 2011-2012 school years, Robinlee Middle School made AYP, evidently closing the achievement gap with these same populations of students. In the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years, Robinlee Middle School was named a “High-Progress School” by the Georgia Department of Education. Under the state of Georgia’s newest accountability system, Cardoza (2012) defined “A ‘High-Progress School’ as a Title I school among the 10% of Title I schools in the State that was making the most progress in improving the performance of the ‘all students’ group over three years on the statewide assessments” (Reward School Definition section, para. 2). Robinlee Middle School was in the top 10% of low-socioeconomic schools in the state of Georgia recognized for closing the achievement gap (Cardoza, 2012).

The Men’s Group at Robinlee Middle School was established in 2009, and although no direct correlation has been made between group practices and the simultaneous closing of the achievement gap, the group had never been studied as an intervention. Robinlee Middle School has demonstrated great progress in closing the achievement gap with low-socioeconomic minority students, and those overrepresented in special education programs— all cited in the
literature as at-risk populations (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Barbarin, 2010). Understanding the students perspectives of their educational and personal experiences as a part of the Men’s Group could shed light on the relation of involvement in the program to closing the achievement gap for students in this demographic. This is an aspirational goal beyond the scope of this research, and the researcher did not try to make any correlations between making AYP, closing the achievement gap, and the components of the Men’s Group.

Students who leave Robinlee Middle School will enter Pine Hills High School. In 2010, the graduation rate at Pine Hills High School was 70.4% (64.3% among African-Americans and 69.2% among Hispanics) and 71.7% (67.4% among African-Americans and 74.6% among Hispanics) in 2011 (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). Examining the perspectives of the educational and personal experiences of the members of the Men’s Group as they move toward graduation could provide beneficial data in understanding the program as an early intervention to combat the dropout crisis. Given dropout causes being attributed to disengagement, deviant behavior, and a lack of positive school relationships, program relations to these specific factors could also yield promising results. As with closing the achievement gap, examining perspectives can be viewed in light of how the program relates to disproportion in discipline among these at-risk populations. Unforeseen benefits may also result.

Much of the information gleaned from such a case study may be used locally to modify the existing program to understand it as an intervention, to improve its effectiveness, before suggesting that other middle schools in the district replicate the components of the program. Given schools with similar demographics and risk factors, information may provide helpful information for replicating a similar program in any public school or system across the nation.
Again, these are all aspirational to the intent of this study and the results will dictate such recommendations.

A case study of the Men’s Group at Robinlee Middle School provided an opportunity to study a group with unique components as a possible early intervention to improve high school completion rate for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males. There is no program in the research exactly like it. The study took into account the perspectives of the students it was designed for, possibly shedding light not only on the program, but also on the actual educational and personal factors that may put these students at-risk. The program was embedded into the regular school day. Understanding the program and its influence through the perspective of those involved provided much insight for practitioners and scholars alike.

**Assumptions**

A major assumption in this study was that it was understood that all minorities or those living in low-socioeconomic conditions were not and should not be labeled at-risk. They did not automatically carry with them certain attitudes or negative perceptions of education. Bartlinger (2001, p. 4) points out, “Regardless of myths and stereotypes, poor people share the reverence of the middle class for education as well as the perception that mobility depends on school achievement and attainment” (as cited in Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005). There was no attempt made to find fault with those who were labeled at-risk. The researcher held no stereotypes based on race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

Another major assumption was that education is a democratic right in American society, and that all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, have a right to receive an education. De Vito (2007) clarified such an assumption:

Educational entitlement under judicial ruling specifies that, although the right to an education is not granted federally, if it is provided by the state, on the other hand, then it
Many Americans believe that education exists as a fundamental right. (pp. 173-174)

As such, academic achievement and school completion are priorities within the education system. Prince, Pepper, and Brocato (2006) noted these factors as priorities. To understand interventions aimed at improving the school completion rate, it is assumed that education and its components aimed at increasing student achievement are understood priorities.

A third assumption was that this research focused on implications for solutions for practice. The intent was not to, for example, inform any type of policy. As Rothstein (2008) noted, “It’s a canard that educators advocating socioeconomic reforms wish to postpone school improvement until we have created an impractical economic Utopia” (p. 11). It was also not to place blame. According to Winter and Butzon (2009):

> It is consistent with attribution theory for educators to attribute the failure of schools to the students they teach- or parents, or the test, or curriculum, or poverty, because individuals tend to view their environments in ways that will protect their self-images. (p. 1)

No part of this research was conducted in an effort to attribute discouraging findings to any responsible party. Instead, the assumption was that the purposes of this research were aimed at providing research findings with implications for practitioners and their daily practices as they work with students.

A fourth assumption was that in using interviews as a method of research, subjects answered interview questions honestly to the best of their ability as a reflection of their respective perspectives. The research remained ethical in the treatment of minors, anonymity, and confidentiality. Considerations for interviewing and conducting sound research with minors were consistently taken in to account as the participants were volunteers and they could withdraw from the study at any time and without ramifications.
Definition of Key Terms

Achievement Gap—Rothstein (2008) defined achievement gap as the “difference in the average achievement of students from disadvantaged and middle class families” (p. 8). Achievement is usually measured by performance on standardized tests. Achievement gaps can also occur between minorities and non-minorities, male, and female students.

At-risk students—For the purposes of this research study, students labeled at-risk were those students who are or were at-risk for poor educational, and subsequent personal, community, and adult outcomes.

Disproportionate Discipline—The term refers to the excessive number of school discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions received by low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic male students as compared to their counterparts in the United States.

Engagement—The process of being emotionally involved in and attached to school in a meaningful way.

Gifted Education—Paraphrasing Eger (2013), gifted education is instruction that is designed to meet the unique needs of a student who demonstrates qualifying high intellectual or creative ability, high motivation, or excels in specific academic fields. For the purposes of this study, gifted education programs included all types of specialized models designed for students qualifying as gifted.

Intervention—Any program or research based recommendation or strategy aimed at combating poor outcomes or risk factors.

Low-socioeconomic—Schools determine low-socioeconomic students as those receiving free and reduced lunch, because it can be disaggregated at the local school level on an annual basis (New America Foundation, 2013).
Poor Outcomes or Risk Factors—Resulting negative outcomes for at-risk students are poor outcomes or risk factors. For example, achievement gaps, overrepresentation or underrepresentation, disproportionate discipline, school to prison pipeline, low life expectancy, are considered poor educational outcomes.

Special Education—Special education is instruction that is designed to meet the unique needs of a student with a qualifying disability. For the purposes of this study, special education programs include all types of specialized models designed for students with qualifying disabilities.

Limitations of the Study

Possible limitations existed within this research study. One such limitation deals with the generalizability of the findings of the study. According to Hays (2004), “Generalization is not a goal in case studies, for the most part, because discovering the uniqueness of each case is the main purpose” (Hays, 2004, p. 218). Simons (2009) noted a possible limitation in case studies as “the way in which inferences are drawn from a single case” (p. 12). Due to such a limitation, it may be hard to justify the generalization of findings or replication of findings to other areas of practice.

Another limitation deals with the length of the study. Due to the nature of the position of the researcher, the opportunity to study the group was limited. A more longitudinal study examining the program and the perspectives of the participants over several years is warranted. Such a limitation is described by Simons (2009) as “the distorted picture it can give of the way things are, and its essential conservatism—the case study is locked in time while the people in it have moved on” (p. 12). The limitation here was that the case study only presented information for a certain length of time, five months.
Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 provides an introduction, describes the background and the rationale for the study, the statement of the problem with the research questions, and includes the significance of the study. Chapter 1 chapter lists assumptions, definitions of terms, limitations of the study and the overall organization of the dissertation. Chapter 2 includes a review of the related literature examining at-risk populations, poverty and race, poor educational outcomes, the dropout dilemma, poor personal and adult outcomes, causes, interventions, and perspectives.

Chapter 3 presents the research design and theoretical framework, describes the setting and participants, explicates the methodology and methods, reports data analysis methods, and examines ethical considerations. Chapter 4 reports the data and its analyses reported in the case study format. Chapter 5 presents a holistic case analysis of the data presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 6 discusses the results and the implications for school practitioners involved in the education of low-socioeconomic minority adolescent males, and provides recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males are at-risk for poor educational and subsequent adult outcomes (Barbarin, 2010; Clark et al., 2008; Guiberson, 2009; Howell & Tavakolian, 2012; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Rothstein, 2008; Simmons, 2010; Togut, 2011). Among those at-risk populations are low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males (Barbarin, 2010; Bishaw, 2012; Clark et al., 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2010; Skiba et al., 2010). A need exists to develop programs to mitigate the risks of these negative outcomes.

The purpose of this study was to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males, and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the program. The study asked the following overall research questions:

1. What is the history of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group and how does it operate now? What norms, values, or innovative interventions are embedded in the Men’s Group?

2. What do the involved professionals perceive as the impact of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s group on the academic and personal lives of the students?

3. How do the involved students see the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in relation to their academic and personal lives?
4. Does the program have an influence on the students academically and/or personally?

In an effort to answer these research questions, it was important to review the literature in several key areas. First, the researcher attempted to understand what the literature presented about outcomes for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males. Second, the researcher sought to find research in the literature involving interventions for these at-risk populations. Third, the researcher attempted to find examples in the literature where perspectives of at-risk youth were considered in light of their educational and personal experiences. Thus, a review of the literature is presented surrounding the following areas in which this case study was grounded:

- At-Risk Populations
- Poor Educational Outcomes
- Poor Personal and Adult Outcomes
- Interventions for At-Risk Students
- At-Risk Student Perspectives

What follows is a review of the related literature surrounding this study examining the perspectives of the participants—10 students, one principal, and the teacher—of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

**At-Risk Populations**

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the United States Government began to pass compulsory attendance laws in an effort to compel all students of a certain age to attend public school (Coulson, 1999). It was during this time when education began to establish itself as a priority for the nation’s children. Now, education is not only seen as a priority, but arguably also
a responsibility of government, and even a basic need of life for all children. Solari and Balshaw (2007) wrote:

"Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship.

Today, it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right, which must be made available to all on equal terms. (Solari & Balshaw, 2007, pp.147-148)"

Education, then, was established as important in the United States. The nation saw a need to send its children to school—a need that has stood the test of time.

Since the passing of compulsory attendance, as students of all varieties have entered and exited the doors of public schools throughout the country, many of them have been deemed at-risk by education professionals, program providers, policy makers, and researchers. Although there is no consistent definition for what at-risk means across all contexts, it is nevertheless important for stakeholders to establish a standard definition or reference point for populations of students that discussed. An obvious question is at-risk of what? Thus, the focus shifts to a response concerned with outcomes, and the context in which these outcomes take place. An at-risk student then, is one at-risk for poor outcomes in the context of the school building, and in the context of the community when exiting school (Moore, 2006).

For the purposes of this study, it was important to understand why low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males are regarded at-risk. Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds or those living in poverty are considered at-risk. The poverty rate for children has
historically been somewhat higher than the overall poverty rate. In 2010, children represented a disproportionate share of the poor in the United States; they were 24% of the total population, but 36% of the poor population (Bishaw, 2012). Living in poverty puts students at-risk for poor outcomes in educational and community contexts.

Minority students are regarded as at-risk. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation in government schools in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, opening public school doors across the United States for African-American students. Since desegregation, certain populations of African-American students have been represented by statistics labeling them at-risk for poor outcomes in educational and community contexts (Ornstein & Levine, 1984). School population increases have been marked by an increase in Hispanic students, as well. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), much of the recent rise in minority enrollment may be attributed to the growth in the number of Hispanic students. Certain populations of these students have also fallen under the category of at-risk.

All minorities or those living in low-socioeconomic conditions are not and should not be labeled at-risk, nor there be any attempt to find fault with those who are labeled at-risk. The literature, examined later in this review, provides explanations, or causes for various risk factors. One should note, however, that race and ethnicity has been an indicator in isolation as a risk factor for poor educational outcomes. Barbarin (2010) noted:

Some people look at these data and dismiss them as unrelated to race and ethnicity. It is a problem of poverty, they would say. Indeed, these problems are strongly associated with poverty, which disproportionately affects African-Americans. Even though these trends are more pronounced among the African-American poor, they are also observed to a lesser extent among middle- and high-income African-American families. (p. 83)
Although race and ethnicity were often associated with poverty in affecting at-risk populations, they were not always inseparable. Race and ethnicity, in isolation, can also disproportionately cause populations of students to be considered at-risk.

Similarly, Skiba et al. (2010) said, “Race and socioeconomic status are unfortunately highly connected in American society” (p. 1088). Minority students who come from low-socioeconomic circumstances are generally the populations at greater risk for poor outcomes. The poverty rate for children varies substantially by racial demographics. In 2010, while White children made up 12.4% of children living in poverty, African-American children made up 38.2%, and Hispanic children made up 35% of these children (Bishaw, 2012). Socioeconomic and racial demographic parameters have been the basis for labeling students at-risk. One should understand what poor outcomes exist both in the educational and community contexts for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic students that have labeled as students at-risk.

**Poor Educational Outcomes**

The purpose of this study was to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males, and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the program. The next step in the review of the literature furthers understanding of poor educational outcomes experienced by low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males.

The educational experiences of low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males are arguably marginalized from those of their counterparts. The literature is prevalent on the subject, as theories about the experiences of adolescent African-American and Hispanic males living in poverty emerge (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Howell & Tavakolian, 2012; Machtinger, 2007; Olszewski-
Kubilius, 2006; Rothstein, 2008; Simmons, 2010; Togut, 2011; Ushomirsky, 2011). One must consider academic achievement as a focal point of the educational experience. There are many inter-related issues surrounding poor educational outcomes. Table 2.1 highlights the key poor educational outcomes reported in the research and used to inform the present study. The academic achievement of low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males often lags behind the achievement of their classmates, an issue referred to as “the achievement gap” (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Machtinger, 2007; Ushomirsky, 2011).

Table 2.1

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<th>Key Poor Education Outcomes</th>
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<td>Achievements Gaps</td>
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<td>Literacy</td>
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<td>Socioeconomic</td>
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<td>Racial and Ethnic</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Access to Quality Curriculum</td>
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<td>Over representation in</td>
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<td>special education</td>
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<td>Disproportionate Discipline</td>
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<td>Dropout Dilemma</td>
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Achievement Gaps

Gaps in achievement exist among students across different socioeconomic statuses.

According to Rothstein (2008), “The achievement gap is a difference in the average achievement of students from disadvantaged and middle class families” (p. 8), and Olszewski-Kubilius (2006) declared:

Study after study has demonstrated that children from disadvantaged households perform less well in school on average than those from more advantaged households. This empirical relationship shows up in studies using observations at the levels of the individual student, the school, the district, the state, the country. (p. 28)

Across various levels, achievement gaps are prevalent among poorer populations. Those students living in poverty achieve lower academically than their counterparts, who live in more advantaged circumstances.

Achievement gaps occur across racial and ethnic demographics as well. “The minority achievement gap is so named, because, on average, minority students' school performance is much lower than that of White students,” according to Simmons (2010, p. 51). Again, the disparity exists across numerous indicators of measurement. Williams (2011) points out, “On almost every indicator of achievement including grades, standardized achievement tests, and college attendance and completion, minority children do not achieve at the same levels as nonminority children” (p. 65). Achievement gaps exist among minority populations, as well.

Gaps in achievement between low-socioeconomic minority students and their counterparts manifest themselves in what is known as a literacy gap. Au and Raphael (2000) discussed the literacy gap: “Historically, schools have been unsuccessful in bringing students of diverse backgrounds to the same levels of literacy achievement as their mainstream peers, resulting in a literacy achievement gap” (p. 172). Language acquisition presents difficulties for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Jensen (2009) noted, “Children raised in poverty
experience a more limited range of language capabilities” (p. 35). In students who speak English as a second language, the gap is augmented, as Cummins (2011) described, “Very different trajectories are involved for [English Learner] students to catch up with their peers in each of the dimensions of English language acquisition proficiency” (p. 143). A literary gap exists between low-socioeconomic minorities and their counterparts, often amplified by difficulties in English language acquisition.

The literacy gap perhaps may be attributed to a lack of resources for low-socioeconomic students in their homes. Jensen (2009) asserted:

Even when low-income parents do everything they can for their children, their limited resources put kids at a huge disadvantage…. [and] “[Low-Socioeconomic] children have fewer play areas in their home; have less access to computers and the Internet; own fewer books, toys, and other recreational or learning materials; spend more time watching television; and are less likely to have friends over to play. (p.36)

Lack of access to developmental resources for children living in poverty has cognitive implications for these children. As Jensen (2009) continued, “Evidence suggests that poverty adversely alters the trajectory of the developing reading brain” (p. 37). The literary gap has been credited to a lack of resources, and subsequent inhibited cognitive development among students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

The achievement gap is compounded by what is known as the gender gap, examined by Clark et al. (2008), who shared, “During the past decade, there has been an increasing gender achievement gap with male students lagging behind their female counterparts on a number of important indicators of school success” (Clarke et al., 2008, p. 127). Low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males appear to be at greatest risk for an educational outcome where their academic achievement lags behind that of their classmates. Socioeconomically and demographically, disparities in academic achievement are prevalent.
Access to Quality Curriculum

In addition to experiencing achievement gaps as a poor educational outcome for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males, another poor educational outcome is the lack of access to a quality curriculum. A part of the educational experience of any student is access to a quality curriculum. Historically, access to quality curriculum has been hindered for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males (Bonner & Jennings, 2007). Togut (2011) noted, “minority and low income students are much more likely to be grouped into average or low-ability courses, as compared to predominantly white, higher income schools, which offer average, above average, and honors courses” (p. 168).

Specifically, these risks are greatest for males, as Bonner and Jennings (2007) reported, “African-American males have been disproportionately placed in special education classrooms and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs” (p. 34). Access concerns reach to these gifted courses where the same students are less likely to have enrolled in or completed advanced or gifted courses in school (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; The Education Trust, 2006). Specifically, “An issue of much concern, and under much scrutiny and debate, is the persistent and extensive under-representation of African-American students in gifted education,” according to Ford et al. (2011, p. 239). Limited access to a quality curriculum is apparent in the underrepresentation of these students in these advanced and gifted classes.

In much the same way, Hispanic students and those coming from low-socioeconomic backgrounds face barriers in entrance to gifted education classes. Ford (2010), in examining national statistics of students in gifted education classes noted that, “Likewise, Hispanic students are underrepresented by 38%, resulting in another large number of students who are not accessing gifted education curriculum, programs, and services” (p. 36). In Georgia, the access
issues are no different. McBee (2006) found, “Georgia continues to struggle with the underrepresentation of minority and low-SES students in its gifted programs” (p. 110). Both nationally and locally, the underrepresentation of Hispanic and African-American males is of concern.

Access to a quality curriculum is also hindered by an overrepresentation of adolescent African-American and Hispanic male students in special education programs (Barbarin, 2010; Guiberson, 2009). Togut (2011) stated, “A United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights survey reveals that since the 1970s there has been persistent overrepresentation of minorities in certain special education eligibility categories. . . , [such as] intellectually disabled and emotionally behaviorally disabled” (p. 164). African-American students have seen a greater overrepresentation according to Garda (2005) — “African-American students are identified as disabled under the IDEA in numbers that so exceed their proportion in the general population that the Department of Education considers it a national problem and experts proclaim it a crisis” (p. 1072). Males appear to be disproportionately placed in special education programs. For the nation as a whole, the overrepresentation of male students in special education is pervasive (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005).

Poverty also has implications for overrepresentation of minority males in special education programs, possibly compounding the race and ethnicity factor. Togut (2011) found, “Some researchers conclude that poverty is a strong variable contributing to the disproportionality of minorities in special education” (Togut, 2011, p. 169). Certain researchers, for example Artiles et al. (2002), cautioned that there is a direct link between socioeconomic status and student placement in special education programs and that “Aside from the pervasive potential impact of poverty on children’s development, it should be acknowledged that poverty is
associated with lower academic achievement, which in turn exacerbates the chances of special education placement” (p. 6). Living in poverty has an effect on school performance and child development, which in turn, may increase the likelihood of placement in special education.

**Disproportionate Discipline**

Academically, low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic students, and males in that population specifically are at-risk for poor educational outcomes. There are substantial gaps in their educational achievements as compared to other populations, and they are underrepresented in gifted and advanced courses, while overrepresented in special education programs. Low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males are also at-risk for poor educational outcomes with regard to school discipline. A disproportionate number of African-American and Hispanic males are referred to the office for discipline infractions and subsequently suspended or expelled from school (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). African-American males see higher numbers of referrals, suspensions, and expulsion rates (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011).

There are two factors that have implications for this risk factor. First, from a legal standpoint, these students have historically been silenced. According to Skiba et al. (2010), “The courts have, despite opportunities, refused to provide access for relief to students of color in school disciplinary cases” (p. 1100). Second, as with prior risk factors, poverty plays a role, but not in isolation, as Skiba et al. (2010) elaborated, “Thus, although economic disadvantage may contribute to disproportionate rates of discipline for students of color, it cannot completely explain racial and ethnic disparities in school suspension and expulsion” (Skiba et al., 2010, p. 1088). Again, socioeconomically and demographically, these students are placed at a disadvantage.
The Dropout Dilemma

Poor outcomes, or risk factors, including gaps in academic achievement between low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males and their counterparts, overrepresentation in special education programs, and underrepresentation in gifted and advance courses have existed. Low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males are disproportionately disciplined in school. Academic and behavioral outcomes or risk factors may contribute to perhaps the greatest risk factor—the number of students who drop out of school.

The literature is wrought with statistics pointing to the likelihood of low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males dropping out of school (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Barbarin, 2010; Howell & Tavakolian, 2012; Machtinger, 2007; The Education Trust, 2008; Whiting, 2009). “It is important to note that the high school dropout rate is significantly higher among minorities such as Hispanic and African-American populations,” according to Howell and Tavakolian (2012, p. 77). Specifically, at a discouraging rate, half of African-American and Hispanic populations do not graduate from high school (Whiting, 2009). Low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males make up most of that percentage (Barbarin, 2010).

In 2012, President Obama declared the importance of focusing on the dropout rate as an area of concern in a State of the Union address, even suggesting raising the legal age a student may drop out of school (Dervarics, 2012). Perhaps the poorest possible educational outcome for low-socioeconomic African-American or Hispanic males is that they would choose to walk away from school. Each of the aforementioned risk factors may contribute to this dropout crisis. Carpenter and Ramirez (2007) conducted multiple studies in which they found direct correlations with dropout rates and socioeconomic, minority, and gender achievement gaps.
An increase in the dropout rate among low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males has been attributed to the difficulties in providing these students with adequate literacy skills. Au and Raphael (2000) stated, “There is an indicator of schools’ difficulty in providing students of diverse background with adequate opportunities to acquire mainstream literacy skills” (p. 174). A lack of mainstream literacy skills, including reading skills, has been linked to an increase in the dropout rate. Shuman (2006) described such a link:

The teaching of reading has come to be regarded as one of the highest priority areas in modern education because our schools are failing to teach reading effectively to large numbers of students who progress to secondary school without having achieved working competency in basic skill. Everyone knows the results: the struggling reader cannot survive in what is essentially an academic environment, so he puts in his time and ultimately drops out of school. (p. 220)

The literary achievement gap, and the lack of success in equipping low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males with the appropriate literacy skills have contributed to high dropout rates among the population.

Underrepresentation in gifted and advanced courses and overrepresentation in special education programs negatively influences the dropout rate for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males (Whiting, 2009). Harsh discipline consequences often result in these same students not completing school (Barbarin, 2010). Skiba et al. (2010) described this link:

In the long-term, school suspension has been found to be moderately associated with higher rates of school dropout and has been reported to be used in some schools as a means of encouraging certain students to drop out of school. (p. 1077)

Poor educational outcomes often result in students leaving school early. When students leave school early, they are in danger of becoming at-risk for other poor outcomes.
School to Prison Pipeline

Whether these at-risk students are dropping out of school, or being suspended or expelled from school, much of the concern lies with where they go next, resulting in poor community outcomes. Whether they opt to leave or are forced out, they are exposed to elements of the criminal justice system through an underlying culture of criminalization of these youth populations while they are still in school. In the modern day school building, there is an increased police presence, surveillance technologies, and the use of metal detectors. Schools are much safer places for students than the streets, where they are susceptible to crime; however, research has shown this is not due to equipping schools much like a penal system (Simmons, 2010).

Low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males, when suspended, expelled, or having dropped out of school, are not receiving an education and are unsupervised. Many of these risk factors result in what is referred to as the “school to prison pipeline” (Barbarin, 2010; Hancock, 2011; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Simmons, 2010). As Rocque and Paternoster (2011) pointed out, “Poor performance in, and disengagement from school for African-American students may in turn lead to higher crime and incarceration rates compared with whites” (p. 662). When young males are not in school, they become subject to involvement in criminal activity. Barbarin (2010) noted, “Expulsion and drop out from school give boys much unsupervised time that facilitates risky behavior that leave many African-American boys on the wrong side of the law” (p. 84). With some sources reporting higher dropout rates for low-socioeconomic Hispanic males, the “school to prison pipeline” statistics are just as discouraging for this population (Hatt, 2011; Noguera, 2003).
Research has indicated specific crimes committed by those dropping out of high school. There has been evidence of correlation between violent felony referrals and high school dropout rates (Ikomi, 2010). Homicide is one of the leading causes of death among African-American and Hispanic young men (Jones-Webb & Wall, 2008). A concern among the criminal activity engaged in by these high school dropouts is illicit drug use (Kogan, Luo, Brody, & Murry, 2005; Townsend, Flisher, & King, 2007). Dropouts are much more likely to become involved in gangs and illegal gang activity (Staff & Kreager, 2008). Such serious criminal activity would suggest not only entry into the legal system, but may also set these at-risk populations up for difficult future circumstances from which to escape. Barbarin (2010) described this situation:

Once in the system, it is difficult to emerge from it. Most juvenile offenders recycle multiple times through the system. Recidivism rates hover around 60%. The consequence of this entanglement in the justice system is a life at the margins. (p. 84)

Once entering the system, the entrant is entrapped, often unable to escape. The at-risk, low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American or Hispanic male student transitions to African-American or Hispanic adult. The adult is now at-risk for poor personal outcomes.

**Poor Adult Outcomes**

Poor educational outcomes for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males can likely result in dropping out of high school, and as these students drop out, the school to prison pipeline is fueled. Hatt (2011) noted, “Without a high school diploma, these youth are far more likely to end up unemployed, in prison, and living in poverty” (p. 478). Upon entering the school-to-prison pipeline, school dropouts, realistically are more than likely to experience poor adult outcomes. As Smith and Hattery (2010) found:

The majority of [those] who enter prison will eventually be released from prison and the vast majority will return to the same communities putting additional strain on already scarce resources as they attempt to garner the assistance they need to successfully reenter the free world. (Smith & Hattery, 2010, p. 388)
Once school dropouts enter the school to prison pipeline, even if escaping, are more likely to experience poor adult outcomes as they re-enter prison, or are released.

Low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males experience poor educational outcomes. The purpose of this study was to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males, and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the program. At-risk students, who experience poor educational outcomes, in turn, can experience poor adult outcomes. Table 2.2 highlights the key poor adult outcomes examined to inform the present study.

Table 2.2

*Key Poor Adult Outcomes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Key Researchers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>Barbarin (2010); Couch &amp; Fairlie (2010); Hill &amp; Torres (2010); U.S. Department of Labor (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College entrance and completion</td>
<td>Henry J. Kaiser Foundation (2006); Comfort (2012); Case (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to quality healthcare</td>
<td>Copeland (2006); Kposowa (2007); Murphy, Xu, &amp; Kochanek (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyclical Nature of Poverty</td>
<td>Bishaw (2012); Barbarin (2010); Jensen (2009); Jones (2004); Macartney, Bishaw, &amp; Fontenot (2013); Hatt (2011); Mackey &amp; Mackey (2012); Smith &amp; Hattery (2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The “school to prison pipeline” often results in discouraging adult life situations, or poor adult outcomes. Even if high school dropouts manage to escape the school to prison pipeline, risk factors can result in other poor adult outcomes, as Barbarin (2010) discussed:
Many African-American men leaving prison arrive at adulthood unprepared for its responsibilities and ill-equipped to participate in home, community, and work life. They are beset by chronic unemployment, disenfranchised as citizens, and in time many become disengaged from the children they bear. As they age, most fare poorly on every index of well-being, including financial and marital stability, physical health, psychological well-being, and life expectancy. (Barbarin, 2010, p. 84)

Many African-American and Hispanic adult men struggle to find employment, or they settle for low paying jobs. “The unemployment rate among blacks in the United States has been roughly double that of whites for several decades,” according to Couch and Fairlie (2010, p. 227).

Hispanic men experience a higher rate of unemployment than whites, while lower than African-American men (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014). Research has attributed this Hispanic increase in unemployment to the possibility of the cultural impact of championing manual labor in the home as a way for providing for one’s family. As such, these Hispanic adult males may settle for low paying manual labor jobs (Hill & Torres, 2010).

Poor outcomes exist outside of employment. A report by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2006) claims that 5.9% of Hispanic men and 7.3% of African-American men ranging from ages 18-29 graduate from college. The school to prison pipeline, often results in low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males entering adulthood while incarcerated instead of while in college. Comfort (2012) stated:

Being in a place with uninterrupted time to think about one’s life and one’s future is a standard practice afforded to youth during their emerging adulthood, some of whom enjoy the liberty of doing this on and island or mountaintop, and many of whom do so in the halls and on the campuses of academe. That emerging adulthood is construed for the better-off as a time to indulge in privilege and promise while impoverished young adults are expected to learn from and even thrive through suffering can alert us to further layers of inequality and disadvantage that merit exploration. (p. 315)

Many low-socioeconomic minorities are denied the opportunity to enter adulthood on college campuses. If low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males are afforded the opportunity to enter college, many of them face obstacles in remaining there. Case (2013) noted,
“A troubling aspect of increasing ethnic diversity on college campuses is that students of color may find it more difficult to persist and thrive at traditionally white campuses when compared to the success rates at minority serving institutions” (Case, 2013, p. 129). The researcher described the faults of higher education in supporting minority student college completion. Low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males face difficulties in entering and remaining in college.

Hispanic and African-American adult males lead all other races in lacking access to health care. Copeland (2006) found:

Our nations racial and ethnic minority Americans suffer increasing disparities in the incidence, prevalence, mortality, and burden of diseases and adverse outcomes compared with white Americans. Sources of these disparities are multivariate, complex, and rooted in an inequitable health care system. (p.265)

Limited access to adequate health care may result in the most concerning adult outcome—shorter life expectancies experienced by African-American males. In 2010, the life expectancy for African-American males was 71.8 years and for White males was 76.5 years (Murphy, Xu, & Kochanek, 2013). Kposowa (2007) stated, “Although the United States has made strides in improving life expectancy for the population, the gap between whites and minorities has remained consistently wide for the past 40 years” (p. 17). Access to quality health care and lesser life expectancy have been documented as poor adult outcomes.

Poverty simultaneously continues to be a major risk factor for these adult populations. In 2011, 15.9% of the U.S. population had income below the poverty threshold, marking the fourth consecutive increase in poverty rate (Bishaw, 2012). From 2007 to 2011, the poverty rate among African-Americans was 25%, among Hispanics was 23%, and among Whites was 12% (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013). Poverty disproportionally affects African-American
and Hispanic males. Living in poverty, a poor adult outcome for some African-American and Hispanic males, is augmented by its cyclical nature.

In his book, *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, Eric Jensen (2009), provides an in-depth discussion of the cyclical nature of poverty. Poor adult outcomes after dropping out of school include access to employment, furthering education, adequate health care, and quality of life, which have resulted from adverse child experiences and aforementioned educational outcomes. In turn, the children of these adults are exposed to these same risks and outcomes, “perpetuating the cycle of poverty” (Jensen, 2009, pp. 9-10). Parents who performed poorly in school often have negative attitudes toward their children’s schools, further moving education down on the priority list, and exacerbating the chances for poor educational outcomes for at-risk populations.

There are gender implications for adult males that also have an intergenerational impact. As Barbarin (2010) pointed out, many of these adult men, “become disengaged from the children they bear” (p. 84). Research has shown the importance of adolescent males having a relationship with their fathers. Jones (2004) found positive correlations between quality of relationships and contact with sons and resident and non-resident fathers. Fathers play a key role in the academic achievement of the child and the likelihood their child will stay in school. Mackey and Mackey (2012) discussed the important role of the father:

> The suggestion made here is that the father’s influence on his children in terms of academic achievement, even at the modest level of simply staying in school extends beyond the early formative years and into middle childhood and beyond. The adherence of the child’s father to the mother-child dyad seems to be one agent which biases the child toward receiving a high school degree. (p.147)

Much like the cyclical nature of poverty, then, the absence of a father can become cyclical in nature. The influence of the father on the child manifests itself based on the father’s experience as a child.
As poverty disproportionately affects some African-American and Hispanic males, a multitude of difficulties can ensue. As Barbarin (2010) described, “The litany of difficulties associated with [underprivileged] African-American boys developing in to men is extensive; it has all the elements of a classic tragedy” (Barbarin, 2010, p. 82). Living in poverty starts low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males behind, as they lack the basic resources for literacy and other basic academic skill development. Academically, they achieve at lower levels than their peers by numerous measurements. In school, they are underserved, underrepresented in gifted and advanced courses, and overrepresented in special education programs. They are disproportionately referred to the office for discipline infractions, and subsequently suspended or expelled from school.

Poor academic outcomes or risk factors lead poor African-American and Hispanic males to drop out of school, and ensnarl many of them in the school to prison pipeline, resulting in poor outcomes in the community. Consequently, their adult lives are marked by more problematic outcomes, including unemployment, crime, poor quality of life, and even early death. Their children are often subject to the same risks, and the cycle becomes a difficult one to break for African-American and Hispanic males.

**Interventions for At-Risk Students**

**Addressing the Focus of Interventions**

Findings about the poor educational, personal, and adult outcomes for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males are discouraging to say the least, and a natural inclination is to determine what can be done to combat these statistics. There is substantial evidence that there is a need for programs to help low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males to succeed in and finish school. Perhaps central to
solution is debate over cause. The predisposition when placing blame would be to start with those in power. For educators, it would be a waste of time to wait for the elimination of poor outcomes for at-risk students, as Rothstein (2008) claimed, “It's a canard that educators advocating socioeconomic reforms wish to postpone school improvement until we have created an impractical economic Utopia” (Rothstein, 2008, p. 11). Teachers and administrators do not control the federal policy that makes the rules for schools.

Inside the school building, central to the debate in academic achievement and school performance is the age-old parents versus teachers versus student’s battle. According to Winter and Butzon (2009):

It is consistent with attribution theory for educators to attribute the failure of schools to the students they teach—or parents, or the test, or curriculum, or poverty, because individuals tend to view their environments in ways that will protect their self-images. (p. 1)

Families living in poverty, however, often time have difficulty understanding their role in the education of their child, and face difficulties in supporting work associated with school. Families perceive the school and educator as holding the sole responsibility in the educational achievement and attainment of the child (Jensen, 2009; Minke & Anderson, 2005).

Increases in parent involvement in schools has been linked to school success for at-risk students, and is greatest during the elementary years, while waning toward the middle and high school years of school (Minke & Anderson, 2005, Stevens & Patel, 2009). Parents have been shown to demonstrate good intentions with regard to attempts in supporting their child’s education (Bracke & Corts, 2012). Minke and Anderson (2005) proposed an environment of collaboration rather than blame to increase the likelihood of parent involvement and its accompanying benefits. Although these findings have implications for school practice for at-risk populations, educators are again confronted with a matter of control. Since what occurs in the
home of a child often falls out of the circle of influence of the educator, the emphasis again shifts toward the confines of the school building.

**Solutions Associated with Poor Educational Outcomes**

To be able to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, it was important to review the literature in light of interventions for at-risk students. Irrespective of blame, suggestions for improvement for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males have emerged in the literature. Most of the empirical literature has centered on teacher or student-focused initiatives with regard to academic achievement (Abbott, Walton, & Greenwood, 2011; Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Clark et al., 2008; Daniels, Marcos, & Steres, 2011; Machtinger, 2007; McDonald & Figueredo, 2010; McKenna et al., 2012; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Rothstein, 2008; Simmons, 2010; Ushomirsky, 2011; Van Kleeck, 2008; Williams, 2011).

Many of these suggestions hinge on interventions aimed at school personnel practice. Williams (2011) describes what are known as the 90-90-90 schools—schools with more than 90% of students on free and reduced lunch (an indicator of low-socioeconomic status), 90% of students from an ethnic minority, and 90% of students meeting or exceeding state standardized academic achievement tests. All of these schools have six characteristics in common, as Williams (2011) defined:

- The 90-90-90 schools all emphasize academic achievement; offer the students curriculum choices focused on reading, writing, and math; frequently assess student progress and give the students multiple opportunities for improvement on assignments; emphasize writing; and allow teachers to collaboratively score the students’ work. (p. 68)

Administrators and teachers are encouraged to make academic achievement a priority, offer student choice, use data to drive instruction, emphasize writing across the curriculum, and work collaboratively in an effort to close the achievement gap. Other programs have existed placing students as the focus.
Other research has encouraged opportunities and programs for students to aid in combating the achievement gap as a poor educational outcome. Rothstein (2008) noted the importance of providing after-school enrichment programs to provide academic support for at-risk low-socioeconomic minority male populations to aide in closing the achievement gap. Ladd (2012) argued for an increased amount of time spent in school through after school and summer programs, and subsequently valuable use of that time. Ladd also noted the importance of early interventions in the lives of young at-risk populations prior to normal school entry age. Shernoff (2010) discussed the vast quantity of such programs, and emphasized the quality of experiences in the programs as a much more significant factor.


Combatting the middle school literacy gap has seen some promising interventions, including McKenna et al. (2012), who suggested allowing males to read recreationally using digital sources to improve literacy skills. Daniels, Marcos, and Steres (2011) encouraged middle schools to adopt a school-wide reading culture to influence student engagement and improve reading skills. Substantial literature exists with regard to improving the reading and writing of students with deficits in literacy skills (Abbott, Walton, and Greenwood, 2011; Daniels, Marcos, & Steres, 2011; McDonald & Figueredo, 2010; McKenna et al., 2012; Van Kleeck, 2008).
There are teacher-focused approaches to contest the underrepresentation of low-socioeconomic minority males in gifted and advanced courses. This outcome is largely attributed to teacher control. Ford (2010) stressed more rigorous instruction, leading to higher educational achievement, and finally, more gifted referrals for low-socioeconomic minorities. There are cultural and socioeconomic factors, which influence teacher selection for gifted services, as Ford et al. (2011) described, “They shed light on how these factors and others influence educators' referrals, expectations, and decisions, and, consequently, jeopardize the equitable participation of African-American students in gifted education” (p. 248). Suggestions for improvement have called for an emphasis on professional learning on cultural awareness and sensitivity research. Ford et al. (2011) suggested, “Learning about this scholarship should be a prominent feature of teacher education and professional development initiatives” (p. 248). Many have argued that underrepresentation is a product of uninformed educators, and they have encouraged teacher training as a solution approach (Ford, 2010; Ford et al., 2011).

Student-focused programs have been championed as an intervention in the underrepresentation epidemic. Bonner and Jennings (2007) suggested youth mentoring to incite leadership skills among gifted youth to bring attention to their gifted potential. Olszewski-Kubilius (2006) touted a program entitled Project EXCITE, in a large suburban Chicago school district, aimed to raise the achievement of gifted minorities in an effort to help them qualify for accelerated math and science classes. The program was found to have improved student access. Both teacher and student-centered initiatives are aimed at increasing student achievement through more rigorous academic teaching and learning.

Overrepresentation issues for at-risk students see similar causes and solution suggestions as those for gifted underrepresentation concerns, but rely exclusively with a teacher-centered
approach. As with the cultural awareness issues among teachers selecting gifted minority students, the same issues exist in the special education selection process. Togut (2011) found, “There are a number of recommended strategies to reduce overrepresentation of minorities in special education. One strategy is to create a successful school environment for all students and accurately distinguish disabilities from cultural differences” (Togut, 2011, p. 174). Guiberson (2009) also stresses cultural competency among education professionals and training to induce such environments. Artiles et al. (2002) similarly suggested reform of identification, referral processes, and teaching and learning via teacher training and professional learning:

The special education process encompasses multiple aspects that include the preparation of school personnel, the social organization of learning in general education classrooms, pre-referral interventions, referrals, assessment, eligibility, and placement practices. . . . [and] solutions in each of these phases is growing. (p. 8)

Recommendations for solutions for overrepresentation of low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic Males in special education programs have been largely teacher-focused. This was also true with regard to the disproportionate discipline risk factor for at-risk students irrespective of race or gender.

The fact that low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males are disproportionately referred to administrative offices for discipline infractions and subsequently suspended or expelled from school has left little debate for cause and solution. Many scholars find fault and remedy with prior case law and policy (Simmons, 2010; Skiba et al., 2010; Solari & Balshaw, 2007). With discipline referrals written by teachers, and dispositions for discipline infractions falling under the sole influence of school administrators, educator focused initiatives are the chosen course. Rocque and Paternoster (2011) noted, “the academic troubles of young blacks could be due to feelings of racial hostility or disparate treatment by teachers, particularly
disciplinary treatment” (p. 635). The authors’ research suggests teacher training on cultural awareness and tolerance as proposed mitigation.

Several causes and proposed solutions have been mentioned for narrowing the gaps in achievement, underrepresentation in gifted courses, overrepresentation in special education programs, and disproportionality in discipline seen by minority male children living in poverty. These risk factors can result in the increased likelihood for these students to drop out of school early, to enter the school to prison pipeline, and to experience poor community outcomes as adults. Scholars have debated and continue to debate over the causes and possible solutions to ameliorate the propensity for these poor outcomes. Table 2.3 provides a summary of the research on interventions related to poor educational outcomes.

Table 2.3 suggests various interventions, which exist to combat specific risk factors. Many of the programs focus on either teacher or student behavior or practice. Thus, a gap in the literature exists, where few programs were found to combat risk factors in combination, or which had implications for both students and teachers. There is a need to examine the literature for programs that targeted risk factors in combination and had implications for multiple parties.

**Solutions-Dropout**

It is arguably a noble, but trivial cause to attack one risk factor in isolation such as the achievement gap to improve outcomes. Many risk factors fall out of the scope of influence of the practitioner and are left under the guidance of the policy maker and those outside of the school. Research has demonstrated a need to influence teacher and educator practice, yet literature demonstrates little evidence of specific detailed cases of success. Although suggestions and implications have resulted, staggering and discouraging statistics persist for these youth. This highlights the dropout risk factor as a major one for consideration among those mentioned for
### Table 2.3

**Summary of Interventions for Poor Educational Outcomes Research for Low-Socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic Males**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Suggestions/Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Williams (2011)</td>
<td>Teachers and Administrators</td>
<td>School-based strategies for closing the achievement gap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladd (2012; Rothstein (2008); Shernoff (2010)</td>
<td>Student after school programs</td>
<td>Early intervention and extra time needed to close the achievement gap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford (2010); Ford et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Professional learning for gifted underrepresentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonner &amp; Jennings (2007); Olszewski-Kubilius (2006)</td>
<td>Student programs</td>
<td>Gifted underrepresentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artiles et al. (2002); Guiberson (2009); Togut (2011)</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Teacher initiatives for special education overrepresentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbott, Walton &amp; Greenwood (2011); Daniel, Marcos, &amp; Sterest (2011); McDonald &amp; Figueredo (2010); McKenna et al. (2012); Van Kleeck (2008)</td>
<td>Teachers, Administrators, and Students</td>
<td>Literacy skill development and early intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simmons (2010); Skiba et al. (2010); Solari &amp; Balshaw (2007)</td>
<td>Teachers and Administrators</td>
<td>Practical implications for discipline and cultural awareness training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

two reasons. Any one of the aforementioned risk factors—achievement gaps, overrepresentation and underrepresentation issues, and disproportionate discipline—often lead to students leaving school early. Two, there are numerous student-focused programs with evidence of success in
combating the drop out risk factor for at-risk populations. Literature has provided additional reasons for why students do or do not finish high school.

Several scholars have pointed out the importance of school engagement, the avoidance of deviant behavior, and the maintenance of positive school relationships with peers as factors contributing to keeping students in school (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Basch, 2011; Charmaraman & Hall, 2011; Henry et al., 2012; Newcomb et al., 2002; Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Specifically, Newcomb et al. (2002) found that although academic achievement and poverty mediated all other variables in likelihood of early dropout from school, other factors also contributed. Among these variables were general deviant behavior and bonding to antisocial peers. Programs designed to address students likely to engage in these behaviors early on are suggested as a solution. Barry and Reschly (2012) suggested that students finish school when they are consistently engaged in classroom and other school activities. Barry and Reschly (2012) encouraged early intervention through locally designed programs by identifying at-risk populations locally. Henry et al. (2012) reported similar findings and solutions related to disengagement, deviant behaviors, and early interventions.

The research, scholarly, and practitioner literature has provided some examples of programs aimed at decreasing the dropout rate for at-risk populations, with most programs occurring outside of school hours (Charmaraman & Hall, 2011; Ladd, 2012; Martin et al., 2007; Rothstein, 2008; Somers et al., 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). In a review of arts-based programs for high school students held outside of school hours, Charmaraman and Hall (2011) noted the importance of providing programs where students could develop a caring relationship with an adult, develop an appreciation for the arts, and experience a positive learning
environment. Programs with these characteristics were found positively to influence school completion.

Somers et al. (2009) discussed a program as part of a school university partnership that involved tutoring and summer enrichment. No direct influence was found on dropout prevention, but the program was found to have aided in preventing school failure. Arguably, such characteristics are designed to engage students in school.

It is important to note the importance of relationships as a factor in engaging students in school (Davis & Dupper, 2004). Part of the relationship factor includes the relationships with adults in the school building. Bergeron, Chouinard, and Janosz (2011) noted, “As results show, a negative relationship with teachers remains the strongest predictor of high intentions to dropout for most students” (Bergeron, Chouinard, & Janosz, p. 277). Similarly, Barile et al. (2012) found that schools with better student perceptions of the teaching climate were associated with lower student dropout rates. Knesting and Waldron (2006) noted that it goes beyond simply relationships to meaningful relationships. Meaningful relationships are defined as those where there are meaningful connections as perceived by the student—“relationships with teachers who believed students could graduate and provided support and caring” (p. 603).

Peer relationships are also implicated to have an effect on student engagement in school. Marcus and Sanders-Reio (2001) noted that the likelihood that children will finish school is enhanced by their healthy attachment to positive peer relationships. Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, and Tyler (2004) described a specific program intervention known as the “Effective Learning Program,” designed to help at-risk students develop relationships with their peers. Participants saw an increase in graduation rates as compared to non-participants. Relationships build student engagement in school, and thus serve to improve completion rates.
Other programs have worked to help students avoid deviant behavior. Martin et al. (2007) developed a program for high school students aimed at targeting discipline and attendance, factors seen as contributors to student dropout and disengagement in school. The after school program involved tutoring, counseling, and other enrichment activities, and saw decreased discipline referrals and increased attendance. Day-Vines and Day-Hairston (2005) developed a program designed to engage students in small counseling groups aimed at teaching and promoting pro-social behaviors in African-American students with high numbers of discipline referrals, and they reported success at decreasing said numbers of referrals.

Mentoring and tutoring programs have also shown promise, as Featherston (2010) found, “Mentoring, tutoring, and specific academic interventions all are effective at addressing the factors associated with the high school dropout crisis in America” (Featherston, 2010, p. 74). In a review of several different programs, Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) found that mentoring and close monitoring of students both in school and out of school were indicators of successful programs. Lunenburg (2000) listed several specific mentoring programs with proven successes for increasing high school completions rates for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males. Travis and Ausbrooks (2012) discussed a program entitled, “Empowerment Today,” where students were afforded a one-time opportunity to spend the day with a university student mentor from a nearby college campus. Travis and Ausbrooks’s (2012) findings indicated a need for a more prolonged mentoring relationship.

Programs designed to increase high school completion rates for at-risk students have seen success, occurring outside of school hours, and marked by characteristics aimed at increasing school engagement, helping students to avoid deviant behavior, and including elements such as
mentoring and tutoring. In addition to providing ways for these students to engage in school and avoid deviant behavior, the literature has suggested early intervention.

Hickman et al. (2008) argued that differences between dropouts and their counterparts begin to emerge early on—“Dropouts appear to have exhibited differential capabilities in comparison with graduates as early as kindergarten” (Hickman et al., 2008, p. 12). The middle school years are an appropriate time to intervene, and according to Henry et al. (2012):

Thus, it seems prudent not to wait until students are dropping out, or have dropped out, of school to intervene. Factors, especially multiple school risk factors, during the middle school years are prime candidates for interventions designed to enhance school engagement. (pp. 164-165)

Many risk factors could be simultaneously combatted during the middle school years, as waiting later may be too late. Most of the programs mentioned are for high school students, however, and this is why the present study is important—to capture the perspectives of middle school African-American and Hispanic males who are involved in an intervention.

Few programs in the literature have mentioned dropout intervention at the middle school level or earlier (Blount, 2012). Orthner et al. (2010) discussed a cross-curricular program designed for middle schools to bring a career focus into the everyday classroom. The program provided career-oriented lessons for core curriculum classes in an effort to get students thinking about their future. Such an intervention was designed to boost student engagement, and was reported to have been successful by student and teacher participants at four middle schools, although no empirical evidence was provided. Clark et al. (2008) examined a program for school counselors working with middle school boys to enhance the learning environment, to promote strengths, and to encourage positive attitudes toward academic achievement and future planning. Table 2.4 provides a summary of the research on interventions to combat the dropout dilemma.
Table 2.4

Summary of Dropout Programs for Low-Socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic Males

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Suggestions/Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day-Vines &amp; Day-Hairston (2005); Henry et al. (2012); Martin et al. (2007)</td>
<td>Dropout Programs</td>
<td>Causes – disengagement, deviant behavior, antisocial peer relationships; Programs should address deviant behavior and Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bergeron et al. (2011); Barile et al. (2012); Charmaraman &amp; Hall (2011); Davis &amp; Dupper, (2004); Knesting &amp; Waldron (2006)</td>
<td>Dropout Programs</td>
<td>Programs should provide opportunities for positive adult relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunenburg (2000); Featherston (2010); Somers et al. (2009); Travis &amp; Ausbrooks (2012); Tyler &amp; Lofstrom (2009)</td>
<td>Dropout Programs</td>
<td>Programs should provide mentoring, tutoring, and summer enrichment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus (2001); Nowick et al. (2004)</td>
<td>Dropout Programs</td>
<td>Programs should provide opportunities for positive peer relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.4 suggests there were several programs in the literature aimed at helping at-risk students to complete school. Programs were found to be most successful when they allowed student members to engage in activities after the school day, allowed students to develop positive relationships with adults and peers, encouraged opportunities to avoid deviant behavior, and had facets of mentoring and tutoring.

Gaps in the literature existed where few programs intervened as early as the middle school years. Also, all programs occurred outside of the school day or as a separate entity from the school. A review of the literature warranted further research into a program, occurring as a
part of the school that intervened during the middle school years. Such a program needed to be viewed in light of what had made other programs successful. Two programs in the literature were found to have certain similarities to the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group; however, neither of these studies examined the perspectives of the participants as was the focus of the present study.

**Similar Solutions**

Although there have been no interventions exactly like the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, two stand out in the literature as having similarities. Wyatt (2009) described an all-male group called the “Brotherhood” for high school African-American males. Although the program was designed for high school students, it was similar to the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in that it operated within the Chicago Public Schools and nationally in other school districts. Also, the groups were similar in, as Wyatt (2009) pointed out, “The weekly attendance averages 40 students. The objective of the Brotherhood is to improve the graduation rate of African-American males within Chicago Public Schools” (pp. 466-467). The “Brotherhood” and the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group had certain similarities. Both groups had similar numbers in attendance, had similar objectives in improving the graduation rate for minorities, and both operated within a public school system. Differences between the groups still existed in how they operated and how they were studied. Also, a major difference is that the Robinlee Middle School, although it is situated in an urban context, was not as big as any of the schools in Chicago and the Chicago Public School System.

The “Brotherhood” and the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group operated differently in several ways, in addition to the ages of their target populations. The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group targeted Hispanic students in addition to African-American students, while the
“Brotherhood” did not. The “Brotherhood” was led by school counselors, and met weekly after school, while the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group met monthly during the school day, and was led by an English Language Arts teacher. The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group included numerous other components that the “Brotherhood” did not. The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group incorporated field trips, service learning projects, motivational speakers, and journal reflections.

In addition to the differences in operation, the two groups were also studied differently. Wyatt (2009) collected final grades of members of the “Brotherhood” and questionnaires were distributed to group members in an attempt to argue the impact of the program on academic success. The implications of Wyatt’s (2009) study provided insight for school counselor practices. The grades of members in the program were reportedly higher than non-members, and questionnaire data indicated that members saw the program as beneficial to their academic success (Wyatt, 2009).

Although the “Brotherhood” and Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group shared similar components, their noted differences warranted further research. Furthermore, Wyatt’s (2009) study incorporated limited data collection methods. More research was needed that took a more in-depth look, using different data collection methods, at a program like the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

Bailey and Paisley (2004) described a program entitled, “Project: Gentlemen on the Move,” which was an extracurricular program focusing on promoting academic and social responsibility among at-risk African-American males. “Project: Gentlemen on the Move” began as a part of a high school in in western North Carolina in 1989 as an enrichment activity for African-American male students. The program was then adopted as a model to be used in other
schools in North Carolina and Georgia (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Bailey and Paisley (2004) provided a brief glance at the program since its inception. Over a five year period, “Project: Gentleman on the Move” was reported to have improved the grades of its members. Additionally, members of the group reported by interview that “Project: Gentleman on the Move” was beneficial. Bailey and Paisley (2004) noted, “It is apparent from both student members and parents that Project: Gentlemen on the Move had a positive impact on the academic performance and social development of its members” (p. 83).

“Project: Gentlemen on the Move” was similar to the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in that they both involved a focus on personal and academic development of African-American male students (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). The most striking similarity is that the “Project: Gentleman on the Move” model now operates in Copper, Georgia and is open to Bailey County students. Although “Project: Gentleman on the Move” is open to Bailey County students, it operates as a part of a local university as a separate entity. “Project: Gentleman on the Move” is part of the larger “Empowered Youth Programs.” “Empowered Youth Programs” are administered by a local university professor, and are open to both African-American males and females in grades kindergarten through 12, while “Project: Gentlemen on the Move” is open only to African-American males in grades kindergarten through 12 (Bailey, 2011; Bailey, 2013).

The Copper, GA “Project: Gentlemen on the Move” is characterized by a Saturday academy, fall and spring intersession, school-based academic monitoring, and community service. Such components differed greatly from those of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. “Project: Gentlemen on the Move” is different from the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in many ways. Although “Project: Gentlemen on the Move” maintains a partnership with Bailey County Schools, the program is open to any African-American male students in the
Copper, Georgia area. “Project: Gentlemen on the Move” does offer earlier intervention—prior to high school—for its members; however, the program operates separately from the school, as a part of a university, and as an extra-curricular enrichment initiative. “Project: Gentlemen on the Move” is not open to Hispanic students (Bailey, 2011; Bailey, 2013).

Although there have been studies concerning the components of “Project: Gentlemen on the Move,” no study was found which considered the impact of the program on the students of Bailey County specifically, nor were there any in-depth case studies similar to that of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. Despite similarities, “Project: Gentleman on the Move” and the Robinlee Middle School Men’s group held numerous differences (Bailey, 2011; Bailey, 2013). These differences warranted a case study to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males.

Additionally, programs have been implemented in Bailey County in an effort to support low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males. A mentoring program exists for all Bailey County students through a partnership between the Bailey County Chamber of Commerce and the Bailey County School District. The “Bailey County Mentor Program”:

Recruits and trains volunteers to serve as mentors to students in all public schools, K-12 grade. They function primarily as friends. Mentors are asked for a minimum of one hour per week for one school year, with the opportunity to continue multiple years. (Shilton, 2014, para. 2) 

In the 2012-2013 school year, the “Bailey County Mentor Program” claimed to log 622 visits between mentors and mentees in 21 Bailey County Schools resulting in a total of 7,000 mentor and mentee visits (Shilton, 2014). The “Bailey County Mentor Program” differs greatly from the Robinlee Men’s Group in that its main focus is providing students with mentors. The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group contains many components in addition to mentoring. Although the
program has seen success in implementation, and mentoring has been seen as an effective practice in dropout prevention programs, the “Bailey County Mentor Program” has never been examined through research in light of its specific effects on Bailey County students. The differences between the two programs, and lack of research on either program, justified a case study of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

**At-Risk Student Perspectives**

Dropout programs existed in the literature, which combatted risk factors in combination, and provided suggestions for program improvement. The purpose of this study was to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males, and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the program. In light of the consideration of perspectives of those involved in the program, there was a need to examine the literature on perspectives of low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males.

There is evidence in the literature concerning the perspectives low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic adolescent males have of their educational experiences. Scholars contend that these at-risk students often have negative perspectives of educational experiences. Students who have poor school experiences or perspectives of those experiences, gain negative self-esteem, and are not comfortable in the school environment. They are apt to want to escape such conditions. Such a phenomenon is known as “academic disidentification,” and has implications for future research (Cokley et al., 2011). Part of “academic disidentification” deals with the self-perceptions of these students. Whiting (2009) discussed the link between self-perception and school completion:

How students view themselves as learners is important to consider when trying to promote their achievement and confidence in school. It is clear that students who lack
confidence in school become unmotivated and unengaged, and they find their identities in other areas. In other words, students with an underdeveloped sense of self-efficacy are more likely than others to be at-risk for poor achievement. Stated another way, they are less likely to be resilient—to persist in school and be high achievers…. [and] Many times, these unmotivated, underachieving, and unidentified students are disproportionately Black and Hispanic males. (Whiting, 2009, p. 54)

At-risk students who drop out may lack self-confidence in school and perceive themselves as being incapable of succeeding in school, resulting in them leaving school early. Understanding how low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic students perceive themselves was important to consider in this research study.

Similarly, students’ self-perceptions are often affected by how the adults around them are thought to perceive them, which also could lead to discouraging outcomes. Rocque and Paternoster (2011) discussed this relationship between adults in a school and student self-perception:

A stereotype by teachers that black students are academically deficient and hostile to the teachers’ goals could easily lead teachers to see black students as ‘troublemakers’ or menaces. Psychological research has indicated that youths are likely to disengage from school and academic pursuits if they perceive negative information about themselves or their racial group within the school environment…. [for example] when students perceive that racial stereotypes are being employed by teachers, they are more likely to perform poorly, which eventually leads them to detach themselves from the educational process. (p. 636)

Again, self-perception in relation to educational perspective can lead to disengagement or detachment from school, and subsequently increase the likelihood for dropping out. How students perceive how adults perceive them has implications for viewing the perceptions of the participants in this research.

At-risk students may have a negative perspective of school experience due to cultural or racial differences. Often times, the culture of the student and that of the school may seemingly be incompatible. As West-Olatunji et al. (2006) summarized the incompatibility like this:
If African-American students arrive in the school environment with a set of unique and legitimate ways of being that are cognitively, linguistically, and behaviorally different, perhaps even oppositional to the normative school context, then the school failure must be the result of the cultural incompatibility of the schooling environment. (West-Olatunji et al., 2006, p. 4)

If students are culturally different than that of the school context, they will likely have negative perspectives of that context, and be prone to disengagement. If students are disengaged from school, they are at-risk for dropping out.

Cultural differences, arguably affect adult perceptions, and in turn, might affect student perceptions. In a review of the prominent literature on the subject, Bethell (2012) pointed out that cultural differences often result in teachers perceiving African-American males as low achieving and aggressive. Such a perception results in low expectations that are correlated to poor educational outcomes for these students. Student perception, again influenced by adult perception, is perhaps caused by cultural difference.

Cultural differences often fall along racial lines, especially among African-American males. Some African-American males may feel discouraged to achieve academically because of racial identity. Day-Vines and Day-Hairston (2005) noted:

The urban, African-American male subculture often endorses values that reflect the direct antithesis of healthy psychosocial functioning, such as academic underachievement, aggression, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, and illegal activity..., [and] Any expression of human frailty or a desire to achieve academically and engage in pro-social behaviors may engender ridicule, ostracism, and humiliation from the peer group. (p.240)

African-American males may, in fact, perceive school as a place to achieve academically, but are intrinsically struggling with self-perception and racial identity. Again, there exists a strong influence among peer relationships, as well. As a result, these students may disengage from school, and be more likely to drop out.
Cokley et al. (2011) described the cultural or racial identity crisis more bluntly with the adolescent population of African-American males. The authors described academic environments often perceived to be dominated by White culture:

Adolescents whose racial identities are largely shaped by racial stereotypes, antipathy toward the dominant White culture, and a narrow conception of ‘Blackness’ will likely have more reactive racial identities that are at greater risk for ‘academic disidentification’ and lower academic achievement. However, adolescents whose racial identities are school-oriented and socially conscious reject racial stereotypes, are open to experiences with different cultures, and who hold a broader conception of ‘Blackness,’ will have more nuanced and proactive racial identities that promote academic identification and higher academic achievement. (Cokley et al., 2011, p. 63)

“Disidentification” is the result, widening the divide between at-risk student and the school context.

Understanding the literature with regard to student perspectives was an important part of this research. The next step was to examine studies that included perspectives of low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males as a part of the research design and purpose. Few studies have examined the perspectives of at-risk students in low-socioeconomic educational environments. Two of these studies dealt with the drop out issue. Brown et al. (2003) examined students’ perceptions of school life with regard to feelings of alienation and found that those with perceptions of alienation were more likely to drop out. Hughes et al. (2007) looked at student perceptions on dropping out of high school and finishing a test of general education development. Findings indicated a need to modify school environments to increase school engagement.

Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) examined student perceptions of traditional schools versus subsequent placement in a public alternative school. Results provided data on how student perception of student-teacher relationships, home-school connection, school climate, support, and discipline could inform practice in the educational environment. Although there has been
little research delving in to examining student perception, scholars have noted the importance of looking below the surface. For example, Rowley and Bowmen (2009) stated:

Therefore, it is not enough to study Black males and to create policies to alter their plight. It is equally important that we see them for the diverse group that they are and more importantly that we listen to what they are telling us about who they are, what they think, and what they hope to achieve. Now is the time to move forward. (Rowley & Bowmen, 2009, p. 318)

Simply studying populations out of context has not been enough. Gaining an understanding of student perspectives could unlock a plethora of information to aid students at-risk and those who are able to influence local policy and practices aimed at supporting African-American and Hispanic males.

Chapter Summary

Low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males are at-risk for poor educational outcomes (Artiles et al., 2002; Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Clark et al., 2008; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Ford, 2010; Howell & Tavakolian, 2012; Machtinger, 2007; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Rothstein, 2008; Simmons, 2010; Togut, 2011; Ushomirsky, 2011; Williams, 2011). Gaps in academic achievement exist between low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic male students and their counterparts (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Clarke et al., 2008; Machtinger, 2007; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Rothstein, 2008; Simmons, 2010; Ushomirsky, 2011; Williams, 2011). African-American and Hispanic male students are underrepresented in gifted and advanced courses and overrepresented in special education programs (Artiles et al., 2002; Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Barbarin, 2010; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Ford, 2010; Ford et al., 2011; Garda, 2006; Guiberson, 2009; McBee, 2006; Togut, 2011). Low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males are disproportionately referred to office for discipline infractions,
and subsequently suspended and expelled from school (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Skiba et al., 2010).

Risk factors contribute to the likelihood that low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic male students will drop out of school (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Barbarin, 2010; Carpenter & Ramirez, 2007; Howell & Tavakolian, 2012; Machtinger, 2007; The Education Trust, 2008; Whiting, 2009). Leaving school early results in additional poor outcomes, marked by incarceration and poor adult outcomes including unemployment, lower quality of life, and lower life expectancy (Barbarin, 2010; Bishaw, 2012; Couch & Fairlie, 2010; Hancock, 2011; Hatt, 2011; Hill & Torres, 2010; Jensen, 2009; Jones, 2004; Mackey & Mackey, 2012; Noguera, 2003; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Simmons, 2010). The epidemic is cyclical in nature, and the problem starts all over again as these adults have children (Jensen, 2009; Jones, 2004; Mackey & Mackey, 2012).

Programs have targeted risk factors in isolation, but the problem persists (Artiles et al., 2002; Bishaw, 2012; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Ford, 2010; Guiberson, 2009; Ladd, 2012; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Rothstein, 2008; Shernoff, 2010; Simmons, 2010; Skiba et al., 2010; Solari & Balshaw, 2007; Williams, 2011). Interventions to target the dropout crisis may be a more effective approach. Dropout interventions have proposed engaging at-risk students in school, helping them to avoid deviant behaviors, allowing them opportunities to develop positive social relationships with adults and peers, and intervening early (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Bergeron et al., 2011; Blount, 2012; Charmaraman & Hall, 2011; Clark et al., 2008; Davis & Dupper, 2004; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Henry et al., 2012; Hickman et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2007; Newcomb et al., 2002; Orthner et al., 2010).
Proven interventions have involved facets of mentoring and tutoring (Featherston, 2010; Lunenburg, 2000; Marcus, 2001; Nowicki et al., 2004; Somers et al., 2009; Travis & Ausbrooks, 2012; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Although two programs displayed similarities to the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, differences warranted a need for further research (Bailey, 2011, 2013; Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Wyatt, 2009).

The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group was examined as a program embedded in the school itself, and in light of what is known about at-risk students. A gap in the literature is research has shown the need to consider the perspectives of students in studying such a program. An opportunity to study such a unique program existed with this case study.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males, and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the program. To further define this study, student members, the faculty mentor, and the principal of Robinlee Middle School were interviewed and observed to gain their perspectives on the influence of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group on the academic and personal lives of the members. Also, document analysis, ethnographic journaling, and the use of supplemental quantitative data served as data collection methods to support the purpose of this study.

The participants in this study included 10 student members, the faculty mentor of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, and the principal of Robinlee Middle School. A qualitative case study approach was used to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the program.

This chapter included the research questions, the theoretical framework that guided the research, a description of the research design and rationale for the study, the data sources, an overview of the analysis of the data, and the ethical considerations of reliability and validity of the study.

Research Questions

To understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic African-American males, and to understand the perspectives of those involved in
the program, it was important to identify and to understand two sets of perspectives. Data
collection methods were used to glean data to discover first, the perspectives of the 10 student
members of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. Second, methods were used to garner
data to seek the perspectives of the two adults who were most closely associated with the
Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group—the faculty mentor and the principal of Robinlee Middle
School. The methodological approaches allowed the researcher to link systematically the overall
research questions with the data collection methods. The study asked the following overall
research questions:

1. What is the history of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group and how does it
   operate now? What norms, values, or innovative interventions are embedded in the
   Men’s Group?
2. What do the involved professionals perceive as the impact of the Robinlee Middle
   School Men’s group on the academic and personal lives of the students?
3. How do the involved students see the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in
   relation to their academic and personal lives?
4. Does the program have an influence on the students academically and/or personally?

**Conceptual Framework**

What is research? Meriam (2009) attempted to answer the question—“In its broadest
sense, research is a systematic process by which we know more about something than we did
before engaging in the process” (p. 4). How one comes to know about something is a matter of
conceptual framework, epistemology, methods, and methodologies. Before discussing methods
and methodologies, it is important to understand the conceptual framework and epistemology on
which the research was built. When choosing methods and methodologies in research, one must
justify their uses and according to Crotty (1998), “Justification of our choice and particular use of methodology and methods is something that reaches in to the assumptions about reality that we bring to our work. To ask about these assumptions is to ask about our theoretical perspective” (Crotty, 1998, p. 2). The conceptual framework for this research study was a social constructionist theory of knowledge rooted in the interpretive tradition.

When people seek knowledge or experience in some aspect of the social world in which they exist, he or she is arguably interpreting that world. Traditionally, gaining knowledge in such a way has been known as a social constructionist theory of knowledge, which is an interpretive tradition in qualitative research. According to Prasad (2005):

> Interpretive traditions emerge from a scholarly position that takes human interpretation as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world. . . , [and] reality exists not in some tangible, identifiable outside world, but in human consciousness itself. In other words, what is of paramount importance is how we order, classify, structure, and interpret our world, and then act on our interpretations. (p. 13)

Thus, the key to gaining knowledge is the interpreter experiencing and then making sense of, or interpreting, that social experience. This case study attempted to answer research questions through the interpretation of data in such a way to enable both the researcher and the participants to construct meanings based on the social experiences that occurred within the bounded case of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

Such a conceptual framework lends itself to a qualitative approach to research because as Meriam (2009) pointed out: “Qualitative researchers are interested in in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). Qualitative approaches to research allow for an interpretive understanding of reality. In addition to focusing on meaning and understanding through
interpretation, the researcher was the primary interpreter, and the process was inductive rather than deductive.

Crotty (1998) encouraged qualitative researchers to describe the epistemology, which informs the theoretical perspective. Crotty (1998) defined epistemology as the “theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (p. 3). Arguably, a theoretical perspective of interpreted reality is a socially constructed one. As Patton (2002) pointed out:

Because human beings have evolved the capacity to interpret and construct reality—indeed, they cannot do otherwise—the world of human perception is not real in an absolute sense, as the sun is real, but is ‘made up’ and shaped by cultural and linguistic concepts. (p. 96)

Patton (2002) further argued, “All reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed. There is no exception” (p. 97). A socially constructed framework in the interpretive tradition served as a framework for this study.

Because reality is socially constructed, it was important for the researcher to seek data to answer research questions focused on the social interactions of the participants and to explore further the meanings attached to them. As such, through entering the research site, the researcher was able to get close to the participants to explore their meanings. Meanings were interpreted in two ways. The researcher was able to gain knowledge first, through observing, and at times being involved in the social interaction with the participants, and second, through observation of participants socially interacting with each other. It was through these efforts that the researcher was able to interpret these social interactions. Also, participants constructed meaning through their own social construction and interpretations, and the researcher attempted to capture these meanings. Moreover, through participants’ interactions with each other, they interpreted meanings about the group, the program, and themselves as part of either being a member of the
Men’s Group (e.g., the students) or their close association with the group (e.g., the principal and the faculty mentor of the group). Social constructionism, grounded in the interpretive tradition, then, was the conceptual framework for this case study.

**Research Design**

**Methodology—Case Study**

The methodology used in this research was a case study, which according to Hays (2004), “involved the close examination of people, topics, issues, or programs” (p. 218). The purpose of this study was to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males, and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the program. A case study approach to examine the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group was a fitting method to use. In light of the theoretical framework and epistemology, a case study as a methodology of qualitative research was appropriate for seeking to answer the proposed research questions. Flyvbjerg (2006) pointed out:

> The case study is a necessary and sufficient method for certain important research tasks in the social sciences, and it is a method that holds up well when compared to other methods in the gamut of social science research methodology. (p. 241)

Given meaning was interpreted through social construction, case study was chosen as a methodology.

As Simons (2009) pointed out, “It is through analysis and interpretation of how people think, feel, and act that many of the insights and understandings of the case are gained” (p. xiv). Interpretation of the events of the case is at the heart of the research. Likewise, case studies are linked to social constructionist epistemology. Simons (2009) continued to discuss how researchers and participants in case studies may likely interpret or construct their knowledge. Case studies, thus, are appropriate methods for such a framework and epistemology.
Although it is difficult to pinpoint a generic definition of case study, the literature points to various key descriptors. Hays (2004) noted, “Case studies seek to answer focused questions by producing in-depth descriptions and interpretations over a relatively short period of time, perhaps a few weeks to a year... [and] they investigate contemporary cases for purposes of illumination and understanding” (p. 218). The case study of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group sought to answer questions through a data collection process spanning a six-month period.

This research study attempted to provide short but in-depth descriptions and interpretations, as advocated by Simons (2009), of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group to provide findings to inform practical applications and to point to future areas to research. It is also beneficial to understand what type of case study was conducted. Stake (1995) claimed, “The point of making these distinctions is not because it is useful to sort case studies in to categories but because methods used will be different” (p. 4). The type of case study used in this research can be categorized most closely as intrinsic, instrumental, and ethnographic. Stake (1995) defined an intrinsic case study—“where a case is studied for the intrinsic interest in the case itself” (p. 3). Stake (1995) defined an instrumental case study as one “where a case is chosen to explore an issue or research question determined on some other ground, that is, the case is chosen to gain insight or understanding into something else” (p. 3). The purpose of this study called for an intrinsic interest in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as an intervention for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males, but this study also looked to gain insight about the interventions in general for at-risk populations at the middle-school level.

The case study of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group shared methods in common with an ethnographic case study (Simons, 2009). Although caution should be used in narrowing
the scope of this study in to any one particular type, intrinsic, instrumental, ethnographic case study constructs provided a framework for employing methods that were appropriate and that could provide a robust understanding of the perspectives of the participants in the Men’s Group. Figure 3.1 demonstrates the arrival at the use of case study as a methodology from an interpretive theoretical framework.

![Diagram of Theoretical Framework]  

*Figure 3.1. Case study as a methodology in the interpretive tradition.*

It is important to note the difference between methodology and methods for the purposes of this study. Crotty (1998) distinguished between the two when he noted that methodology is “the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice of methods to the desired outcomes” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). Crotty (1998) also noted that methods are “the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis” (p. 3). The methodology used was a case study based on a social constructionist interpretive tradition. Simons (2009) noted, “that case study has an overreaching research intent and methodological purpose, which affects what methods are chosen to gather data” (p. xiii). The actual techniques for gathering evidence to answer research questions, driven by the methodology, are the methods that were included in this research study.

**The Case—Contextual Setting and Participants**

Due to the intrinsic and instrumental nature of this case study, the case was defined. Robinlee is a public middle school in Copper, GA serving grades six through eight. Robinlee Middle School was built in 1996, and is 1 of 4 middle schools in Bailey County, a county that
serves 12,557 students in 21 schools. The city of Copper had the 11th largest income gap in the nation between its wealthiest and poorest citizens in 2010 (Lubin, 2010). In 2011, an estimated 34.6% of the citizens of Copper were below the poverty level as compared to 16.5% of the state population (United States Department of Commerce, 2013).

Robinlee Middle School’s demographics consisted of 60% African-American students, 32% percent Hispanic students, and 8% other race students. Robinlee Middle School, as a member of the Bailey County School District, provides a representation of the students and families of Bailey County. In Bailey County, 26.5% of the residents are African-American; 66.8% are White; 10.5% Hispanic; and 4.4% are Asian or Multi-racial. Comparatively, the Bailey County School District students are 55% African-American; 20% Hispanic; 19% White; and 6% Asian or Multi-racial (Carl Vinson Institute of Government, 2013; Georgia Department of Education, 2011).

In 2009, a male English Language Arts teacher at Robinlee Middle School established a Men’s Group for eighth grade males at the school. The group is still in existence and serves about 25 male students, of who 19 are African-American, 5 are Hispanic, and 1 is White. Members of the Men’s Group provide an accurate representation of all Bailey County students. As Simons (2009) noted, “Another way of defining the case is to decide what constitutes the bounded system. This is the single unit of analysis—a class, institution, project, or program” (p. 17). The single unit of analysis, or case in this study was the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. The setting surrounding the study consisted of regularly scheduled events and meetings at Robinlee Middle School, and field trips and projects in the Copper community. The setting was largely dictated by where the functions of the Men’s Group took place, the monthly meetings, and other activities associated with the Men’s Group.
Case Study Design and Sampling

Often in a case study, the design may change as the study unfolds over time. Simons (2009) described this as, “emergent designs with the potential to shift focus in response to a growing understanding of the case, unanticipated events, or a change in emphasis by the stakeholders or case researcher” (p. 19). As those members of the Men’s Groups have moved on to high school, new members emerged in conjunction with this study, and as such, new participants also arose. Simons (2009) noted:

Most often in case study, where the aim is to understand or gain insight into the case, the sampling will be purposive. You will choose people to interview who have a key role in the case and events to observe from which you are likely to learn most about the issue in question. (p.10)

Sampling, then, in this case study was purposeful in that students were selected to best understand or gain insight into the case. This type of sampling approach allowed the researcher to learn most about the issue in question.

Given the purpose of this study was to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males, participants were selected to best achieve that purpose. Given that there were 29 members of the Men’s Group, a subset of 10 student participants all of low-socioeconomic status and who were of African-American or Hispanic descent were chosen to participate. The researcher also examined behavior referrals and standardized test scores to create a participant population of 10 student members who were representative of the total population of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. The members were selected to best provide information on the case and research purpose. Participants also included the faculty mentor of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, and the principal of Robinlee Middle School.
An unexpected data source opened up when the faculty mentor suggested interviewing a few students who had move onto the local high school. Through referral from the faculty mentor, three high school students were interviewed. Those participants included two juniors and one sophomore who had participated in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. Although these interviews lasted only 30 minutes, they proved to be invaluable to support triangulation later during data analysis.

Data Collection Methods

Following Magana’s (2002) suggestions, the researcher incorporated numerous qualitative methods to collect data including:

1. Individual interviews with the 10 students, the principal, and the founder and faculty mentor of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group;
2. Brief follow-up interviews with each of the 10 student member participants after the first student member interview;
3. Observations of four regularly scheduled meetings, an observation of one field trip, observations of three after school service projects, and an observation of one during school service project;
4. Attendance at activities such as field trips, service project sites, and other germane activities during a six-month period;
5. Document analysis of artifacts about the Men’s Group and the written reflections the members of the Men’s Group were asked to keep;
6. An ethnographic research journal in which the researcher reflected about meanings of data, experiences, and other items deemed noteworthy before, during, and after data collection over the six-month period of the study;
7. Data about the 10 students including, for example, report-card grades, test data, attendance data, and discipline data.

8. Other data sources to assist with triangulation consulted such as three high school students who had participated in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. Their perspectives were used to help clarify and confirm hunches about the data collected from the 10 student participants in the Men’s Group.

Simons (2009) noted, “Three qualitative methods often used in case study research to facilitate in-depth analysis and understanding are interview, observation, and document analysis” (p. 21). All of these methods were incorporated in to this case study.

**Interviewing**

Interviewing was a method of choice for this case study. As Simons (2009) pointed out, “Compared with other methods, interviews enable researchers to get to core issues in the case more quickly and in greater depth, to probe motivations, to ask follow-up questions, and to facilitate individuals telling their past stories” (p. 31). Individual interviews took on what can be characterized as qualitative semi-structured interviews dominated by open-ended questions (Roulston, 2010). The selection of the interview format was based on the position of the researcher within the context of the school building, to be discussed in the ethics part of this chapter. In addition, participants as minors required some structure, but caution was taken as to not elicit answers or stifle data collection with too much structuring or close-ended questioning.

Although the interviews would not likely be deemed phenomenological or ethnographic interviews, they did mirror such a description of both types at times. In phenomenological interviews, Roulston (2010) noted, “The purpose of this kind of interview is to generate detailed
and in-depth descriptions of human experiences” (p. 16). In this case study, participants yielded responses generating in-depth descriptions of experiences related to the Men’s Group.

Spradley (1979, p. 19) noted that in ethnographic interviewing, for example, “the focus of ethnographic interviews is on generating participants’ descriptions of key aspects related to the cultural world of which he or she is a part—that is space, time, events, people, activities, and objects” (as cited in Roulston, 2010). Participants yielded responses related to the cultural worlds they were a part of in their educational and personal lives. Both types of interviews called for semi-structured, open-ended questions to yield in-depth responses.

It is important to note that some view interviewing adolescent subjects as problematic. For example, Eder and Fingerson (2002) claimed, “The task of interviewing children and adolescents presents researchers with unique opportunities and dilemmas” (p. 181). A research study like this one, grounded in the notion that youth perspectives are of vital importance in the interpretation of knowledge in this research, found interviews to be an important method. This is especially true when avoiding the sole reliability on adult interpretation. As Eder and Fingerson (2002) noted, “One clear reason for interviewing youthful respondents is to allow them to give voice to their own interpretations and thoughts rather than rely solely on our adult interpretations of their lives” (p. 181). Eder and Fingerson (2002) continued to caution those interviewing adolescents to use reciprocity, create a natural context, and to combine interviewing with other forms of data collection and group interviewing. During the interviews with minor participants, all of these strategies were implored to balance the power dynamics that existed between the researcher/interviewer and the students and others/interviewees.

For the purposes of this project, the researcher engaged each student participant in brief, individual follow-up interviews following each of the longer individual interviews. deMarraias
(2004) discussed checking findings and following up with participants in the “after the interview” phase. deMarrais (2004) stated, “Researchers need to be sure to have the participant explain in more detail even those concepts where meaning might be assumed” (p. 64). Follow-up interviews have been cited in the research as helping to clarify meaning and probe for more information (Fetterman, 2010; Simons, 2009). Follow-up interviews allowed the researcher to garner more in-depth descriptions and other relevant data from student participants.

As a way to gain deeper understandings of the Men’s Group, participants were interviewed. Participants included 10 student members of the Men’s Group, the faculty mentor of the Men’s Group, and the principal of Robinlee Middle School. First, the researcher selected 10 of the student members to interview two times individually. Each of the 10 student members was interviewed once in August and once in December. These same students participated in a follow-up interview after each of the individual interviews in August and December. Individual interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. The follow-up interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. Second, the faculty mentor of the Men’s Group was interviewed twice; each interview lasted one hour. Third, the principal of Robinlee Middle School was interviewed one time; this interview lasted 90 minutes. Fourth, 3 graduates of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group who are now in high school—2 juniors and 1 sophomore—were interviewed for approximately 30 minutes each.

Appendix A provides a specific interview guide to be used for individual student participant interviews. Appendix B provides a specific interview question guide to be used for individual adult participant interviews. Each question in the guide is linked to a research question. The questions in the guide were designed to elicit answers to provide data aimed at answering these case study research questions. However, the guides were not meant to provide
an exhaustive list of questions as the researcher desired to follow the trail of the participant’s responses as a strategy to dig deeper into the meanings associated with their responses.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was another method used in this study. Mason (2002) described participant observation:

The terms observation, and particular participant observation, usually refer to methods of generating data which entail the researcher immersing herself or himself in a research setting so that they can experience and observe at first hand a range of dimensions in and of that setting. (p. 84)

Given interpretive and social constructionist researcher frameworks, participant observation as method was a fitting one for this case study, as Mason (2002) noted:

If you decide to use observational methods you will have an epistemological position which suggests that knowledge or evidence of the social world can be generated by observing, or participating in, or experiencing natural or real-life settings, interactive situations, and so on. (p. 85)

Observations of student members participating in events of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group served as an appropriate method for this study. Student members were observed during monthly meetings, service-learning projects, and during field trips.

There are numerous reasons for using participant observation. Simons (2009) summarized five key reasons for using participant observation as a method in case studies:

The first is that through observing you can gain a comprehensive picture of the site, sense of setting, which cannot be obtained solely by speaking with people. Secondly, documenting observed incidents and events provides rich description and a basis for further analysis and interpretation. Thirdly, through observing you can discover norms and values, which are part of an institution’s or program’s culture or subculture. Fourthly, given that interview privileges are articulate, observation offers another way of capturing the experience of those who are less articulate. . . . [and] Finally, observations provide a crosscheck on data obtained in interviews. (Simons, 2009, p. 43)

Of significance is that all of these reasons spoke to addressing the purpose and the research questions that focused this study. Because observations provide a sense of setting, rich
description, norms and values of the culture of a program, avenues of discourse for less articulate participants, and supplemental data to interviews, they provided a strong choice of this method for the case study of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

For the purposes of this study, the researcher worked to both uncover and generate data through participant observation. Participant observation allowed for a focused approach to uncovering data in addition to the construction of data through reflection about entering the research setting. Participant observations were unstructured, and Simons (2009) defined unstructured observation as such:

Unstructured observing tends to be direct or naturalistic—not constrained by pre-ordinate designs or intent, documenting or interpreting issues/incidents in the particular context in naturally occurring circumstances. Observations are primarily descriptive, interpretative to a degree, use both intuitive and rational means of capturing the essence of what is observed and are reported in accessible language. It is this form of observation that is most adopted in case study research to document an incident or event, explain the culture or aspects of the culture, or provide the basis for interpretation of data obtained by other means. (pp. 43-44)

The researcher engaged in participant observation of all members and the faculty mentor of the Men’s Group as they engaged in activities in the school and at their meetings as a whole on six occasions. The meetings included a group of 25 male eighth graders. Nineteen of the members were African-American, 5 were Hispanic, and 1 was White. Members’ ages ranged from 13 to 15. As the current members have moved on to high school, new members emerged, so sample demographics were subject to change. The leader of the group was a white male in his early 40s and the principal of Robinlee Middle School has held that position for 5 years supporting the development of the Men’s Group.

There were six observations of the members and the faculty mentor of the Men’s Group. Four of the observations occurred during the school day, during the appropriate time for school meetings, to support being nonintrusive at regularly-scheduled meetings. One of the observations
was during the school day during a Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group field trip. Another observation occurred after school during a service-learning project. Four of the observations of regularly-scheduled meetings lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour in August, September, October, November, and December 2013 respectively. The field trip observation lasted between 3 and 5 hours. The sixth observation occurred after school to allow for observing students engaged in an extracurricular service-learning project, and lasted for approximately one hour.

**Document Analysis**

A third method of data collection involved document analysis. Document analysis as a method fits well within an interpretive and social constructionist framework. The use of documents in this study focused on what Prior (2003) described, “how documents are manufactured and how they function rather than simply on what they contain” (p. 4). Focusing on function of use is interpreting function in the social context.

Students in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group wrote written reflections of experiences as a part of the group. As Simons (2009) pointed out, “Written documents may be searched for clues to understanding the culture of organizations, the values underlying policies, and the beliefs and attitude of the writer” (p. 51). Document analysis supported the purpose of the study. As a part of the program, students wrote reflections about their experiences with the group after each meeting, project, or field trip. Six reflections of each of the 10 student members were collected and analyzed. The group faculty mentor assembled these documents in newsletters to promote the program. These newsletters, in addition to other school documents, descriptions of the program, brochures, and other documents related to the Men’s Group were collected and analyzed in an attempt to answer research questions.
Ethnographic Journaling

A fourth method of data collection is ethnographic journaling. Simons (2009) noted, “Observation is present throughout the whole research process from the moment you enter the field until you leave” (p. 43). The case study researcher is constantly observing, although at times much differently than in a more formal participant observation. Observations like these should be noted. Prasad (2005) described ethnography as:

Very much part of the anthropological discipline within which it developed as a way to understand ‘natives’ in their own cultures. . . . [and] ethnography tends to be most forcefully equated with methods and methodologies calling for some form of in-depth fieldwork employing participant observation as a primary component of the research project. (p. 75)

The research study, predominantly a case study, implored some practices of ethnography. Prasad (2005) elaborated on this concept—“conceptualized predominantly as a mode of data collection involving the development of close connections with subjects and situations being studied” (p. 75). One such practice is fieldwork, which Fetterman (2010) defined as, “working with people for long periods of time in their natural setting” (p. 33).

For the purposes of this study, the researcher implored fieldwork aimed at getting to know the basics of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group at first, and then moved to identify and understand themes in the program aimed at answering the research questions. Fetterman (2010) further described fieldwork:

Fieldwork is the most characteristic element of any ethnographic research design. The ethnographer begins with a survey period to learn the basics. During this post survey phase, the ethnographer identifies significant themes, problems, or gaps in the basic understanding of the place or program. (Fetterman, 2010, p. 8)

In addition to gaining an understanding of the program, many ethnographies work to understand the relationship between the target culture and the mainstream culture. As Fetterman (2010) elaborated, “A typical ethnography describes the history of the group and the degree of contact
between the target culture and the mainstream culture” (p. 11). Research questions in this study were aimed at understanding both the history of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group and an understanding of its embedded social norms and values, or culture, making field work an adequate fit.

As Fetterman (2010) pointed out, fieldwork often makes use of methods inherent in case studies. Many of those methods are identical to those used in this study, for example, interviewing, participant observation, and document analysis. Specifically, data collection in this study included ethnographic journaling. Ethnographic journaling manifests itself in the creation of field notes. Fetterman (2010) described, “Field notes are the brick and mortar of an ethnographic edifice… [and] The most important rule, however, is to write the information down” (p. 116). As the researcher enters the field, it is important that in the vast number of observations of numerous activities are recorded.

A second characteristic of ethnographic journaling is the use of diary type reflections. Fetterman (2010) further discussed this process:

Speculations, cues, lists, and personal diary-type comments should remain in a separate category from observation notes. Such notes are working documents that help guide the ethnographer’s work. They serve as a reminder to follow up on a long list of topics and task. Notes about the researcher’s mood, attitude, and judgments during a specific stage of the research endeavor can provide a context from which to view primary field notes. (pp. 117-118)

The case study used several characteristics of ethnography, most notably the use of fieldwork and ethnographic journaling to record the experiences of the researcher in the field. During the entire phase of this research project, the researcher engaged ethnographic journaling to document field notes and researcher thoughts about meanings of data, experiences, and other items deemed noteworthy before, during, and after data collection over the six-month period of the study.
Supplemental Quantitative Data

Although this case study was by no means defined as a mixed methods methodology, it is important to note that some forms of quantitative data were used to supplement the qualitative data collected at the site. As Simons (2009) noted:

> It is important to acknowledge that case study research need not use only qualitative methods. Methodology does not define a case study, although it shapes the form of a particular study. It is possible to conduct a case study comprised of quantitative data. (p. xv)

Simons (2009) indicated that “both qualitative and quantitative to extend or deepen an understanding of the case” (p. 22). Use of quantitative data in this study worked to deepen the understanding of the case. The researcher examined quantitative data, such as standardized achievement test scores, report card grades, attendance data, and disciplinary reports of the 10 student members for analysis to supplement other data obtained in the case study. Appendix C, at the end of this dissertation, provides a summary of all specific data collection methods for this case study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis begins the next phase after data collection. Analysis in qualitative research is often dependent on the conceptual framework of the researcher. Much like Simons (2009) noted, “How you approach analyzing and interpreting data will depend upon the overall perspective you take to your research and how you see the social world” (p. 107). As such, in working from an interpretive framework, there is no scientific formula for data analysis. Simons (2009) cautioned analyzing data may:

> Draw attention to the creative and personal skills required to make sense in this way. There are no set rules or procedures to follow. Each researcher will find his or her own particular way in interpreting the data, even if using well-known strategies. (p. 107)
Data analysis fell largely on the interpretation of the researcher in this case study. Even so, it was important to have a plan for the methods of data analysis. Simons (2009) claimed data analysis can be characterized by procedures such as, “coding, categorizing, concept mapping, theme generation— which enable you to organize and make sense of the data to produce findings and an overall understanding (or theory) of the case” (p. 105). The goal of data analysis for the case study was to tell the story, or overall understanding of the case. In its simplest form, data analysis in this case study was inductive thematic analysis. Guest et al. (2012) characterized exploratory data analysis where “…the researcher carefully reads and rereads the data, looking for key words, trends, themes, or ideas that will help outline the analysis before any analysis takes place” (pp. 7-8). Such a process makes analysis inductive, as opposed to deductive, or confirmatory.

Borrowing from Simons’ (2009) and Guest’s et al. (2012) approaches, the researcher explored, coded, and categorized data by reading individual student participant interview transcripts from the first interviews, examining student written reflections, reviewing the ethnographic journal, and considering supplemental quantitative data such as class grades, discipline referrals, and attendance. Trends emerged among the vast array of data gathered from various resources—student participants were likely to report being influenced most by peers and family members, and talked frequently about the habits and practices of schooling and understandings of the future. Subsequently, data were coded as relating to peer or family influence, the habits and practices of schooling, and/or understandings of the future. This examination and organization of data resulted in descriptions of individual cases, or the student profiles, provided in Chapter 4. Figure 3.2 depicts an excerpt of the data analysis process that resulted in Donnie Gibbs’ individual case description in this study.
Peer pressure is hard. My friends try to talk me into doing bad things, wrong things like in class. Like they wanna talk and I know I have to pay attention and I have to get my work done before I can do any of that stuff, but they still try to distract me.

I’m planning to make all A’s on every single progress and report card. I will study each and every day.

[Donnie] repeatedly called his mother to check in and let her know he was staying after school to be interviewed for the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Transcript</th>
<th>Coded as peer influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written Reflection</td>
<td>Coded as habits and practices of schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnographic Journal</td>
<td>Coded as family influence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from Various Sources Coded and Combined

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**Figure 3.2.** Excerpt of data analysis process resulting in Donnie Gibbs’ individual case description.

Thematic analysis is described by Roulston (2010) as an “approach [that] generally entails some form of data reduction, categorization of data, [and] reorganization of data in to thematic representations of findings” (p. 151). Guest et al. (2012) provided this in-depth definition of thematic analysis:

Thematic analyses require more involvement and interpretation from the researcher. Thematic analyses move beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes. Codes are then typically developed to represent the identified themes and applied or linked to raw data as summary markers for later analysis. (p. 10)
The process used for data analysis in this research study was inductive thematic analysis. This involved reducing data, categorizing data, and then reorganizing data into themes.

More specifically, this phase of the research study borrowed from Wolcott (1994) in his description of “transforming” data (p. 11). Wolcott (1994) made distinctions between three ways of organizing and making sense of qualitative data: description, analysis, and interpretation:

Description addresses the question—what is going on here—staying close to the data as originally recorded. Analysis examines the question of how things work or why they don’t moving beyond the purely descriptive to systematically identify key factors and relationships, themes and patterns from the data. Interpretation focuses on the major question of meaning, ‘What is to be made of it all?’ These three categories are not mutually exclusive or discrete. Nor are they necessarily sequential or to be applied in all cases. (p. 11)

Although data analysis did not exactly mimic this process, it did closely resemble aspects of the philosophy.

Through various forms of data collection, there was a vast array of data. The researcher deemed it important to select data, which was most fitting to the research purpose, to answer research questions, and to help tell the story. There is no step-by-step process or appointed time during which data analysis is to occur, and Simons (2009) pointed out: “From the moment you select your research questions and design your study you are foreshadowing issues or indicating frames for analysis” (Simons, 2009, pp. 105-106). Data analysis was an ongoing process.

There are two additional important factors to note with regard to data analysis. The researcher considered how to read the data and then how to organize the data. For the purposes of this study, the data were read literally, interpretively, and reflexively. According to Mason (2002), literally means the researcher is interested in the data and its “literal form, content, structure, style, layout, and so on” (p. 149). Data analysis involved the literal reading of data to determine what data were relevant. For example, the researcher read through participant
interview transcripts to determine which participant responses were relevant to answering research questions.

Mason (2002) described, “An interpretive reading will involve you constructing or documenting a version of what you think the data mean or represent, or what you think you can infer from them” (p. 149). Here, the organization into themes begins to take place. Mason (2002) noted, “A reflexive reading will locate you as part of the data you have generated, and will seek to explore your role and perspective in the process and generation and interpretation of the data” (p. 149). As a researcher entering the field, it was vitally important to reflexively examine the data.

When considering a more in-depth look at the organization of data to look for themes, this study used a more holistic approach. Mason (2002) discussed this type of approach:

Non-cross-sectional, contextual, or case study forms of data organization involve ways of seeing and sorting your data which do not necessarily use the same lens across the whole. Essentially, these forms of data organization involve looking at discrete parts, cases, or contexts within your data set, and documenting something about those parts specifically. In that sense, it is a practice guided by a search for the particular in context rather than the common or consistent, and the holistic rather than the cross-sectional. (p. 165)

The focus was more on the holistic Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a case instead of separate cross-sectioned categories. There was, however, categorization of themes. As Mason (2002) further suggested:

You will not feel bound to ensure that you have a common set of categories for indexing, worked out in advance, as you would with cross-sectional logic. . . , [and] Your task will be to identify and represent what you see as the key elements of the particular and holistic part of your data which you are examining. (p. 167)

Thus, data analysis in this study was marked by a holistic approach to searching for themes from an interpretive framework. For example, the researcher examined data from numerous methods as a whole, and looked for themes to emerge as key elements to inform the study.
After individual case profiles were developed, thematic analysis in this study involved examining data holistically to look for themes. This portion of the analysis process attempted to gauge the influence of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group on student participants’ choices. Specifically, data analysis attempted to answer research questions three and four. The researcher looked for themes relating to Men’s Group influence by examining all previous data in addition to reading individual student participant interview transcripts from the second interviews, and examining transcripts from participant observations. Consequently, six themes emerged, and are presented more in-depth in Chapter 5. Each piece of data was coded as related to building a positive peer community, developing a more realistic understanding of the future, or communicating the appropriate habits and practices of schooling. Figure 3.3 presents an example of the number of codes for each of three student members in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

![Figure 3.3](image)

*Figure 3.3. Excerpt of thematic data analysis summary of three Robinlee Middle School men’s group members.*
Data analysis was inductive thematic analysis. Instead of testing preconceived hypotheses, the researcher interpreted meaning through recurring themes among values, perspectives, and influences within the social interactions of the members of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. The researcher attempted to answer research questions by looking for themes in the data and then interpreting meaning among those themes to tell the story of the case study. Data were read literally, interpretively, and reflexively. Instead of using cross-sectioned categorization of themes, the researcher used a more holistic approach to searching for themes.

**Ethics**

It was of utmost importance that this research study was ethical and trustworthy. Simons (2009) cautioned, “The fundamental ethical principle in research, whatever methodology you choose, is to do no harm” (p.85). The case study received approval from the International Review Board with the School District and the University associated with the study. All research processes and procedures conformed to the ethical principles of these professional associations. Conducting ethical research goes beyond conforming to such principles, however. The researcher consistently gave attention to ethical considerations. As Simons (2009) noted when considering ethics in research, “you need to nurture it throughout by adhering consistently to procedures and scrutinizing your ethical judgments in the field” (p. 89). The researcher sought to ensure ethical research by frequently reflecting on scholarly work with regard to its ethical and trustworthy measures.

Due to the researcher’s positional power in the school as an Assistant Principal, and the propensity through case study methodology to build relationships with participants, it was important not to take advantage of such relationships. Such a factor, coupled with the
vulnerability of subjects as minors, called for discretion with the use and reporting of data. When participants shared information, it was used for research purposes only. As Simons (2009) cautioned, “You need to be sure that you do not unintentionally misuse this information and exploit a person’s openness or vulnerability” (p. 85). Maintaining trust and avoiding exploitation of relationships for any personal gain were priorities for conducting ethical research and ensuring reliability in this study.

Stemming from these relationships was the tendency for the researcher to have a past history with the students, with the program, and perhaps a fondness or intention on advocacy for the program or students. Fetterman (2010) described: “Advocate ethnography is legitimate and ethical but should take place after the research is complete” (p. 140). To ensure this research process was fair, honesty was an important component. Fetterman (2010) further cautions researchers “must be candid about their task, explaining what they plan to study and how they plan to study it” (Fetterman, 2010, p. 143). Being sure the researcher was transparent and honest about the research process ensured trustworthiness. Being open and honest about the researcher’s own perspective and subjectivities was also helpful to ensure reliability. Mason (2002) called this using “reflexivity” (p. 177). Maintaining trust and honesty were pillars of ensuring reliability in this research.

Specifically, important procedures to consider in ethics and reliability are informed consent, minor assent, participant control, confidentiality, and anonymity. What lies at the center of these procedures is balance. Simons (2009) referred to this as the democratic model:

What is relevant is the way in which ethical principles are derived from the central aspiration of the democratic model—how to find an appropriate balance in research between the individual’s right to privacy and the public’s right to know. (p. 90)
Finding a balance between privacy and right to know was a safeguard for conducting ethical and trustworthy research in this study. Finding such a balance also ensures reliability.

For all methods in this study, the researcher obtained informed consent from adult participants. They were free to withdraw from participation in the study at any time. When involving minor participants, minor assent was obtained, in addition to parental permission, and any minor participants were free to withdraw from participation in the study at any time. Participant control involved participants having access to how they are viewed in observations and the right to refuse its use before it is used in the study. Confidentiality allowed participants the freedom to keep certain items confidential if they desired, and anonymity was protected through the use of pseudonyms. Special attention was given to the vulnerability of minor subjects in explaining such procedures adequately, and anything that would endanger a participant was reported. All of these procedures helped to maintain trust, honesty, reliability and an ethical research process.

**Reliability**

There were numerous factors to pay attention to when adhering to ethics in research. One such factor was maintaining the reliability of the research. Wolcott (1994) noted, “fieldworkers need to be able to justify the truth value of their accounts as more likely or more credible” (p.170). Reliability in qualitative research, then, involves ensuring the data is credible, honest, and trustworthy. It does not necessarily conform to the same measures of reliability in quantitative research (Simons, 2009). The researcher attempted to ensure reliability in the case study of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group through honest and trustworthy research.
Validity

Ensuring both the internal and external validity of the case study was important in conducting qualitative research. As Fetterman (2010) pointed out, “No one can be completely sure about the validity of research conclusions, but the ethnographer needs to gather sufficient and sufficiently accurate data to feel confident about research findings and to convince others of their accuracy” (p. 9). When considering internal validity, it is important to gather accurate data. For the purposes of this study, the concept of triangulation worked to ensure internal validity. Simons (2009) discussed the concept of triangulation:

Over the past thirty years, the concept of triangulation has broadened to take account of forms of social research, including case study, which acknowledge multiple perspectives and that these are socially constructed. Triangulation, in this concept of research, is less concerned with confirmation or convergence, whether through different data sources, methods, theories or researchers, but with exploring different perspectives and how they do or do not intersect in the particular context. How different perspectives came to be constructed and meaning attributed to them, and the extent to which they diverge, may be just as significant in determining accuracy and meaning of interpretations as convergence. (p. 119)

Looking at the Men’s Group through various perspectives, analyzing for various themes, and seeing how they do or do not intersect contributed to internal validity. By understanding the perspectives of the students, then the adults involved with the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, and then comparing or contrasting those perspectives, triangulation unfolds. Consequently, internal validity is ensured.

External validity involves convincing others of what Fetterman (2010) called the “sufficiently accurate data” (p. 9). Flyvbjerg (2006) cautioned, “it is incorrect to conclude that one cannot generalize from a single case” (p. 423). To make generalizations, one must ensure external validity of findings. The researcher in this case study attempted to do this in two ways. First, the researcher provided sufficient data. As outlined in this chapter and in Appendix C, the
researcher used six different forms of data collection, and many of them were used more than once. Second, the researcher attempted to ensure the accuracy of the data by ensuring its reliability, in addition to focusing on the usefulness of the data. Fetterman (2010) claimed, “Satisfactorily eliciting, recording, and expressing this perspective takes hours, days, months, and sometimes years. Although time-consuming, this approach ensures the validity and usefulness of the data I have collected” (p. 22). During the data collection process, the researcher worked to ensure the satisfactory recording of data to aid in the external validity of this research.

All documents that described the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, quantitative data that showed attendance, discipline referrals, class grades, and other information in addition to the interviews, observations, and reflective journal entries by the 10 participants helped to corroborate data. However, triangulation was achieved also by including interviews with three graduates of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group who are now in high school. These young men were interviewed to clarify and confirm hunches about the data. The case study of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group used various procedures and practices to ensure trust, honesty, and transparency in an ethical and trustworthy research process. These practices helped to ensure reliability and validity in this case study.

Chapter Summary

The research study was grounded in the theoretical framework of the interpretive tradition. That framework coincided with a social constructionist epistemology. The researcher saw the acquisition of knowledge as interpreted in social contexts. As such, the chosen methodology was a case study to understand the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males, and to understand the perspectives of those involved in the program. Data generation methods included individual
interviewing, participant observation, document analysis, ethnographic journaling, and the use of qualitative data as supplemental data. Data analysis involved a holistic approach to inductive thematic analysis, in an effort to tell the story of the case. The researcher strove to remain trustworthy, honest, reflective, and reflexive in adhering to procedures to maintain reliability and validity in conducting ethical research.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS: PORTRAITS OF THE ROBINLEE MIDDLE SCHOOL MEN'S GROUP AND ITS PARTICIPANTS

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of participants in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, an all-boys middle school program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males. Through direct observation of and interaction with the participants, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the history of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group and how does it operate now? What norms, values, or innovative interventions are embedded in the Men’s Group?

2. What do the involved professionals perceive as the impact of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s group on the academic and personal lives of the students?

3. How do the involved students see the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in relation to their academic and personal lives?

4. Does the program have an influence on the students academically and/or personally?

The participants in this study included 10 students who were current members of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, three former Men’s Group members now in high school, the instructor of the Men’s Group, and the principal of Robinlee Middle School. Selected student participants mirrored the demographics of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. The
Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group will be referred to as the “Men’s Group” throughout Chapters Four and Five to avoid unnecessary repetition.

A qualitative case study approach was used to understand the perspectives of those involved with the Men’s Group. As Eder and Fingerson (2002) noted, “One clear reason for interviewing youthful respondents is to allow them to give voice to their own interpretations and thoughts rather than rely solely on our adult interpretations of their lives” (p. 181). This study sought to give voice to the student participants to understand their perspectives of involvement in the Men’s Group.

To identify the impact and influence of the Men’s Group on the student participants, it was essential to first understand the influences on the lives of the student participants prior to participating in Men’s Group activities, as well as to gauge students’ understanding of education and their views of the future. Exploring the history and context of the Men’s Group and of Robinlee Middle School itself was also vital to answering the research questions. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the contextual setting of Robinlee Middle School, the history and context of the Men’s Group, and the participants in that group. The following section attempts to answer research questions numbers one and two.

**Community and School District Content**

A public middle school located on the outskirts of Copper, Georgia, Robinlee Middle School was built in 1996 “within a rural setting fed by an urban population” (AdvanceEd, 2012). Robinlee is one of four middle schools in Bailey County, a county that serves 12,557 students in 21 schools. Each middle school in Bailey County serves students in grades six through eight. In Bailey County, 26.6% of the residents are African-American; 61.9% are White; 10.4% are Hispanic; and 1.1% are Asian or multiracial. The Bailey County School District students are
52% African-American; 23% Hispanic; 19% White; and 6% Asian or multiracial (Carl Vinson Institute of Government, 2013; Georgia Department of Education, 2011). The county poverty rate is 34.6% (United States Department of Commerce, 2013).

Robinlee Middle School served 650 students in the fall of 2013. The student body is comprised of 60% African-American students, 32% Hispanic students, and 8% other students (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). In 2012, approximately 94% of Robinlee’s students were enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program—a school’s measure of socioeconomic status (AdvanceEd, 2012; Williams, 2011). Figure 4.1 summarizes the demographic composition of Bailey County, the Bailey County School District, and Robinlee Middle School.

Robinlee Middle School has almost 250 eighth graders, approximately 145 of whom are male. Forty-nine percent of the eighth grade males at Robinlee Middle School are African-American, while 38% are Hispanic. The remaining 13% of the eighth grade male population is comprised of White and multiracial students. Thirty-five of the 145 eighth grade males received special education services. Nineteen of the students receiving special education services were African-American, 6 were Hispanic, and 10 were White, Asian, or multiracial. Eleven eighth grade males were labeled gifted—four of these students were African-American, four were Hispanic, and four were White. Fourteen Hispanic males at the school received English Language Learner services. Extracurricular activities offered to all eighth grade males at Robinlee Middle School include band, orchestra, chorus, basketball, football, soccer, track and field, robotics, chess club, Academic Bowl, Future Farmers of America, a community service club, and the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.
In 2008, Robinlee Middle School was labeled a Needs Improvement-5 year status school under the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) component of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (Georgia Department of Education, 2008). In 2002, NCLB was signed into law in an effort to improve academic achievement and close the achievement gap. Per the requirements of the law, students must make adequate academic progress each year regardless of race or economic status,
as determined by a published formula and measured by standardized achievement tests (The Education Trust, 2003).

As a Needs Improvement school, Robinlee Middle School was under state direction for improvement due largely to the achievement gap demonstrated by poor academic performance on state standardized tests among African-American students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. In 2008, 52.2% of African-American students met or exceeded the target score, while 54.3% of economically disadvantaged students met or exceeded the target score. Nineteen percent of students with disabilities met or exceeded the target score. To make AYP, 59.5% of students in each of these groups needed to meet or exceed the target score (Georgia Department of Education, 2008).

During the 2010-2011 and the 2011-2012 school years, Robinlee Middle School made AYP by closing the achievement gap among these student populations. In the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years, Robinlee was named a “High-Progress School” by the Georgia Department of Education. Under Georgia’s newest accountability system, Cardoza (2012) defined “A ‘High-Progress School’ as a Title I school among the 10% of Title I schools in the state that was making the most progress in improving the performance of the ‘all students’ group over three years on the statewide assessments” (Reward School Definition section, para. 2). Robinlee was in the top 10% of low-socioeconomic schools in the state of Georgia recognized for closing the achievement gap (Cardoza, 2012).

According to its mission statement, Robinlee Middle School:

promotes and celebrates learning through high expectations, collaboration, and authentic instruction. In partnership with families and the community, our mission is to inspire students to achieve at high academic levels through challenging and innovative learning opportunities that support the development of students’ individual talents. (AdvanceEd, 2012, p. 3)
Robinlee’s mission focuses on student learning, and the school strives to provide learning opportunities for each student through quality instruction. Each student at Robinlee is enrolled in four core subject classes: math, English Language Arts, social studies, and science. One teacher from each of these core subjects makes up an interdisciplinary “team.”

AdvanceEd, the International Registration for Accreditation (2012), released the following description of Robinlee Middle School in an *Executive Summary*:

At [Robinlee Middle School], students are placed on teams in keeping with a strong middle school philosophy. Teachers meet daily during common planning time to discuss student needs. Connections courses introduce students to a variety of skill-building subjects. During their three years at [Robinlee], students have the opportunity to take classes in band, chorus, orchestra, consumer science, agricultural science, visual art, physical education, and foreign language. (AdvanceEd, 2012, p. 4)

In addition to being placed in teams and enrolled in core classes, students had the opportunity to take a variety of elective classes.

Robinlee implemented innovative programs such as single-gender classes and the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (IBMYP). Both programs advanced the school’s mission of enhancing teaching and learning to support student development. Several single-gender classes were offered in math and English Language Arts at each grade level to limit distractions for students. The IBMYP attempted to engage students in more rigorous instruction and to develop international mindedness. The International Baccalaureate Program was a school wide initiative:

[Robinlee Middle School] is now in its first year as a candidate school for the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (IB). IB is an internationally renowned program designed to address students’ physical, intellectual and emotional needs through a framework of academic rigor and international mindedness. (AdvanceEd 2012, p. 4)
Using an IB framework for instructional purposes in all classes and teaching single-gender classes in math and English Language Arts allowed teachers to better meet the diverse needs of the students at Robinlee Middle School.

Robinlee Middle School’s diverse faculty had experience teaching in various parts of the world. Robinlee’s 54 teachers averaged 12 years of teaching experience, and 38 held a Master’s degree or higher. AdvanceEd (2012) described the Robinlee Middle School faculty as follows:

The staff of [Robinlee] represent a wide variety of cultures and linguistic backgrounds. Several staff members have taught in countries around the world. Over the past three years, the retention rate of [Robinlee] staff has been increasing. In 2011, the turnover rate was 12%. The average number of years a staff member is employed at [Robinlee] is 6.5 years. (AdvanceEd, 2012, p.4)

In 2013, the school was part of a Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards (GAPSS) analysis. Taylor (2013) described a GAPSS analysis as “an onsite assessment of a school’s progress toward meeting the School Keys. The School Keys are Georgia’s standards for schools and describe what schools need to know, understand, and be able to do” (para. 1). The School Keys included standards to assess the school culture at Robinlee Middle School. The school scored “operational” or higher on all nine indicators for the “School Culture” standard, defined as, “The norms, values, standards, and practices associated with the school learning community to ensure student achievement and organizational productivity” (V. Kahn, personal communication, October 2, 2013). According to the GAPSS analysis, Robinlee Middle School had a positive school culture.

As a part of this school culture, Robinlee Middle School adopted and emphasized Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Sugai et al. (2000) defined PBIS as:

A framework for enhancing the adoption and implementation of a continuum of evidence based interventions to achieve academically and behaviorally important outcomes for all subjects . . . The important supportive relationship between school and classroom-wide culture and individual student success is emphasized. (p.132)
Using the PBIS program, the school emphasized the importance of establishing positive behavior among its students and positive relationships among teachers and students. The PBIS framework sought to link Robinlee’s positive school culture with individual student performance. In incorporating the PBIS framework, the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group worked to support positive school culture.

**The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group: A Description**

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of participants in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males. To fully describe the program, this section begins by highlighting the voices of the two adults most closely connected to the program, Principal Frank Oliver and program founder Rick Thomas, a Robinlee teacher. These participants spoke in depth about the history of the program, the impact of families and peers on the students at Robinlee, and the role of other programs for and influences on the students at Robinlee Middle School.

**Frank Oliver’s Perspective**

Frank Oliver, the principal of Robinlee Middle School, is a 50-year old African-American male and was the fifth principal in four years assigned to Robinlee. Mr. Oliver began his career at Robinlee in 2007. During his first year, the school did not make AYP; however, it made AYP in each of his subsequent years as principal. Mr. Oliver reported that he had not always wanted to be a teacher. He stated:

> I wanted to be a lawyer . . . I found a passion, though, when I realized there were so many kids out there that I was able to reach just from my raising and the things I had done . . . You realized you’ve made a difference in kids’ lives when they become adults and they still want to be around you . . . It was about making a difference and that was my passion.

Mr. Oliver found his life’s passion in education, choosing his career because of the difference he believed he could make in the lives of his students.
Mr. Oliver was present for the inception of the Men’s Group in 2008. He described how the group got started:

A phenomenal eighth grade language arts teacher, [Mr. Thomas], came to me and he had an idea of reaching out to some young men because we were always punitive in nature. It was never trying to figure out why little boys do the things they do. The make-up was this little advisement group that came up with by-laws and the rules. You weren’t just all of a sudden in it. You had to work to be a part of the Men’s Group. You had to write papers. You had to have discussions. They had heart-to-heart, heartfelt conversations in which it was a safe haven for young men to come to and express themselves.

Mr. Oliver described his own role in the creation of the Men’s Group as minimal, noting:

I wouldn’t say that I had any influence in making it successful. I would say it is a commitment on the adults’ parts. I’m the type of leader that if you say you are wanting to do something, I am going to say let’s try it. Let’s do it and let’s try it as long as it is benefiting our kids. If it is benefiting our children, we are going to do it. We are going to go for it. I think in my years here, I know a few people who know a few people that can make things happen for our kids. I would much . . . I know everyone would much rather see these kids in a positive light than in a negative light.

Mr. Oliver was the school’s leader during the inception of the Men’s Group. While he did not take credit for creating the group, his leadership style encouraged innovative programming that would positively impact students. He granted Rick Thomas permission to create the Men’s Group, and he supported the group by helping acquire the resources that allowed the group to function.

Mr. Oliver described the influence of family and home life on the values and choices of Robinlee Middle School students:

Our economic rate is around 95% free and reduced lunch rate, where the vast majority of our population is below the poverty level. I think it affects our school because many of our students start their education careers behind. A child from a middle class family— they are going to [pre-Kindergarten] knowing their ABC’s, knowing how to pick up a book, having read a book. They have print at home. Many of our kids don’t have all of those privileges of print at home . . . you know, having books . . . educational books and things of that nature and education is not always at the forefront. We’ve had 20 or more families that are homeless and having books is not always at the forefront. When you are living in poverty, survival becomes the mode at the forefront. Having books is not
important when you don’t have a home to put those books in. So many of our kids
struggle and deal with that daily. And it makes a major difference in their education.

Mr. Oliver believed that many male students at Robinlee lacked a positive male role at
home, and observed, “Students care about how they are received by their parents.” He stated:

There are so many things going on in [students’] lives that unless they have some role
models—whether they are female role models, but mostly male role models that are truly
needed in their lives. They don’t have them to keep focused and see that there is life
outside of their current situation.

Mr. Oliver believed that male role models provide young male students with broader
perspectives that may significantly influence students’ values and choices. He asserted:

Growing up, a lot of us could have made certain choices, but we made the choices that
we made because of other adults in our lives. I learned from other people’s mistakes that
I didn’t want to make those mistakes.

Mr. Oliver believed that adolescents often make choices based on emulating the actions of those
around them:

If you see enough people doing right, other people will do the same thing. It’s like the
person holding the door open . . . just watch . . . . If a person walks in to a convenience
store and one person holds the door open, they say thank you but they also reach back
and hold the door open for someone else. Because somebody did something positive for
them, they will turn around and do something positive for somebody else.

Adolescents, he observed, and especially adolescent males, emulate others because they
value acceptance from both adults and peers. Thus, student values and choices are heavily
influenced by peer relationships. Mr. Oliver elaborated:

Most of our males struggle with acceptance. You know, in middle school being accepted
by your peers is important. Being accepted with the clothing that the kids wear, having
the latest electronic devices, through their hairstyle, the way they wear their clothing,
whether it’s the way that they are received by their friends, having the nicest shoes and
things of that nature. Students value acceptance. They really, really value being accepted.

Mr. Oliver gave credit to many of the teachers at Robinlee Middle School for influencing
students in a positive way. He reported:
Good things are taking place because some of our teachers, administrators, and others are saying, “Okay, I believe in you and we are going to expose you to some positive things.” And it’s not just isolated to one particular group of students. It gives everybody an equal opportunity to be exposed to positive programs.

In accordance with his belief that students need role models to expose them to life beyond their current situation, Mr. Oliver believed school programs should provide students with new experiences. Mr. Oliver described some of the programs students at Robinlee Middle School had access to:

- We have a [career, technical, and agricultural education] program. We have a great counseling program. We try to work with kids to give them new experiences. We have been able to expose these students to a chess team. We have been able to expose students to our step team . . . to our student council. There is so much that our kids have opportunities to be a part of if they choose to.

Such programs advanced Mr. Oliver’s goal of influencing students’ perceptions of their education and future. He asserted:

I think the greatest thing we are attempting to do is knowing that every student needs some form of education after high school. We never stop at high school. We never just let high school graduation be a period at the end of a sentence. It is a comma. And it is a springboard into the future. And knowing that every student needs a high school diploma, and we let that be known from day one. But also we let our kids know that you have to go on to get some form of education. Whether you want to become an electrician, a doctor, or a lawyer, there is another world out there that they’ve got to become exposed to.

At Robinlee Middle School, teachers and programs worked collaboratively to instill an understanding of the value of education in each student.

**Summary.** Although Robinlee experienced increased academic success after Frank Oliver took over as principal, Mr. Oliver did not take credit for having a significant influence on the Men’s Group. Mr. Oliver perceived his role as encouraging teachers to implement programs that were “good for kids.” Mr. Oliver believed the Men’s Group would benefit the students of Robinlee, so he supported the group by approving its formation and helping to obtain the necessary resources to allow it to function.
Mr. Oliver discussed the influences on adolescent males’ choices and reflected on what low-socioeconomic adolescent males may value. He asserted that family and home life have an impact on the adolescent males at Robinlee, highlighting the impact of homes that lack access to educational materials or to male role models. Mr. Oliver believed the adolescent males at Robinlee valued the perceptions of peers and adults in their lives, and desired to be accepted. He credited teachers with developing programs that positively influenced participants’ understandings of their future and helped them recognize the value of their education.

Rick Thomas’ Perspective

Rick Thomas began his career in teaching in 2008, a year before he founded the Men’s Group. Mr. Thomas chose teaching as a second career after working previously as a construction contractor and carpenter. Explaining why he chose a career in teaching, he stated:

The main reason I wanted to teach was because I knew it would be a field where I could be a little creative. I like to write and I like to be in front of people. I like to engage with people, but I didn’t necessarily like to be friends with people, and I thought that’s kind of what teaching is. It’s like you are performing because I did these acting things and I liked that whole aspect of like engaging with people. I like young people, and I was a terrible student. I always didn’t like my teachers. In fact, I completely wiped every middle school teacher from my memory. So, I’m thinking that is probably something I need to do to try and make up for some of that. I kind of saw myself as a teacher and always felt like it was something I would eventually do.

Mr. Thomas got the idea to start the Men’s Group in his second year at the school, after adjusting to being a new teacher in his first two years. He described the beginning of the Robinlee Men’s Group:

[Mr. Oliver] started single-gender classes, so I had an all boys class. I thought I would have a guest speaker talk once a month so they wouldn’t have to listen to me all the time. I introduced the idea to the class, and this was a rough class. This was a rough group. They weren’t behaving well. They were up for it, so I started inviting people . . . trying to relate it to the curriculum the best I could.
Mr. Thomas noted that the first guest speaker was a success, which encouraged him to continue with the idea:

The first guy actually was a former Robinlee Student. We were doing characterization and I said just come in here and tell a story about like your best friend. It was awesome. He told a fantastic story and he was real and he was making them laugh and they enjoyed it.

The same year, Mr. Thomas invited a judge to speak to his class, and the judge in turn invited the class to go on a field trip. Mr. Thomas recalled that this was the beginning of incorporating such field trips regularly into his English Language Arts class:

That first year we had a judge who invited us to go to his courtroom. So we went on a field trip to the courthouse and saw him sentence people. Later that same year, we had a restaurant owner and then a college football player. We had a good group come through, and I saw that the students were responding well to it.

Mr. Thomas required the students in his all-male English Language Arts class to write thank-you notes to the invited guest speakers. He described this assignment:

I made them write a thank-you note to the first speaker. I asked them to include something about what he said. I then learned that I could incorporate the writing process into it. Thank-you notes began to be redundant, so I got the idea for a written response and changed the assignment to a prompt instead of a thank-you note.

The first all-male English Language Arts class subsequently evolved into the Men’s Group. Mr. Thomas described this evolution:

It was very effective: If they didn’t do the writing, then they wouldn’t come to the group. I had a system where it would keep them in line and it was definitely good. I had some students who couldn’t function in other classes, but they would do right in my class. That first year started out as a classroom management piece. Since it was working so well, I decided to make it work or open it up to the whole eighth grade . . . all of the eighth grade males.

In this way, the inaugural Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group was created in 2009.

Mr. Thomas recognized the influence of family and home life on the values and choices of Robinlee students. Mr. Thomas believed the parents of Robinlee students cared for their
children, stating, “I firmly believe they are cared for at home for the most part and parents are doing the best they can.” However, he noted that other elements of students’ home lives could have a major influence on their academic success:

I think one of the things that I realize happens to our kids is that they do not get read to. They do not get an education foundation at home as far as literacy and as far as being taught how to read and write as a part of growing up. So for me, trying to connect with them in an educational way is sometimes hard. So in that sense, that is what I know is my challenge . . . for me to have an expectation of them in like school that this is what you have to do in school, knowing they have not been brought up that way.

Mr. Thomas also expressed concern that many adolescent males at Robinlee Middle School lacked male role models at home. He stated:

You look at the fact that when they go home, who is there to care for them? I know that we have strong support for mothers supporting their children, but statistically when you look at when fathers are not at home and what young males do to sort of defend themselves emotionally when they don’t have fathers, I think they feel cheated and they feel defensive. They love their mothers, but they feel cheated, and I have to try and break through that defensiveness. To go through something like that at this age is hard.

In addition to recognizing the impact of their home lives and the availability of male role models, Mr. Thomas believed that Robinlee students were also strongly influenced by their peers:

The power of peer influence is extremely powerful at this age. You can’t avoid the fact that they try to push each other. And pushing each other is a good thing unless it becomes . . . like . . . let me see how I can outdo you in this.

Sometimes, he added, his own influence as a teacher was mitigated by the influence of peers, as the consistent and dominating influence of peer pressure led male adolescents at Robinlee to make the wrong choices:

these students might know something is wrong, but if they hear it over and over again from their friends, eventually they are going to do it, because that is the kind of pressure they are under. Then it comes here and you are still, as a teacher, my voice is not as respected because they are going to listen to their friends.
Mr. Thomas believed so strongly in the effectiveness of after-school programs and extracurricular activities that he often invested his own resources in these programs. An ethnographic journal entry documented an occasion in which he awarded one Men’s Group member with a $100.00 check as a part of a contest. He served as an instructor and facilitator for several of these programs and activities. Mr. Thomas described his involvement:

I have been the soccer coach for seven years . . . I have led a service group for the past couple of years which involves service projects and stuff like that. . . . I started a chess club last year in October. . . . Usually about 16 students show up every other Wednesday to play chess. And I’ve started a new group this year to focus on my soccer players outside of soccer season.

When asked why he was involved in so many of these programs, he replied, “I like doing things after school with students because I think they are different. Their motivation is different. I think even more after-school programs are needed to reach more kids.” Mr. Thomas spent so much time with students outside the classroom because he believed in the influence of these programs. He perceived that students who were not influenced in the general classroom setting might be influenced in an extracurricular setting.

**Summary.** Rick Thomas, who began teaching as a second career, started the Men’s Group in his third year of teaching. The Men’s Group evolved from Mr. Thomas idea of inviting guest speakers to his all-male English Language Arts class. After one of the guests took the class on a field trip, Mr. Thomas asked his students to write thank-you notes, first in response to the field trip and subsequently after each guest speaker presentation. In response to his early success in incorporating guest speakers, field trips, and written responses as classroom management tools, Mr. Thomas decided to offer a similar program every year open to all eighth grade male students. He named this program the Men’s Group.
Mr. Thomas believed male students at Robinlee Middle School were cared for at home, and recognized the influence of family and home life on the students’ values and choices. Male students did not always value literacy, and sometimes lacked relationships with fathers, which influenced male students’ academic and behavioral choices in school. Mr. Thomas saw male students as readily influenced by both positive and negative peer pressure, and he saw the value and potential of providing extracurricular programs for students at Robinlee Middle School.

The Experiences of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group

This section provides in-depth descriptions of the experiences of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. Case study participants were observed engaging in four monthly meetings, three service projects, and one field trip. Rich descriptions of these events provide an in-depth look at the Men’s Group as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males. Figure 4.2 displays a timeline of the events of the Men’s Group.

![Timeline of 2013 men’s group events](image)

Figure 4.2. Timeline of 2013 men’s group events.

The First Monthly Meeting: Being a Man

The first meeting of the 2013 Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group was held on August 15, 2013. All 25 participants were in attendance, each with a signed parent permission form. The permission form provided a description of the Men’s Group written by Mr. Thomas, the group’s sole faculty mentor. The permission form explained:

Once a month, at our school, a guest speaker is invited to make a presentation to a group of 25-30 8th grade male students. Meeting positive role models is an important part of
becoming a productive citizen. Each guest speaker that comes to our school brings his unique life experience. For each guest speaker, the students are asked to write a brief essay on a topic that relates to their own life and understanding of the world they live in. Students who participate in the program also have the opportunity to go on field trips that involve unique educational experiences. Students in the group also meet regularly to work on projects that serve the school and community. At its core, the Men’s Group program promotes leadership, literacy, and service. The young men soon realize they can make a small difference in a world that needs big changes.

At the bottom of the form, each student was asked to sign and ask a parent to sign the following pledge: “I understand that my participation in the 8th grade Men’s Group depends on my willingness to set a good example to my peers and fulfill the requirements of the program.”

The Men’s Group involved a monthly visit from a guest speaker during one of the student’s elective classes. Mr. Thomas arranged an agreement between each student and his teacher to receive a pass to miss an elective class period. Each member of the group was required to submit a written reflection on each guest speaker’s presentation. Men’s Group participants were permitted to attend events upon completion of writing activities.

At the beginning of the first monthly meeting of the 2013-2014 school year, Mr. Thomas described the Men’s Group to the student attendees. He said:

Every young man in the eighth grade has a chance to be a member of this group. This group is not about missing class, eating [fast food], and going on field trips to have fun with all of your friends. We do all of that, but there is a purpose to what we are doing. The next official meeting will require turning in a written response to today’s meeting. How do I choose who gets to come? If you write two to three sentences, then you will probably not get to participate, but if you take your time and put some thought into it, you will get to come back.

He then projected a series of newsletters on the classroom whiteboard portraying the events of the past years of the Men’s Group. As he displayed these pictures, he spoke about the various events. At the bottom of each newsletter was the school’s insignia, accompanied by the following motto: “Leadership. Literacy. Service. The 8th grade [RMS] Men’s Group. Bringing Leadership and Literacy from the Community into the Classroom.”
Mr. Thomas reminded students of the required commitment of Men’s Group members, then introduced the guest speaker for the first meeting, the principal of Robinlee, Mr. Frank Oliver. Mr. Oliver told the participants about “growing up in the projects,” and stated, “Your education is important. You can make your way out of any tough situation by doing what is right and by taking school seriously.” The premise of Mr. Oliver’s message was an emphasis on doing one’s best in school and making good choices. Mr. Oliver reminded students of his favorite saying—“When you miss school, you miss out”—reminding participants that coming to school and making good choices could provide them with opportunities to escape difficult circumstances.

Mr. Thomas then introduced the second guest speaker, a new eighth grade male teacher. The new teacher, a 50-year-old African-American male, asked the students what it meant to be great. He asserted that to be great, one must realize that one’s life is connected to the lives of others, and one must leave a lasting impact when he dies. He asked the students to think about how their decisions impact others and how they want to be remembered when they’re gone. Then, Mr. Thomas closed the meeting and asked the students to gather for a group photo.

The Second Monthly Meeting: Choices and Identities

Seventeen students attended the second Men’s Group monthly meeting, where Mr. Thomas introduced the guest speaker as a “troubled man.” An African-American male in his mid-twenties entered the room in a prison jumpsuit and handcuffs, walking with a cane. The guest speaker told the students he was incarcerated for the bad choices he made, and that the decisions one makes determines one’s outcomes. The speaker stressed the importance of finishing school, of surrounding oneself with positive influences, and of respecting family members and teachers.
Attendees at the second monthly meeting were required to submit a written response to the first monthly meeting. The assignment, focusing on the topic of “My Identity,” was described as follows:

There are numerous ways to identify who we are. Who are you? How do you identify yourself to others? In the first paragraph of your essay . . . write about who you are and who you want to become. How has your identity changed since you have been in middle school? In the second paragraph of your essay, write about a conflict that you might have to overcome in the future. How does this conflict shape your identity and how you will rise above it?

Men’s Group participants were asked to think about their present and future identities, and how conflict has shaped and would continue to shape those identities. Completing the written response enabled students to attend the “bad choices” speech given by the “troubled man.”

The Third Monthly Meeting: Serving Others

To open the third monthly meeting, Thomas introduced the guest speaker as a “friend of the Men’s Group.” The speaker, a white male in his early fifties, was a local lawyer who was a manager for a prominent local band. He spoke of losing his father at a young age, the emphasis his mother placed on school, and the importance of serving others, and described his experiences traveling with the band as well as his financial success. He attributed his success to making good choices along the way, and encouraged students to take responsibility for their own success. An African-American man in his early thirties, a representative of a community service organization, accompanied the first guest speaker, and spoke about how Men’s Group members could serve each other and the community.

To attend the third monthly meeting, attendees had to write a response to the “troubled man” guest speaker, then describe goals they hoped to achieve before attending high school, obstacles standing in the way of those goals, and a plan for overcoming these obstacles. The second writing prompt, entitled “Men’s Group Writing Assignment #2,” stated:
Write down three goals you want to achieve this year. For each goal, you will write a paragraph that outlines the specific steps you will take to achieve each goal, and why you want to attain that goal. For each goal, describe an obstacle that might get in the way of achieving your goal. Use different reasons and obstacles for each goal.

Student attendees were asked to reflect on what the “troubled man” said about choices and consequences by writing about the pursuit and achievement of goals.

**The Fourth Monthly Meeting: Entrepreneurship**

To attend the fourth monthly meeting, students were required to submit a written response essay, with the option of writing about the previous month’s guest speakers or reflecting on a field trip from the previous month. One of the writing prompts, entitled “Service Writing Prompt,” stated:

Consider this . . . If there is enough food to feed everyone in the world, why is world hunger still a problem? What can you do in your school and in your community that will send a positive message to others?

Another writing prompt, entitled “Men’s Group College Experience Tour,” instructed:

Write a reflection on your college tour experience: 1st paragraph: Introduction, write about your participation in the Men’s Group. Write a couple of sentences about your plans after high school. 2nd paragraph: Write a paragraph focusing on the meeting or the tour next to where you see your name. 3rd paragraph: Choose another part of the trip that was also memorable or meaningful and write a paragraph about what you learned. 4th paragraph: Write a conclusion that reflects your overall experience.

Above this writing prompt was a recap of the field trip itinerary, with students’ names listed adjacent to each of the various activities of the day.

Students attending the fourth monthly meeting were encouraged to prepare an additional presentation for this meeting if interested. Mr. Thomas wrote in the “Shark Tank” writing prompt:

Next month, [a local entrepreneur organization] will be visiting the Men’s Group. They will be here to listen to innovative ideas from our students. A $100 grand prize will be awarded to the student who best presents his ideas to our guests. If you are interested in
being a part of this event, be prepared to give a 3-5 minute presentation to the “Shark Tank.”

Students attending the fourth Men’s Group had the opportunity to present an innovative idea for four guest judges, who would choose the best presentation. Attendees were expected to write a reflection paper on their experience of attending the meeting. Mr. Thomas instructed in the writing prompt:

Think about inventions that have affected our lives. Select one invention that you think has had an impact on society. For this essay, include an innovative idea that would improve this particular invention. Give specific examples about how your idea would change the way people use this invention. You may also present an idea that is not yet on the market. Be sure you can explain how you intend to manufacture, advertise, and distribute your idea or invention.

At the beginning of the fourth monthly meeting, Mr. Thomas introduced the guest judges for the student competition:

These four gentlemen are here from [name of local entrepreneur organization]. This group was created for entrepreneurs by a very successful entrepreneur. The group tries to encourage others and show them how to share their ideas and make dreams a reality. These gentlemen will serve as judges for your individual presentations of your inventions.

Mr. Thomas introduced the first member of the entrepreneur organization, a white male in his late twenties, who told attendees about his profession as a commercial filmmaker. The second member of the organization, a white male in his mid-thirties, spoke about a company he owned that created software to help teachers learn. Next, the third member of the organization, a white male in his late twenties, told attendees about his company that designed video games. The fourth judge, the founder of the company, did not address the students, although he was instrumental in organizing the visit.

Student attendees were asked to present invention ideas to the judges, who then asked the students questions about their inventions. A recurring question for each student was, “If I gave
you one million dollars, how would you use it?” The winning invention was a voice-activated door system presented by a student who said he would reinvest the money in his company. Mr. Thomas presented him with a large faux check for $100, and gave him a real check for $100 after the school day had ended. The four visitors and the winning student posed for a picture.

**The Field Trip: College Experience**

On October 11, 2013, Men’s Group participants who had submitted a written response to the second monthly meeting attended an all-day field trip to a nearby university. Before students boarded the bus, Mr. Thomas requested that they represent their school and families positively, and briefly discussed the day’s events. The first stop at the university was an undergraduate introductory sociology class, where the students were invited to attend a class lecture. The professor, a white male in his early forties, lectured on the history of race and ethnicity.

After the class, Mr. Thomas led the group on a walk across campus to the law school, where the law school dean, an African-American male in his early forties, met the students and led them to a courtroom in the law school building. Two current law school students, both African-American females in their early twenties, handed each student a small bag with pens, notepads, and a t-shirt with the law school’s logo displayed on the back. The dean of the law school explained that the courtroom was an area where law school students practiced litigation, described practicing law as an occupation, and talked about how he became a dean. He encouraged the students to be good readers and writers, then introduced the two law school students, who led the group on a tour of the law school.

After the tour, the students went on a short walk to the business school building, where they were greeted by two African-American professors from the business school, both in their mid-forties. The professors led the students to a boardroom where they sat in leather chairs
around an elongated mahogany table. One of the professors gave a presentation about the
business school and explained his role in recruiting minority students to the university. He
encouraged students to set goals and dream big, become an expert at something, surround
themselves with positive peer influences, and persevere through difficult times.

The second professor then spoke about solving problems through public policy. He
encouraged students to learn more about the university and the importance of going to college,
and reinforced the importance of spending time around positive peer influences. He gave each
student a yellow highlighter and encouraged the students to read as much as possible and
highlight the various things they learned from reading.

Following the presentation the students boarded a bus and proceeded to a large cafeteria
on campus, so they could eat where the university students did. Mr. Thomas paid for the students
at a cash register located at the cafeteria entrance and students were able to sit among the
university students eating there. The students entered various lines offering a wide variety of
foods. After lunch, the students deposited their trays where they were cleaned at the rear of the
cafeteria, and boarded the bus once more to proceed to a museum honoring the university’s
football team.

Students explored the museum on their own, posing for a picture in front of the list of
athletic scholarships awarded to university football players. Afterward, the students boarded the
bus that took them to the university’s football stadium. At the entrance, the father of one of the
Men’s Group members and employee of the university’s athletic department, met the attendees
and led them on a tour of the stadium, the playing field, and the locker room. At the end of the
tour, he gave each student a t-shirt and cup displaying the university football team’s logo.
As the student attendees exited the stadium, Mr. Thomas led them to an adjacent building where four African-American male college students were waiting in a classroom to greet the students. Introductions were made and the college students described their involvement in a leadership group for minority males at the university. They also described their experiences as college students and answered questions about college life. After the meeting, the student attendees boarded the bus to travel back to Robinlee Middle School.

**Service Projects: Helping at School**

From August 2013 to December 2013, the Men’s Group participated in three after-school service projects at Robinlee Middle School. In the first project, five Men’s Group members built a “little free library”—a small, birdhouse-like structure that sat atop a post in front of Robinlee. Robinlee students and teachers could use the library by donating books or borrowing books to read. The Men’s Group members who participated in building the “little free library” used various tools to dig a hole, place a post in the ground with concrete, build the birdhouse-like structure, and affix it atop the post.

Mr. Thomas provided the tools and materials and assisted the Men’s Group members with the project. When asked how many students participated in after-school service projects, Mr. Thomas replied, “I never want to have more than five or seven students after school, because if there are too many and you are managing their negative behaviors instead of their positive behaviors. You are dealing with tools and it can become dangerous.” Thus in organizing and facilitating service projects such as the building of the “little free library,” Mr. Thomas limited participation as a safety precaution.

The Men’s Group completed two more after-school service projects in September and November, 2013. In the September project, three Men’s Group members hung large signs,
promoting health and physical activity, in the school’s gymnasium. In the November project, five
Men’s Group members built a bench next to the “little free library,” where those visiting were
able to sit and read. Mr. Thomas organized and facilitated the projects and provided the tools and
materials necessary to complete them.

A newsletter written by Mr. Thomas described another project held during the school
day: “Gentlemen committed to a two-week rotation of taking up the trays and cleaning the tables
in the cafeteria. After two weeks, they trained the next crew.” Photographs of the students
participating in the cafeteria work were placed adjacent to this description in the newsletter. Each
Men’s Group member who participated in the cafeteria work was invited to attend a pizza lunch
with Mr. Thomas during the month in which they served.

Summary

The Men’s Group held four monthly meetings, attended one day-long field trip,
participated in three after-school service projects, and completed one service project during the
school day. Student attendees were required to submit written reflections to attend Men’s Group
events, where they heard from guest speakers on various topics that served as themes for the
events. Service projects were designed to make improvements or provide a service to Robinlee,
and the field trip offered student members what was described as a “college experience.” Rich
descriptions of the individual events of the Men’s Group provide a thorough description of the
program.

Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group Student Profiles

Nobel-Prize winning philosopher Albert Camus once observed, “Life is the sum of all of
your choices” (Buchanan & O’Connell, 2006, para. 3). German novelist Jean Paul noted,
moreover, “The conscience of children is formed by the influences that surround them” (Atwell,
The adolescent male members of Robinlee Middle School’s Men’s Group made choices every day, with each choice subject to a multitude of influences. To document the myriad influences and choices of each individual group member would therefore be an insurmountable task.

In this study, however, the researcher sought to understand how the adolescent male participants perceived their education and how they related their daily choices to future outcomes. The following sections describe the strongest influences on the choices of the adolescent males in the Men’s Group as follows:

1. Parents or other family members
2. Peers
3. Other strong influences, such as music and sports

These strong influences, combined with students’ understanding of the value of education and its impact on their future, influenced the daily choices of the Men’s Group members. The remainder of this chapter provides rich, detailed descriptions of each group member to illustrate how these influences shaped their choices with regard to their schooling. The following student profiles attempted to answer research questions one and four. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the study participants’ information. Pseudonyms are used to protect student identity and to maintain ethical and trustworthy researcher related to the participants.

**Diego Barcenas**

Diego Barcenas is a 13-year-old Hispanic male in the eighth grade who lives at home with his mother, father, and a younger sister who is in elementary school. Diego reads on a third-grade level. As a seventh grader, he passed all of his classes and all subject areas of the state-mandated standardized test with the exception of English Language Arts. During the first quarter
of his eighth grade year, Diego was passing all of his classes and was never referred to school administrators for discipline infractions. Diego was absent three times as a seventh grader, and halfway through his eighth grade year had been absent only once. Table 4.2 provides a summary profile of Diego’s recent academic and behavioral performance.

Table 4.1

*Summary of Demographic Information on Student Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diego Barcenas</td>
<td>Student Member</td>
<td>13 years old, Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus Cole</td>
<td>Student Member</td>
<td>14 years old, African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donnie Gibbs</td>
<td>Student Member</td>
<td>14 years old, African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny Gordon</td>
<td>Student Member</td>
<td>14 years old; African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon Norris</td>
<td>Student Member</td>
<td>13 years old; White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis Parker</td>
<td>Student Member</td>
<td>14 years old; African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darius Robinson</td>
<td>Student Member</td>
<td>15 years old; African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenny Sams</td>
<td>Student Member</td>
<td>14 years old; African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javier Sanchez</td>
<td>Student Member</td>
<td>14 years old; Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos Valdez</td>
<td>Student Member</td>
<td>14 years old; Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce Billups</td>
<td>Former Student Member in High School</td>
<td>16 years old; African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt Dixon</td>
<td>Former Student Member in High School</td>
<td>16 years old; African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Maxwell</td>
<td>Former Student Member in High School</td>
<td>16 years old; African-American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4.2

**Summary of Diego Barcenas’s Recent Academic and Behavioral Performance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student/Semester</th>
<th>Class Grades</th>
<th>Standardized Test</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>D/A</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>SS</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diego Barcenas</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2013 (8th Grade)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2013 (7th Grade)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** M=Math; LA=English Language Arts; SS=Social Studies; S=Science; 1= Elective 1; 2= Elective 2; RL= Reading Grade Equivalent; D= Discipline Referrals to Administration; A=Days Absent; Standardized Test Passing Score= 800; Passing Class Grade ≥ 70; - denotes data unavailable as student had not been administered the test.

Diego reported, “My favorite subject I’d say is math cause I am good with a lot of numbers.” In contrast, Diego found reading difficult, explaining, “Well, reading, it’s kind of difficult for me because I am not so good with my English.” Diego, who moved to the U.S. from Mexico at the age of five, received assistance with learning English through the English Language Learners program. He reported that he enjoys playing with his younger sister, riding his bike, and helping his mom around the house.

Diego spent a lot of time at home with his mother, and stated that he enjoyed helping her at home. When asked what he liked to do for fun at home, he stated:

My mom, she babysits and sometimes she needs some help around the house, so usually I play a little bit with the kids she babysits, and with the chores and anything she needs. We usually go bike riding with the kids. We still have our old small bikes so the kids like to ride around the neighborhood. I watch them from the back of the house, while my sister watches them from the front.
Diego felt that as he got older, he needed to take on more responsibility. He asserted, “Since I’m a teenager, I’m trying to support myself and helping around more because now you’re not a kid no more. You’re more of an adult and you’ve got to help yourself more in life.”

When asked where he learned that he needed to be more responsible as he got older, Diego replied:

I learned that from my dad, because he said that if I don’t stop acting like a kid, then when he is not with us no more, I’ll have to take care of my sisters and my mom. He says that I have to be more responsible to be successful in my life.

Diego defined responsibility as doing what you are required to do to be successful:

Responsibility is, to me it means to be more responsible, like to never be late, show up on time, do what you’re supposed to do, and not play around, but focus. To try to get your stuff done and ask if you have a question about it so that you can be more successful.

Part of this increasing sense of responsibility emerged in Diego’s desire to help his father:

Over the summer, my dad takes me to work roofing with him, and I earn a little money and save it up. I’m saving for my dad because in the winter sometimes he needs money to go some place to get better work because of the weather. So I’m saving up some money to help him out.

Diego credited his father with fostering this sense of responsibility to help and care for his family.

Diego mentioned several times his close relationship with his younger sister, whom he enjoyed spending time with and whom he helped to learn English. He stated:

The most difficult thing I’ve had to do in life is like trying to keep my sister focused because my little sister, she is . . . when we get home, she is kinda like failing on her English because she barely studies at school and she still can’t say some words right. I am trying to help her out. Me and her, sometimes we group up because we are bored. We write some stories and then we share them with each other and read them.

In a follow-up interview, Diego spoke of a difficult time in his life. His baby brother passed away when Diego was younger, and the tragedy deeply affected Diego. He recalled:
I was eight years old when that happened. I remember it. It was hard on me to focus in class because what happened to him. What if it happened to me or my sister? What if I couldn’t be where I am right now? Me and my sister felt really bad about it. I’ve learned that if one of your family members dies, then you have to keep going. You have to concentrate on studying and work and whatever and keep moving on. You can try to have a better life to honor them because they are not there.

The family tragedy Diego experienced early in life taught him to value perseverance, as he worked to move forward after his brother’s passing. He focused on his schoolwork and on taking care of his sister and family as a means of dealing with the tragedy. Having persevered through this event, Diego valued his family even more, and as a result his family had a major impact on his values and choices.

Diego felt that his peers sometimes picked on him because of his difficulty with English. He reported:

We moved here when I was five, and it was pretty difficult for me to get started on learning English cause I was already getting comfortable with my native language. The difficulties I have in school is mostly people making fun of how I talk. Sometimes they really hurt and I can’t do anything about it but some other times I ignore them and just keep moving on.

Perhaps as a result of his peers’ hurtful actions, during his interviews, Diego spoke mostly of the influence of his family instead of his peers.

Diego spoke emphatically of his desire to improve his use of the English language. He reported that he worked on his English at school:

I want to make my English more fluently [sic]. That will help me with my reading because it will make me a better reader and with the classes I’m taking with my language arts teacher. She helps us out with reading so we can become better readers. And in life if you don’t know how to read and write then you can’t do anything. You can only do some hard jobs that are very dangerous because they don’t involve reading or writing.

Diego desired to improve his English skills because he believed becoming a better reader and writer would provide new opportunities for him, including becoming a U.S. citizen. He
stated, “I really want to get better at English so if they open the thing that they were going to say of making us legal citizens.” Diego saw education as a crucial factor in gaining U.S. citizenship.

Diego’s family inspired him to do well in school. He reported, “Education is very important to me because I really want to help out my family in life.” Diego saw education as an avenue through which he could improve his family’s quality of life. Diego’s parents instilled in him an appreciation for his schooling by encouraging him daily to do his homework, get good rest, and value his education; in turn, Diego hoped to use his education to help his family.

Diego believed education was the pathway to obtaining a better career. He reported that he wanted to be a doctor, saying:

The thing I really want to be is a doctor cause I want to help people in life and to keep them living great. You help people by if they are sick, you can get the medication they need and tell them what kind they need to take.

Diego seemed to understand generally what doctors do, and ultimately wanted to help people who were sick. Diego’s noted that his mother influenced his aspiration to become a doctor, stating:

I learned that from my mom, who is very sick because she has diabetes. I try to help her out as much as I can so she doesn’t have to move a lot. I feel good about myself when I help her because she is sick.

Diego related his desire to improve his English to his goal of becoming a doctor. He believed learning English would help him get the classes he needs, in addition to providing him with a new set of skills. Diego said:

I can communicate to different people who speak different languages. I can help translate, and I can keep up my grades. If I can do both languages, my scores will be much higher. If I have good grades and test scores, I can have much better classes. Not the slow classes. I’ll have to take less classes to help me out. I don’t want to have to repeat classes.
Diego believed if he got better grades and thereby access to better classes, he could achieve his goal of becoming a doctor:

I have to get good grades so I can get a degree. I have to take classes of what I want to learn about and focus in those classes so I can get a job. After high school, I will try to get, I don’t know what it’s called, but it helps you get in college because of immigration. Then I have to do well there so I can keep going. I don’t know how long I have to go to be a doctor. If I keep working hard and they allow some immigrants to go to college, I think I might be able to because of all of the hard work that I am trying to do.

Diego had a basic grasp of the requirements for becoming a doctor, realizing that he had to obtain good grades and continue his education through college. He could not describe the details of the postsecondary work required to become a doctor, and was unsure of the requirements for immigrants to attend college. Nevertheless, he believed he could achieve his goals through persistent hard work.

**Summary.** Family appeared to be the dominant influence in Diego’s life, and he enjoyed taking on new responsibilities to help each member of his family. He valued responsibility and credited his father with teaching him the importance of responsibility. Diego learned to persevere as a result of difficult life experiences involving his family.

Diego’s parents instilled in him a genuine appreciation for education. He understood the importance of improving his English and demonstrated a strong desire to do so. Diego believed if he could speak better English, he and his family would have access to greater opportunities. He valued helping others and desired to become a doctor so he could help the sick. Diego understood that becoming a doctor would take hard work and good performance in school, but was less sure of the requirements for immigrants to attend college and of the professional responsibilities of doctors.
Marcus Cole

Marcus Cole is a 14-year-old male in the eighth grade who lives at home with his mother. Marcus reads on a fifth-grade level, and as a seventh grader, Marcus passed all of his classes and all subjects on the state-mandated standardized test with the exception of social studies. During the first half of his eighth grade year, Marcus was passing all of his classes and was never referred to school administrators for discipline infractions. Marcus Cole was never absent as a seventh grader, but halfway through his eighth grade year, he had four recorded absences. Marcus reported, “My favorite subject in school is band. My least favorite class is Spanish.” At home, Marcus enjoyed, “going out to the movies and going to the mall.” Table 4.3 provides a summary profile of Marcus’ recent academic and behavioral performance.

Table 4.3

Summary of Marcus Cole’s Recent Academic and Behavioral Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student/Semester</th>
<th>Class Grades</th>
<th>Standardized Test</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>D/A</th>
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<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LA</td>
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<td>88</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Spring 2013 (7th Grade)</strong></td>
<td>82</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>88</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Note.</strong> M=Math; LA=English Language Arts; SS=Social Studies; S=Science; 1= Elective 1; 2= Elective 2; RL= Reading Grade Equivalent; D= Discipline Referrals to Administration; A=Days Absent; Standardized Test Passing Score= 800; Passing Class Grade ≥ 70; - denotes data unavailable as student had not been administered the test.</td>
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</table>

Marcus stated that he valued his family and described visits with his father, although he lived primarily with his mom. He noted, “I get to see my dad about once a week. I go to his house. We get something to eat and go to the park. I don’t know what the name of the park is. We give bread to the birds and ducks, and sometimes we cook on the grill.” Marcus described
his father as someone he enjoyed spending time with, but did not elaborate on his father’s influence on his behavior or choices.

Marcus described a close relationship with his mother, and credited her with teaching him how to behave and with influencing his choices at school. He said:

My mom is pretty strict. She doesn’t let me go anywhere or do nothing, because she says I’m not old enough. I mostly spend time with her and don’t hang out with my friends. I learned stuff from my mom. She tells me what I’m supposed to do. You’re supposed to be quiet and do your work at school. I don’t get in trouble because my mom will take my games away from me.

Marcus also attributed his values to his mother’s influence, stating:

Me and my mom watch football and movies and we grill out at the house. It’s just us two. If I am disrespectful at home, she will take my games up or not let me go outside with my friends. I think she worries about me, but not too much. My mom loves me a lot. She don’t want nothing to happen to me. She teaches me not to grow crazy and to be a good man. That when I have a wife one day to be good to her.

Marcus’ mother influenced his choices outside of school, as Marcus learned to demonstrate self-control and respect for others in an effort to avoid punishment.

An ethnographic journal entry documented a period of time during the first half of his eighth grade year in which Marcus had to move in with his aunt and cousins. Marcus elaborated on the occurrence:

I had to go live with my auntie and cousins. The cousins was two of them. It was like my mom was yelling too much. She had to go to the hospital because she was out of control. I was scared. I didn’t want to move in with my auntie, because I love my mom better. My mom got better, and I live with her again now. I’m happy now.

In contrast to the choices Marcus learned to make as a result of his mother’s influence, Marcus believed many of his peers made poor choices at school. He observed:

Kids talk back and cuss like they do. That makes me kind of scared. Cause I don’t like to see people get in trouble. Those kids may do bad things because they get mad. They may throw stuff and yell. I get scared and I have bad feelings when they do that. Getting in trouble to me is like punishment. You do something you weren’t supposed to do. They do
that like every day. They do it in certain classes. Their parents cuss too much so they get it from them and from other kids.

In contrast to some of his peers, Marcus made choices to avoid punishment and other negative experiences he associated with misbehavior. He experienced tranquility when he made good choices for himself.

Marcus described his friendships at school and at home:

My friends at school, I have a lot of friends. A good friend is one who doesn’t get in trouble or do bad stuff. I go outside on Fun Friday at school and we play together . . . like basketball. I also talk to them at lunch and stuff. My friends at home, I really have just one close friend. We play basketball, baseball, and soccer. Sometimes in my yard; sometimes in his yard. He goes to school here, but he is in the sixth grade.

Marcus reported that he occasionally faced negative peer pressure from his friends:

Some friends try to pressure you, but I always say No. They want me to get in trouble. They try to throw paper and get me to make fun of other students. I don’t do that because if you get in trouble, you get held back, and you have to make new friends. You can’t see the friends you already have.

When asked about his perspective on his education, Marcus primarily reported on his behavior. He noted, “If you get in trouble, it will be on your record, and you can’t graduate and get a good academic scholarship.” Marcus frequently responded, “I don’t know” when asked how much he valued his education and what education meant to him. He believed that if he completed his schoolwork and avoided getting in trouble, his education would serve him well.

Marcus appeared motivated primarily by avoiding “getting in trouble” with regard to his education and schooling. Marcus did state that one of his values was “graduating from school.”

Elaborating on his plans for the future, Marcus explained:

Once you graduate high school, you feel big. After high school, I want to be a math teacher. You have to go to college. You have to graduate high school, and then get a scholarship. You can get a scholarship I think by . . . I don’t know. I think the principal or the superintendent gives you a scholarship. I don’t know . . . one of them. The students that graduate get a scholarship . . . some of them. The ones who pass get the scholarship.
I want to go to the [University] because it’s more better. I think they teach more stuff and have more classes.

Marcus understood that to achieve his dream of becoming a math teacher he must graduate and attend college, but he was uncertain how one specifically enrolls in and pays for college.

**Summary.** Marcus Cole reported having a close relationship with his mother and seeing his father once a week. He credited his mother with teaching him certain values and made choices to avoid punishment from his mother. Marcus saw his peers as often getting in trouble in school, and chose friends who did not get in trouble. Marcus believed if he made positive choices and stayed out of trouble he could graduate from high school. He hoped to become a teacher and knew he would have to attend college to do so, although he did not understand the specifics of attending or paying for college.

**Donnie Gibbs**

Donnie Gibbs is a 13-year-old African American male in the eighth grade who lives at home with his mother and younger brother, a seventh grader at Robinlee Middle School. As a seventh grader, Donnie passed all of his classes, receiving all A’s and B’s. During the first half of his eighth grade year, Donnie again received all A’s and B’s, and passed all subject areas of the state-mandated standardized test. He read on an eighth grade level and “exceeded the standard” in the subject areas of math, social studies, and science on the state-mandated standardized test. Donnie was never referred to the administration for discipline infractions during his seventh grade year, nor during the first half of eighth grade. Donnie was absent once as a seventh grader and not at all during the first half of his eighth grade year. Table 4.4 provides a summary profile of Donnie’s recent academic and behavioral performance.
Table 4.4

**Summary of Donnie Gibbs’s Recent Academic and Behavioral Performance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student/Semester</th>
<th>Class Grades</th>
<th>Standardized Test</th>
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<th>D/A</th>
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<td>(8th Grade)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>M  LA  SS  S  1  2</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Spring 2013</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(7th Grade)</td>
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</table>

*Note.* M=Math; LA=English Language Arts; SS=Social Studies; S=Science; 1= Elective 1; 2= Elective 2; RL= Reading Grade Equivalent; D= Discipline Referrals to Administration; A=Days Absent; Standardized Test Passing Score= 800; Exceeding the Standard > 850; Passing Class Grade ≥ 70; - denotes data unavailable as student had not been administered the test.

Donnie enjoyed coming to school, saying, “I like all of my classes. I really don’t have a favorite.” When asked about activities he enjoyed, he reported, “I really love football and playing football for the school. Sometimes I watch TV.”

Donnie credited his parents as having a positive impact on his life. In his first interview he stated, “I learn most about life from my parents. They taught me not to smoke, drink, do drugs, join gangs, and stuff like that.” Donnie credited his mother with being his greatest influence, noting:

My mom has the biggest influence in my life. She’s always there. She gives me good advice. She understands where I’m coming from. She’s like a role model to me. She never lets me go anywhere where I could get in trouble. She taught me how to be a leader.

Donnie reported that his parents taught him wrong from right, and he looked up to his mother and heeded his mother’s advice.
Donnie sees his father every Tuesday and every other weekend. Although Donnie stated that his father had an influence on him, his father’s absence also had an effect on him. He reported:

I don’t see my father as much. I think that’s why I look up to my mom so much. When I’m at home with my mom, I feel like I have to be the man in the family. I have to look after her and my brother.

Without his father at home, Donnie felt a sense of responsibility as the oldest male in the house. Donnie said his father taught him values, but credited his mother with having the greatest impact on his value system, teaching him how to make positive choices in both school and life.

Donnie reported that the hardest part of being a teenager was peer pressure. In his first interview, he asserted:

Peer pressure is hard. Peers try to talk me into bad things. Wrong things like in class. Like they wanna talk and I know I have to pay attention and I have to get my work done before I can do any of that stuff. I’m trying to be honest. Sometimes I play around, but most of the time I pay attention and do my work.

Although peer pressure was frustrating for Donnie in the classroom, where he felt other students did not share his goals and tried to get him off track, he did not report encountering peer pressure outside of school:

I hear a lot of kids getting pressured to do drugs or drink or join gangs. Most teenagers face peer pressure to do those things. I don’t face those kinds of peer pressures, because I don’t hang around people that do that stuff.

Donnie did not experience peer pressure outside of school because “I don’t really hang out socially with friends outside of school.” When asked why students engaged in negative behaviors outside of school, Donnie replied, “They feel lonely. They need someone to hang around. Maybe they don’t have that at home.” Donnie believed some of his peers were searching for acceptance because they did not find acceptance at home.
Donnie was viewed by a majority of students as a leader among his peers. An ethnographic journal entry documented an instance in which students on a field trip were asked who a leader was at Robinlee—field trip participants identified Donnie as a leader. When asked to define a leader, Donnie replied:

A leader means being responsible, respectful, hard working, a communicator, and a risk-taker. I believe I’m all of those things. I’m responsible, respectful. I work hard and I try to communicate and take risks. I hardly ever get in trouble.

Donnie acknowledged that his friends perceived him as a leader because of his values. When asked where he learned those values, he responded, “From my mom. I learned it from my mom.” Donnie believed the leadership qualities he exhibited reflected his mother’s influence.

Donnie cited football as another important factor influencing his decisions. He described the value of playing football:

I’ve been playing since I was four or five. I like contact. When I hit someone it gives me confidence. I like helping the team win, too. Football teaches me to stay out of trouble, because you can’t play if you get in trouble and have a bad attitude.

Football influenced Donnie’s decision-making by encouraging him to stay out of trouble, and his attitude by teaching him to remain positive.

Donnie reported that he liked school, and said his favorite part of middle school was “learning new things and being around my friends.” Donnie wanted to go to college so he could be “successful,” noting that successful means “to be a leader.” Donnie valued leadership and felt he possessed the values that accompany being a leader. He believed college would help him continue to act as a leader, and thus would guarantee him success. Donnie had a minimal understanding of the steps one takes to get to college:

I will pass the CRCT obviously and go to high school. I will take the SAT in 9th grade and the ACT in 10th grade. I will get my credits in 11th and 12th grade. And then I will get accepted to a college. I want to go to a college closer to home. By passing the two tests and getting my credits, I will get to college.
Donnie knew he must pass his classes to receive his high school diploma, and he understood the need to take and pass standardized tests and college entrance exams for admission to college. When asked about the application process for college, however, Donnie admitted, “I don’t really know how that stuff goes.”

Donnie had aspirations for life after college. He asserted, “I want to be drafted to the NFL. If that doesn’t work out maybe I can get my own business in technology. Something like computers. I don’t really know how to explain it.” Donnie based his career aspirations on two activities he valued and enjoyed. He enjoyed football and desired to play professionally. However, he acknowledged that football might not work out, and in that case he would choose a career involving technology and entrepreneurship. Although Donnie demonstrated a basic understanding of the need to go to college to prepare for a profession, he did not know how a career in technology would make him a leader, and thus, successful.

**Summary.** Donnie admired his parents and gave them credit for instilling in him an appreciation for education. He credited his parents, and especially his mother, with teaching him to make positive choices. Peers at school often distracted Donnie, and he noted that some of his peers experienced peer pressure outside of school, possibly because they were unfulfilled at home. Donnie did not report experiencing peer pressure outside of school because he rarely interacted socially with his peers.

Donnie viewed himself as a leader and his peers acknowledged his leadership. He credited his mother with teaching him how to be a leader and instilling in him values associated with being a leader. Donnie exhibited an interest in attending college and displayed a basic understanding of the requirements for attending college, but could not articulate how attending college related to his career interests.
Johnny Gordon

Johnny Gordon is a 14-year-old African-American male in the eighth grade who lives at home with his mother, stepfather, and high school aged sister. As a seventh grader, Johnny failed his English Language Arts class, but passed all subjects on the state-mandated standardized test. Johnny reads on a seventh grade level and “exceeded the standard” on the science portion of the state-mandated standardized test.

During the first half of his eighth grade year, Johnny was failing social studies, math, and one of his electives. He was referred to school administrators for discipline infractions on three occasions as a seventh grader, and on two occasions during the first half of his eighth grade year. Johnny had no recorded absences as a seventh grader and halfway through his eighth grade year had been absent one time.

Johnny reported that his favorite subjects were social studies and math. He said, “I like learning about our economy, government and stuff. And I like history. I like math better than language arts.” Johnny enjoyed playing sports with his friends. “I like to play basketball, play football, play games. I like to play with my friends outside.” Table 4.5 provides a summary profile of Johnny’s recent academic and behavioral performance.

Johnny expressed great admiration for his stepfather, and appreciation for his mother’s help with difficult situations he encountered. He reported in his first interview:

Yeah, he’s the best father ever. He stayed with me instead of he didn’t make bad decisions like my biological father. He gives me what I want. Clothes, shoes, games, and simple, child-like things. Mostly because in previous years I’ve done what I’m supposed to do. I never ask him for something serious. If I don’t do good, he won’t give me anything. Most of the time when I don’t do good, he doesn’t even talk to me. I hate that. I would look at him the same way if he didn’t. He stepped into my life when he didn’t have to. My mom didn’t have anything else. Everything got better for my mom, me, and my sister. If I need it, he will still buy it. Most of the time I be wanting a shirt, he’ll get it for me if I’m doing right. I want to do good in school so my dad will talk to me and he will take me places.
Table 4.5

Summary of Johnny Gordon’s Recent Academic and Behavioral Performance

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<tr>
<th>Student/Semester</th>
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<th>Standardized Test</th>
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<th>D/A</th>
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<td>M  LA  SS  S 1 2</td>
<td>M  LA  R  SS  S  RL  D  A</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Spring 2013 (7th Grade)</td>
<td>74 68 77 65 90 68 807 831 812 810 900 4.1 4 0</td>
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</table>

Note. M=Math; LA=English Language Arts; SS=Social Studies; S=Science; 1= Elective 1; 2= Elective 2; RL= Reading Grade Equivalent; D= Discipline Referrals to Administration; A=Days Absent; Standardized Test Passing Score= 800; Exceeding the Standard ≥ 850; Passing Class Grade ≥ 70; - denotes data unavailable as student had not been administered the test.

Johnny’s admiration for his stepfather led him to try to behave and do well in school.

Johnny reported that he relies on his mother to help him with “serious situations.” In his follow up interview, Johnny stated:

I talk to my mom about serious things, like problems with life or drama at school. She helps me with situations I’m having problems with. She gives me ways I can do better or ways I can handle situations. When I play outside with my friends, she trusts me as long as I don’t do anything crazy, and I’m home by 10:00 (p.m.) on the weekends. I have to be home by 8:30 (p.m.) on weekdays.

Johnny looked to his mother for guidance in dealing with challenging situations. She appeared to make the rules about his behavior and curfew, and Johnny attempted to abide by these rules.

Both of Johnny’s parents are involved in monitoring his performance in school. Johnny reported:

I have to do my homework before I leave and my parents check it, because they email with my teachers. My parents take school very seriously because they did and that’s the environment they grew up in and me. Education is important to my mom and stepdad, because they want to see me do good and don’t want to see me struggle like my real father did. He dropped out of high school, and went to jail. He could never get a job after that. They don’t want to see me struggle. I value my education to make my parents proud.
Johnny valued his education because his parents did, and he sought to do well in school because this is what his parents expected of him. Johnny was disciplined or lost privileges when he did not make good choices in the eyes of his parents.

Johnny reported, “getting distracted by girls, so sometimes I don’t focus or do what I’m supposed to do. I focus on other things than school.” Although seeking approval from peers influenced his choices, Johnny did not mention peers affecting his value system. He said, “I don’t feel peer pressure to do drugs or drink or party or any of that stuff. I stay away from it.”

Johnny enjoyed spending time with his friends. In his follow-up interview, he asserted:

> I hang out with friends that live near me that go here. We ride our bikes all over town. Sometimes we walk around different stores. We ride every weekend, but we go eat or go to the mall about every other weekend. We ride our bikes all the way to the mall. I love riding bikes. I don’t care how far it is.

Although Johnny enjoyed spending time with his peers, he did not report that his friends influenced what he valued. Johnny may have made decisions based on some peer influence, but any such influence was usually superseded by the stronger influence of his parents.

An ethnographic journal entry documented an incident in which Johnny was involved in a fight on the school bus. Johnny’s parents met with the principal, and subsequently disciplined him for his actions. “My parents haven’t let me go outside in two months except last Saturday.” Although Johnny chose to fight with a peer, his parents attempted to influence his future choices to prevent him from acting in this manner again. Johnny referred to playing football as a major part of his life, stating:

> I like being physical. It releases anger in me. I can hit someone on the field if they make me angry. Sports teaches me to grow up and stop being childish. Like what the coach says to me or what we do in practice. It teaches me discipline like how we do drills. Not to disrespect my coaches.
Johnny believed football instilled in him desirable character traits and values. He asserted, “I also learn teamwork and sportsmanship.” Playing football was also provided a channel through which to release anger. Johnny recalled, “Last year it was horrible. My grades were horrible. My parents wouldn’t let me play football for like a whole month.” Because Johnny valued playing football so highly, his parents were able to use football as a tool to motivate Johnny.

Johnny emphasized how much he valued his education, noting in his first interview, “Education is very important. I don’t want to stay in this town the rest of my life. I want to go to college. I want to get to the next step.” Johnny saw college as necessary for reaching this “next step.” In his first interview he stated, “I want to either play pro football or make a car business or sell real estate or stuff.” At another point in the interview, he exclaimed, “I want to be an engineer, like being a nurse.” Johnny was clearly undecided about his professional future, and in a follow-up interview, he changed his mind again. “I don’t want to play pro football anymore. I want to go to school for art. I want to be a better artist.” In the course of the two interviews, Johnny identified six different occupations he might want to pursue.

Although Johnny was unsure of his future occupational interests, he was certain he wanted to make money. He said, “I want to be rich. I want to make money and be a millionaire.” Johnny was equally sure that he wanted to attend a particular state university, stating:

I want to go to [state university] because of football. In my opinion it’s the greatest college because the thing I want to go to school for. I have a booklet from there. It says that 30% of the students go there for arts and sciences.

Johnny’s keen interest in football led him to seek out information on this university, but he lacked a clear understanding of how such a school would help him obtain future employment.

Johnny was also uncertain how he would get to college. He said, “I will do the things my parents tell me to do now—good grades and good behavior. Other than that I have no idea what
to do.” Johnny trusted that his parents knew what it took to get to college, and his parents used his desire to attend this specific university as a motivational tool. Johnny stated, “My parents always remind me that I want to go to [state university] at home and they say those grades are not what the coach at [state university] wants.” Johnny did not know what steps were required to gain admission to his desired university, so he looked to his parents to guide him in these steps.

Johnny relayed information that did not always coincide with his actions at school. When asked to explain this discrepancy, he replied:

I can sit in class and do my work. I talk to a teacher on the side. The teachers say I’m passing. When I get progress reports, it’s a completely different story. My grades aren’t high, because I guess I get a big head [and] I start slugging off when they tell me I’m passing.

Johnny’s actions in school did not always align with his reported goals and values, an inconsistency he attributed to “slugging off” when he thought he was doing well.

Summary. Johnny’s parents and peers, as well as his involvement with football, influenced his choices, values, and understanding of his education. However, his parents appeared to be the dominant influences in his life. Johnny expressed great admiration for his stepfather, who rewarded him for good behavior and academic performance, and for his mother, who helped him make choices in difficult situations. Peers had limited influence in Johnny’s decision-making and value system, while he credited football with teaching him various values. He cited the sport as the reason he wanted to attend a certain university, yet his parents controlled his ability to be part of the football team.

Johnny did not have a clear understanding of how he would get to college or what he wanted to do with his life, but he trusted his parents to help him make the right decisions. Johnny believed education was important because his parents believed it was important. Although his
actions did not always align with his stated values, Johnny relied primarily on parental influence in making choices and identifying his values.

**Brandon Norris**

Brandon Norris is a 13-year-old white male in the eighth grade who lives at home with his mother, aunt, uncle, and two younger cousins. Brandon has an older brother who lives with his father in another state. Brandon reads on a 12th grade level, and as a seventh grader, he passed all of his classes and all subjects of the state-mandated standardized test. He “exceeded the standard” on the social studies and science portions of the state-mandated standardized test, and during the first half of his eighth grade year, he was passing all his classes. Brandon was never referred to school administrators for discipline infractions, and missed only one day during his seventh grade year.

Brandon’s favorite subject in school is English Language Arts, and he is performing well in school. He reported in his first interview that he enjoys “playing video games and reading.” Brandon noted that he does not enjoy doing chores at home. “There is something about being a teenager. Like the chores. I have to take my dog out and sometimes it takes too long.” Table 4.6 provides a summary of Brandon’s recent academic and behavioral performance.

Brandon expressed admiration for his mother, stating, “I am closest to my mom. We are always hanging around, doing a lot. Most of the things I do, I do with her. Sometimes we go to the gym together.” In his first interview, Brandon credited his mother with teaching him several important life lessons:

My mom taught me that life isn’t fair. She said life isn’t fair because there are a lot of things that happen in the world and that’s not fair. You have to go with the flow. You’ve got to move along with it. She’s taught me to not be disrespectful. People won’t like me if I’m disrespectful. Yeah. I know this to be true.
Table 4.6

Summary of Brandon Norris’s Recent Academic and Behavioral Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student/Semester</th>
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<th>Standardized Test</th>
<th>R</th>
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<td>11.0</td>
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Note. M=Math; LA=English Language Arts; SS=Social Studies; S=Science; 1= Elective 1; 2= Elective 2; RL= Reading Grade Equivalent; D= Discipline Referrals to Administration; A=Days Absent; Standardized Test Passing Score= 800; Exceeding the Standard > 850; Passing Class Grade ≥ 70; - denotes data unavailable as student had not been administered the test.

Brandon credited his mother with teaching him about life and the importance of behaving respectfully. As a result, Brandon learned to persevere through hard times and to treat others with respect. In his first interview, he stated:

My mom is going to school and she has a job, but she doesn’t really make very much money. She wants to be a nurse, cause she can save people’s lives. So we live with our aunt and uncle. I didn’t want to move in really. That’s because I like it with just us. I mean I was okay with it, but I’d rather it just be me and my mom. Pretty soon, we will get our own house, though. I understand why we had to do it.

Brandon reported that when he does poorly in school or gets in trouble, he is grounded. He explained how this consequence influences him not to misbehave, noting, “Because then I’ll get grounded and you don’t want to get grounded. I’m just saying you don’t want to because it’s no fun. I have to work.” Brandon’s mother has a major influence both on his values in general, and his values specifically related to schooling and education.
Brandon admires male family members other than his father and was close to his late grandfather, whom he said was the reason he and his mom moved. Brandon’s grandfather was sick, so he and his mother moved to be closer to him. Brandon described this time:

One of the hardest things I’ve ever been through in my life is seeing my grandfather die. I didn’t see him, but when I heard. He took us to a lot of places. The coolest place he took us was to Las Vegas. It was a long ride and we went to the Hoover Dam. When we got there, we found a small town and it has like a zoo park. We spent almost the entire night trying to find someone to get us in. But we moved, and about two months after, my grandfather died of cancer.

Brandon enjoyed spending time with his grandfather, who took him to various places, and he remembered those events in detail. When asked what his grandfather taught him, he replied, “I can’t really think of anything right now.” Although Brandon had fond memories of his grandfather, he did not elaborate on any values his grandfather taught him.

Brandon also expressed admiration for his older brother. In his first follow up interview, he asserted:

I admire my brother, because he taught me a lot of stuff. Like how to play video games and I’ve been around him for most of my life until I moved. He always wants to talk to me even though we are so far away from each other. He always likes to do stuff with me when I see him.

Brandon looks up to his older brother and acknowledges his influence; however, he did not elaborate on his brother’s impact on any of his specific choices or values.

Brandon chose not to speak much about his father, but did offer the following:

I was sad when we had to move away from my dad. I never talk to him anymore, because . . . because I can’t tell you why. I sort of miss him. I used to see him, but he doesn’t live near us. I don’t want to talk about it.

Brandon’s father does not seem to have much influence in Brandon’s life.

Brandon reported that he enjoys being alone sometimes, and that he feels bullied by his peers at school. In his first follow-up interview, Brandon shared:
I like being alone because I get to have my own personal space, and I get to do something that I want to do. If I’m in the mood to be around people I will, but if I don’t then I really won’t. I feel good and happy when I’m alone.

Brandon also reported that he enjoys being alone because he is sometimes bullied at school. In his first interview, he recounted, “Kids at school sometimes talk about me, throw stuff at me, do things . . . push me. It makes me feel like everybody hates me. Sometimes kids make balls of paper and turn around and bop you in the face. It sucks.”

Bullying was a source of distraction for Brandon, as he explained. “It affects how I learn. Sometimes it makes me feel like I don’t want to come to school.” Ethnographic journaling documented a classroom event in which another student slapped Brandon on the back of the head. Brandon became very upset as a result of this incident. Brandon saw his peers as bullies at times, making it hard for him to focus and discouraging him from wanting to come to school.

Brandon’s peers did not influence him to make choices that would get him in trouble. When asked if he engaged in bullying others or distracting other students from learning, Brandon responded, “I don’t cause what they are doing could be bad and get you in serious trouble. And maybe if you are doing something bad people will not like you because you are a mean person.”

Peer influence did not change how he valued education, but it did affect his school life. Although Brandon described feeling bullied, he also reported that peer companionship was more favorable than being alone. Although he contradicted his earlier “I have friends at school in the eighth grade. I would rather be at school with my friends than be at home by myself.” Outside of school, Brandon mentioned only one friend, a sixth grader whom he described as his closest friend. “He lives in my neighborhood. I like to spend the night at his house. I don’t really hang out with other kids outside of school.”
Brandon reported that playing video games and reading were some of his favorite parts of being a teenager. In his first follow-up interview, Brandon said:

I like to play video games because they are fun and give me something to do. They make me feel un-bored. I play them at night. The games I play are rated M for mature. I play Call of Duty and Halo and sometimes Bioshock or Grand Theft Auto. I like those because they are military games. The other two are just if I don’t like playing the other ones. I have to concentrate when I’m playing because I might miss something. Especially if you play online. It’s annoying when that happens. I want to do good in those games, so people when know I’m good at them.

Brandon is influenced by his passion for video games. He reported that he learns to concentrate from playing video games, and performing well in the games makes him feel good about himself.

Brandon also enjoys reading in his free time, and on several occasions in his ethnographic journal he described reading as one of his favorite things to do. He reported that reading offered an escape from bullying. In his first interview he shared:

I read most of the time. Fiction books. Fiction like fantasy. Lockdown: Escape from Furnace. It’s a series. A kid that goes to the penitentiary for a crime he did not commit. The book is real except for some things in the book. At the end, in the last book, the fourth and fifth books is when he gets out. It is almost like an Apocalypse. I read cause it makes me feel better. It keeps my mind away from thinking about a person bullying me.

Brandon reported that his education was “super important.” He said, “You need to be educated so you can go to college and get a good job.” Brandon reported that he wanted to go to college, explaining:

You have to have the skills you need for it. I mean some jobs you have to have certain skills. Like if you want to be a teacher, you have to go to the schools to get the skills to be a teacher.

Brandon seemed to understand that the fundamental purpose of attending college is to learn necessary skills and increase one’s chances for employment. He stated that he planned to
attend college, but did not demonstrate a clear understanding of how one attends college. When asked how he would get to college, he replied:

I have to graduate from high school and middle school and get a scholarship, but I don’t know how you get a scholarship. I don’t get why college has to cost so much. I know I have to make good grades and find a college to go to on the Internet. Then you have to register and I don’t know. I don’t know the answers to how you get to college.

Brandon knew that college costs money, but he did not know how to get a scholarship, nor could he describe an appropriate protocol for finding a college to attend.

Brandon also expressed an interest in joining the military, stating, “I kinda want to go to the military. Either the Navy or the Army.” He noted that this interest developed because he had family members who had served in the military. “My dad, my grandpa, my uncle, my cousins have been in the military.” Brandon did not have a realistic understanding of how joining the military would coincide with college. He stated, “You can go to college to be a technician and you can use those skills while you are in the military.” Despite expressing an interest in both college and military service, Brandon did not understand how the two would fit into his future plans.

**Summary.** Family and peers each had an influence on Brandon. He described a close relationship with his mother, whom he admired and respected, and who instilled values of respectfulness and perseverance in Brandon. Brandon’s mom expected him to do well in school and as a result, he made efforts to perform well in school. Brandon reported being bullied at times and enjoyed being alone at times. When alone, his favorite activities were playing video games and reading, but he did not view these two pastimes as influencing his values.

Brandon’s peers had little negative influence on his value system. Although he was concerned at times about how his friends perceived him, he maintained that he did not engage in bullying or distracting behaviors. Brandon hoped to attend college and possibly join the military,
following in the footsteps of many of his family members. Brandon did not have a clear understanding of what it would take to attend college or of how college and the military might work together in his future plans.

**Louis Parker**

Louis Parker is a 14-year-old African-American male in the eighth grade who lives at home with his mother and three toddler siblings. As a seventh grader, Louis failed his English Language Arts class, but passed all subject areas of the state-mandated standardized test. Louis read on an 11th grade level and “exceeded the standard” on the math, English Language Arts, and science portions of the state-mandated standardized test. During the first half of his eighth grade year, Louis was passing all of his classes. As a seventh grader he was referred to school administrators twice for discipline infractions, but he had not been referred to school administrators at all in the first half of his eighth grade year. Louis was absent twice as a seventh grader, and halfway through his eighth grade year, had no recorded absences.

At school, Louis enjoyed writing, saying, “I like to write. I like about writing like you can just think stuff about it and just write it down. Like write stories.” In addition to writing, Louis enjoyed spending time with his friends at school and at home. Louis noted, “I like to see my friends at school. Sometimes we hang out at my house or somewhere in the neighborhood playing basketball.” Table 4.7 provides a summary profile of Louis’ recent academic and behavioral performance.

Louis rarely saw his father, but reported having a close relationship with his mother. Louis was affected by his father’s absence and spoke about his parents’ divorce when he was younger. He said:
Yeah, I kind of grew up fast. Cause my momma, like when my momma and daddy broke up . . . not necessarily broke up but when my daddy just left, I guess I didn’t have the right guidance. I tried to turn to my mom, but it wasn’t the same.

Table 4.7

*Summary of Louis Parker’s Recent Academic and Behavioral Performance*

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<tr>
<th>Student/Semester</th>
<th>Class Grades</th>
<th>Standardized Test</th>
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*Note.* M=Math; LA=English Language Arts; SS=Social Studies; S=Science; 1= Elective 1; 2= Elective 2; RL= Reading Grade Equivalent; D= Discipline Referrals to Administration; A=Days Absent; Standardized Test Passing Score= 800; Exceeding the Standard > 850; Passing Class Grade > 70; - denotes data unavailable as student had not been administered the test.

Louis felt keenly the lack of a male role model to guide him in making the right choices.

In his first interview, Louis described how he felt about his relationship with his father:

I have sort of a relationship with my dad. I mean I see him like two times a year. It’s difficult because everyone wants to grow up with their mom and their dad. I don’t feel anger or sadness, but I feel like I’m missing a part of my life that I need to have.

Louis perceived his mother as strict, but he had a great appreciation for her. Louis credited his mother with helping him grow up. Referring to a change in his behavior from his seventh to eighth grade year, Louis said:

Last year I was careless. I kept thinking about my mom. I wanted to see a change. I didn’t like what I saw in myself last year. It was all my mom that made me change. I was tired of seeing her cry and stressed out about me, because I know she has so much other stuff going on. This year is better. It’s like I’m teaching her stuff and she’s teaching me stuff. We are working together.
Louis and his mother developed a mutually respectful relationship in which Louis saw his mother as someone he cared deeply for and desired to please. Ethnographic journal entries documented several occasions on which Louis’ mother kept in touch with his teachers and other school officials to be sure Louis was on track.

Louis was greatly affected by peer pressure and had a genuine concern for how his friends perceived him, stating, “I always want to have all the attention. I like making people laugh and smile.” Louis claimed the most difficult choices he made had to do with his peers. He asserted, “The difficult choices I have to make are the right people, putting myself in the right like environment with the right people so I can stay focused.”

Louis faced pressure from his peers to engage in negative behaviors, and described a time earlier in middle school when he made negative choices because of peer influence. Describing his first two years in middle school, Louis said:

I can say, like back in the past . . . I used to wanna try to do bad stuff. You know. Doing actions—hanging with the guys, smoke weed with them. Be around them. It started in about the middle of my sixth grade year. Like the older kids in the neighborhood. I guess like seeing people I used to look up to go on this road and I guess I think he do it, why can’t I do it? They think we grewed up together, we gonna do it together. People nowadays they want respect in different ways. I guess I was doing that because I wanted more respect.

Louis reported that he began to change his behavior before his eighth grade year. An ethnographic journal entry documented an occasion in which older peers in the neighborhood asked Louis to “come smoke weed.” Louis refused this request and went home. When asked why his behavior changed, Louis replied:

Cause my momma, she talks to me. She knows what the consequences are going to be right when I started off. Like what I do this year will help me for next year. I started to choose new friends. I changed the way I do things or how I act in general. I try to be about business when it’s business time. I guess I can say the people I looked up to, I don’t look up to them anymore. As I got older my maturity grew. My maturity level grew as I grew. It’s a feeling and the way I think about things has changed. I guess that’s maturing.
I guess I’m listening to people telling me what a good student I can be if I keep my mind right.

As Louis grew older, he began to think about and value his education more:

I guess my education might feel more important to me than last year. Cause last year my mind was like crazy. Like how I think. Like my mind is different. Like my education feels more important to me than anything.

He continued:

You don’t come to school to have fun, but you gotta take the small things they give you. Some kids say teachers don’t like them. I try to listen to teachers and get on their good side. I let teachers help me. Honestly, I’m going to say I love to learn. I would choose to learn before I’d like want to hang out with my friends.

Louis displayed a genuine interest in learning. He sought to establish positive relationships with his teachers and to make positive choices for his education. When asked what the most difficult part of school was, Louis replied:

The hardest part of school is just not doing the things you would at home cause you can get caught up for the smallest things. Like the language and the way you talk. You gotta learn how to talk English properly. Cause we grewed up with a lot of slang and stuff. It’s like a bad habit.

Louis saw school as an avenue to help prepare him to be successful, and had aspirations of joining the United States Air Force. He stated:

I come to school because I want to be successful. Successful to me looks like waking up and having a good job to go to. Not just that, but my family doing okay. Having a house, clothes, food. I just want to be able to take care of my responsibilities when I get older.

Louis believed that learning and making positive choices at school would help him become successful. Success, to Louis, meant taking responsibility for his own needs and the needs of his family. Louis aspired to attend college and join the U.S. Air Force. When asked what he knew about the Air Force, Louis answered:

I been wanting to go to the Air Force since fourth grade. I was always interested in airplanes. I was researching about the military and the Air Force like in the fifth grade. I wrote a paper about it. I know I’m going to be in college because I don’t want to just go
straight in the military and start out at a low rank. I want to go to college then so I can already have some rank when I go to the Air Force. I know they can rescue people from fires and stuff like that. I know that mechanics know how to work on airplanes.

Louis demonstrated a moderate understanding of the relationship between going to college and joining the Air Force. He was able to describe some of the activities of Air Force members and connect his current and past interests to his career aspirations. Louis credited his knowledge of the Air Force to research he had completed in school.

When asked how he would go about joining the Air Force, he replied:

I will get there by staying in school. After high school, I want to go to college so I can enter at a high rank. When I go to college I want to study engineering. That has a lot to do with airplanes. So does math. I don’t know what to do after that. I know I go to training. I don’t think about how I will get there that much.

Louis had a minimal understanding of how one enters the Air Force and how going to college might interact with joining the Air Force. He could identify subjects that related to airplanes, and believed he would need to study those subjects in college.

**Summary.** Louis admired his mother but experienced a void as a result of his father’s absence after his parents’ divorce. Louis credited his mother with helping him change his negative behaviors and distance himself from peer pressure from older peers he once looked up to. Louis perceived that he was maturing and attempting to make more positive choices than he had in the past. He began to prioritize his education and developed a genuine appreciation for learning. Louis sought to be successful in assuming new responsibilities in the future. He desired to attend college and join the Air Force, but could not identify the specific steps needed to achieve these aspirations.

**Darius Robinson**

Darius Robinson is a 15-year-old African-American male in the eighth grade who lives at home with his mother and a younger brother and sister. As a seventh grader, Darius passed all of
his classes with the exception of one elective, and passed all subjects of the state-mandated standardized test except social studies. Darius “exceeded the standard” on the science portion of the state-mandated standardized test. During the first half of his eighth grade year, Darius was failing his English Language Arts class but passing all his other classes. He was not referred to school administrators for discipline infractions during his seventh grade year or in the first half of his eighth grade year.

Darius was absent just once as a seventh grader, and halfway through his eighth grade year, he had one recorded absence. Darius reported that his favorite class at school was, “Gym, cause you get to shoot basketball.” At home he enjoyed “playing games and shooting basketball.” Darius reported that he enjoyed being with his friends at school. Table 4.8 provides a summary profile of Darius’ recent academic and behavioral performance.

Table 4.8

Summary of Darius Robinson’s Recent Academic and Behavioral Performance

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Note. M=Math; LA=English Language Arts; SS=Social Studies; S=Science; 1= Elective 1; 2= Elective 2; RL= Reading Grade Equivalent; D= Discipline Referrals to Administration; A=Days Absent; Standardized Test Passing Score ≥ 800; Exceeding the Standard ≥ 850; Passing Class Grade ≥ 70; - denotes data unavailable as student had not been administered the test.

When asked what was important in his life, Darius replied, “My momma, my dad, my brother, and sister.” While Darius’ mother, with whom he lived, had a great deal of influence on the choices Darius made with regard to academics and behavior, his father’s influence had a role
in Darius’ participation in sports. Darius reported that his mother expected him to do well in
school, and he chose to behave appropriately in school, “because I don’t want to get in trouble
with my mom.” He asserted, “She worries about me a lot. Where I am and what I’m doing. She
wants me to pass all my classes.”

Although Darius’ did not live with his father, he was still concerned about his father’s
perception of him. This was especially true in relation to Darius’ involvement in sports, which
was an area in which he and his father connected. Darius stated:

   Football is a big thing for my dad. We talk about it a lot. He wants me to be as good as he
was. When I quit the team, he be mad at me at first. He talked to me about quitting. He
asked me why I didn’t get in and what I be doing.

His father’s involvement in Darius’ life tended to revolve around sports, and Darius wanted to do
well in sports to please his father. He perceived that his father expected his performance in
football to meet certain standards.

   Darius tried to assume a leadership role in the house in his father’s absence, so he
encouraged his brother to do well in school. When asked about his relationship with his brother,
he replied,

   I’m good friends with my brother. You know when we be playing, he always be wanting
to be on my team no matter who we are playing. He wants to go to the NBA. I told my
brother—he say he want to go to college and play basketball and if he tell you, he say he
goin’ there for one year and get drafted. I told him he need to stay longer, so if he get
hurt, he could still have a degree or something. He could still have somewhere to work.

   Darius tried to instill in his brother the value of education, and encouraged him to stay
out of trouble. He stated, “I try to say if you want to, you got to be good if you gonna play
basketball. If you gonna get in trouble, you won’t get to play.” Darius tried to teach values to his
brother that were likely taught to Darius by his mother. Darius valued his family, and they in turn
influenced his choices.
Darius was easily influenced by his peers, and perceived his relationship with his peers as a distraction from his schoolwork. Darius seemed very concerned with how his friends perceived him, and on several occasions he spoke of his friends distracting him in school. He said:

We be messing with each other at school. Talking about what each other wears and laughing at each other. My friends and stuff be distracting me. I have to try to stop talking and get to work. My friends make me get in trouble. I don’t want to be around my friends, so I want to be focused.

Darius was concerned that he could not focus in class, at times, because of his interaction with his friends. When asked why he engaged in teasing with his friends, he replied:

When they say something about me, we always play like that because it’s funny. If you say something to those who don’t, they get mad. I try to focus sometimes and they force me to say something back. I try to ignore it, but they keep saying something. If I don’t it would probably stop, but my friends will tell me to get on ’em and say something back, so I do it.

Darius took little personal responsibility for his role in engaging in teasing and disruption with his peers, instead blaming his friends for distracting him from his schoolwork. Although he knew if he stopped engaging in the interaction the teasing would likely stop, he still chose to engage in disruptive behavior.

Darius cited engaging in disruptive behavior with his peers as a reason for quitting football. He reported:

People I was hanging with were playing around and I would get in trouble, so I wouldn’t get in. So I quit. It’s the same as when I’m in class, and I’m around the wrong people and they be talking and playing and stuff.

Darius knew he would not get to play in football games if he continued to engage in disruptive behavior, but instead of discontinuing his disruptive behavior, he chose to quit the football team.

Darius stated that he valued music and sports. When asked what he valued about music, he replied:
I like to listen to music. Rap, like hip-hop. Music is one of the only things I have to do when I’m bored. Music makes me feel good and hyper like I wanna dance. Rap I like the lyrics I can connect to. I like the figurative language and the metaphors and similes. Like comparing things to other things makes sense to me. Rap teaches me good values because it is a talent and it takes hard work. Music and rap influences my life to maybe keep me out of trouble.

Darius perceived his affinity for rap music as something that kept him out of trouble, and he was able to relate ideas he learned listening to music to ideas he learned in his English Language Arts class. Rap, for Darius, was a source of entertainment that prompted feelings of excitement.

Darius also noted that he valued sports, especially football. When asked why he valued sports, he responded:

I love football. I wanna win. Like I wanna win. I want to score. I like being recognized. It makes me feel good. I get excited. I like to hit people and stuff. I like to tackle. It helps my team win on the defensive side. It makes me feel like I’m doing something I had to do. I’m handling my business. Like when someone counts on me to do something and I do it.

Darius valued football because he perceived football as place where he could be recognized, be part of a team, and assume new responsibilities.

Darius stated that he valued his education, observing, “It’s important to me. I only want to get A’s and B’s, so I can get in a good college. So I can get a degree. So I can be a music producer.” Darius appeared confident that he wanted to attend college, and believed getting good grades would help him get into college. He said, “You have to be a good guy. You work hard and you make people notice you and you know a lot of people. You don’t do the stuff that other people do.”

Darius believed that to get to college he needed to behave appropriately and to avoid peer pressure, and if he worked hard and “got to know people,” he would be able to attend college. Although Darius was confident that he wanted to go to college, he was unsure of specifically how to obtain a college education. When asked how he would pay for college, he replied:
Well my momma’s got me a bank account, but I don’t know how much money she got in there. I guess I can get a loan, but I don’t know how to do all that stuff. Like getting to college.

Darius was unsure of the specific details related to paying for, enrolling in, or attending college.

Darius was confident in his career goal but uncertain how to achieve it. He said, “I want to be a music producer. They like create beeps and make raps and stuff, or they make lyrics and get rappers started.” Darius seemed to have a general idea of what music producers did, but did not know how he would be compensated as a music producer. He asserted, “I think they make a lot of money. I don’t know how they get it, though.” Darius did not understand how attending college would coincide with a career in the music industry, reflecting:

I think music producers need an education. I got to get a diploma and go to college. Some don’t, but I want to. Then you get started making time and saving money so I can go to the studio so I can write all the time to figure out lyrics and stuff. I would get a job. Like at the new Kroger. I could download beats from the Internet.

**Summary.** Darius’ mother’s expectations influenced his performance in school as well as his behavior. Darius also valued his father’s perception of him and attempted to please his father when engaging in sports. Although he understood his parents’ expectations of him, Darius was also subject to negative influences from his peers. He engaged in disruptive behaviors with his friends and blamed these behaviors for deficient performances in school or sports. Darius did this despite being aware of the consequences associated with his disruptive behavior.

Darius valued music and sports, and spent his free time engaging in these activities. Consequently, these pastimes had an impact on his value system. Darius was confident he would attend college and become a music producer, but confused about how college would contribute to such a career. He was unaware of specifically how one would choose, enroll in, and attend a college, and did not demonstrate a sound understanding of music production as a career. These various influences affected Darius’ daily choices.
Kenny Sams

Kenny Sams is a 14-year-old African-American male in the eighth grade who lives at home with his mother, father, brother, and sister. Kenny reads on a seventh grade level, and as a seventh grader, he failed his English Language Arts class but passed all subject areas of the state-mandated standardized test. During the first half of his eighth grade year, Kenny was failing his social studies class but passing all his other classes. He was referred to school administrators for discipline infractions on five occasions as a seventh grader, and on four occasions during the first half of his eighth grade year. Kenny was absent five times as a seventh grader, and halfway through his eighth grade year, he had eight recorded absences.

Kenny stated that math was his favorite subject, but acknowledged that doing math was “hard.” In his first interview, Kenny reported:

I’m not even worried about writing being a problem. Reading— that’s not a problem either because it is basically like writing. So out of reading, writing, and math, I’d have to say math is the hardest out of those three.

Kenny enjoyed playing and watching sports and interacting with his friends, reporting, “I like going out every weekend . . . having friends . . . playing basketball. . . . playing any kind of sport I want . . . playing games . . . having my own right to call people . . . watching games and stuff.” Table 4.9 provides a summary profile of Kenny’s recent academic and behavioral performance.

Kenny spent a lot of time at home with his two younger siblings because of his parents’ work schedules. Kenny felt a lot of responsibility to spend time with the younger children, stating:

I have to take care of my brother and sister, watch the house. You can’t really go outside, because you gotta look back and see the house, and think about what’s happening because your parents aren’t there. See, I barely know how to cook and all that but see,
when we are hungry they look at me to cook and stuff and I really don’t know how to. So it’s hard.

Table 4.9

*Summary of Kenny Sams’s Recent Academic and Behavioral Performance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student/Semester</th>
<th>Class Grades</th>
<th>Standardized Test</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>D/A</th>
</tr>
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<td>Kenny Sams</td>
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*Note.* M=Math; LA=English Language Arts; SS=Social Studies; S=Science; 1= Elective 1; 2= Elective 2; RL= Reading Grade Equivalent; D= Discipline Referrals to Administration; A=Days Absent; Standardized Test Passing Score= 800; Passing Class Grade ≥ 70; - denotes data unavailable as student had not been administered the test.

As the eldest child in the house, Kenny perceived himself as responsible for the well-being of his younger siblings in his parents’ absence. In a follow-up interview, Kenny elaborated on this sense of responsibility, asserting:

I have to do that because my mom goes to work in the AM and comes home late at night. My dad works at night [and] doesn’t come home until eight in the AM. So I’m home with those two. I can’t go nowhere I need to, because they come in and are in need of being watched. I don’t take care of them. I’m at home with them. We come home and snack on stuff. We eat Hot Pockets or Party Pizza or mac and cheese. I follow the directions on the box. I may help them, but they have learned to do it by themselves.

Kenny saw the responsibility of watching his younger siblings as preventing him from doing what he needed to do. In a follow-up interview, Kenny stated, “It makes me mad sometimes to have to stay with them. I may want to go to the football game or something, but I can’t, so I get mad.”

Generally, Kenny had a positive perception of his parents and appreciated that they both worked hard to provide for the family. He observed, “My mom and dad always make sure we got
something to eat in the house.” Kenny seemed to look up to the adult males in his family and to value the advice his father and grandfather give him. He stated:

I will never do drugs. My dad tells me to never do drugs. My grandfather told me that he dared me to find other ways of making money than selling drugs and doing weed and all. My dad tells me I will either end up in jail or dead if I do drugs.

Describing his frustration at having to change schools after sixth grade, Kenny noted that during this time, he looked to his father for encouragement. Kenny wanted to move back to his old school, and his father influenced his thinking on the matter. He said, “There ain’t no point in going to my old school while I’m at Robinlee . . . my dad told me this . . . when I know I live on that side of town.” Many of Kenny’s responses reflect efforts to emulate his father. For example, he stated, “I love everything about basketball because my dad likes basketball,” and “I have my favorite college because everyone on my dad’s side of the family went there.”

Friends comprised a big part of Kenny’s life, and his peers held great influence over his choices. In his first interview he referenced peer influence when describing moving to Robinlee from another school in the county:

I figured out we were moving. We moved and when I came to Robinlee, the first few weeks I didn’t know anybody. I knew only a couple of people and they would tell all the other kids that I’m coming and all that. And it was hard and I was nervous, but then I’m going to say, after a couple, three weeks, it was fun and I like it. But then over the summer I was saying I wanted to go back to my old school and all that, but you see I’m back now so it’s all right. So basically it is just passing by until I go to high school. I know I’m going to see all the same people from my old school in high school.

The family’s move had a significant impact on Kenny, as his main concern regarding school was the friends he had there. Kenny described middle school as just “passing by” until he could be reunited with friends from both schools at the high school. School, for Kenny, appeared to be valuable primarily as a place to interact with his peers.
Kenny described middle school as hard “mainly because of the drama.” When asked what he meant, he responded:

Let’s see. Like you got one dude telling you this and then you go to the person he told you about and he’s telling you this about the first dude. And then you get to arguing and whatever and it comes back to you and I’m in the middle of it. That’s hard.

Kenny’s response indicated that his peers were a distraction from his schoolwork. Navigating interpersonal relationships was difficult for him because of the “drama.”

Ethnographic journaling documented several occasions in which Kenny was asked to leave classes due to his behavior. Most of the time his teachers revealed that he was distracting other students, off task, and disrespectful. When asked about these incidents, Kenny replied, “There are times when I’m making a big scene because other people are distracting me.” When Kenny was disciplined on these occasions, he was documented as being frustrated and angry at his loss of privileges. On one occasion, Kenny got into a fight with another student on the bus over where he and the other student would sit. After the fight was broken up and as he exited the bus, Kenny was observed shouting, “I got mine in. He won’t mess with me again.” It was evident that Kenny was concerned with what his peers on the bus thought about his involvement in the altercation.

Kenny faced a dilemma when being disciplined for various infractions. Although he was documented as becoming frustrated and angry when disciplined, he revealed in a follow up interview his desire to change:

I haven’t learned, but I am going to change. I have some solution. I’m not passing and I’m in trouble because I keep getting sent out. I have to get my grades right, do my homework, stay out of trouble, listen to teachers, and fix my problems. I need to go to my teachers and tell them I will change.

Kenny indicated that he wanted to change, but seemed to have difficulty in doing so. At times he had difficulty accepting responsibility for the choices he made, instead blaming his peers or
teachers. Upon reflection he expressed regret over those choices and voiced a desire to change, but he rarely behaved differently.

Kenny experienced peer pressure outside of school, for although he was often at home with his younger siblings, his older neighbors attempted to influence his choices. In describing the influence of his peers outside of school, Kenny stated:

Yeah . . . older people try to get me to do bad things. There’s a dude that lives next door to me. He sells drugs. But he hasn’t really tried to get me to do it. But like, it’s like when I see him and he’s doing it, like it seems like he thinks he’s got my attention on wanting to do it with him. When it’s hard to have money, it’s tempting to want to do that.

Although Kenny denied involvement in selling or doing drugs, he faced the temptation of peer pressure. Kenny clearly valued the perception of his peers, who were, therefore, a major influence on his decisions.

Kenny expressed a great interest in the sport of basketball. He described basketball as something he valued, noting, “It teaches me things. I like winning things with a team. When I play, I feel loved, and I feel like I belong. I’m doing what I want to do, too.” Kenny found acceptance in playing basketball, and it was an activity he enjoyed. Kenny wanted to make good choices in school on account of basketball. He said:

Education is important because of basketball. The only reason it’s important is basketball. It’ll get me where I need to go. I want to be on the team, and I have to do my work, because the coach wants us to be doing good in school; doing our work. Like we don’t have a bad name about ourselves around the school. And he wants somebody on the team that’s not going to be just playing around and joking and all that stuff and just be a part of the team showing off. He wants people that want to actually play and win and stuff like that.

Basketball influenced Kenny’s values and choices, and he valued his schooling because he valued basketball. Upon learning that he was ineligible to play on the Robinlee basketball team, ethnographic journaling documented a change in Kenny’s behavior at school. After finding out he was ineligible to play, Kenny was involved in a fight, and was often documented as being
disrespectful to his teachers. Kenny claimed, “I’m mad at teachers who kept me from playing basketball.” It appeared that losing the privilege of playing basketball influenced Kenny’s behavior and decision making.

Kenny claimed to value his education and expressed a desire to go to college. Kenny described his education as “important” in the following response:

It’s very important. Because when I get older, I want to go pro, but that’s hard. But like, you know how the pro divides up into 35 teams, and there are only 15 people on each team? There’s a good million that wants to go, but probably 100 will make it. So in order to make it . . . the education . . . that’s what’s going to get you there.

Kenny sees his education as a springboard to catapult him to a career in professional basketball, but he also described another reason for going to college. “I will be a writer, a journalist, but I’m going to put my mind more on basketball than I am a journalist. But if basketball doesn’t work out then I’ll be a journalist.”

Kenny reported a desire to go to certain colleges based on their locations and their reputation for sports, but he could not explain how one gets to college. Kenny did not identify any reasons to attend college that indicated an appreciation for the education he would receive there. He offered the following description of how one would be able to attend college:

You have to have all A’s to get into college; the right behavior. You have to have a GPA. It costs so much to go to college . . . about $25,000. I’m going to get a scholarship. I’ll get a writing scholarship and then I’ll try out for the team. If I do all of my work the rest of my school career, I will go to college. I need to find a way to get scholarships. I’m going to college through sports or writing I know. I need to be good at sports to get noticed. If I can’t answer a question, then Google will have all of the answers.

Kenny’s response demonstrated a deficit in his understanding of the reasons for attending college as well as the means to get there.

**Summary.** Family, peers, and basketball each had an influence on the choices Kenny made. He often made decisions based on conversations with his father or in an effort to emulate
or seek approval from his father. Kenny valued the perception of his peers and engaged in certain behaviors in an effort to seek peer approval. Basketball was among the entities that Kenny valued, and he cited its influence on his choices on several occasions. He saw education primarily as an avenue through which to reach his long-term goal of playing professional basketball, but he lacked a realistic understanding of how his current and future education related to this dream.

**Javier Sanchez**

Javier Sanchez is a 14-year-old Hispanic male in the eighth grade who lives at home with his mother, father, and older brother. Javier reads on a tenth grade level, and as a seventh grader, Javier passed all his classes and all subject areas of the state-mandated standardized test. He “exceeded the standard” on the English Language Arts and science portions of the state-mandated standardized test. During the first half of his eighth grade year, Javier was passing all his classes. He was never referred to school administrators for discipline infractions as a seventh grader or during the first half of his eighth grade year. Javier was absent five times as a seventh grader, and halfway through his eighth grade year, he had two recorded absences.

Javier’s favorite subject in school was social studies. He enjoyed participating in band and listening to and playing music. When he was away from school, Javier enjoyed “hanging out” with his family. He said, “I especially like to spend time with my brother and sisters when I’m away from school. We do everything together.” Table 4.10 provides a summary of Javier’s recent academic and behavioral performance.

Javier demonstrated a passionate appreciation for his family, whom he credited with greatly influencing him. He stated:

My family is a very joined family that has grown bigger and bigger every time. Like every day we just come together more than we were previously. I wouldn’t say it is the
only family in the whole world like that, but I feel like we are one of a kind. Like everybody gets along with each other and nobody is going to sleep being mad with one another in the family. I just feel a special thing that God has given me to be with the close family that I have.

Table 4.10

**Summary of Javier Sanchez’s Recent Academic and Behavioral Performance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student/Semester</th>
<th>Class Grades</th>
<th>Standardized Test</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>D/A</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LA</td>
<td>SS</td>
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<td>Javier Sanchez</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall 2013 (8th Grade)</td>
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<td>Spring 2013 (7th Grade)</td>
<td>86</td>
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*Note. M=Math; LA=English Language Arts; SS=Social Studies; S=Science; 1= Elective 1; 2= Elective 2; RL= Reading Grade Equivalent; D= Discipline Referrals to Administration; A=Days Absent; Standardized Test Passing Score= 800; Exceeding the Standard ≥ 850; Passing Class Grade ≥ 70; - denotes data unavailable as student had not been administered the test.*

Javier perceived his family as unique because of their continual and growing closeness. Javier had a very trusting relationship with his father and often heeded his father’s advice without question. For example, Javier described his reasoning for tucking in his shirt during school:

I mean I don’t really like school uniforms. I don’t like tucking my shirt in. I do it because my dad always tucks his shirt in and he gets mad because he knows I can tuck my shirt in if he does. But I do it, because we are teenagers, but once I get older I am going to find out that this is the proper way to dress. I know he is helping me.

Javier perceived that his father was trying to teach him values that Javier himself would recognize as valuable in the future. Javier trusted that his father had Javier’s best interest at heart, and made choices based on that trust.
Javier credited his family with teaching him certain values that affected his daily choices. He felt that he had learned to be more responsible from his older family members. Javier explained:

I just learn from the older people in my family and just watching what they do. You go to them for help. They taught me that if you agree to do something like do what you started. Like finish what you start. Basically like you get better for doing something like you do it if you are committed to being there. You are more responsible.

Javier learned the value of responsibility from watching and communicating with his older family members. Javier’s perception of his family affected the choices he made daily. He credited his family for helping him avoid bad choices:

Cause every time I think about getting in fights and every time I think about my choices, I always reflect and always go back to what my family would do. What would they think about and what would they say about it? My brother told me don’t ever get in a fight cause if you get in a fight at school it would always bother you. It would cause other problems for you. My dad is not mean but he is very tough with his speeches. Other people might think that getting in trouble will fix everything. So I make better choices. I just try to relax a little and think about what I am going to do before I do it.

Javier often reflected on what he had learned from his family, expressing great admiration and appreciation for them. Javier respected his older family members, valued their advice, and credited them for his attempts to make better choices.

Javier struggled with the perception of his peers because he valued how his peers perceived him. Despite the strong influence of his family on his values, he was conflicted when dealing with complicated situations with his peers. He stated:

I try my best not to make problems with other people. Like get in a fight or stuff like that. Like right now that type of problem like people making fun of me, but I still don’t know what to do about it because I don’t want to get in a fight this year. I haven’t gotten in a fight at all in my whole school years and I really don’t want to screw it up this year especially. But like I’m struggling with it but I am trying to deal with it myself.
Although Javier attempted to avoid conflict with his peers, at times interactions with his peers caused frustration for him. He attributed this frustration to his peers’ inability to understand his speech because of a medical condition he was born with. Javier described the condition:

The hardest thing for me is my speech problem. I have had seven surgeries on my cleft palate. I get mad and sad about it at the same time because really those seven not all of them have worked. Cause I really don’t want to have that type of problem with me. Then like accepting it, I have no option, but I didn’t choose to be like that.

In addition to his own frustration with his “speech problem,” Javier perceived his speech as affecting his relationships with his peers. He said:

It’s difficult for other people to understand me and when they don’t they might act different than from what I do. I might tell them I wasn’t born with the same ability that they were. So I get mad at them. If they understand me, then I’m absolutely all right with it. But if they keep repeating or messing with me then it’s a hard thing for me. They make fun of me and pick on me and that’s really hard for me.

Javier struggled with his peers’ perceptions when his peers ridiculed or picked on him because of his cleft palate. This treatment made him angry and frustrated, and he was conflicted about how he should respond.

Javier expressed a deep appreciation for music, asserting, “Music keeps me running every day. Like I can’t go a day without beating on something.” Music inspired Javier, and he enjoyed both playing and listening to it. He stated:

I like new age like popular music. But really what I like about music is just the beats and the rhythms of songs. I don’t really pay attention to the lyrics. I mostly pay attention to the music. Like if I hear a song . . . like I play bass and guitar . . . any time I hear a song and I can hear the bass I just go there in my mind, like imagining where they go, and once I think I know I just go home and start playing what I heard.

Music provided an escape for Javier, and he experienced positive feelings when playing or listening to music. Javier attempted to emulate musicians and express himself through music. Music affected Javier’s feelings, and as a result, influenced his choices about how he spent his time.
Javier described his anxiety over his citizenship status as a significant influence in his life and something he thought about frequently. He described his relocation to the United States:

I don’t basically know how all of it happened because I was only six years old, back when I was very young. I do remember later having to go to court to see if I could be here or if they had to deport me. But my parents told me that back then people would get deported. I got a letter one day that I had to be deported and this and that. They said I was illegally in the country. I was very scared.

Javier described how his citizenship status was resolved after that frightening incident:

I already got my work permit. I had to report to court and we went to court and I had to fill out paperwork and I got my work permit and they cancelled or erased my deportation. Now I can focus on doing well in school and I don’t have to worry about that stuff. I’m very appreciative I get to stay here and I try to make good choices because I’m lucky.

Javier’s anxiety about his citizenship affected the amount of attention he could give to school. Having resolved that concern, Javier’s gratitude for the opportunities he had led him to do well in school and make positive choices.

Javier stated that he valued his education because he experienced greater responsibility and opportunity as he progressed in school. Javier was concerned about how adults perceived him in school, and sought to make positive choices because he saw his education as a means through which to obtain a promising career where he could earn money. Javier displayed great interest in attending college, and credited his interactions with his family as helping him to value his education. However, he could not describe the specific steps required to enroll in and attend college, and he was unsure of his career interest.

Javier reported having more responsibility in middle school. He stated:

Being in middle school for me is a lot of responsibility. You’ve got to start doing stuff more mature than you did at a younger age. Like start doing what young adults do. Like being in several activities, having a tight schedule and stuff like that and just being more responsible and mature in what you do.
Javier perceived that it was important to behave with greater maturity in middle school. Being mature, to Javier, meant becoming more involved in school activities.

Javier also saw new opportunities in the ways adults in the school perceived him. He said:

You never know what kind of people might come to the school and like if they look at you and see you are doing what you are supposed to do, then you look smart or like intelligent. The teachers and people who visit think you are a good student. They might actually think you are special and may give you an opportunity to do something.

Javier believed making positive choices in school would provide him with increased opportunities. He sought to accept greater responsibility in an effort to prove to adults his various capabilities. Javier valued the perceptions of the adults at his school. He also valued his education, which he viewed as a means of achieving the freedom to choose a career that matched his interests and for which he would be compensated appropriately:

My education is very important to me. If you get a good education and a very good degree and everything, you can just pick what you want to be. You would have money in your pocket. Not many people get the privilege of having that opportunity. To have that opportunity in future careers.

Javier expressed an interest in attending college and credited his family with teaching him the value of continuing his education. He said:

I am going to try my best to go to college. I’m going to start earning money and maybe get a scholarship and like really try my best to be in college. In my family I don’t think anybody went to college. None of them are from here. Some were brought at an older age and they could not continue with their education. I feel education is a great opportunity because of what I’ve seen about my family and what they’ve taught me.

Javier credited his family and his observations of his family members’ inability to further their education for making him appreciate the opportunity to attend college.

Although Javier wanted to attend college, he was unsure of the specific steps he would need to take to realize his dream. He stated:
I don’t even know what I have to do to get to college, except do what I’m supposed to do in school. I mean I wasn’t born here, but I think I still have the ability to go to college. It’s not as easy as people who were born here. People who were born here just have to have a high school diploma and money and the basic stuff that you need to go to college. I know I have to have very good achievement and grades.

Javier did not understand the specific process of enrolling in college and was uncertain how his citizenship status would affect his ability to attend college. Javier was also unsure of his career choice, stating, “I don’t really think about that now. I don’t know exactly what I want to do. I just want to do something with music.” Despite a lack of certainty about his specific career path, Javier was confident that he wanted to work in music.

**Summary.** Javier’s family had a strong influence in his life, and he credited his family with teaching him values and encouraging him to make positive choices. Javier strove to avoid conflict with his peers, but valued their perception of him. His difficulties with speech led to frustrating interactions as he struggled with how to respond to peers who made fun of him or picked on him. Javier frequently thought about his citizenship status and how it affected his life. He valued education and believed a good education would provide him with greater opportunities in life. Although he was determined to attend college, Javier did not demonstrate an understanding of the steps for enrolling in and attending college. He saw college as a necessary element in obtaining a promising career, but was unsure of his specific career choice.

**Carlos Valdez**

Carlos Valdez is a 14-year-old Hispanic male in the eighth grade who lives at home with his mother, father, and younger sister. Carlos reads on a seventh grade level, and as a seventh grader, Carlos passed all of his classes with the exception of English Language Arts, and passed all subjects of the state-mandated standardized test, including “exceeding the standard” in science. During the first half of his eighth grade year, Carlos was passing all of his classes. He
was referred to school administrators for discipline infractions on two occasions as a seventh grader, and on one occasion halfway through his eighth grade year. Carlos was absent twice as a seventh grader, and halfway through his eighth grade year, he had one recorded absence.

In his interview, Carlos stated, “Some classes are hard and some are easy. My favorite subjects are math and language arts, because they are easy. Social studies is hard, so I don’t like it.” Away from school, Carlos enjoys visiting various parks and going to the library with friends from his neighborhood. Table 4.11 provides a summary profile of Carlos’ recent academic and behavioral performance.

Table 4.11

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<th>Student/Semester</th>
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<th>D/A</th>
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<td>M  LA  SS  S  1  2  M  LA  R  SS  S  RL  D  A</td>
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<td>Spring 2013 (7th Grade)</td>
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Note. M=Math; LA=English Language Arts; SS=Social Studies; S=Science; 1= Elective 1; 2= Elective 2; RL= Reading Grade Equivalent; D= Discipline Referrals to Administration; A=Days Absent; Standardized Test Passing Score= 800; Exceeding the Standard > 850; Passing Class Grade ≥ 70; - denotes data unavailable as student had not been administered the test.

Carlos admired and respected his parents, especially his father, with whom he spent time working and learning new skills. He obeyed and accepted his parents’ rules for him, and viewed his freedom to leave the house as a privilege. Carlos described what it was like to be a teenager:

It’s hard because you really want to do a lot of stuff, but you’re not able to cause you think you’re big now, but my parents say I’m not yet, so I’m not arguing with that cause I respect them. I really want to do a lot of stuff on my own, but I don’t, because I listen to my parents. I have to be home before nine every night.
Carlos reflected that being a teenager was hard because he was ready to accept new responsibilities, but he was not allowed to do so by his parents. His parents established rules for Carlos at home, and Carlos respected his parents’ authority and trusted their guidance. An ethnographic journal entry described an occasion in which Carlos’ father came to a conference for a class in which he was struggling. Carlos was very respectful of his father, vowed to change his behavior in the class, and subsequently improved his behavior and performance in the class.

Carlos spent considerable time with his father and spoke of him frequently. He said:

I’ve done a lot of work with my father. We are very close. He is good at it. I’ve done it plenty of times. I work a lot with him at his job. We do a lot with landscaping. I like working with him. I know how to do a lot of stuff. We like to help people remodel their garden or their yard or something. It’s fun.

Carlos had great admiration for his father. He enjoyed spending time with his father and developed a close relationship with him by working with him in landscaping, a job that taught Carlos many new skills.

Carlos enjoyed coming to school to see his friends, and reported that his favorite part of being in middle school was “getting to see [his] friends.” He was occasionally off task and disruptive in class as a result of joking around with his friends. Carlos was concerned about how his friends viewed him and often made choices in an effort to please them. Carlos claimed he avoided negative behaviors and resisted peer pressure because he was fearful of getting in trouble. An ethnographic journal entry described a time in which Carlos was frequently off task and disruptive in his science class. When asked about his behavior, Carlos answered:

It’s really hard for me to pay attention in class. I mean, I have so many friends in class. We’re always joking around and it makes it hard to pay attention. I just get sidetracked and forget what I’m doing. I really don’t know why I do it. It’s fun. I laugh and cut up with my friends. Sometimes it’s my fault and sometimes they start it.
Carlos enjoyed spending time with his friends in school, but at times his interaction with them caused him to become distracted and inattentive. Carlos accepted responsibility for being off task and disruptive, but did not change his behavior.

Carlos acknowledged that peers outside of school sometimes pressured him to engage in behaviors he wouldn’t choose on his own. He recalled:

One time I went to this thing with my friends. There was a roller coaster there. I really don’t like them, but I was already in line with my friends. I really didn’t want to go cause I was scared and I’d never been on one before and that was really hard for me. They were pressuring me and making fun of me, so I just went ahead and got on. I acted like it was fun, but I hated it.

As a result of his concern about how his friends perceived him, Carlos reported that at times he made decisions to avoid being teased or chose to do things he did not enjoy just to please his friends. Carlos witnessed his peers engaging in negative behaviors in the neighborhood. He stated:

I hang out with everyone in my neighborhood . . . all different kinds of people. I don’t really see gangs, but some of them do try to pressure me to like drink and do drugs and things. I know it’s bad for me, but they think it’s cool. I don’t really want to, so I just stick around and don’t talk much.

Carlos recalled another incident in which he experienced peer pressure:

One time, I think we were going to steal a bike or something like that from somebody’s house. I really didn’t want to go cause I was scared I was going to get caught or something, so I went home. I didn’t want to.

Not all of the influences in his neighborhood were negative, however. Carlos described a relationship he developed with a mentor in the neighborhood:

There’s this lady in the neighborhood. She comes there and helps kids. We usually just hang around with her and she takes us to places that are really fun. We go to like the parks and play soccer. She teaches us karate. Her daughter goes to school here. She talks with us a lot because she wants us to do well at school.
Carlos appreciated spending time with a mentor and enjoyed visiting places with her and his peers in the neighborhood. Carlos perceived this mentor as trying to instill in him certain values related to his education and schooling. Carlos stated that his parents taught him to value education, explaining:

It’s very important because I really need it so I could like be a good citizen to the country. My dad and mom always tell me this. It is very important right now. They talk to me a lot about that.

He emphasized:

I have plans to finish high school. Kids who drop out of school just don’t want to do the work and it’s probably too hard for them. That’s why they drop out, but I’m not going to. I’ll do the work. It’s not too hard for me.

Carlos also spoke of his plans for a career after high school, stating:

I want to be a mechanic. I want to work on like luxury cars. I know I have to get some more training . . . so I’d know the right stuff to do and not just mess up on the cars I work on and everything.

When asked how he will get additional training, Carlos responded:

I don’t really know. I mean, I want to go to college but I kinda can’t. I can’t go cause first of all if I was to go, I would have to pay a lot of money and that’s a little bit too much money. I might have to wait a year before I go, too. So I could save up some money. I know I have to pay a lot because I wasn’t born in the U.S.

Although Carlos knew he needed additional training to accomplish his goals, he was not sure how to acquire such training. Carlos perceived that college would be an expensive undertaking, particularly as a non-U.S. citizen, and he was unsure whether he would be able to continue his education after high school.

**Summary.** Carlos respected and admired his parents, especially his father. He accepted their authority and made decisions based on their advice. Carlos appreciated receiving more freedom as he got older and enjoyed attending school to be with friends. He was concerned about how he was perceived by his peers, and at times made decisions simply to please his peers at
school or in the neighborhood. Carlos developed a relationship with a mentor who encouraged him to do well in school. Carlos stated that education was important to him because his parents told him he needed an education to be a good citizen of the country. He dreamt of becoming a mechanic, but was unsure whether he would be able to obtain additional training or attend college because of his citizenship status.

**Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of participants in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males. This chapter presented a rich description of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group as well as individual portraits of each of the students who participated in the program during the fall of the 2013-14 academic year. Each portrait included participants’ perspectives on various influences on their values and choices, including their views about how family, peer, and other influences have shaped their understanding of education and their future plans. The following chapter presents a holistic thematic analysis of the common themes among the student participants.
CHAPTER 5

THEMATIC FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of those involved in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males. A qualitative case study approach was used to investigate the perspectives of participants in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, referred to in this chapter simply as the Men’s Group. This research was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the history of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group and how does it operate now? What norms, values, or innovative interventions are embedded in the Men’s Group?

2. What do the involved professionals perceive as the impact of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s group on the academic and personal lives of the students?

3. How do the involved students see the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in relation to their academic and personal lives?

4. Does the program have an influence on the students academically and/or personally?

All eighth grade males at Robinlee Middle School were afforded the opportunity to participate in the Men’s Group. As such, the Men’s Group was examined as a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males. Ten student members of the Men’s Group were interviewed to elicit their perspectives on life as an adolescent male. The
participants comprised a diverse group, much like the population of Robinlee Middle School. Of the 10 student participants, 6 were African-American, 3 were Hispanic, and 1 was White.

Of the 10 student members, 7 participated in 4 or more of the 9 Men’s Group activities in this study and were considered regular participants. Three students—Diego Barcenas, Johnny Gordon, and Kenny Sams—participated in three or fewer of the Men’s Group activities. Chapter Four presented an analysis of the findings related to the context and individual cases of all 10 student participants in this study. This chapter provides a thematic analysis of the adult and student perspectives regarding the impact of the Men’s Group on the academic and personal lives of students involved in the program.

The thematic case analysis indicated that Mr. Thomas, the founder and instructor of the Men’s Group, explicitly designed experiences for students involved in the program that communicated the values, or messages, of the Men’s Group to its members. Mr. Thomas recognized that the adolescent males in the Men’s Group would be confronted with choices throughout their lives. The Men’s Group served as one among a number of influences on the young men’s choices. Like all students, these young men would have to make individual choices and learn from their mistakes. However, Mr. Thomas hoped these students’ choices would be influenced by messages they received as members of the Men’s Group.

Students who participated regularly in Men’s Group activities understood these messages, and findings suggest the received messages had some influence on the students’ choices. Figure 5.1 provides a diagram of how the philosophy and messages of the Men’s Group interacted within a nexus of influence to impact students’ choices.
The Philosophy of the Men’s Group: Communication through Repeated Messages, Experiences, and Positive Relationships with Adults

Men’s Group experiences provided an avenue to convey program messages, and positive relationships with adults helped students further understand the values of the program. Program messages were strengthened when they mirrored messages communicated by family members. The Men’s Group philosophy produced three implicit messages, or values, which will be described later in the chapter. The three implicit messages are: the significance of building a positive peer community, the important habits and practices of schooling, and the need for a more realistic understanding of the future.

Communication through Repeated Messages

Men’s Group participants were more receptive to the program’s messages when they reinforced messages communicated by the students’ families. Mr. Thomas, the Men’s Group faculty mentor, described this philosophy:

Their mothers and families may say, “This is wrong, you shouldn’t do that.” But how much of that is going to carry over? It is one of those things that if you start hearing stuff
over and over again and you start believing it is true. If you hear someone say [something] over and over you are going to believe them and then you start doing those things. So I think these are the guidelines I like to follow and I like to model the Men’s Group after this. Here’s somebody saying and here’s someone saying it, so if enough people are saying it, then maybe it is the truth. You have to reinforce the message with their peers and with their families. Then they get a sense of what is right and wrong. They really do.

The implicit messages of the Men’s Group often worked to reinforce messages communicated at home. When Men’s Group values mirrored family values, the influence of the Men’s Group on student choices was strengthened.

The influences of families and the Men’s Group interacted with the influence of peers in the lives of the adolescent males, creating a nexus of influences on the daily choices made by Men’s Group participants. Students lacking a strong positive family influence were more likely to be influenced by negative peers, and thus to make negative choices. Students with a strong positive family influence were less likely to be influenced by negative peers, and consequently more likely to make positive choices.

As students participated in Men’s Group activities, the influence of the program joined the nexus of peer and familial influences. At times, the values communicated by the Men’s Group joined forces with values communicated by families, and the battle over peer influence was won. Mr. Thomas described in depth the connection between family, peers, and the Men’s Group:

You look at the parents at home. Like I said, I firmly believe they are cared for at home, and for the most part they are being told what is right and wrong at home, but that’s not the only way it’s going to work. Then you are influenced. Then it comes here and you are still, as a teacher, my voice is not as respected as far as their opinions on what to do because they are going to listen to their friends. But with the Men’s Group, you get the administrators and people from the community that are respected and it becomes more relevant and more important. They just keep hearing the same message. Then they buy into it and you start seeing some of the rewards of their good choices.
When Men’s Group participants heard messages from speakers that reinforced the messages and values emphasized at home, they were influenced to make more positive life choices.

Those who participated regularly in the Men’s Group activities noticed the connection between values taught at home and values communicated by the Men’s Group. Darius Robinson noted, “The Men’s Group teaches me like what my dad be telling me.” Similarly, Javier Sanchez stated:

I think the Men’s Group so far has helped me by it has made me think about everything—like what my parents tell me every morning before I go to school. I think the Men’s Group and my parents . . . they teach me similarities of what some of the things that my parents might tell me that the Men’s Group might teach me. I’ve actually learned from my parents and I think that is very important related to the Men’s Group, because that is actually what the Men’s Group is all about.

Louis Parker also reflected on the connection between familial and program influence:

The main thing that killed my momma was my education, so I did that for her. I put it in my mind to focus on my work. She just want me to do better. It’s like I said. Every time I think about how the Men’s Group helps me, it brings me back to my momma. It’s really all connected.

Men’s Group participants noticed the similar messages delivered by family members and the Men’s Group, and the students’ understanding of and attention to these messages increased the more they were repeated.

**Influence through Experience**

At the heart of the Men’s Group were the experiences it provided for its members. Mr. Thomas explained, “I want to provide opportunities that aren’t normally there. Really, to me, that is the backbone of the Men’s Group.” Men’s Group experiences conveyed messages to participants in an effort to influence their choices. The experiences provided by the Men’s Group resulted in authentic learning by offering members opportunities to practice learned values and encouraging positive choices among members.
Mr. Thomas believed in the importance of providing students with opportunities to practice “taught messages” through real-world application of classroom teachings. Describing his philosophy, he noted:

If kids don’t have opportunities they’re not going to get anything out of their education at all. Just sitting in a classroom is not going to give you the education you need. You gotta live what is being taught to some extent. In my heart, I think that is the direction education needs to go. I mean you want to put kids out there in real world situations . . . not just let them sit in the classroom. They need to experience more about how to do things than learning about how other people do things.

Mr. Thomas carried this philosophy over to the Men’s Group, which was designed to provide participants with taught messages reinforced by authentic life experiences outside the school setting. Mr. Thomas believed it would be futile to lecture students on the values conveyed by the Men’s Group. Instead, student members needed to learn these values through experience:

I mean, you really can’t teach values unless you provide a way for students to experience using them. I don’t think most students believe the message of the Men’s Group unless they experience it. When they experience it, the message will make sense. “He told me that. That’s exactly what he said.” And you know, they’ll be like, “That’s exactly what my mom said, too.” I hear that a lot from the guys. You know, no one is lying to them. It really is the truth.

Mr. Thomas believed the participants could learn to make better choices as a result of Men’s Group experiences that exposed them to more positive options:

They are going to make mistakes. You want to say, “This is better for you.” I definitely think that providing them with options and exposing them to various things may help them make better choices. You may believe in it and think it’s right. And you might not make such a bad choice.

As students learned values through experience, they were less likely to make poor choices. Mr. Oliver, the principal of Robinlee, confirmed this outcome: “I know that the boys in the Men’s Group made certain positive choices because of the experiences they took part in.”

In addition to helping the students make better choices, Men’s Group experiences provided students with positive ways to spend their time. Mr. Thomas noted:
I think this program works well in that way. If on an afternoon when I’m doing something with them, and they are doing something that they love in a safe environment as opposed to a moment where he could make a bad decision. It gives students positive things to do.

Men’s Group experiences provided positive options for students that helped forestall the risk of students making poor choices about how to spend their time.

**Influence through Positive Relationships with Adults**

The development of positive relationships between students and adults comprised a significant component of the Men’s Group that was designed to strengthen the group’s messages. Men’s Group activities provided exposure to role models, and Mr. Thomas himself served as a role model for participants. Access to role models in the community supported, motivated, and encouraged students by providing examples for them. Mr. Thomas’ strong relationship with members of the Men’s Group also reinforced the program’s messages.

As part of the component of building relationships with adults, Mr. Thomas worked to expose Men’s Group members to a variety of role models. He stated:

> The more people you meet, the more opportunities you have. Everything is involved around meeting role models. There is nothing bad about meeting good role models. That’s where the people who work with program come in. When you have people supporting you, you believe in yourself more and you follow up on that because you need someone to believe in you. Everybody needs somebody to motivate them. They need a role model. They need somebody that they can look up to that’s not unreachable, that’s not an NBA star or a rap star. They need somebody that is obtainable. Like somebody they can communicate with and maybe I am not that person, but I can introduce them to somebody who is that person. You know . . . you’ve gotta have a role in your community that is a positive role model. Not someone who is going to tell you to go steal something but somebody who is going to continually say that you are a good person and you want to succeed in life.

Membership in the Men’s Group also enabled students to build a strong relationship with Mr. Thomas himself, and time spent working together on after-school service projects further strengthened that bond. Mr. Thomas said, “The after-school stuff is something I think is fun
because I want to build that relationship with the student.” Moreover, students were more receptive to the messages of the Men’s Group when they had a strong relationship with Mr. Thomas. He described how the benefits of building strong bonds with Men’s Group members carried over into the regular school day:

They are not as receptive to it in the classroom as they are after school. It is that total different person so you are able to communicate with them on the level that you want them to be. You know you want them to go in this direction so if you can start showing them these are things that happen when you allow opportunities to be available. I think as many kids as you can reach after school the better . . . I think the inter-relationship part of it is what makes the classroom management piece sometimes work better. I have a better relationship with those kids I spend more time with.

Spending time with students outside the regular school day enabled Mr. Thomas to establish relationships that positively influenced student behavior during the school day.

Mr. Thomas did not see himself as a role model or mentor to members of the Men’s Group, stating, “I don’t know. I never feel like I’m in a position as a role model or a mentor.” However, Mr. Oliver, the school principal, noted a strong relationship between Mr. Thomas and the Men’s Group members. Mr. Oliver believed Mr. Thomas was a role model and mentor for members of the Men’s Group, observing:

These young men benefit so much from being exposed to [Mr. Thomas]. [Mr. Thomas] gave of himself, but they will never forget it. They will never, ever forget. They will talk about it years later . . . remember when [Mr. Thomas] took them to such and such. He is their mentor, and that makes a difference.

Despite denying that students viewed him as a role model, Mr. Thomas unknowingly described serving as a mentor to students:

They are learning how to use tools . . . So there are so many things happening that you don’t get anywhere else. I mean to learn how to use a drill. That is a big deal. I wish I could teach them how to use saws. I use a hand saw a lot to teach them how to hold it straight, and it’s hard. It’s really hard.
Both the Robinlee principal and former Men’s Group students recognized the key influence of the relationship between Mr. Thomas and Men’s Group participants. Mr. Oliver observed that the strength of the Men’s Group was providing members with the opportunity to engage with role models. He asserted, “You have to surround yourself with positive people... with role models. The Men’s Group does this for students. Our young men need positive role models.” Mr. Oliver elaborated on the importance of exposure to role models, observing:

If everybody... if everything in your world is negative, you think the world is negative. And it’s easy to feel that way. If you have positive role models, that says, “You know what? You are smart and I believe in you.” When you get ready to do something wrong, you will remember what that person said. Mr. So and So said I was smart and he believes in me, so why should I do this?

Former members of the Men’s Group now attending high school also saw Mr. Thomas as a mentor. Matt Dixon, a high school junior, said of Mr. Thomas:

He was like a father figure to me. He was hard... not too hard... but he wanted the best out of us and he knew everyone in the Men’s Group could do good. He like showed us how to act... like if someone was cutting up in the hallway, he would correct them.

When Mr. Thomas and a member of the Men’s Group had difficulty building a strong relationship, it sometimes resulted in a lack of student participation in the group. Such was the case with Kenny Sams, who participated in only three of the nine Men’s Group activities. Both Kenny and Mr. Thomas acknowledged a strained relationship. Kenny stated:

At the beginning of the year, I thought the Men’s Group might be a good experience, but then me and [Mr. Thomas] just couldn’t get along. I was always getting in trouble in his class, and I think he got tired of giving me chances. Then I started to not think about the Men’s Group anymore.

Mr. Thomas described a similar relationship with Kenny:

As far as [Kenny], I think actually he goes in a full circle. He didn’t buy in, because our relationship was like catastrophic. He was always being hostile toward me, and we were constantly back and forth. He could not behave in class... My thing is I’m never going to give up on him. I know he can come around.
Although Mr. Thomas’ relationship with the other nine Men’s Group members was positive, a strained relationship with Kenny Sams deterred the student from fully participating in group activities. Mr. Thomas continued to strive to build a relationship with Kenny despite this strained relationship.

**Summary**

The Men’s Group philosophy encouraged reinforcing messages through multiple sources to strengthen the impact of those messages. The influence of the Men’s Group on student choices was strengthened when Men’s Group messages mirrored messages communicated by families. Experiences also reinforced the messages of the Men’s Group, resulting in authentic learning and providing students with productive ways to spend their time. Exposure to positive relationships with adults, including community role models and the Men’s Group mentor, further strengthened the influence of the Men’s Group messages. Only one student avoided Men’s Group activities because of a strained relationship with the faculty mentor.

**The Messages of the Men’s Group**

The messages communicated by the Men’s Group were grounded in a philosophy comprised of several fundamental values. Mr. Oliver and Mr. Thomas described the explicit messages or values embedded in the Men’s Group. Mr. Oliver stated, “I think [students] are learning to take responsibility, first and foremost . . . to be responsible for their actions.” Similarly, Mr. Thomas noted, “Responsibility and being held accountable for your actions are definitely the kinds of values that I try to maintain.” Although student participants in this study may have understood and have been influenced by these explicit messages, stronger implicit messages emerged through data analysis. The Men’s Group communicated, and participants
understood, three key messages: building a positive peer community, engaging in appropriate habits and practices of schooling, and developing a more realistic understanding of the future.

**Building a Positive Peer Community**

The first value embedded in the Men’s Group is that of building a positive peer community. The Men’s Group taught members about the influence of peers, established a supportive community among Men’s Group participants, and engaged in service activities that fostered a sense of collective accomplishment among those who participated. The message of building a positive peer community was not explicitly communicated, but a series of activities was designed to implicitly communicate this value. Mr. Thomas sought to create experiences that would foster positive peer groups for low-socioeconomic adolescent males at the school. He acknowledged that male adolescents were easily influenced by their peers, and consequently needed to understand the benefits of building a positive peer community.

**Lessons about the influence of peers and peer communities.** A thematic analysis of the group’s activities demonstrated the recurrence of a message regarding the influence of peers and the need for positive peer communities. Guest speakers at the monthly meetings discussed the influence of peer communities on students’ choices. For example, at the first monthly meeting, Mr. Oliver told the attendees, “You want to look big and bad in front of your friends . . . sucking your teeth . . . pants down below your waist. You aren’t looking big and bad. You are embarrassing yourself.” A guest speaker at the first meeting emphasized, “Your network is your net worth.” Similarly, at the second monthly meeting, the “troubled man” guest speaker stated, “A lot of your peers intend you no good. I made bad choices that put me in jail because of the people I hung around with. When I got out of jail, those people were gone.”
During the field trip, students heard similar messages regarding the influence of peer communities from various speakers. The two guest speakers at the business school both addressed this point. The first speaker stated, “It’s important who you hang around. I know that since you are on this visit, you are making good choices about who to hang around.” The second speaker agreed, noting “[The first speaker] is exactly right. It’s very important who you hang out with.” The speakers on the field trip encouraged attendees to make positive peer group choices.

Mr. Thomas asked the Men’s Group members to reflect on their peer group choices in the “My Identity” writing assignment. He said, “There are numerous ways to identify who we are. Who are you? How do you identify yourself to others? Who are you to your friends?” Those who participated in this writing assignment reflected on how they portrayed themselves to their peers. In doing so, members were forced to think about how their peer community affected their identities, actions, and decision making.

All of the Men’s Group participants reported that the message from the guest speakers about finding appropriate peer communities had made an impact on them. Brandon Norris said, “I remember one guy. He went to jail. He taught me you have to be careful who you hang out with. It was just that he hung out with the wrong crowd all the time.” Similarly, Darius Robinson asserted:

I learned that hanging out with my friends ain’t as good as I think it is. I mean they my friends and I like to talk about something with them, but sometimes they distract me from my work. Like it was teaching me to ignore somebody when they do something to me and they telling us to not hang out with the wrong people . . .

All seven of the students who engaged regularly in the Men’s Group activities reported learning the importance of making positive choices in choosing peer groups.

In their written reflections, the Men’s Group participants demonstrated their understanding of the value of making positive peer group choices. Darius Robinson wrote, “To
make my goals happen, I need to not play around with my friends.” Similarly, Donnie Gibbs wrote, “I need to ignore friends who want to lead me in the wrong direction.” Carlos Valdez commented, “I need to not pay so much attention to my friends who want to get me in trouble.” All of the seven of the student participants who regularly attended the Men’s Group activities wrote of learning the importance of positive peer group choices in their written reflections.

Although most group members reported receiving the message about peer communities, ironically peer influence prevented two students from fully engaging in Men’s Group activities. Mr. Thomas described the influence of peer communities on the two of the three students who did not participate regularly in the Men’s Group activities. He stated:

Diego . . . I think he has this very private agenda. So in that sense, he is not a social kind of person. He stays to himself. He works hard, but I don’t think he disagrees with the things we are doing. I just don’t think he likes hanging out with the guys as peers.

Diego Barcenas was not perceived as a very social person. He did not engage in many Men’s Group activities because of his tendency to avoid peer community interaction. Diego was influenced by his peer community inside the Men’s Group by avoiding program activities.

Much like Diego, Kenny Sams was greatly influenced by his peer community, but outside the Men’s Group. Mr. Thomas described this influence:

In class, Kenny is really influenced by his classmates. He has a hard time behaving appropriately around his classmates. The guys [make fun of] each other and it’s like it’s hard for him not to join in. He can get caught up with that and then is off task.

Kenny was so greatly influenced by his peers that he chose not to join in many of the Men’s Group activities.

Building a support community of peers within the men’s group. Mr. Thomas attempted to design experiences that would enable the Men’s Group to serve as a support community for members. During the discussion with college students on the field trip, one male
college student stated, “It is important to be a part of something positive. I wanted to be a part of a group that could make me better.” The male college student encouraged students to find a supportive community of peers.

In an interview, Mr. Oliver described the Men’s Group as a place where male adolescents could “belong.” He stated, “The Men’s Group gives you an opportunity to belong, to be a part of an organization, or a team. Everybody wants to be a part of something or belong to something. That’s what the Men’s Group provides.” The Men’s Group provided a place where male adolescents could find a supportive community of peers.

Mr. Thomas provided students with opportunities to engage in service projects that helped build a support community of peers within the Men’s Group. Members experienced a sense of belonging and opportunities to interact positively with peers. Mr. Oliver stated:

They kill themselves to stay after school and work with [Mr. Thomas] to build things because they are a part of something positive. It’s amazing . . . they never, never are out there fussing and arguing. They are all participating and working because they are doing something positive.

Mr. Thomas noticed a difference in the behavior of students who participated in the service projects. He reported:

I know sometimes I have had some crews that you would not imagine getting along in school, but we get them after school and you know we get in a huddle and we say we’re going to do this job. And they work great together. But then you know at school they don’t talk to each other or acknowledge each other.

Mr. Thomas elaborated, “During the service projects, they are not affected as much by negative peer pressure, and they can focus on positive reinforcements that you want them to hear.” The after-school service projects provided a place where students could belong and a place where they could interact with peers, working as a team outside the regular school day.
Mr. Thomas purposefully designed activities in which students could be positively influenced by their peers; he also created opportunities where students could avoid negative peer pressure. He noted:

If the numbers get too high, then it becomes like a party. They are showing off for their friends. You’ve gotta watch out for that. If there’s too many it becomes sort of dangerously tense. You can feel too much energy like that dangerous elbow in the wrong direction. I never want more than 30 people in there as far as a guest speaker and I never want to have more than five or seven after school. Because it is too many and you are managing negative behaviors instead of positive ones.

Mr. Thomas reported on the effects of this supportive community of peers on some Men’s Group participants, noting that two of the students found a sense of belonging in the group. He said, “I think that [Brandon Norris] and [Donnie Gibbs] enjoy the companionship and being a part of the group.” Mr. Thomas believed there were leaders in the group who had a major role in positively influencing their peers. He stated, “I always look to [Donnie] to be a positive influence. He is like the model . . . the quiet leader. He leads by example rather than trying to influence people to do things.” Similarly, Mr. Thomas perceived Louis Parker as a leader, noting, “People respect [Louis] on a different level.”

Men’s Group participants reported that activities were a place to develop positive relationships and experience a supportive peer community. Referring to the cafeteria service project, Javier Sanchez stated:

It made me feel good because I never thought I would be able to help my friends . . . It’s good to help my friends, because you are an example to others. I found out some of my friends may be leading me in the wrong way. If you don’t respect your friends around you, then they won’t respect you back. I need to choose friends that I can respect like ones in the Men’s Group.

Javier reported that the cafeteria service project allowed him to experience helping friends and serving as an example. Through the experience, Javier learned what kinds of peer groups he should choose—those who could serve as a supportive peer community.
Marcus Cole described the sense of belonging he gained from participating in the Men’s Group:

The Men’s Group is like helping people and doing stuff together, like teamship and friendship. We like get to know each other and do stuff together. The Men’s Group teaches me that we meet friends.

Similarly, Carlos Valdez said:

Cause in the Men’s Group I kinda feel like . . . that someone could be like a really good friend and helper or something. Learn how to, uh, work together with other people . . . how to help each other out of a situation. Like I guess it taught me to feel more like a family towards each other.

Past members of the Men’s Group also reflected on the influence of the positive peer community they experienced in the group. Matt Dixon recalled:

Our Men’s Group . . . we were all sorta like a family. You do better when you have supporters, and people that can help you. You can’t do everything by yourself. It makes you feel better when you have like a supporting cast. You just feel like you can do more.

Matt valued the Men’s Group as a place where students could form positive peer relationships that encouraged them to make more positive choices.

Similarly, Chris Maxwell commented on the importance of the interpersonal bonds shared with peers in the Men’s Group:

In high school we have more like groups and like people that . . . so called cliques or whatever. Like in the Men’s Group at Middle School, everybody was together, but now in high school, everybody is trying to go their own separate way.

All past participants recalled the Men’s Group as a place where students could create positive interpersonal relationships with peers and experience positive outcomes as a result of those relationships.

Engaging in service activities and experiencing a sense of accomplishment. In addition to building a supportive peer community, Mr. Thomas wanted students in the Men’s
Group to experience an individual and collective sense of accomplishment. Mr. Thomas elaborated on the purpose of the service projects:

I always try to make the service project about the experience. In other words, like stuff around the school, so they could say, “I was a part of that,” or “I did that.” Then they can feel better about themselves and share it with their friends.

Similarly, Mr. Oliver noted:

My favorite part of the program is actually seeing the results of the service projects . . . what they create. They do a lot around the school, and these young men take great pride in seeing their work. The finished project . . . they have added something positive to the school.

Completing the service projects gave students a sense of accomplishment. The pride they felt in seeing the results of their work helped students feel better about themselves, which in turn helped them relate to their peers. Mr. Thomas explained:

We put up benches, and the kids took ownership of it and that is real service. It is something they showed pride in. They really enjoyed it and they really enjoyed sharing what they had accomplished with their peers.

Students also reported feeling a sense of accomplishment as a result of providing a service that benefitted their peers. Louis Parker stated:

Serving others? It really made me think about doing things for those who need it. It made me feel good, because in a way, as I’m growing up, I’m seeing the things I do have and not thinking about the things I don’t have. I’m grateful for the stuff I have, and not mad about the stuff I don’t. It taught me to share with others and be happy to give to my peers instead of being the needy.

Louis learned more about himself through engaging in service projects. As he gained a better sense of who he was, he began to focus less on what he needed and more on what he could do for others. In this way, the Men’s Group activities enabled students to better understand themselves through a sense of accomplishment, and consequently, to better relate to their peers.

**Summary.** The Men’s Group activities were designed to help participants learn the value of building a positive peer community and begin creating such a community for themselves.
Although this value or message was not explicitly communicated, a series of Men’s Group activities implicitly suggested the need to build a positive peer community. Through the activities, participants learned about the influence of peers, built a supportive community of peers within the Men’s Group, and engaged in service activities that provided a sense of accomplishment, enhancing their sense of self-worth and consequently their relationships with peers. Both current and former members of the Men’s Group described the group as a place where they learned the importance of building positive peer communities, found a supportive community of peers, and experienced a sense of accomplishment.

**Developing the Practices and Habits of Schooling**

Another value embedded in the Men’s Group was the importance of schooling. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines education as “the knowledge, skill, and understanding that you get from attending a school, college, or university” (“Education,” 2014). Schooling is defined as “the training, guidance, or discipline derived from experience” (“Schooling,” 2014). Differences between education and schooling have been discussed in recent literature. Ward (2013) explained:

> Schooling does not equal education. School is the major means society uses to pass along the information and the habits of mind that are expected in ordinary life within a society. At its best, schooling is the focal point for a series of years wherein children are expected to develop practices and appetites for establishing a life-long quest for effective knowledge and its real-world applications. (p. 28)

Schooling, then, attempts to encourage positive practices and habits among those attending school. Education is the culmination of knowledge gained in school and its application to real life.

As a result of participating in the Men’s Group, students developed an understanding of the appropriate habits and practices required of those in school. However, the Men’s Group did
not establish among its members a lifelong quest for effective knowledge and the application of knowledge. Data analysis indicated that student participants did not always value the knowledge, skills, or understanding acquired at school, but instead, developed an appreciation for the rituals and routines associated with the school experience. The Men’s Group communicated a protocol for the academic habits and practices expected at school. Appropriate academic practices included finishing school (or avoiding dropping out), engaging in written reflection, behaving appropriately, reading, and making good grades. Appropriate school behaviors were those that aided in the pursuit of these academic practices.

Mr. Thomas stated that he did not intend for the program to be available only to those who developed certain habits and practices in school:

But you know, it’s like if they are making a bad grade in class, I’m not going to judge them. I never want that to be like you can’t be in the Men’s Group unless you make a certain grade or you can’t be in the Men’s Group if you get in trouble, because that works against me. Like they will be like, “Well, I didn’t want to be in the Men’s Group anyway.” That is not the message I want them to have.

Although Mr. Thomas did not explicitly communicate to Men’s Group participants the necessity for appropriate academic habits and practices, the group’s activities implicitly communicated the importance of engaging in these practices and habits.

The Men’s Group communicated to participants several necessary academic practices and habits of schooling. These included attending, engaging in, and finishing school; making good grades; and reading. Men’s Group members were perceived to understand the importance of each of these practices with the exception of reading. Student participants never reported receiving a message about the importance of reading, although the Men’s Group experiences implicitly communicated such a message.
**Attending, engaging in, and finishing school.** During the first monthly meeting of the year, Mr. Oliver shared a message with the participants centering on his favorite saying: “When you miss school, you miss out.” Mr. Oliver explained the importance of schooling and of taking school seriously, and encouraged participants to take advantage of what they could learn at Robinlee Middle School. During the second monthly meeting, the “troubled man” guest speaker also encouraged the students to take advantage of the opportunities available to them:

Make sure you finish school. Your education is everything. You have to have a high school diploma at least. You have to be able to have an intellectual conversation. You have to pay attention in class. Get to class and suck up your education. Knowledge is power.

At the third monthly meeting, the first guest speaker reflected on his own school experience in a message encouraging students to make school a priority:

My mom always focused on education. I wasn’t always the best student, but I always did my work. If you set a goal and put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything. Life is all about choices. At some point, it’s up to you. Do you go to the game or do your homework? At some point you have to choose to do your homework. It comes up to you in the long run.

Similarly, during the field trip the participants heard messages of encouragement to engage in and finish school. The dean of the law school told them, “You may not know what you want to do later in life, but the most important thing is that you take your education seriously and finish school.”

Adult participants in the study perceived the Men’s Group as having an impact on students’ commitment to finish school. Mr. Thomas stated:

When you look at programs helping kids stay in school, you are maybe just focusing on a few where the message sinks in. Those are the kids that are going to keep other kids in school. So it’s not what we do necessarily as far as when the kids are here in eighth grade. It’s after they leave and the groups that they hang out with and who they choose to hang out with. Hopefully we have had an effect on that and that’s where it kind of spreads the message. That’s what’s going to keep them in school . . . is their friends.
Mr. Thomas noted the Men’s Group was only available to a small segment of the total school population, and only for a short period of time. Nevertheless, he believed the student participants benefited from hearing the message about finishing school. If the students who heard the message encouraged other students to value schooling and avoid dropping out, the program could have a broader impact on the general student population.

Mr. Oliver also believed participation in the Men’s Group encouraged students to stay in school. He stated:

The kids that I’ve found that did not buy in, and it’s only a few, but if you lose one, that’s too many. Many of them end up dropping out of school after their freshman year of high school. Quite a few of them do. But those who do buy in actually go on. Last year, we had seven or eight come back to Robinlee on their graduation day. They came back to see [Mr. Thomas] and their other teachers. These kids that have been away from here for four years that came back to let us know that they were graduating and that was their way of saying thank you. I know many of them would not have done that without the Men’s Group influence.

Student participants reported understanding the importance of attending, engaging in, and finishing school. In a written reflection, Darius Robinson wrote:

Another goal I have is to not get in trouble and stay out of ISS [in-school suspension]. It is hard to make up work when you are not in class. When you miss school, you miss out. I have to get good grades so I can go to high school.

Darius not only recognized the importance of attending school and remaining in class, but he also remembered verbatim the message given by Mr. Oliver at a Men’s Group meeting.

Javier Sanchez also reflected an awareness of the importance of graduating from high school. Javier stated:

Yeah, I put more effort in school because of the Men’s Group. Just like I got projects and then I got . . . in January we’ve got the writing test. I used to ask myself, “Like why do we got to know this and do all this?” Now I realize that this is the stuff we are going to use so that we can graduate from high school.
Echoing these thoughts, Brandon Norris reported, “The Men’s Group has helped me stay focused. Sometimes the guest speakers encourage you to do good things at school. If they are encouraging me to good things then I do well in school and graduate.” Marcus Cole reported a similar understanding, asserting:

Oh yeah. The Men’s Group makes me pay attention more in class and do my work. I do more work and I study more. It teaches me that. I know I have to do those things to graduate from high school.

An analysis of the history of the Men’s Group revealed a possible influence of the program on participants making choices to avoid dropping out. Table 5.1 provides a summary of the progress toward finishing high school of past participants in the Men’s Group.

Table 5.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Students</th>
<th>On Track</th>
<th>Behind</th>
<th>Transferred</th>
<th>Dropouts</th>
<th>Percent on Track</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>72</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>72%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. 2012-2013 complete data unavailable; totals are for first three years.*

As this data illustrates, a larger portion of Men’s Group members completed high school than members who did not. “On track” meant having earned the appropriate number of credits for years in high school. The data in Table 5.1 supports the assertion that participation in the Men’s Group positively influenced past student members to finish school; however, participation in the Men’s Group did not guarantee that a student would finish school. As the Men’s Group progressed from past to present, group numbers generally increased, as did the likelihood past group members would stay on track to graduate.
**Making good grades and reading frequently.** Guest speakers communicated the importance of making good grades and reading frequently as necessary practices of good schooling. One guest speaker encouraged students to work hard and read regularly, urging:

> You have to work hard in school. Real success is a lot of steady, hard work. That means doing your work and getting your grades. Keep them up. Speak up for what you want and go after it. You have to work for it. And read. If y’all don’t read, please read. Reading changed my life. Actually read . . . it will change your mind completely.

The second speaker at the third monthly meeting also highlighted making good grades and reading often as necessary practices of schooling.

During the field trip, both guest speakers at the business school suggested similar practices. The first guest speaker told attendees, “You should care about your grades. Make good grades now, and you will appreciate it in the future.” The speaker encouraged students to adopt a habit of making good grades. Students received a highlighter and the following instructions from one of the speakers:

> Why do you think I gave you a highlighter? I gave you a highlighter because I want you to read. It is important for you to read and soak up any knowledge you can get. It doesn’t matter what you read, but read as much as you can and highlight things you find that are interesting.

Students reported a desire to earn better grades as a result of participating in Men’s Group activities. Donnie Gibbs asserted:

> The Men’s Group has helped me because at first I was like playing around in some of my classes, but I realized that all my classes in school are important. I know I need good grades in all classes if I want to pass. So I started making the right decisions and stopped playing around. I pay attention and make good grades. I’m trying to stay on the right track.

Carlos Valdez also noted the importance of making positive school choices, writing:

> Another one of my goals is to get better grades than last year. To make good grades you have to do homework. I need to study more and stop going out so much. I need to pay attention more. The best way to get good grades is to listen.
Supplemental quantitative data suggested that participation in the Men’s Group had some influence on academic performance. Higher group class grade averages and increases in personal class averages of those who participated in the Men’s Group indicated a positive influence on group participants’ grades. Although data analysis in this study was largely qualitative, a thematic analysis of student academic performance did yield some correlation between participation in the Men’s Group activities and higher grade point averages.

Participants’ eighth grade class grades for the fall of 2013 were averaged and compared with their seventh grade class grades for the spring of 2013. Table 5.2 summarizes the progress of student participants’ grades from seventh to eighth grade, comparing student participants who participated regularly in Men’s Group activities with those who did not.

Table 5.2

*Summary of Progress of Class Grades among Students who Regularly Participated in the Men’s Group*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Grade Average</th>
<th>Percentage with &gt; 1% Increase from 7th to 8th</th>
<th>Percentage with &gt; 1% Decrease from 7th to 8th</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular Participants</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Regular Participants</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An increase in class grade averages among those who participated regularly in the Men’s Group could be attributed to the type of students likely to commit to attending the activities of program. Mr. Thomas reported that most of the students who participated in the Men’s Group had a desire to make positive choices about their schooling. He noted:
Really the kids who participate are going to be the kids that want to do well. It sort of transfers that way. I think the kids that demonstrate the most problems in school are obviously not the kids that have any interest with being in the program, or with any program, for that matter.

Similarly, Mr. Oliver perceived that participation in the Men’s Group had a greater impact on certain students. He stated:

I think the difference that I’ve seen with kids that buy in and kids that don’t is that kids that buy in realize that, You know what? I am tired of this merry-go-round that I’m on and that I am realizing is not going anywhere and that I want to get off that merry-go-round and I want to do something.

Both men believed students who desired to perform well in school were more likely to participate in the Men’s Group. Student participants understood the messages about adopting practices and habits that would help them make good grades in school, but membership in the Men’s Group did not guarantee an improvement in grades.

Holistic thematic data analysis produced limited results on the impact of Men’s Group participation on increasing reading frequency. Multiple data collection methods produced very little evidence of Men’s Group participants receiving the message that reading frequently was a necessary school practice or habit. Although such a message was communicated, it would be difficult to try to correlate regular participation in the Men’s Group with an increase or decrease in reading frequency or ability with such limited data.

**Written reflection and appropriate behavior as sound academic practices.** The Men’s Group sought to foster in its members appropriate behaviors related to the habits and practices of schooling. To attend, engage in, and finish school, as well as to make good grades, one needed to behave correctly. Mr. Thomas taught participants that their behavior itself was a sound academic practice and encouraged them to carry over the lessons learned in the Men’s Group into the regular school day. Mr. Thomas noted:
What happens when the group is successful is it carries over into the school and classroom, and that is what you want. You want what is going on outside class to carry over into your classroom. When you see kids that are a problem before and now they are doing the work and being a positive influence to students around them. They’ve had an experience outside of the regular classroom and then they come into the classroom and they are more receptive to teaching and learning that is going on and they start a chain reaction to other students, where you actually have a productive learning environment like you are supposed to have. Without that experience, the connection between the Men’s Group and school, it would be way more difficult.

By teaching appropriate behaviors outside the classroom that affected behavior in the classroom, Men’s Group activities helped members relate appropriate behavior to academic practice.

Mr. Thomas encouraged students to engage in written reflection as a means of discouraging negative school behavior. He believed Men’s Group members should learn to write to express themselves, instead of keeping thoughts to themselves. The “Men’s Group Writing Assignment #2” asked students to, “Write down three goals that you want to achieve this year. Remember these are short-term goals that you should set for yourself before high school.” Other assignments asked participants to write as an avenue for reflection. Mr. Thomas saw improved writing and literacy among participants as a byproduct of the written assignments. He stated:

You definitely learn something from it. Improved writing skills are great, but the real reason you want them to write is to get in that habit of reflecting on their lives and the mistakes they have made and just being able to put into words what they are thinking, because if you are not able to do that, then you hold so much inside and it comes out in different ways that are negative and violent. They just lash out. I firmly believe this . . . that writing is a way of controlling emotions, of expressing emotions without physically displaying them.

In crafting the writing assignments, Mr. Thomas sought to encourage students to reflect on their emotions as a means of helping them to make better behavioral choices at school.

The writing assignments may have discouraged some students from participating more fully in the Men’s Group. Diego Barcenas and Johnny Gordon did not participate in writing often and neither student engaged in self-reflection. Diego participated in only two Men’s Group
activities. He had below average literacy skills in English, as Spanish was his native language.

Diego read on a fourth grade level and did not pass the state-mandated English Language Arts test at the end of his seventh grade year. As a result, he had difficulty with writing. Deigo stated:

The challenges about the writing prompts are they are very hard because you gotta figure out how to start and end your paragraphs and how many paragraphs and how they need to be organized . . . I think I didn’t come to Men’s Group much, because I couldn’t do the assignments. They were complicated. I didn’t finish most of them. Writing is hard because you have to know where to capitalize, how to spell right, and where to put punctuation.

Johnny attended only three Men’s Group activities, attributing his lack of participation to his lack of desire to complete the writing assignments. Johnny read on a sixth grade level and passed the state-mandated English Language Arts standardized test at the end of his seventh grade year. Johnny noted that he could complete the assignments, but he did not want to. He said:

The assignments. I don’t like doing the extra that I don’t have to do. It had nothing to do with [Mr. Thomas]. I can write; I just don’t like the assignments. That’s the main reason I didn’t participate. I mean, there ain’t nothing wrong with it. I just don’t want to do that work. I thought they were going to be reasonable . . . like writing about life. Just writing about you. It’s more like writing official for like business or something.

Notably, Johnny received the second most disciplinary referrals of the 10 students in the sample.

For Johnny, avoidance of writing may have limited his self-expression and resulted in other ways of acting out. Such a scenario supported Mr. Thomas’s belief in employing writing as a tool for expression to avoid negative behaviors.

Mr. Thomas believed the behaviors exhibited by members of the Men’s Group often did not reflect an understanding of the value of schooling. He asserted:

You think about valuing your education. Sometimes the boys are off task. They misbehave. I think they value like the moment. When you are in the moment, you don’t think about your . . . So, it’s all in the moment. You ask the kids, “Do you value your education?” and of course they do. But do you value your education right now? This very second? And it’s like they can’t answer that. Over the long haul I think they value their
education. You can see it in their work. You can see it in their writing and what they turn in, but from moment to moment, you can’t really say.

Mr. Thomas noted that students who participated in the Men’s Group learned to value their education over time. Students understood the message of appropriate academic practices and habits; however, these same students did not always make positive behavioral choices at school. As discussed in Chapter Four, students are influenced by numerous factors in their choices at school each day. As a result, participants did not always behave in a manner that reflected their understanding of appropriate school behaviors.

Over time, however, Men’s Group participants revealed a greater understanding of appropriate behaviors and their implications for schooling. For example, all seven of those who participated regularly in Men’s Group activities reported learning to “focus.” Donnie Gibbs described reported:

The Men’s Group is like showing you how to behave at school . . . to focus. To focus means to be responsible and always make the right decisions. The guest speakers tell us how they were in school and what they’ve been through. Then we can learn from them when we go through it.

Carlos Valdez also spoke about learning to focus, reflecting, “I knew I needed to focus. If I was bad in my classes and not paying attention, then I could get into trouble. So I calmed down. And I don’t get in that much trouble any more.”

Supplemental quantitative data suggested that participants understood positive behavior as a beneficial academic practice. Students who participated regularly in Men’s Group activities appeared to be influenced by an understanding of good behavior as a necessary practice of schooling. Table 5.3 summarizes the quantitative impact of the Men’s Group on student participants’ behavioral choices related to the number of discipline referrals.
Table 5.3

**Summary of Men’s Group Participation on Participants’ Behavioral Referrals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Student Participants</th>
<th>Number of Referrals per Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular Participants</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Regular Participants</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary.** The Men’s Group communicated a message to participants about the importance of schooling. The practices and habits of schooling include attending, engaging in, and graduating from high school; making good grades; reading frequently; engaging in written reflection; and behaving appropriately. Men’s Group participants demonstrated an understanding of most of these practices and habits. Results indicated that Men’s Group members saw value in attending, engaging in, and graduating from high school; making good grades; and behaving appropriately. Members did not demonstrate an understanding of the need to read frequently, or to engage in written reflection. Results suggested the understanding these schooling practices contributed to but did not guarantee engagement in these practices.

**A More Realistic Understanding of the Future**

The Men’s Group attempted to provide a more realistic understanding of the future for its student members. Chapter Four described each participant’s understanding of the future, revealing a limited understanding of life after high school in each individual case. A holistic thematic analysis revealed the need to think about and understand the future as a key message of
the Men’s Group. Obtaining a more realistic understanding of the future required relating today’s choices to tomorrow’s consequences and learning about life after high school.

**Future consequences for today’s choices.** At the entrance of Robinlee Middle School is a sign that reads, “Do what you have to do today, so that you can do what you want to do tomorrow.” Symbolically, the sign could serve as a motto for the Men’s Group, which attempted to help students connect present choices to future consequences. Mr. Thomas said in his first interview, “The Men’s Group is about how to see yourself in the future . . . definitely. This is what you can be if you apply yourself. This is where you can go.”

Mr. Thomas hoped to help Men’s Group members relate what they were doing now with what they hoped to accomplish in the future. He described this message when he said:

> You always tell kids to believe in their dreams and all that. You’re never going to take that away from them, but I think if you have that dream you absolutely need to encourage the fact that there is only one way you are going to do these things that you are talking about doing, and that is to be responsible and be accountable, and what you are doing right now is not even close to it.

Only by learning to make positive choices now could students hope to achieve the goals they set for the future. Mr. Thomas explained:

> The Men’s Group is more of a, “Hey, you live in a bubble. You know there are people out there that are doing these things and you need to figure out what you are going to do with your life instead of sitting around and playing video games. You have to imagine what life is like as a grown-up.”

Mr. Oliver viewed the opportunity for students to hear from guest speakers each month as a distinctive strength of the program. The philosophy of the Men’s Group provided a chance for students to interact positively with adults, including the monthly speakers. Mr. Oliver described the importance of this element of the program:

> You know, if you’ve got enough people that you see, and [Mr. Thomas] brings in phenomenal speakers each month, all the way from attorneys, to band managers, to professional athletes, doctors, and poets. Students are able to listen to these speakers and
hear their stories. They see themselves in the shoes of the speakers, and they learn where they made mistakes. A lot of the speakers talk about going from middle school to where they are now.

A guest speaker at the first monthly meeting reinforced the message linking present actions to future accomplishments:

If you want to be great, life is about the now. You can’t get caught up in the now. You will walk around with your head down in 10 minutes. Life is about preparation for the future. You are in the eighth grade. Your work is about your future.

By encouraging students to think about preparing for the future in the present moment, speakers hoped to help the participants understand how their choices as adolescents influenced their outcomes as adults.

Mr. Thomas also tried to help the Men’s Group members develop better communication skills. According to Mr. Thomas, teaching students to communicate in a professional manner, an important skill for the future, is one of the most important facets of the Men’s Group. He stated:

Just communicating with people. Learning how to communicate with people I think is a skill that no one else is going to teach them unless we do. They need to understand how to communicate as adults do. Otherwise, as adults, they go out and don’t know how to treat the people they communicate with.

Mr. Oliver also emphasized the need for students to learn to communicate respectfully with adults, noting:

We are trying to teach our kids how to say thank you, no ma’am, and yes ma’am and realize it’s okay. It’s cool. It’s okay. Too many of them get caught up with being disrespectful when they communicate. Manners will get you further than money ever will.

Mr. Thomas attempted to design experiences that helped teach Men’s Group members appropriate interpersonal communication as a life skill. None of the regular participants in the Men’s Group reported an understanding of the importance of communication. Nevertheless, during all activity observations, regular participants in the Men’s Group were observed
interacting respectfully with adults, and none of these participants were referred to the
administration as a result of disrespectful communication with adults.

Students did report gaining an understanding of how their present choices related to
future outcomes. Carlos Valdez descriptively summed up the impact of the Men’s Group on the
relationship between choices and outcomes. He noted:

The Men’s Group is a little group that [Mr. Thomas] made that shows us how to be
responsible. He teaches us life skills so that we need to learn to be better in the future. He
puts little projects together so we can get experience working. They’re fun, and we
sometimes have meetings with people who come to talk to us about life and do the right
thing, so we can be productive when we grow up. I learned that what I do today can
affect my future and how I’m going to be later on in life. We should be responsible
adults. It makes me ask myself about what I want to do every time I do something that
might set me back by just making the right choices. I need to make the right choices.

Through the experiences it provided and the positive relationships with adults it fostered, the
Men’s Group sent a message of encouragement to students about their choices. Participants
perceived that what they were learning to do presently would one day benefit them as adults.

The students credited guest speakers for frequently sharing personal stories of how past
choices impacted future consequences. Four of the seven regular participants identified the
“troubled man” as their favorite guest speaker. Darius Robinson said, “The guy in prison was my
favorite. He taught me you got to make the right choices to not end up in a bad situation.”

Similarly, Donnie Gibbs noted:

I learned to just stay out of trouble . . . like that guy who went to prison. He was telling us
to always make the right decisions cause you never want to get in trouble and it could
lead to bad things like going to jail. No one wants to go to jail. So he was telling us to
always make the right decisions, because it could really mess up your future.

Students described thinking about the future as an integral part of their experience in the
Men’s Group. In a writing assignment about goals, Louis Parker wrote:

Goals are important. They are important in your teenage life, but also in your adult life. It
helps you think about your future and make a plan to be successful. If you have a plan,
you can know what you need to do to be successful. Knowing you can dream and achieve your dreams is a good feeling.

Thinking about the future encouraged the members to reflect on their dreams, and to identify what they needed to do now to achieve those dreams.

**Learning about the future.** The Men’s Group experiences provided students with a clearer understanding of what life might be like after high school. Learning about life after high school, in turn, equipped students with a more realistic understanding of the future. Students learned about higher education and what was needed to work professionally as an adult. Mr. Oliver described how the Men’s Group supported the broader mission of Robinlee Middle School:

> I think the greatest thing we are attempting to do is knowing that every student needs some form of education after high school. We never stop at high school. We never just let high school graduation be a period at the end of a sentence. It is a comma, and it is a stopping point, but it is also a springboard into the future. The Men’s Group exposes students to education beyond high school, and knowing that every student needs a high school diploma and we let that be known from day one. But also, we let our kids know that you have to get some form of education.

The principal of Robinlee saw value in the Men’s Group teaching students about higher education, as this effort advanced the school’s mission to help students understand and plan for life after high school.

Mr. Oliver also believed the Men’s Group helped members develop more realistic expectations for the future. Mr. Oliver observed that many adolescent males had unrealistic expectations of playing sports professionally, and he believed the Men’s Group taught students to think more realistically about their educational choices. Mr. Oliver said:

> The Men’s Group is also understanding that everybody is not going to the NFL. Everybody’s not going to the NBA. Being realistic about your abilities and also knowing that you have the ability to graduate from high school first and foremost. But you also have the ability if you want to go to the NBA, to at least put forth the effort and realize
that there’s a whole lot of work that goes in before you come out. You also need an
education past high school most of the time. It’s a process.

Mr. Thomas elaborated on the goal of helping students achieve realistic understandings
of future outcomes. He stated:

Yeah . . . all of them want to go to college and it is like, you know, of course we are
encouraging our kids to go to college. But I’ve got news for you. If you can’t write a
complete sentence right now and you are really not trying to . . . and you are really just at
this place where you can’t formulate a complete sentence right now in eighth grade, it is
going to be really hard for you to go much past that in high school. So it is very
unrealistic. You’re not going to say that to a kid. And it’s probably not even something
you should think as a teacher, but you are also aware of the reality of the situation.

I think every kid has skills. And I see that with kids that have graduated and kids I keep
up with. And they have matured and they have skills and maybe they are not the best
writers but that’s not going to keep them from getting a good job. And maybe they aren’t
going to college but that’s not going to keep them from providing for their family and
working hard and being responsible citizens.

But no matter what kind of job that you get you still gotta show up every day. You gotta
do the best the best you can do and in the end you want to move up if you have a chance
to move up. So all the things that we’re teaching, the way that I’m seeing . . . that I’m
trying to promote is like that responsibility, that accountability for being in the job. You
know, getting a job.

Whereas Mr. Oliver emphasized the need for some type of educational training after high
school, Mr. Thomas believed students needed to be more realistic about their educational futures.

Mr. Thomas’ goal was to send a message to the Men’s Group participants about being
responsible regardless of their specific educational or career aspirations. Both men agreed that a
high school diploma was a must, but they differed in their perceptions about realistic
expectations for students after high school.

Regular Men’s Group participants appeared to have learned more about the future
through their experiences in the group. Describing their field trip to a local university, Mr.
Thomas stated:
It was awesome in the sense of going to all of those different locations at [the university]. I thought it really came together well and they got a lot out of it. They had a better understanding of college . . . It made me think we need to do something like that more frequently. I mean, the kids learn so much from getting that experience.

Mr. Oliver also believed the Men’s Group was effective in teaching students about college life. Mr. Oliver noted:

We have been able to expose students to so much. We have given them opportunities to actually go on trips. There is so much to offer them outside of their own town. The Men’s Group is a part of that. Students are learning what these places are like . . . what college is like.

All student participants claimed they had a desire to go to college, and students who participated in the field trip to the university reported that it helped them learn about college life. Marcus Cole noted, “I would say the field trip like changed our mind on how college really was. Like it changed our opinions.” Darius Robinson asserted:

College is almost like what I’m doing now but it’s way harder. I just can start out in college, but I need to get my grades higher now, and be able to affect where I’m going by how my grades look. By choosing what college I can go to. I mean the classes, they was long and I don’t know how many hours. It’s a lot of writing and talking.

Darius and others who participated in the field trip discussed differences between their present schooling and the education they would pursue after high school. Through the experience of visiting the university, Men’s Group members gained a more realistic understanding of education after high school.

Learning about college through the field trip gave students confidence in their present abilities. Attendees were now capable of linking their present schooling to their future education, and envisioning college as something they would be able to participate in one day. Donnie Gibbs said, “I learned a lot about life after high school. It’s amazing how many things you can do in college. I know I can get to college now, but I have to do good in school.”
Louis Parker expressed an understanding similar to Donnie’s in a written response to the trip. Louis wrote in a poem:

Road to UGA, I was feeling comfortable in a way.  
Positive learning, good environment had me thinking  
I’ll be coming back one day.  
While I was walking, analyzing, dreaming,  
it won’t be long before I’m here.  
Man, these days add up to years.  
Changing my mind, thinking about other careers.  
Got people talking in my ears . . .  
I guess that’s how I’ll live.  
I want to wake up rich,  
but I’m gonna be patient until my time is here.

By gaining a more realistic understanding of college from the field trip, students began to view college as a viable option for the future.

The Men’s Group also offered students a more realistic understanding of employment after high school, and participants described learning skills that helped prepare them for this work. Brandon Norris stated:

When we did those projects, we experimented what we might be able to do in the future. It wasn’t a job or nothing, but it was like just something to do. So we would know like in the future, maybe you would get a job and you might need to know something and you might already have experienced it, so you might know a little bit about it.

Similarly, Carlos Valdez noted:

[Mr. Thomas] teaches life skills that we learn and need to learn. And he puts projects together so we can get experience like in working. They’re fun. And we sometimes have meetings with other people that come that like talk to us about life. They tell us about their jobs and stuff, so we can be more productive when we grow up.

The Men’s Group provided students with a more realistic understanding of the skills needed for employment after high school, as well as teaching them some of these skills.

Men’s Group participants also reported learning about employment after high school from the guest speakers. The “Shark Tank” meeting featured a group of entrepreneurs from the
community who discussed what it meant to be entrepreneurs. Brandon Norris described what he learned about entrepreneurship:

I remember the Shark Tank. It would be cool to start a business. I wanted to do a touch screen washing machine. I learned that not everyone always is going to be successful when they start a business. It’s hard to come up with a business.

Monthly meetings, in addition to service projects, provided students with a glimpse of the possibilities for future careers. The guest speakers provided students with a more realistic understanding of the skills and abilities necessary to prepare them for future employment.

**Summary.** A third message or value embedded in the Men’s Group was the need for a more realistic understanding of the future. Students who participated regularly in the Men’s Group demonstrated an understanding of how present choices affected future outcomes. Those who regularly attended Men’s Group activities developed a more realistic understanding of the future. However, students did not report an understanding of interpersonal communication as an important element in preparing for the future. Nevertheless, the message received by Men’s Group members regarding life after high school had a noticeable influence on the choices made by those participants.

**Overall Summary of the Findings**

It is evident from the data analysis that the Men’s Group influenced the choices of students who regularly participate in the program’s activities. Seven of the 10 students in this study participated in 4 or more of the 9 Men’s Group activities, while 3 of the students participated in 3 or fewer activities. Students who attended the Men’s Group regularly were exposed to key messages through participation in the program. The thematic analysis revealed that these messages were conveyed and reinforced through three primary means that were incorporated into the philosophy of the Men’s Group:
1. The Men’s Group messages were strengthened and better understood, and had greater influence, when they reinforced messages students heard from family members.

2. The Men’s Group meetings and experiences were designed to explicitly and implicitly deliver the messages through authentic out-of-school activities.

3. The Men’s Group messages were strengthened by opportunities for participants to develop positive relationships with the faculty mentor and other adults.

From thematic analysis, three themes emerged as key values of the Men’s Group, which comprised the content of the Men’s Group messages. These three themes were:

1. The need to build a positive peer community.

2. The need to engage in positive habits and practices of schooling.

3. The need to develop more realistic understandings of the future.

Students who regularly participated in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group received and understood these messages. The messages interacted with familial and peer influences to affect the choices of student participants. The values or messages of the Men’s Group were shown to have an influence on the choices of student participants. Chapter Six presents a summary of the study in relation to the existing literature as well as a discussion of the themes that emerged from the analysis of this case study. Implications for future studies are also discussed.
CHAPTER 6
SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of participants in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the history of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group and how does it operate now? What norms, values, or innovative interventions are embedded in the Men’s Group?
2. What do the involved professionals perceive as the impact of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s group on the academic and personal lives of the students?
3. How do the involved students see the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in relation to their academic and personal lives?
4. Does the program have an influence on the students academically and/or personally?

Summary of Research Design

A qualitative case study design was used to examine the perspectives of participants in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, a program for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males. Participants included 10 current Men’s Group members, three former members presently in high school, the faculty mentor for the Men’s Group, and the principal of Robinlee Middle School. Data were gathered from multiple sources to further validate the findings. Sources included:
1. Two 30-minute individual interviews with the 10 current student members.

2. Brief 10-minute follow-up interviews with each of the 10 student members after the longer individual interviews.

3. One hour-long interview with the principal of Robinlee Middle School and two hour-long interviews with the faculty mentor of the Men’s Group.

4. Observations of four regularly scheduled meetings lasting one hour each, an observation of one field trip lasting eight hours, observations of three after-school service projects lasting two hours each, and an observation of one in-school service project lasting one hour.

5. Document analyses of six written reflections from each of the 10 current student members.

6. Ethnographic journaling by the researcher of interactions with Men’s Group members.

7. Supplemental quantitative standardized test scores, class grades, and discipline data for student participants.

8. Other data sources to assist with triangulation were consulted such as three high school students who participated in the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group. Their perspectives were used to help clarify and confirm hunches about the data collected from the 10 student participants in the Men’s Group.

A social constructionist theoretical foundation was employed in this study. Prasad (2005) describes a social constructionist theory of knowledge as the result of a “scholarly position that takes human interpretation as the starting point for developing knowledge of the social world . . . [and] how we order, classify, structure, and interpret our world, and then act on our
interpretations” (p. 13). Similarly, Patton (2002) asserted, “All reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed” (Patton, 2002, p. 80). A social constructionist conceptual framework, then, involves constructing knowledge through interpretations of social interaction.

Using this framework, the researcher sought to understand the impact of the Men’s Group on the low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males who participated in the program. Through observing and interacting with participants and observing participants interacting with each other, the researcher interpreted meanings associated with the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group to answer the research questions posed in this study. In addition, participants constructed meaning through their own social construction and interpretation, and the researcher attempted to capture these meanings.

A case study design was chosen as the methodology to interpret socially constructed meaning in this study. Hays (2004) stated, “Case studies seek to answer focused questions by producing in-depth descriptions and interpretations over a relatively short period of time, perhaps a few weeks to a year . . . They investigate contemporary cases for purposes of illumination and understanding” (p. 218). The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group served as the case for this research, and multiple forms of data were collected through a variety of methods to produce in-depth descriptions of the program and those associated with it. Meaning and understandings of the case emerged through interpretation of socially constructed data.

The numerous data collection methods used in this study were appropriate for the case study methodology (Fetterman, 2010; Mason, 2002; Prior, 2003; Raulston, 2010; Simons, 2009). Data collection methods helped to render thorough descriptions of the Men’s Group activities and to capture the perspectives of the adult participants who were instrumental in creating the program. The first set of student participant interviews elicited student perceptions of life as an
adolescent male. This data were then examined through exploratory data analysis, in which “the researcher carefully reads and rereads the data, looking for key words, trends, themes, or ideas that will help outline the analysis before any analysis takes place” (Guest et al., 2012, pp. 7-8).

This first phase of data analysis involved reviewing transcripts from participant observations and interviews, ethnographic journals, and participant written artifacts, and examining supplemental data such as class grades, test scores, and student discipline data. Through inductive or exploratory data analysis, key trends emerged regarding the history and present perceptions of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, as well as in student perspectives on the influences on their choices as adolescent males.

In this study, the researcher analyzed adult perceptions of the history of the Men’s Group, observations of Men’s Group activities, and written artifacts to provide an in-depth description of the program. The researcher also analyzed trends in student perceptions of life as an adolescent male, in particular identifying family, peers, and other sources as recurring influences on student choices. These trends, coupled with supplemental quantitative data, yielded an in-depth description of each student participant. In-depth descriptions of each adult participant’s perceptions of the Men’s Group and its impact on students were provided. Such descriptions provided the context for this study and comprised smaller, single cases within the broader case study of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

After compiling descriptions of the Men’s Group program and its participants, the researcher analyzed the data through holistic thematic analysis. Triangulation worked to ensure internal validity in data analysis in this study. Triangulation in a case study is “less concerned with confirmation or convergence . . . [and] more concerned with exploring different perspectives and how they do or do not intersect in a particular context” (Simons, 2009, p. 119).
The perspectives of those involved with the Men’s Group intersected to produce the socially constructed meaning interpreted in this study. Data analysis produced descriptions of the Men’s Group program and the participants involved in the program. Six themes emerged from the data related to the values of the Men’s Group and the influence of these values on the lives of the student participants in this study.

The influence of the Men’s Group was often implicit, conveyed through messages that reflected the values embedded in the program. Moreover, the influence of the Men’s Group was subject to a nexus of influences on the choices students made, including peer, familial, and other influences. Werner-Wilson and Arbel (2000) conducted one of few studies examining these various influences, noting, “Some suggest that adolescents’ parents and peers provide competing messages about norms and values, while others suggest that parents and peers provide compatible messages” (p. 266). In this study, the Men’s Group worked to gain influence on student choices, through compatibility or competition, within an existing context of familial, peer, and other influences.

Mr. Thomas, the Men’s Group faculty mentor, intentionally designed experiences for students to serve as avenues to convey the group’s messages. These messages gained influence when they mirrored messages communicated by other sources, such as families. Men’s Group messages also gained influence when students built positive relationships with adults. The messages or values of the Men’s Group included the need to build a positive peer community, develop appropriate habits and practices of schooling, and achieve a more realistic understanding of the future.
Discussion

Referring to the review of relevant literature, the six themes that emerged from the case study analysis of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group are discussed below in relation to their success in communicating group messages and influencing participant choices.

**Theme 1: Values, or messages, communicated by the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group were strengthened when they reinforced messages received from other influences, such as familial influences.**

Members of the Men’s Group were more receptive to messages when they had received similar messages at home. Minke and Anderson (2005) stated, “Students whose families are involved in their education, regardless of family background or income, are more likely to earn higher grades, be promoted, show improved behavior, and enroll in postsecondary education programs” (p. 181). There is little doubt that parental involvement results in positive outcomes for students, or that lack of parental involvement impacts students negatively. Jensen (2009) found:

> The chronic stress of poverty impairs parenting skills, and disengaged or negative parenting in turn impairs children’s school performance. Parents who are struggling just to stay afloat tend to work extra hours, odd shifts, or multiple jobs and are less able to provide attention and affection and to devote their time, energy, and resources to their children. (p. 28)

Parents of students living in poverty can encounter barriers to involvement in their children’s schooling, resulting in negative outcomes for student academic performance. Blaming parents for negative student performance, however, is ill advised (Winter & Butzon, 2009). Instead of blaming parents, research points to a need for accountability on the school’s part in developing collaborative relationships with parents. Perspectives of students in this study indicated strong relationships between Men’s Group members and one or more family members.
Despite the low socio-economic status of Men’s Group members, students reported receiving messages from the Men’s Group that mirrored messages received at home. Messages regarding peer group choices, the appropriate habits and practices of schooling, and contemplating future outcomes were received both at school and at home, and these similar messages worked in tandem to influence student choices.

The findings of this study are consistent with the literature that identified similar messages communicated by, or values embedded in, the Men’s Group and the families of Men’s Group members. Regardless of student participants’ demographic or socioeconomic status, data analysis revealed that similar values were conveyed by the Men’s Group and participant families, both of which valued positive peer relationships, positive messages about school, and realistic understandings about the future. Although this study was not specifically designed to assess parental involvement or perceptions, similar values at school and home could serve as a starting point for school-family collaboration.

**Theme 2: Men’s Group experiences were intentionally designed to communicate the implied messages of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.**

The positive effects of extracurricular programs, including dropout prevention programs, on decreasing poor outcomes for low-socioeconomic adolescent males have been well documented (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Blount, 2012; Clark et al., 2008; Day-Vines & Day-Hairson, 2005; Henry et al., 2012; Hickman et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2007; Newcomb et al., 2002; Orthner et al., 2010). All of these programs are seen as more effective when they incorporate opportunities for students to engage in school. Shernoff and Vandell (2007) noted that extracurricular activities offer, “an important developmental context providing opportunities
for adolescents to experience heightened levels of engagement, challenge, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and initiative” (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007, p. 891).

Research has frequently examined the quality of experiences extracurricular programs provide for students (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2007; Greenberg, 2012; Kruczek, Alexander, & Harris, 2005; Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). In addition to examining the value of extracurricular experiences for students, this study provided an in-depth look at experiences as an avenue through which the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group communicated its messages and values. Ezrailson, Kamon, Loving, and McIntyre (2006) highlighted the importance of how teachers communicate with students:

When we tell a small child, “Don’t touch that—it’s hot!” does the child believe us? Or, as many children do, does she test that statement by putting her hand on the hot object? How often do [teachers] feel disappointed when we have given a particularly satisfying lecture or even a great demonstration and we find out later that students had failed to “get” and even missed our most elegant points. How we communicate is as important as what we say. (p. 279)

By highlighting the values implicitly conveyed through experiences, the current study found that experiences can serve as effective means of communicating with students. Mr. Thomas designed intentional experiences that worked together to communicate implicit messages to Men’s Group members. The totality of experiences, seen from the perspectives of participants, provided them with a more holistic understanding of the implied messages of the Men’s Group.

**Theme 3: Messages of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group were strengthened by the opportunity for members to develop positive relationships with adults.**

Rishel et al. (2007) stated, “Significant non-parental adults play an important role in adolescent development. Youth who form strong relationships with non-parent adults are more likely to display positive developmental outcomes with youth who do not” (p. 496).
Opportunities to build relationships with adults can positively impact youth development. The Men’s Group activities provided opportunities for members to build relationships with adults through interaction with guest speakers, the faculty mentor, and other professionals. Guest speakers and other adults served as role models for members of the Men’s Group.

Adolescent role-model choices have been examined in the literature (Hurd, Zimmerman, & Xue, 2009; Ivaldi & O’Neill, 2010; Jensen, 2009; Onyekwuluje, 2000). Adults who interacted with Men’s Group participants were members of the community surrounding Robinlee Middle School and were therefore accessible to Men’s Group members. Outside of the mentoring literature, scholars have rarely examined the impact of accessible role models. However, Nauta and Kokaly (2001) found that “Persons who are perceived as role models can facilitate academic and career development through their support and guidance as well as through the degree to which they provide inspiration and modeling” (p. 82). The adult professionals who interacted with the Men’s Group were perceived as accessible role models and worked to communicate the messages or values of the Men’s Group.

Exposure to role models through interactions with adults strengthened the message of achieving a more realistic understanding of the future for Men’s Group participants. Guest speakers and other professionals spoke of personal life choices that resulted in their present careers. Fouri and Buchannan (2002) found:

Children can benefit from relationships with adults who are successful in their areas of interest. These adults may be present in children’s lives as mentors, role models, heroes, and heroines. The relationships that develop range from close, interactive partnerships to admiration or imitation of public figures. (p. 37)

The role models for the Men’s Group benefited the student participants by allowing them to see successful adults in various areas of professional interest. Through exposure to accessible role models, the Men’s Group members developed a better understanding of the future.
The relationship between Men’s Group members and the adults with whom they interacted was characterized by motivational speaking. Men’s Group members were exposed to adults who delivered motivational messages during monthly meetings and on the field trip. Little scholarly literature has examined the value or impact of motivational speaking. Day-Vines and Day-Hairston (2005) described a counseling technique known as “bibliotherapy”:

During bibliotherapy, student counselees read about literary characters who undergo experiences similar to their own. It is through this shared experience that students identify and connect with the character’s situation and come to the realization that others experience similar concerns. For urban African American adolescents who might have been socialized into a culture of inferiority, encouraging them to read about people who have overcome adversity may serve as a significant source of empowerment. (p. 240)

Arguably, motivational speaking may work in much the same way. When students hear a speaker whose experiences are similar to their own, they are likely to connect with that speaker’s situation and develop a more realistic understanding of the future. Further studies are needed on the influence of motivational speakers on student engagement.

Men’s Group members developed positive relationships with their faculty mentor, Mr. Thomas. It is widely accepted that programs promoting positive relationships between teachers and students can improve student outcomes (Barile et al., 2012; Bergeron et al., 2011; Charmaraman & Hall 2011; Davis & Dupper, 2004; Knesting & Waldron, 2006). Mentoring has been identified in the literature as a method for improving outcomes for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males (Featherston, 2010; Lunenburg, 2000; Travis & Ausbrooks; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Most of these studies view “mentors” as individuals from the community who serve in no official school capacity; rarely are programs viewed in light of teachers serving as “mentors” for their own students. However, Mr. Thomas, the Men’s Group faculty mentor, built positive relationships with students by mentoring them during the intentional experiences he designed and facilitated. The case study of the Robinlee Middle
School Men’s Group contributes to the literature through its examination of the impact of a program in which students perceived their teacher as a mentor.

**Theme 4: Members of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group received a message related to the importance of building positive peer communities.**

A key message of the Men’s Group emphasized the importance of building positive peer communities. “Peer groups serve a number of useful and salient functions throughout adolescence,” explains Nyarko (2012, p. 162). Similarly, many scholars advocate offering programs that help students learn to avoid negative peer influence while providing opportunities for students to engage with positive peer influence (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999; Henry et al., 2012; Longhurst & Mccord, 2007; Marcus, 2001; Martin et al., 2012; Orthner et al., 2010; Quigley, 2004; Tarantino et al., 2013). These programs emphasize the powerful impact of peer influence. Similarly, this study highlighted strong peer influence as a recurring theme among members of the Men’s Group. The implicitly communicated values of the Men’s Group included the need to avoid negative peer influence, and the group offered opportunities for members to build positive peer relationships with other group members. Values embedded in the Men’s Group thus mirrored those embedded in other programs discussed in the literature.

The Men’s Group differed from programs examined in previous research in conveying messages related to peer communities through a variety of experiences, and by providing structured opportunities for members to reflect on these messages. Seldom in the literature are programs that couple a diverse set of experiences with opportunities to practice and reflect on learned values. Guest speakers, service projects, and a field trip worked together to convey messages encouraging Men’s Group members to avoid negative peer influence, to make positive
peer choices, to provide opportunities for students to put into practice received messages. Men’s Group members were also afforded opportunities to reflect on experiences and learned values through written assignments.

The case study of the Men’s Group identified service projects as an avenue through which members could feel a sense of accomplishment and thus better relate to peers and build positive peer communities. Programs supporting service-learning for at-risk students have shown promising results in the literature (Blount, 2012). Case (2007) argued that at-risk students at an alternative school who built a community garden “gained important academic and leadership skills, improved the look of their school and their outlook on school, reconnected to their community, and gained pride, self-respect and a sense of their own and their community’s potential” (p. 41). Further research is needed to explore service-learning as a means through which participants can gain confidence and consequently build positive peer communities.

Programs that provide opportunities to offer service have resulted in positive outcomes, although few provide opportunities for students to engage in projects to better their school. The service activities of the Men’s Group enabled students to improve their school surroundings, providing students with a sense of accomplishment. Arguably, this sense of accomplishment aided Men’s Group members by improving self-evaluation with regard to newfound abilities. Participation in Men’s Group service activities increased participants’ self-esteem, and as a result enhanced their ability to build positive peer communities.

**Theme 5: Members of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group received a message encouraging development of the appropriate habits and practices of schooling.**

Students living in poverty are often absent from school, which inhibits the absent student’s academic success (Morrissey, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2013). Frequent absenteeism is
correlated with disengagement from school. Students living in poverty are subject to frequent absences, and thus risk becoming disengaged from school, placing the students at greater risk of dropping out of school (Schoeneberger, 2012). Wang and Peck (2004) explained the impact of school engagement on educational and other outcomes:

> Active engagement in school is vital to a student’s educational success and subsequent development into a competent member of society. Students who are more engaged in school earn higher grades and show better psychological adjustment to school. Conversely, students who are disengaged from school are more likely to experience academic failure, school dropout, and a host of other negative psychosocial outcomes (p. 1266)

The scholarly literature has frequently cited school engagement as a predictor of high school graduation (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Henry et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2007).

While the present study did not correlate attendance with school engagement or subsequent high school gradation, it did examine a program designed to communicate a message relating to high school completion. This case study revealed that the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group communicated a message about the need for members to attend, engage in, and finish school as positive practices and habits of schooling. Data analysis indicated that student participants understood the message concerning attending and engaging in school. Interviews with former Men’s Group members indicated that students who participated in the Men’s Group were likely to graduate from high school; however, there was not enough data to correlate participation in the Men’s Group with high school graduation. A longitudinal study examining the program and the participants’ perspectives over time is needed to better understand the influence of the Men’s Group on high school performance and completion.

Boling and Evans (2008) stated, “The lack of adolescent literacy is a significant problem that will have a dramatic social impact. Each day, thousands of students dropout of high school
because they lack the basic literacy skills needed to be successful” (Boling & Evans, 2008, p. 59). Reading skills have long been seen as related to high school completion (Chang & Jordan, 2010; Fitzhugh, 2011; Russo, 2011; Sparks, 2011; Daniel et al., 2006). Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group activities encouraged students to engage in appropriate habits and practices of schooling, including making good grades and reading frequently. Participants reported receiving a message to make good grades, and participation in the Men’s Group had some positive influence on members’ class grades.

Another implied message—the “lost message”—of Men’s Group activities was the importance of reading as a positive habit of schooling. However, members of the Men’s Group did not report receiving a message that frequent reading was a priority, and no evidence was found that the implied message about reading influenced student members to read more frequently. Student participants engaged in writing assignments, which they perceived as a mode of reflection rather than a method to improve literacy. Two students reported that these writing assignments discouraged them from participating more regularly in Men’s Group activities. An ironic “lost message” resulted—most student participants read at or near the appropriate grade level, passed the majority of standardized tests, yet were not perceived as understanding a message involving reading as a priority. Three students were behind grade level, yet a message of the need to read more frequently was not understood by these students. Ironically, a major project of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group was to build a “little free library.”

Another message related to the practices and habits of schooling involved establishing appropriate behavior as a sound academic practice. Several programs have been identified in the literature as influencing adolescents’ behavioral choices (Blount, 2012; Clark et al., 2008; Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Henry et al., 2012; Hickman et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2007).
Numerous factors influence the behavior of adolescent males living in poverty, as Jensen (2009) explained:

Socioeconomic status forms a huge part of the equation. Children raised in poverty rarely choose to behave differently, but they are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to confront, and their brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine good social performance in school. (p. 14).

Adolescent student behavior results from a variety of factors, many of which are outside of control of the school. While most programs highlight the importance of providing students with alternatives to deviant behavior, this program examined a message to members emphasizing the importance of appropriate behavioral choices. Student members reported receiving and understanding these behavioral messages. The Men’s Group activities provided a chance for students to practice and reflect on appropriate behavior as a positive practice of schooling. However, the influence of the Men’s Group on behavioral choices may have been mitigated by the tendency of students who already demonstrated positive behavior to participate in Men’s Group activities. Those students may behaved appropriately at school as a result of other factors that contributed to positive behavior.

**Theme 6:** *Members of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group received a message related to achieving a more realistic understanding of the future.*

The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group sought to encourage adolescents to connect present choices with future outcomes. Men’s Group members understood the message about choices and consequences, but there was little evidence that this message influenced student decisions. Reyna and Farley (2006) discussed the choice-making behavior of adolescents:

A key question is whether adolescents are developmentally competent to make decisions about risks. In principle, barring temptations with high rewards and individual differences that reduce self-control (i.e., under ideal conditions), adolescents are capable of rational decision making to achieve their goals. In practice, much depends on the particular situation in which a decision is made. In the heat of passion, in the presence of peers, on
the spur of the moment, in unfamiliar situations, when trading off risks and benefits favors bad long-term outcomes, and when behavioral inhibition is required for good outcomes, adolescents are likely to reason more poorly than adults do. Brain maturation in adolescence is incomplete. Impulsivity, sensation seeking, thrill seeking, depression, and other individual differences also contribute to risk taking that resists standard risk-reduction interventions. (Reyna & Farley, 2006, p. 1)

Receiving a message emphasizing the future consequences of one’s present choices did not guarantee that this message would influence the decisions of Men’s Group participants. Although those who participated in the Men’s Group reported understanding a message of making positive choices as a result of participation in program experiences, it would not be valid to conclude that these decisions were based on evaluating future outcomes. Adolescents’ behavior as well as their behavioral inhibition can be attributed to numerous influences on their choices.

Communication skills have been documented as improving interpersonal competency and thereby enhancing adolescents’ ability to develop interpersonal relationships (Erozkan, 2013). The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group sought to teach student members of the importance of communicating respectfully with adults as a valuable life skill. Student members did not report receiving the message of consistent respectful communication, but frequently demonstrated respectful communication with adults during Men’s Group activities. Adolescents who communicate effectively have been found to have greater self-efficacy (Erozkan, 2013). The students’ ability to respectfully communicate with adults might be attributed to a greater sense of self-efficacy prior to participation in the Men’s Group. Perhaps students who chose to engage in Men’s Group experiences were more likely to already have established a greater sense of self-efficacy.

Adolescents have been found to be capable of making rational decisions to achieve their goals for the future (Reyna & Farley, 2006). Middle School students have been documented as
having little understanding of the future in the literature. Sheperd-Johnson (2000) observed that many middle school students have difficulty connecting what they learn in the classroom with the outside world, as well as understanding how schooling relates to a career. Beale and Jacobs (2004) noted that many middle school males harbor unrealistic dreams of being professional athletes despite discouraging odds, and advocated a curriculum that introduces students to options in other professional fields. Curry, Belser, and Binns (2013) cited numerous concerns regarding students’ lack of understanding with respect to career and postsecondary life.

This study mirrored similar studies in finding that male adolescents had unrealistic views of the future. Participants in this study gained a more realistic understanding of the future by participating in the Men’s Group activities. Students were exposed to career-oriented information from guest speakers and learned about life after high school through a visit to a local university. Service projects provided opportunities for members to learn practical life skills that could aid them in future employment. Members of the Men’s Group were influenced in their decision making by gaining a more realistic understanding of the future.

**Implications for Future Research**

As indicated in the previous section, the findings of this study suggest several avenues for future research. One strength of this study was its consideration of student perspectives. As Longhurst and McCord (2007) stated:

> All too often groups and gatherings of experts come to talk about really important issues about young people, and something is missing from these discussions: that is to hear from the experts themselves. These students are the real experts on what it means to face the challenges of today, growing up as adolescents. (p. 195)

A longitudinal study of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group that continued to highlight student perspectives could investigate the relationship between Men’s Group participation and high school success and/or completion. To better understand the impact of the Men’s Group as
an intervention to prevent high school dropout, such a study could follow members as they progress through high school and either complete or drop out of high school.

There are several implications for future research associated with each of the themes in this chapter. Further research is needed to understand how programs for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males can work to engage and collaborate with members’ families. Research investigating the perspectives of families on programs for students is also warranted. Moreover, further research on how messages are implicitly communicated through intentional experiences would be beneficial.

More research is needed on the influence of accessible and inaccessible role models as well as the impact of motivational speakers on students’ academic and personal outcomes. Future studies could examine how teachers serving as mentors are perceived by students and how such a relationship is valuable. Finally, studies are needed to identify strategies that, individually or in combination, assist students in building positive peer communities, developing positive habits and practices for schooling, and gaining more realistic understandings of the future.

**Implications for Practitioners**

The findings of this study have implications for practitioners at the local district and school levels. Although such a program cannot guarantee high school completion for its members, findings suggest that programs like the Men’s Group may positively impact choices related to high school completion for low-socioeconomic minority males. More programs and program resources are needed to support low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males. The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group, although perceived as having a positive impact on its members, met on average just once per month. Rick Thomas’ commitment of time
and personal monetary resources was crucial to the success of the program, and arguably too much to expect from one individual.

In addition to a lack of funding, time was also a limited resource. Frank Oliver noted, “The other thing is the time commitment. You have to be willing to commit the time in the life of a child.” Similarly, Mr. Thomas asserted, “Being in the classroom and trying to follow the curriculum and do all the things that I am supposed to do, you have to find the time to provide opportunities.” Resources were thus inevitably limited for the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group.

School and district leaders could make programs like the Men’s Group a priority by leveraging resources and time for those involved in such programs. Leaders could recruit and support teachers to collaboratively develop and implement programs for various populations of students. Programs should be offered to serve female students in addition to males. Support could be obtained through fundraising and financial contributions from community leaders and local businesses. Making time in the school day for teachers to plan for and facilitate such programs, and for students to participate in program activities, could enhance program success.

Given the commitment of time and other resources required of teachers like Mr. Thomas, a succession plan that provides continual recruitment of and support for faculty mentors is warranted. Responsibility, commitment, and resources must become a priority for the school system if such programs are to flourish and to build capacity for student success.

While the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group was seen as an early intervention, school and district leaders should consider providing extracurricular programs even earlier and continuing to provide them through high school graduation for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males. As Matt Dixon, a former Men’s Group member and now
a junior in high school, stated, “I feel like if we had something similar to the Men’s Group in high school, it would be awesome. We need it.” All former members expressed interest in joining such a group. Providing programs for various students at all grade levels and coordinating vertical and horizontal alignment among programs at different schools is an intervention that warrants serious consideration by school and district leaders.

Findings from this study offer implications for planning and implementing programs for low-socioeconomic adolescent African-American and Hispanic males. Practitioners can capitalize on the successful experiences of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in offering guest speakers, field trips, service projects, and opportunities for written reflection. Practitioners should consider the implied messages communicated through the experiences of their programs. Additionally, practitioners should understand the interactions of the values of the program with already established student member values. Teacher practitioners should seek methods of improving literacy among program participants as well as considering how experiences related to literacy may discourage some students from engaging in program activities. Students who are discouraged from participating in program activities because of experiences related to literacy may be offered other avenues for self-expression.

Leaders and faculty mentors should collaborate with families to provide programs that demonstrate consideration of the messages families want to communicate to students. Demographic differences and socioeconomic status aside, most families want what is best for their children. Programs should serve as a starting point for collaboration between schools and families to communicate beneficial messages and values to student participants. Programs should provide experiences that communicate program values and offer access to positive relationships with adults at school and in the community. Practitioners offering such programs should consider
teaching the value of building positive peer communities, encouraging positive practices and habits of schooling, and developing a more realistic understanding of the future. Programs should consider ways to relate program experiences to academic and behavioral success in the classroom.

Concluding Thoughts

The findings in this study suggest multiple benefits of offering extracurricular programs to support low-socioeconomic African-American and Hispanic males. Such programs should be offered throughout students’ school age years. Similar programs are needed for a variety of populations to elicit positive academic and personal outcomes for a broader spectrum of at-risk students. The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group supported low-socioeconomic adolescent males by encouraging the building of positive peer communities, the development of positive habits and practices for schooling, and the development of a more realistic understanding of the future. These supports were strengthened by the repetition of messages, intentional experiences, and opportunities to build relationships with adults.

An interpretive social constructionist theory guided this study, highlighting the perspectives of those involved in the program. This study’s limitations—including the brief time period under examination—make it impossible to generalize the findings beyond the immediate case and its context. Nevertheless, this research provides instructive insight into a program for African-American and Hispanic adolescent males and implications for practitioners and further research.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said, “We may not be able to prepare the future of our children, but we can at least prepare our children for the future” (as cited in Arceo-Dumalo, 2013, para. 8). The responsibility of every educator includes preparing children academically and
socially for the future. For those who engage in educating and rearing children of various ages and at various stages, one thing remains true. One can never make choices for a child; the child must make choices for himself. One can only attempt to prepare a child to make appropriate choices, or seek to positively influence the choices of that child. The Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group sought to positively influence the choices of its adolescent members and experienced success in doing so. Much remains to do in researching and developing school programs to empower positive choices that result in successful academic and personal outcomes for their participants.
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APPENDIX A

STUDENT PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW GUIDE
Student Participant Interview Guide

1. Talk with me a little bit about what it's like being a teenager. (*RQ1, RQ4*)

2. Tell me about what it's like being in middle school. (*RQ2, RQ4*)

3. Tell me about the Men’s Group. What does it mean to you? (*RQ1, RQ2, RQ4*)

4. What are some of the difficulties you face in life? In school? How does the Men’s Group help you with those difficulties? (*RQ1, RQ2, RQ4*)

5. What are some of the things you do with the Men’s Group? What are your favorite/least favorites? (*RQ1, RQ2, RQ4*)

6. Tell me how important your education is to you. How does the Men’s Group help you with your education? (*RQ1, RQ2, RQ4*)

7. What do you want to do five years from now? 10 years from now? How can the Men’s group help you reach those goals? (*RQ1, RQ2, RQ4*)

8. If you could change one thing about the Men’s Group, what would it be? (*RQ1, RQ2, RQ4*)

9. How has the Men’s Group helped you in school? In your personal life? (*RQ1, RQ2, RQ4*)
APPENDIX B

ADULT PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW GUIDE
Adult Participant Interview Guide

1. Talk with me a little bit about the students at Robinlee from a socioeconomic, demographic, standpoint, and how you think that affects their academic and personal lives. \((RQ3, RQ4)\)

2. What are some of the academic and personal difficulties the adolescent males at Robinlee face? \((RQ4)\)

3. Are there innovative programs to help educate these students? What about them works? \((RQ1, RQ3, RQ4)\)

4. Tell me what you know about the history of the Men’s Group at Robinlee and how it operates now. What norms and values are embedded in the program? What is innovative about it? \((RQ1)\)

5. Tell me about these students’ feelings on/perspectives of their education. What kinds of goals/future outlook do these students’ perceive for themselves? \((RQ1, RQ3, RQ4)\)

6. What do you see as the impact of the program on the personal lives of the students? On the academic lives? On their future? \((RQ1, RQ3, RQ4)\)

7. How do you see the program affecting their perspectives on their academic and personal lives? \((RQ1, RQ3, RQ4)\)

8. What is your favorite thing about the program? What do you see as its strengths/weaknesses? What are your goals for the program? \((RQ1, RQ3, RQ4)\)
APPENDIX C

SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTION METHODS
### Summary of Data Collection Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Collection Sources</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.</strong> What is the history of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group and how does it operate now? What norms, values, or innovative interventions are embedded in the Men’s Group?</td>
<td>Individual Student Interviews-Two per Follow-up Student Interviews-One per Written reflections of students-Six per student</td>
<td>10 Student Members</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Observations of regularly scheduled meetings and/or attend one or more events (ex: field trip)-Five Observation of after school meeting (ex: service-learning project)-One</td>
<td>10 Student Members</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ethnographic Journal</td>
<td>Faculty Mentor</td>
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<td>Individual Adult Interview-Two Individual Adult Interview-One</td>
<td>Faculty Mentor Principal</td>
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<td><strong>2.</strong> What do the involved professionals perceive as the impact of the Robinlee Middle School Men’s group on the academic and personal lives of the students?</td>
<td>Observations of regularly scheduled meetings and/or attend one or more events (ex: field trip)-Five Observation of after school meeting (ex: service-learning project)-One</td>
<td>10 Student Members</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ethnographic Journal</td>
<td>Moderator of Group</td>
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<td>Individual Adult Interview-Two Individual Adult Interview-One</td>
<td>Faculty Mentor Principal</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3.</strong> How do the involved students see the Robinlee Middle School Men’s Group in relation to their academic and personal lives?</td>
<td>Individual Student Interviews-Two per Follow-up Student Interviews-One per Written reflections of students-Six per student</td>
<td>10 Student Members</td>
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<td>Ethnographic Journal</td>
<td>Faculty Mentor</td>
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<th>4. Does the program have an influence on the students academically and/or personally?</th>
<th>Individual Student Interviews-Two Per Follow-up Group Student Interviews-Two Written reflections of students-Six per student Observations of regularly scheduled meetings and/or attend one or more events (ex: field trip)-Five Observation of after school meeting (ex: service-learning project)-One</th>
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