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Academic Success: A Qualitative Case Study of Student Perspectives

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ACADEMIC SUCCESS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

Over the past eight years of teaching high school, I have noticed more and more high school students seem to be apathetic about their school work and academic success. I wanted to explore why students appeared to care less about their academic success. After consulting the literature, I realized the student voice was missing from most of the current studies; therefore, I wanted my qualitative study to focus on student views.

In order to do so, I created two surveys: one for students and another for teachers, and I also interviewed a small sample of students after completion of the surveys. Teachers were used as a basis to reaffirm or discount student perspectives. The participants (186 student-surveyed and 5 student-interviews) came from a mid-sized, urban, Midwestern city, in a school of 1,700. I used thematic analysis to organize the data. The results yielded similar emergent themes: personal or motivational incentives, grades, graduation, testing, acquiring knowledge, dropout rate, attendance, skill level, and higher education, interaction with teachers and parental support or involvement. Most of these themes were identified by both students and teachers as predictors of success; however, acquiring knowledge was not identified by teachers and the dropout rate was not identified by students. Of these two, the most surprising is that teachers did not identify acquiring knowledge as a predictor of success for students.

In the end, it seems that students and teachers are on the same page when it comes to defining academic success and offering predictors of success.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In recent years No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has led superintendents, administrators, teachers, and community members to analyze and question how successful schools are across the United States. In doing so, this initiative has focused on individual schools within districts, and even more intensely upon subgroups within the schools: minorities, language learners, special needs, socio-economic status (SES) and sex. However, this focus upon subgroups does not address individual students and how their academic success is monitored.

How do schools define academic student success? Is it through standardized test scores that legislation like NCLB encourages? Do teachers stress a different definition of their students' academic success? And most importantly, are students able to identify what it means to be academically successful by the standards of their school? Ignoring the perspective of individual students and overlooking the facets which affect success offer many disadvantages to education. Communication between the school personnel and the students is key to having a set standard which students can meet. Features such as student-teacher relationships, teaching styles, communication styles, building community and culture within classrooms and how students identify with their schools add an element to successfulness that a standardized test cannot measure.

Most educators would agree a successful student has many characteristics, including, but not limited to: personal responsibility or motivation, involvement in school activities, intelligence, parental involvement, and teacher/peer support. Dissecting each

factor for every individual student would be impossible because of the unique circumstances surrounding each student's life, but if we look at these ideas as a whole, we can identify themes of success or lack of success.

Students who take responsibility for their own learning will be more successful in their education. However, the lack of research from the perspective of the individual student is alarming. Most of the research about academic success is driven by national standards, teacher perspectives of specific classes or other case studies researched by adults. Students who identify with their school and who have a firm sense of direction for their post-secondary plans will set goals and become more academically successful. How can we, as educators, continue to study education without communicating with, or at least questioning, the students about their role in the process?

We must also question how teachers communicate the school standards for being academically successful. Are the standards which the schools hold for students communicated in a way that students are able to understand and then able to reach? Or do schools, teachers and students have different, or unmatched, perspectives of how academic success can be defined? If the standards are different, it is imperative that communication be strengthened between all parties in order for students to be more successful in their academics.

Statement of the Problem

My fieldwork in education guides my interest in the student voice. In the eight years I have been teaching in the public schools, I have noticed an increase in student apathy. This lack of concern astounds me because I come from a time, not that long ago,

when it appeared that most of my peers truly took education seriously or perhaps in my naiveté, at least kept up the appearance. In the past year, I have seen more students receiving letter grades which I would consider embarrassing (F) or lackluster (D) at the very least. I continuously ask myself why more and more students seem not to care about their education or their academic success. These questions led me to design a research proposal surrounding the student voice: Why not ask the students? The students should be able to identify how they define their own personal academic success.

There are several factors which influence a student's beliefs. Their beliefs begin early in childhood and progress through adolescence being influenced along the way by other adults, peers, teachers, and other school personnel. Once we, as educators, have a better understanding of the students' perspective of success, we can embrace new teaching strategies and implement new ideas in our classrooms which may aid students in making choices to become more academically successful. Teachers can then begin strengthening their own communication skills in regard to the district or school's standards for the students. If there is a link between identity and success, schools may find more ways to communicate with the students to build their identity within the school system.

Success is important in education today because further emphasis is being put on test scores and other initiatives deriving from *No Child Left Behind.* Students who learn early how to be academically successful, are steps ahead of others who do not have the same know-how. There are other areas to consider: How do students define academic success for themselves? How do schools communicate their expectations to the students?

How do teachers communicate their standards (of success) to the students? What personal responsibility do students have for their own actions and their success in school? As a teacher of these students, currently or in the future, I have a vested interest in hearing their voices. Any insight of students' perspective of academic success I learn from this research may help me to influence them to remain or become academically successful.

Academic success can be defined as *passing* in a class, which is typically 60% (D-) or more on a standard 100% grading scale. However, the definition of success will likely vary for each teacher or student. There could be correlations to the previous success students have experienced, students' plans for post-secondary education, or how a student identifies with the school. In these instances higher levels of success may be reported.

Student voices are often unheard in education. Communication is weak between school personnel and students in the educational realm. I hope to find themes among students' perspective of academic success and to uncover any link between how students identify with their school and their reported levels of success. Common themes and deviations will be noted.

Teachers play a role in how they communicate their standards or the school's standards of success. Therefore, student perspectives will be corroborated by using teacher perspectives to serve as a *reality check* of the school beliefs and values of academic success. I hope to find what the standards of success are from both teachers and students. It is important to recognize that each individual student will have differing factors which play into their perspectives of academic success. It is not the intent of this

study to elicit every factor from the students but instead allow multiple voices to be heard, possibly resulting in themes for an *average high school student.* An average high school student is one who is enrolled in public school in (at least) regular academic classes. This term may include those students who are mainstreamed, have attendance issues, at-risk labels, or those on the opposite end of the spectrum: students taking Advanced Placement or college credit courses in the high school. However, this definition does not include students who spend their entire day in a special needs program or mainstreamed students who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) which allows for differentiated teaching instruction or an alternative rules and guidelines for them to follow during the school day. If there are similar definitions of academic success then communication may be strong within the school. However, if the definitions are not similar or provide few similar themes, then it is possible the communication within the school be improved.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following is a summary of the related professional literature and a synthesis of its pertinence to this research. I will break down the ideas topically in five subgroups to aid in clarity. These subgroups are *Choice Theory*, *Organizational Culture Theory*, *Relationship Building, Culture and Identity*, *Predictors of Success*, and *Motivation and Teacher-Student Communication Styles*.

The theoretical drive for this research focuses upon two theories: Choice Theory and Organizational Culture Theory. I will discuss both of these theories which support the research due to the overlap of Education and Communication disciplines. I have chosen four subtopics to aid in the understanding of high school students: classroom procedures, community building, predictors of success and teacher-student communication styles.

Choice Theory

In 1986 William Glasser published a book, *Control Theory in the Classroom*, in which he created a new theory about what motivates and drives individuals to act or react as they do. He applies the theory to students in classrooms. He believes people make choices based on five basic needs. These needs are survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun. More recently, Glasser renamed Control Theory *Choice Theory*. The name change stemmed from a different way of thinking about the choices we make. The original name, Control Theory, was used first because he originally believed people only *control* behavior. However, he found most people were likely to change their behavior

because of the more commonly known stimulus-response theory. This is when people respond to stimuli, perhaps a reward of some sort. Therefore, he renamed the theory Choice Theory to reiterate that everything a person does is based on choices she makes (Glasser, 1997). In doing so, he omitted the basic need of survival and placed it as the umbrella for the remaining four needs because he believed it is the most crucial aspect.

Many high school students dread coming to school on a daily basis and leave unable to read or function at a sixth grade level (Glasser, 1986). Glasser notes students are not learning because their basic needs are not being met. A student who acts out in class is not necessarily being defiant but trying to gain power. The student, who sits in first hour, unable to concentrate, thinking of when he will eat next, is only trying to survive. These two students may want to learn but are unable to until their basic needs are met.

How can we apply this to a student's academic success? In this research the most important basic needs are belonging and power. Most people want to be successful because it satisfies the needs to belong and attain power. Without power, many people believe they cannot be successful and therefore will not have the respect they want from others. Knowledge is a component of power. Imagine a person going to the airport for the first time; there are several airlines, signs with an overload of information and hundreds to thousands of people. Instantly, she may feel overwhelmed, anxious and scared. Why? She lacks knowledge. She may wonder, "Where do I go? What line do I stand in? If my flight has moved, how do I find where it has been relocated?" This unfamiliar situation is frightening to a person who has never flown or does not fly often. In instances such as

these, the lack of knowledge, if applied to Glasser's Theory is truly a loss of power. Therefore the emotions she felt in the airport situation is proof her basic needs are not being met.

Students encounter similar instances when they lose power or knowledge in the classroom. Often students are presented information that is difficult for them to comprehend, so they may rely on face-saving techniques because they do not want to seem *stupid* in front of their peers. Face-saving techniques are discussed more in depth later in the literature review. Bluestein (2001) recounts a time when she realized a high school senior had not had a hot lunch his entire four years of high school because he had missed freshman orientation and was too embarrassed to ask for help. Not only did this student not have the basic need of knowledge, he also was concerned about belonging.

The other need most applicable to student academic success is belonging. Belonging encompasses the relationships we build on a daily basis. People have a basic need to belong. Maslow (1954) found that when ". . . physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, there will emerge the love and affection and belongingness needs . . ." (p. 89). People strive to belong to a group. It is an inner hunger that cannot be quenched until the need is met. This happens often in classrooms. Some students attempt to make their place by being the class clown or class know-it-all, perhaps even the teacher-pleaser. These students are attempting to gain the respect of other students and the outcome sometimes results in the belonging need being met. Students form relationships with their teachers and peers in school in these ways. We cannot ignore that students also bring their relationships, from home or school, into the classroom. Family

and friend issues, whether positive or negative, affect student behavior. Glasser (1986) believes educators can teach students why and how they behave in reaction to the basic needs so students will be more apt to control or choose behaviors that are most beneficial to them and thus allow them to be more successful in an educational setting. His theory has been used in many schools across the United States since the late 1980s. These schools accepted his belief that the individual basic needs must be met in order for a student to make appropriate choices, whether personal or academic. However, students must be taught how to recognize when a basic need is not being met and what the process of resolving the conflict is. The conflict would vary from each individual student and each circumstance: a student who has not eaten breakfast, communication breakdown between one student and another student or teacher, misunderstanding directions in class, being uncomfortable with change, and physical confrontation among others. Another element to the applied theory is to train teachers so they offer choices to the students before any type of conflict can occur.

Because of his theories, entire communities of schools began practicing the beliefs of William Glasser. He is the founder of the Quality Schools (Palmatier, 1998) and The William Glasser Institute. Dr. Jane Bluestein is a devoted believer and advocate of the principles surrounding Choice Theory and has been instrumental in teaching educators the widely accepted beliefs of Glasser in public schools and colleges across the nation. She teaches at the William Glasser Institute and is also the author of the book *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools, A Guide for Educators and Parents* (2001). In the book she devotes an entire chapter to tools for an emotionally safe school. She illustrates

the same needs Glasser points out in Choice Theory and also offers a sub-section on *Academic Safety: Learning and Success*. She suggests students should be offered an array of choices for assignments. This choice enables the student to become more engaged and have ownership in the project. This belief ties directly into Glasser's beliefs that children, even adolescents, need to feel in control of their own actions.

Bluestein notes how perceptions of achievement can differ among administration, teachers and students. In one instance she recalls a time when she was working with children on reading; the children were not reading on grade level. This group of students worked through one year's worth of material in a matter of months after their reading group was changed from the morning to the afternoon, the students' more alert time of the day. When it became time to complete report cards, she was able to mark the students with As and Bs, but was met with consternation by administrators who in the end changed the grades to Cs and Ds. The school believed that because the students were not reading at grade level, they should not receive letter grades their counterparts, who were reading at grade level, received. The school administration had a different set of criteria than the teacher. She cites a similar instance, but not of her own, when a girl only made one and a half years progress, instead of two that the school required, and the girl was retained. In both of these situations the relationships between the students and teachers became strained, and the students lost much of the academic confidence they had gained.

Bluestein furthers this by stating the fear of failure is most detrimental to students in an academic setting. Tied to the basic need of power, failure can be embarrassing, crippling, and frustrating. But she also contends that students should have the freedom to

fail because in life, failure happens. Failure sometimes occurs by making choices which are not suitable for one's self, or trying something new and not doing it well right from the start. She also reminds us that students who make mistakes only *make* mistakes; they do not *become* a mistake.

Glasser's theory links to Organizational Culture Theory because it is based on a person's choices to create an identity and culture. As I will investigate in the next section, Edgar Schein also gives value to the idea of belonging with his findings about culture and identity.

Organizational Culture Theory

Organizational culture is apparent in every organized group, work, school, family, friendships, et cetera. Within these organized groups a culture exists. The Organizational Culture Theory examines what functions the culture of the group holds. In order to understand how the organizations work, the culture must be examined with the aid of the theory's assumptions. First, Schein (1985) argues it is difficult to define organizational culture due to the individualized nuances within a group or organization, and the intricacies of what encompasses the idea of *culture*. He defines organizational culture as:

> . . . a pattern of basic assumptions—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (p. 9).

Zammuto, Gifford, and Goodman (2000) further the definition to "include idiosyncratic organizational manifestations of these beliefs in the form of myths, stories, rituals, structures, strategies, reward systems, and so on" (p. 263). They insist these

organizational ideologies explain the cause and effect nature of relationships because they are a beliefs system which individuals within an organization either buy in to or reject, and then lead to the individual's "attempt to attain valued outcomes" (p. 262). The value related to this research is academic success. Mary Jo Hatch (2000) defines values as "social principles, philosophies, goals, and standards considered to have intrinsic worth" (p. 249). She states that in an organization values are co-dependent upon many other factors: artifacts, assumptions and the concept of symbols. She posits a model which links these four phenomena. She places values at the top of a circle with assumptions and artifacts to its left and right and symbols directly below. In order for values to be present in an organization they must be identified or observed and then realized or influenced by the members. Therefore, in this study, academic success as a value must be first identified by the members and then acted upon by the members—students in this research. When these values are acted upon, the values then are taken for granted and become part of the assumptions of the organization and "drop out of consciousness" (Schein, 1985, p. 16). However, Schein (1985) states this does not occur for all values an organization has.

Symbols, placed directly below values on Hatch's model could represent the letter grades the students earn in their classes as a conscious reminder of their academic success. Rafaeli and Worline (2000) state that symbols are "both the physical setting of an organization and the objects within that physical setting, and stands for the meaning, experiences, and ideas that people have in and about symbols in the context of the

organization" (p. 73). Hatch (2000) adds to the definition that symbols can represent a conscious or unconscious association to a broader, abstract concept.

Culture has its place in education; Schein (2003) says it best: "If we are teachers, we encounter the sometimes mysterious phenomenon that different classes behave completely differently from each other even though our material and teaching style remain the same" (p. 369). This idea points out the key elements in this research: Students are individuals and have their own perspectives; the culture of a classroom is dependent upon who is in it and how they identify with the class or school. When these students are grouped in classrooms, different personalities or perspectives emerge. Thus, each classroom develops its own organizational culture. Teachers must be aware of this combining of perspectives and be able to create a common ground for students. When these mini-cultures are completely combined, the culture of the school society is developed.

Schein (2004) posits that in order to have any "society" we must agree on what is "real" (p. 137). This shared sense of reality allows members of the society to have control and power within a group. When a group is formed, each group member brings with her a set of assumptions about the world. For example, if a teacher believes a classroom should be a quiet place for students to learn, study, and ask questions by raising their hands, then the teacher would have a rude awakening if all the students believed a classroom should be noisy and comments or questions could be made when the thought arises. Alvesson (1996) states there are truly inestimable ways scenarios, such as this, could take place. In this situation, teachers need to communicate their beliefs, ideas and standards of success

to the students, so that the students are better equipped at being able to meet these standards. Without the shared understanding between both teacher and student, communication can become confusing and misunderstood. Alvesson (1996) furthers, it is much "too time-consuming and distracting to be constantly wondering about different ways of interpreting the world" (p. 62).

This confusion could be classified as a misunderstanding due to a lack of communication between hierarchical levels within an organization. Alvesson (2002) likens an organization to a pyramid. This can be used to describe educational organizations as well. Students tend to be on the bottom of the pyramid and therefore may not be able to identify as closely with the organization as some of the higher ranked positions. The shared symbols and realities which are supposed to be disseminated by the top of the pyramid may not reach the students who are positioned on the bottom.

If students are continuously on the bottom of the pyramid, how can they increase their identity within the school? Rudduck and Fielding (2006) discovered the importance of affirming young people's ideas and perspective in order to "learn to cooperate and to negotiate" (p. 223). These are lifelong skills which should be developed in students while they are still in school. They found that many students identified the difficulty of "having a say" or "finding a voice" within classrooms and the entire school (p. 224).This implies a loss of a value for the students. Teachers who are able to see their students as contributors may discover they can learn from their students. In order to implement appropriate strategies, teachers can influence culture or build community within their classrooms.

This is why the communication between all parties is imperative. Lack or complete loss of communication, lower morale, and other disparaging behaviors may occur without the shared values and a shared sense of reality within the educational realm. Students may lose respect for their teachers or administrators in situations like this.

Relationship Building, Culture and Identity

Culture has several characteristics which Schein (1985) considers merely reflections of an organization, in this case a school. However, he states that these reflections do not define the essence of culture; instead he offers the following definition:

> . . . the term "culture" should be reserved for the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic "taken-for-granted" fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment (p.6)

Although he states that the basic assumptions are "taken-for-granted," this is only after the assumptions are learned and the members are trying to survive within the organization. We will assume a classroom is an organization. If we refer back to the example about the teacher's and students' differing opinions about the classroom, we could test whether the teacher informed her students of the rules or her assumptions, the students would then be able to adjust their behavior and survive within the classroom organization. After the class has developed its culture, the group members then move to relationship building.

Researchers show there is a correlation between comfort level and community building in classrooms (Deemer, 2004; Granstrom, 2004; Reese-Durham, 2005). Students become more successful when they feel teachers and peers care about them and their

learning. It is through both community building and classroom climate that this phenomenon occurs. Community building defines the camaraderie established between students and the teacher. Ruddick and Fielding (2006) define community "as something that can support the development of individual identities, personal autonomy and choice while at the same time highlighting the importance of mutual respect, trust and reciprocity" (pp. 222-223). Community can be affected by the personality makeup of the class from day one, or it can be established by assignments or tasks directed by the teacher. Educators need to have more information directly from the students in order to implement the best teaching strategies for their students. This requires educators to ask questions of their students.

How do students define academic success for themselves and how do their beliefs align with the schools or that of the teacher's perspective? One way students may be able to accurately define their own academic success is by building this trusting relationship, as discussed above, with their teacher and peers (Doucette, 2005). Doucette identifies students' perceptions of what helps the student to become successful in the classroom. Students who feel they are treated fairly may respond more positively to teacher feedback. When course guidelines and assessment strategies are laid out for students, students are able to "establish their own goals and expectations" (p. 22). If a teacher gives constructive feedback in order to truly help the student, the student is more likely to respond in a positive manner, which leads to a more purposeful classroom climate. This is referred to as authenticity (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006), which is a genuine interest in what each party (teacher and student) has to contribute to a dialogue.

Students and teachers develop an unspoken positive relationship when teachers attend students' extra-curricular activities. Therefore, student performance in class may be heightened. Students identified the teacher's ability to be flexible as an effective strategy utilized by teachers (Doucette, 2005). Further, the students identified this flexibility as a way to address individual student needs. These are techniques in which a teacher can build a relationship with a student, but just as importantly, students must develop relationships with their peers. Teachers can also affect peer relationship building in the classroom.

Teachers ultimately influence the climate for the students to be able to build community with each other. From the building of community, culture develops and emerges. The culture of each classroom is individualized to the student make-up, values, beliefs, symbols, and shared assumptions. The culture is influenced by student interaction or student-teacher interaction, physical characteristics of the classroom, the time of day the class is held, the seating chart, or the ability level of the individuals; students tend to fit into certain roles in the teacher's mind, which affects the overall culture or climate for the class. Kutnick, Blatchford, Clark, MacIntyre, and Baines (2005) found that students tend to be grouped within the classroom. For example, a teacher creates a seating chart and inadvertently seats a group of three friends together. This happenstance grouping allows students to readily partake in off-task behaviors by associating themselves with peers. In some instances, teachers may perceive the students' actions as negative behavior and often may construe the students' attitudes as detrimental to the learning environment. Other off-task behaviors may include students talking during work time, glancing at each

other, or whispering (Granstrom, 2004). However, most of these *interruptions* are the students' way of building relationships with each other and strengthening the culture of the classroom. In this study, concern for the individual classroom is not the focus; however, the culture of the school is dependent upon what is happening in the classrooms, offices, and at other venues during the day.

These facets add to relationship building and the overall climate within the school. Student attitudes tend to be more positive when specific guidelines and goals are set in the classroom. The teacher can set these guidelines by establishing rules and procedures. Teachers who have students set academic goals are more apt to have structured classroom climates. The students then assume responsibility for their own learning (Cooper, Horn, & Strahan, 2005). Students who take responsibility for their own learning continuously reflect on their goals and initiate new learning behaviors for themselves which will make them successful. Self evaluation is one technique that can be taught by the teacher but continued by the student. Self evaluation is a high level of development. Bandura (1977) found that individuals who "regulate their own behavior by self-evaluative and other self-produced consequences" (p. 103) were more likely to choose activities in the future which would be positive and function as a type of reward for the individual. Self evaluation is beneficial to the individual. What one person considers rewarding, another may consider disappointing. Therefore, the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction is created by the individual and is determined by the standards which the individual is using (Bandura, 1977). The criterion one uses to judge herself could be a predictor of success. Those who hold higher standards for themselves

may hold a higher academic standard, and those who hold more lenient standards may not hold academic success as a high standard.

Predictors of Success

Self evaluation is a technique used by teachers for students in project-based classrooms as well as in conventional classroom settings. Students who self evaluate reflect constantly on their goals and effect changes needed to achieve their goals. Self evaluation enhances student learning because it improves performance and motivation because students have a better understanding of the material (Olina & Sullivan, 2002).

Olina and Sullivan (2002) also found that teachers who continuously gave feedback to students had students who were more apt to make revisions on their work and produced "higher quality work" (p. 72) than those students who did not receive teacher feedback. Students are aware of what needs to be corrected and then reflect upon their original goals and expectations to improve their work. Those students who are not given feedback are unable to identify their own needs. Ultimately, students who are given feedback eventually need less feedback because the problem areas will be self-corrected. Students begin to take their work more seriously and personalize it; they want to do well and appear intelligent in front of their peers.

Students' fear of appearing unintelligent in front of their peers (Reese-Durham, 2005) results in students using face-saving techniques. This social pressure--a desire to gain acceptance of cliques and peers--which causes face-saving techniques adds to community building in the classroom (Pierce, 2005). The level of comfort becomes higher, leading to a higher academic success rate. However, according to research by

Juvonen (2000), face-saving techniques help with community building by reducing the pressures of impressing their peers or fear of not impressing their teacher. Making excuses is a face-saving technique; it allows the students to face save in front of their peers and teachers by offering reasons why an assignment is not completed, poorly completed or any other event which requires an explanation. Let us take a moment to understand face negotiation in more detail.

First, the word *face* is defined as when a person "defends national pride, honor, dignity, prestige [or] reputation" in a public arena (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 73). She posits in other research (1998) the importance of face because "it can be enhanced or threatened in any uncertain social situation" (p. 187). There are three face concerns: self-face, other face, and mutual face (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). For example, if a person is concerned he may lose face or lessen his reputation in certain situations, he may choose not to participate in the activity at hand. A new student in a classroom may not initially begin speaking in class because the student may be concerned about making an error in front of his peers. This allows the person the ability to save face and would also be considered a *self-face* concern.

In the same situation, the student may try to create new relationships and thus, go out into the world and speak to other students. In situations like this, the person may rely on facework. According to Ting-Toomey (2005) *facework* refers to "the specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors that we engage in to maintain or restore face loss and to uphold and honor face gain" (p. 73). The person attempting to build relationships may feel face loss if he does not feel as competent in the conversation as the other speaker. One way to

regain face loss is to use humor; the person could laugh off the error made while speaking. The last face concern is *other face*. The other face would be the person the student is trying to communicate with. If the student and peer differ in opinions and one fears this difference, this would be an example of other face.

In both of these situations, the non-newcomer may also be experiencing face threats. The speaker may be concerned with how the new student feels emotionally as the conversation continues. Each may experience positive or negative face, *mutual face*. According to Imahori and Cupach, (2005) positive face refers to "the desire for acceptance and approval from others" and negative face refers to "an individual's desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition" (p. 198). Face-negotiation works among all people involved in a conversation.

A student also uses excuses when she has difficulty understanding or doing an assignment. Again this offers a reason for why the student did not achieve a specific desired success (Donaldson, Prinstein, Danovsky, & Spirito, 2000; Juvonen, 2000). They also reference one example as wishful thinking. This type of strategy allows the student to exhibit survival skills. Giving students an approach to problem-solving helps them choose an appropriate behavior which leads to their desired outcome, rather than using avoidance or a possibly negative reaction (Wiest, Wong, Cervantes, Craik, & Kreil, 2001). The same researchers state that this knowledge will lead to intrinsic motivation to do a task well, and students will be more successful. Empowering students with the *how to* ultimately diminishes or lessens the students' anxiety levels and, consequently, results in higher academic success rates.

Motivation and Teacher/Student Communication Styles

Bandura (1997) defines motivation as "a general construct that encompasses a system of self-regulatory mechanisms" (p. 228). He also says that motivational sources are governed by three features: selection, activation, and a continued behavior to achieve specific goals. In other words, motivation is the drive which leads a person to a desired result and is another predictor of academic success. Motivation can either be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation, or one's will, comes from within; extrinsic motivation (a reward for example) comes from an outside source. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation provides rewards a person receives as a result of the success.

When outsiders assign goals for others to achieve, the goals may serve as ". . . guides and aspirations" for one to do well (Bandura, 1997, p. 220). It appears most students may achieve based on extrinsic goals: teachers assign grades, parental expectation, grade point requirements for involvement (i.e. athletics) and peer competitiveness. These goals lead to decreased internal rewards because the achievements are solely for someone else (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1977) also found that children who were enticed to be involved in certain activities or for doing certain tasks for an outside reward were more likely to have a shorter participation time in the activity compared to those who received unexpected rewards or no rewards at all. However, there are students who truly develop pride in self-regulatory attributions.

Bandura (1977) found that although intrinsic motivation begins from an external source, after repeated contact with a specific source and a desired outcome is achieved

the will or desire to continue contact with the source is intrinsic motivation. For example, if a student completes homework for the external reward of a letter grade, the student is moved by extrinsic motivation. When the student receives a grade which triggers a positive, emotional response, the will to get the same grade again is now intrinsic motivation. In education, intrinsic motivation for students may begin with parents who instill the value of education in their children. Children model their parents and then duplicate their beliefs and values. However, there are some students who may feel a strong urge to do well in school only because they have set personal standards and fulfill personal responsibility roles for themselves. Some may even enjoy school and find pleasure in learning. Extra-curricular activities are often incentive enough for students to maintain their grades and attendance in school.

According to DeMoulin (2002), students who are not involved with extra curricular activities do not have the same advantages in personal development as their peers who are involved. In research by Reynolds and Karr (1996), this idea of personal development was further advanced. They present the idea that students learn the skills required to be successful in life after high school by being active in extra-curricular activities. In many schools, students must maintain grades in order to be eligible for extra curricular activities. Grades do not always equal intelligence levels. There are students who are extremely intelligent but do not receive good grades. And others who may not be *book smart* but through hard work receive good grades.

The intelligence of students and their success must be considered. Educators must remember that highly intelligent students must be challenged, or they may become bored

and lose interest in academics. Kitano and Lewis (1999) present information showing a correlation between intelligence and at-risk students. They do not investigate the relationship between high intelligence and lack of student success; however, they do address the notion that students may not be able to problem-solve. Even the most intelligent students may have trouble problem-solving because this is a skill textbooks do not teach. It seems as though more students are coming to the classroom without this skill, so when a problem-solving opportunity presents itself, teachers can directly teach how to solve the predicament.

Witmer (2005) takes a closer look at parents' direct involvement with the school when forming educational relationships. She found more involvement between home and school led to more success for individual students. Involved parents tend to model the importance of education for their children, but as students get older, parents, as a whole, tend to become less involved in their children's lives at school (p. 226). Many students today may not have this support system at home; therefore, they look for it in the classroom or at school.

Teachers have the ability to influence their students on a daily basis more than any other factor, including family. Simple math demonstrates that some students spend more time in the classroom and extra-curricular activities than they do at home. Educators cannot take their role in student success lightly. Teachers who are able to build camaraderie with their class or individual students have secured a positive role-model relationship with the student. Comfort in class relates directly to achievement and also "encourages students to become active, self-motivated learners" (Deemer, 2004, p. 73).

The comfort level a student feels in the class leads to a stronger more unified community or culture in the classroom. Comfort level in a classroom is the degree of anxiousness a student feels. The less anxiety being experienced, the more comfort felt by the student(s). Comfort is important in a classroom because it directly affects the community and relationships formed by students and the teacher. Relationships can be peer/peer or student/teacher. Students also have a relationship with their own selves; this could be examined as self-confidence or self-esteem. This feeling of pride results in higher productivity.

Summary

The research supports that the more comfortable students are with their teacher and peers, and the more their classes have a highly developed sense of community, the more successful the students are. Anxiety levels decrease and students are able to evaluate themselves in a more accurate manner. Teachers who take time to give truthful feedback to students enable them to set goals which are achievable and allow students to experience success. The literature also implies that students who identify with their school or the classes they take are more likely to experience success. The literature also suggests the importance of communication within organizations. If the research demonstrates the lack of communication between individuals in this school, there would be a need for a strengthening of communication.

Of the articles listed in the reference section, not one focused on students' perspectives. It appears there is a considerable lack of research regarding the students' perspective of success. Much of the research presented as to how students succeed is

from the perspective of the teacher or the school organization. This lack of research indicates a need for this study. As a result of this study, the students' voices will be heard Educators may learn what makes students successful from the students' perspective.

From this review, the following research question has been formed: What themes or patterns will emerge from the research in reference to students' perspective of academic success?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Design

In this chapter, I further explain the methodology which was used for this study. In order to ensure a fuller understanding of the topic of study, several methods were used: observation of students, teacher and student surveys, and student interviews. By observations, I am referring to my on-going, non-systematic observations of students as a teacher. Through observation I believe I have been able to identify specific behaviors in students which lead to successful outcomes. The observations have taken place over the course of the eight years I have worked at the school. I have had conversations with students about their grades on an individual basis that have given me insight about some student thought processes. The surveys helped me get basic information which allowed for themes and patterns to emerge from the responses. This aided in identifying communication effectiveness—degree of consistency in defining academic success—among teachers, administrators, and students. Finally, interviews provided the students with an opportunity to explain, in their own words, academic success and other predictors of success from their perspective.

This research began with permission being granted by the school district, the IRB, and finally from the teachers, students and parents or guardians of the students. The data collected took place over a three week period. Surveys were distributed to teachers and students. Interviews were then completed within two weeks of the surveys being returned. The purpose was to determine how secondary students define what academic

success means for them personally. Primarily, students were the focus of this research. Teacher responses were used as a basis of defining the school's perceived beliefs and expectations. I chose to focus upon teachers instead of administration due to their daily contact with the students. In this school, most contact with an administrator deals with discipline.

Educators and school systems need to be aware of how students define academic success for themselves in a classroom. This is important because more emphasis is being put on rigor and relevance in school districts around the nation due to *No Child Left Behind.* Also, communication between all positions in education needs to be strengthened. By doing so, students' voices will become more apparent in the educational realm and the likelihood of miscommunication about academic standards could lessen.

Participants

The case study participants were a sample of convenience. The high school student participants, aged 13-18 years, were from a mid-sized, urban Midwestern city, approximately 70,000 in population, in ninth through twelfth grades. The school population was approximately 1700 students, and 38.2% of the population was on free or reduced lunch.

At first glance the school appears to be college preparatory because of its drive to prepare students for college. The school does offer a variety of Advanced Placement courses, college credit courses, and is an ACT and SAT testing site. However, upon further inspection, it appears that even though the courses and curriculum do attempt to prepare students for college, many of the students may not actually go to a university

directly after high school. The school does not appear to attempt to reach the majority of regular education students who plan on going directly into a trade, i.e. electrical, carpentry, construction and, or automotive. Although courses in most of these areas are offered, they are usually only one semester elective course and only sometimes offer one advanced course after the basic course. On the other hand, real-life coursework for those students considered to be *special needs* (those with an individualized educational plan or modification sheets) are offered in the form of work study programs. These students are generally not included in the reporting of standardized test scores.

When glancing at the school's annual report, every one of the four goals for the school is to increase test scores or bridge the gap between race and socio-economic status students on standardized testing. Although the same report states that 99.5% of seniors reach the required 251 on the district mandated standardized test, individual scores on Math and Reading show that in this year the proficiency goal of 75% was not reached in either category.

Approximately 650-700 students were given the surveys, but only 186 opted to participate in the surveys, of these, five students chose to participate in an interview. It is assumed that approximately 98% of the participants were Caucasian, 2% were minority, including African-American, Asian or Hispanic, due to the school population being 75% Caucasian and 25% African-American, Asian or Hispanic.

I want to be a better teacher to current and future students; therefore, I used students from the school where I teach. An effective teacher must be reflective in practice, and obtaining student perspectives will enable me to hear their needs and reflect

on my own teaching practices. And although the students' perspectives may be varied, the results will be beneficial in helping me learn from the students' definitions of academic success.

An application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB; Appendix A) was submitted for project approval. The students chose whether or not they wanted to participate, and parents also had the option to say no. The parental permission slips (Appendix B) were distributed to the students in their SPA (Student Personal Advisory) class. This class mimics a traditional homeroom. The SPA classes meet every Wednesday for approximately 30 minutes each time and have been in practice for four years. The students were asked to take the permission slips home and return them with a signature during the next meeting time if they wanted to participate. There was not be an incentive to participate, and there was minimal to no positive effects of participating in this research. There was little to no discomfort expected in answering questions about their own academic success. The students also signed a permission form on the day they completed the survey.

I randomly selected teacher participants. Forty-two teacher participants were contacted via the teacher mailroom mailboxes, and twenty-two consented and completed the survey. I chose to contact as many teachers as possible because I knew some would not be able to or not be willing to take part in the research. Contacting more than I needed made me feel reassured I would have enough participants involved and yield a broader spectrum of responses; I also wanted to make sure all academic discipline areas were invited to participate, i.e. math, English, science, social studies, electives. All teacher

participants contacted were given an adult consent form (Appendix C) attached to the teacher survey (Appendix D). The surveys were detached from the consent forms before data collection began, ensuring anonymity.

Email notification was used for immediate communication to contact the teacher participants and the SPA (Student Personal Advisory) teachers, similar to that of a homeroom, concerning unforeseen schedule changes, scripts, requests for any additional information needed from me, or to answer questions from teacher participants.

Data Collection

I presented the students with a survey requesting their definition of academic success, which I also created (Appendix F). The thirteen-question survey was comprised of a variety of questions. The first questions were written to obtain basic demographic data from the student: sex, grade level, and age. There was also an opportunity for the student to voluntarily identify his or her name. This helped in the identification of students who were willing to participate in interviews. Most of those who did not offer their name voluntarily also chose not to participate in an interview. The name or the omission of the name did not affect the responses in any way. The fifth question asked for the student's post-secondary interests. Questions six through eleven pertained to academic success. Numbers six and seven asked the student to define their definition of academic success and their perception of how their school defines academic success. Questions eight through eleven requested students to identify the least and most successful letter grades they have received and to explain how those grades fit their idea of being successful or unsuccessful. Finally the twelfth question asked students whether

or not they feel like they are a part of the school culture. An added thirteenth question asked students to identify the importance of their academic success on a scale from one to seven.

Surveys were distributed to everyone in the selected Student Personal Advisory (SPA), regardless of parental consent. Each student completed a survey as the assigned task in SPA for that particular date. Only those students who returned a parental permission slip had their responses used in the research. I determine who returned a permission slip by comparing the name on the permission slip and the name on the cover sheet (Appendix H) on the survey. The cover sheets were immediately detached from the completed survey to ensure confidentiality. The students who chose not to participate handed in a blank survey, did not sign the consent form or did not return a permission slip—these students did not have their responses tallied into the research findings.

Teacher participants answered a survey similar to the students' survey. The teacher's nine-question survey probed for a variety of information. The first three questions requested demographic information: sex, years taught, and academic department. In question five I asked how the school identifies academic success for students and what specific behaviors the teachers observe in academically successful students. The sixth question asked if there are particular groups of students who fit the individual's definition of academically successful students and then asks the respondent to provide explanations. Questions five and six were completely different than any question asked of the student. These questions were designed to have a better insight to teachers' beliefs as to who may or may not be successful in the classroom. Because

question number six was a fixed-alternative question (yes/no/I don't know), I allowed room for explanations in questions seven through nine.

I created each survey based on the type of information I was hoping to gain, however I realized both surveys could be interpreted by the participants in ways I did not intend. In those cases, I did not want to help students with contextual meaning, to better assure the responses would be as reflective of their views as possible. Therefore a pilot study for the student survey was conducted.

Pilot Study

Upon approval of IRB, a pilot study was completed. I asked a class of mine if they would be willing to complete a survey. They agreed, so I administered the survey in the same manner I had planned to use for the actual research. Five of the fifteen students were either absent, did not sign the permission slip form, or did not respond to all of the questions. Those who did not respond to the majority of the questions were not included in the results. A group of 10 students completed surveys and one participant took part in an interview. The surveys consisted of 13 questions. The goal of the pilot study of the surveys was ultimately to ensure the students' ability to understand and answer the questions in the survey. I also hoped the pilot study would make me aware of any unforeseen problems with the survey I created.

I found that all questions, but one, indicated students understood the questions I asked. The question that students seemed to not know the answer to or misunderstood asked the students to identify their grade point average for the grading period. In response to this question I received question marks on the line, or the blank was left unanswered,

comments that stated the respondent did not know their GPA for the grading period, and questions asking if the question meant cumulative GPA. In light of this issue, I questioned whether or not this question would aid the study or truly be accurate if the students did not know the answer. When, I questioned the pilot study group on their opinions, the majority responded that they would not be accurate in their responses because they do not know their GPA "for sure." Therefore, I decided to leave the question *What is your GPA for the grading period?* off of the survey for the actual study.

The questions probing for the student's perception of the school's definition of success and the student's definition of their own success proved to be worded in ways a high school student understood. Most students answered in phrases rather than sentence format, but their answers were effectively conveyed and understood. When I spoke to the group about their responses and if I understood them correctly, they stated that my interpretation of their responses was correct.

The next chunk of questions seven through eleven asked the students for specific letter grades they have received in classes and why these letter grades represent the most successful and least successful grades they had received. The responses gave me some information I was not expecting. For example, a successful grade for one was not because it was a high letter grade, even though she noted she had received a higher grade in a different class, she stated it was because she worked harder for that grade than the higher grade, so it meant more to her. Question twelve stated *Do you feel as though you identify with your school or are truly a part of your school? Yes No Sometimes.* The responses to

this question were varied. There was at least one response for each indicator. Question thirteen, the added question, read:

Please mark how you rate the importance of your own academic success on the following scale:

Not important Neutral Very important

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

The responses for these questions ranged from two through seven. Questions twelve and thirteen did not seem to have correlating responses. For example, one respondent who marked herself as a seven on the scale chose "no" for identifying with the school.

This weakness led me to implement a third instrument: in-depth interviews. The interview questions (Appendix G) were designed to elaborate on the student survey instruments. Participants chose whether or not they wanted to be interviewed. All interviews followed the surveys. The questions were arranged thematically based on the topics of the research question and sub-questions but will focus primarily upon perspectives of academic success. Participants were asked additional questions if there was cause for more discussion on a particular topic. All names from surveys or audio taped interviews were omitted from the research in order to ensure confidentiality of the interview participants. Due to possible misinterpretation of interview questions and the type of information received from the participants, I conducted one pilot interview.

The female respondent for the pilot interview gave answers which were consistent to her survey responses. She seemed to understand what types of responses were

appropriate for the questions being asked. I felt that after looking at the responses, I did not get to the heart of what I was hoping to find. I noticed the respondent did not respond with as much specific detail as I had expected. I began to wonder if this could be a problem because although the information would be helpful, it was not that much different from what the pilot surveys presented; therefore, I added new probing interview questions primarily to get participants to speak more in-depth about academic success. I thought these questions allowed for richer responses and more insight to the students' way of thinking. Some of the questions may seem off track, such as the questions about the parents, but I added these because in high school, most students are still trying to figure out who they are, and parents add to this identification process. I felt if respondents said that parents react negatively or positively that this could help identify why some students may have certain definitions of success.

The added interview questions allowed the participants to speak more freely about the topic without feeling that all of the pressure was on them. Students really liked to pinpoint the problems or successes of others, and I think they were pretty reliable sources of their peers' behaviors in this type of situation.

Data Analysis

Case studies often allow for many smaller cases within the organization to become apparent (Patton, 2002). Thematic analysis is the method of categorizing data in qualitative analysis used in this study. Patton furthers the idea of thematic analysis, stating two types of findings will be yielded: "(1) high quality, detailed descriptions of each case, which are useful for documenting uniquenesses, and (2) important shared

patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity" (p. 235). The qualitative data was analyzed to determine patterns, trends, categories, and commonalities. All of the data was presented in narrative form; in other words, I used the student and teacher words as much as possible. I looked at both themes that supported or opposed motivation, student-teacher communication, relationships, identity and community building and categorized emerging themes which support personal responsibility, and other patterns which may not neatly be categorized into the aforementioned themes. I did this by systematically coding the responses from all of the gathered data. Finally, all responses were interpreted as a whole to find links or omissions between student and teacher perspectives. In order to best find the emerging themes I followed the following steps in systematically coding the data.

First, I read through the survey and interview transcriptions several times to get a feel for the responses. Second, I identified specific themes which emerged from the responses one by one. I initially conducted separate theme analyses on each form of data (student survey, teacher survey, and student interviews). As I identified themes, I wrote the theme on paper and then listed any sub-theme that I would consider to fall into such categories. Third, I color-coded responses based on the final list of emerging themes identified. The themes were consistent between the students and the teachers except one. Student responses had an emerging theme of acquiring knowledge that did not emerge in teacher responses.

After identifying and coding emergent themes, I then synthesized the information across the three data sources by comparing similar responses in respect to the research

question I posed. This was possible because the themes were very similar. In presenting the data, to prevent redundancy, all methods were combined using methodological triangulation. According to Patton (2002), triangulation is ideal because it can "strengthen a study by combining methods," (p. 247). Due to the larger number of completed surveys, compared to the number of students who were interviewed, most of the responses used in the results were from the surveys. Patton (2002) posits that having one method be more dominant than the others can be common, but also points out that in research which focuses only on one method tends to be more "vulnerable to errors linked to that particular method (e.g. loaded interview questions, biased or untrue responses) than studies that use multiple methods in which different types of data provide cross-data validity checks" (p. 248). As stated earlier, two questions asked of the teachers, which were not asked of the students, are presented separately from the other data. These two questions were designed to gain insight from the teachers about possible factors which may or may not play a role in one's success or lack of success in the classroom.

Qualitative methodology allowed me to interpret meaning based on the responses given. Because of my previous experience of working in education, I was able to interpret the findings based on my interactions with students, teachers and administration. Each of these factors influence and are co-dependent on each other. Patton (2002) warns that observation must reign in assumptions. It would have been easy to assume what one was observing due to past experiences. The best ways to omit any incorrect assumptions was through the reading of responses or through conducted interviews.

The third method of collection, interviews, offered the richest data because it represented the exact spoken words of the students. I used Herbert J. and Irene S. Rubin's book *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (2005) as a guide to designing interview and probing questions. When I designed the interview questions I first thought what types of information I wanted to know. After considering this information, I then chose to begin the interview with more generic questions in order to put the student at ease. As the interviews proceeded, the questions became more in-depth and requested more specific responses from the students. As stated earlier in the Pilot Study section, I chose to add more questions toward the end to allow for very specific responses from the students. The responses were arranged thematically and systematically coded to have a better understanding of the rationale for student responses to the surveys. The interview participants had access to their survey during the interview.

Summary

Qualitative methods were the best fit for the type of research I had hoped to conduct. Observation, surveys and interviews offered an approach to gather student perspectives about their academic success. It was extremely important to me to try and use the student voice as frequently as possible in conveying the results of the research. Education must take a moment to hear the students when they are one of the key factors in successful education.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The following is an analysis of the survey results. I combined both interviews and surveys throughout this section of data reporting because similar themes were represented in all responses. My observations from my fieldwork in the profession are relied upon in the next chapter. The results were thematically arranged by like questions on the student and teacher surveys. There is a separate section for the teacher questions which students were not asked. Both surveys began with demographic information which will be reported first.

Students truly were the focus of this research; however, teachers were used as a sub-group to compare student responses regarding perceptions of the school's view of academic success. Therefore, it is important to give voice to the teachers' role in the research prior to combining their ideas with the students'.

I thought it was important to compare student responses to teacher responses. If the responses varied greatly, it would be an indicator that students and teachers are not working toward the same goals, and therefore may be less successful. When I created the surveys, I wrote questions which were similar to each other regarding defining the school's academic success. Question number four on the teacher survey was designed to identify if teachers were able to iterate a consistent view of the school's standards of success: *How does your school identify academic success for students?* I wanted to find holistically the school's position on academic success from teachers rather than administration. If teacher's had differing views, perhaps this would give insight to any

confusion students might have with their definitions. Also, if the definitions of success from teachers were abstract rather than concrete, it may be difficult for adolescents to make the standard tangible for themselves because teachers may be giving conflicting views in their individual classrooms. However, if the perspectives are similar then I may be able to assume that there is a relatively consistent standard of academic success which is relayed to the students.

Demographic Information

Students

One hundred eighty-six students took part in the surveys, seventy-five of these consented to be interviewed, but only seven followed through with an interview. Student ages ranged from 13 – 18 years of age. See Table 1 for a break down of student age and sex.

Table 1 Age and Sex Breakdown

Age	13	14	15	16	17	18
Male	1	3	21	17	23	18
Female	0	5	23	27	33	13

Students were also asked about the grade level which the school identifies them as. Table 2 identifies grade level for the students based on their sex.

Table 2 Student Grade Level

Grade	9	10	11	12	Not indicated
Male	13	21	22	27	0
Female	15	30	25	32	1

Students were then asked about their post-secondary plans. Table 3 identifies student plans based on their sex and response.

Table 3 Post-secondary Plans

	Military	2 year community college	4 year university	Career	Vocational	Other	Invalid or No response
Male	3	18	52	3	0	4	3
Female	1	30	66	3	1	1	1

Five students identified responses which were not given on the survey. These responses included: "work," "4 years community college," "road trip," "work then 2 year comm. college," and "8 years in college." One response was recorded as invalid because the respondent chose both 2 year college and 4 year university. It is possible this person planned on attending a two-year college to earn an Associate's Degree and then apply that to a four-year university to obtain their undergraduate Bachelor's Degree.

Students were asked if they identified with their school. Table 4 breaks this information down by their sex and responses.

Table 4 School Identification

	Yes	No	Sometimes	No Response
Male	30	15	37	1
Female	34	8	60	1

The last item on the survey asked the students to rate how important their academic success is to them.

Not important Neutral Very important

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

All students circled a number rather that marking their response on the continuum. Responses were as such: no one chose numbers 1 or 2: These numbers identified feelings

of not important to right before neutral. Eighteen respondents marked number 3 which fell right before neutral on the scale. Twenty-four students chose number 4, neutral. Thirty-nine students chose 5; fifty-one chose 6; and fifty-four students chose 7. The numbers 5 – 7 indicated responses above neutral to very important.

Teachers

Forty-two teachers were contacted to complete the survey, but only twenty-two opted to take part. Fifteen females and seven males from the following departments responded: English, Social Studies, Science, Industrial Technology, Student Services (counselors), Math, Physical Education, World Language, Special Education and Business Education. There were 395 years of teaching experiences among all participants, and the average was eighteen years experience. The least amount of teaching experience was three years for one respondent and the most experienced teacher had thirty-two years experience.

Research Question

Students: Their Personal Definitions of Academic Success

The following research question was posed: *What themes or patterns will emerge from the research in reference to students' perspective of academic success?* Analyzing the data from the student surveys in response to this question led to multiple emergent themes. The comments were organized based on patterns in the responses and then assigned a theme as an overall category. The emerging themes were personal or motivational incentives, grades, graduation, testing and acquiring knowledge. Teacher

survey responses are incorporated with student responses to serve as a way to identify similarities or differences between the two groups.

Teacher perspectives of how the school identifies academic success were also categorized thematically. Similar patterns were identified for the teacher responses as were the students: grades, graduation, testing, praise or recognition, and others. One teacher respondent stated the patterns best with his response, "West High evaluates academic success in many different ways: 1.) grade point average; 2) standardized test scores; 3.) graduation rate; 4.) credit completion; 5.) extra-curricular participation/success; 6.) Drop out rate."

Personal or motivational incentives. The students overwhelmingly identified factors which were categorized into the personal or motivational incentives category for their definitions of academic success. This category encompassed ideas such as: working hard, trying one's best, studying, goal-setting, and involvement in extra-curricular activities. Responses falling within this category often incorporated grades as the end result. One female respondent stated, "I define it as success if you are truly doing your best. If you are doing your best, the grades shouldn't matter. By effort." Other respondents noted similar factors: "Trying the best you can no matter what your grades are," "Doing as well as my ability dictates," "try your hardest in school and get the best you can," "Putting a lot of effort into your school work and tests. . . " and "To me success in school is being dedicated to your work regardless of whether you are interested in the course or not."

Students also identified studying, goal-setting and extra-curricular activities as predictors of success for themselves within the category of personal or motivational incentives category. Comments of this nature were "Being able to accomplish academic goals that I set for myself," "By getting to my goals that I set for myself," "positive mindset." One male respondent stated he feels academically successful by referring to the new state guidelines for extra-curricular activities, "No pass no play." This guideline requires any student who participates in a competitive, school-sanctioned, extra-curricular activity to pass all classes with a D- (60%) or higher. Activities which offer a contingency based on grades motivate some students to achieve at least the minimum of a passing grade. When students were asked to state how the school defines academic success this category forty-four respondents alluded to personal or motivational incentives in their responses.

Several of the responses lay with motivation or personal responsibility. In one instance a few students stated that it is up to the individual to create their own successes: "When you do your best and apply yourself in general," "I believe you define success for yourself," "doing your best," "as a way to rease [rise] to the top and try your best," and "working hard to achieve your best, even though your best might not be someone else's best." Others stated, "because teachers can inspire you to do well in something but only you can fulfill those needs," "you have to set your mind. 'Cuz if you say you aren't going to be successful your grades are going to go in the gutter so fast. It should be my responsibility," "you have a really big amount it's up to you. If you have the attitude you want to succeed then you will, if you have an attitude that you won't then you're not,"

and "I think it has a lot to do with the individual person and how well you want to do with whatever it is you are doing."

Attendance was also mentioned: "arrive to class on time," "attending class," "staying in school," "attending school everyday," "coming to school everyday," "being in class," and "making sure you are in school all of the time."

Personal achievements were another category which can be compared to the teachers' responses as well. Students offered responses like "being studious," "making something of yourself," "achievements, goals," "reaching the goal you get and exceeding it," "Its [sic] very important and if you get good success you can recive [sic] solarships [sic] and other stuff," "being proud of the grades you get," and "by doing all of the classes you need to and doing substaintally [sic] well in each one." One respondent offered a more detailed reason as to why achieving academic success in school is important for personal achievements:

> Um, right now, other than college and getting in there and transcripts it's always been my parents and I have always wanted to do well because my parents wanted me to do well and just their support and all of my elementary school teachers said I could do well—after 3rd grade. My 1st and 2nd grade teachers didn't think I could do anything, so I got this kind of I'll show you attitude over the years. Well, if you look at the job market right now, a lot of them require higher education, for example like most of them do, but even McDonalds and places like those look for food safety and if you want to be a manager you have to go through so many classes just to be a manager and that's just McDonalds. There are other businesses that you have to go back for other training, if you are a mechanic you have to go back for mechanical training. No matter what you do you have to have some form of education, no matter what it is.

Higher education, which could be seen as a personal achievement, was also a factor in students defining how their school defines academic success. Responses about

going to college, "seeing that you will succeed after you graduate" and "getting ready for the next step" were common themes which emerged from the students' words.

Students also focused upon praise, clubs and awards: ten students identified praise or clubs as significant. These two categories have been put together because most often clubs are praised for their hard work and dedication, so it seemed fitting to group these together even though they can be looked at as two separate entities. One respondent wrote he knew the school defined academic success when he would hear, ". . . great job. Nice to have you in." Others stated, ". . . keep up the good work," and "Teachers tell us we are doing good, I guess." The recognition of being nominated Student of the Month was also mentioned. This honor is awarded to eight selected students per month by teachers. The teachers select students based on their behavior, extra-curricular involvement, citizenship and other personal characteristics. The students cannot have been student of the month in the past. Individual departments choose the students each month, and a student may only have the honor one time in her high school career. Another student acknowledged other school awards, "My school define's [sic] my academic success by giving me awards. . ." The remaining respondents cited being involved in school functions and extra-curricular activities.

Teachers did not have the personal or motivational incentives as a category represented in their responses for the teacher survey; however, they did cite that extra-curricular activities, praise and clubs are predictors of academic success for students. The category of praise or clubs was highly recognized as a way for the school to identify academic success. Within this category, sub-topics emerged: awards, dual-credit or

college level courses, extra-curricular events, and recognition. Three respondents mentioned National Honor Society. This is an organization which students must submit an application, complete volunteer work and be recognized as an upstanding school citizen. Student of the month, academic letters, senior awards, achievement certificates, national merit scholar, and names in the local newspaper were other forms of recognition offered by the teachers.

According to the teachers, the school also looks at students who are enrolled in college level courses or dual-credit courses. Dual credit courses allow a student to take a class at the high school, but it is sponsored by a local community college. These students receive one grade for the class which is then applied to their high school credit requirements and also begins their college transcript. Two teachers identified the number of "students who take AP [Advanced Placement] and HCC [Hawkeye Community College] courses" and "enrollment in & success in AP or dual enrollment classes." AP classes are advanced placement; students who elect to take these courses may opt to take a test at the end which may earn them college credit. This college credit can then be applied to most universities as an undergraduate credit.

Grades. Another category which roots itself in extrinsic motivation is grades. A majority of students responded with factors such as: GPA (grade point average), honor roll (recognition), progress, credit completion, and coursework. The factor most readily identified as a predictor of success by the students was grades. Respondents offered one to two word responses such as: "Grades," "Good grades," "Passing school," and "my grades." Other comments referring to grades were "Passing all classes with a "b" or

above," "earning a good grade," "passing every class with A B or maybe C," "getting the grades that satisfies myself [sic]," "All A's and B's on a report card and a 3.5 or higher," "I define academic success as receiving a 3.5 GPA or above," "Doing your classes well so you'll pass. A, B, C are good grades D, F are bad," "I think B's and C's are my academic success for me," or "Getting the highest grade possible and doing better than everyone else at the classes I am taking." One student combined personal motivation and grades when stating:

> Well, grades are a big part of it. But another part of it is if you are trying your best. Or if you are like a C student and you work hard for your grades and you worked hard and hey you deserve it because you worked hard for your grades.

All of the latter responses refer simply to grades or grading procedures. The second to last response hints at competition among students. Other responses which inferred competitive responses referred to the types of classes one takes or the difficulty of the classes taken. A competitive comment was "A lot of my friends do well in school; it's not like a competition, but it's like if they are doing well, why aren't I? It just keeps you accountable." One male student stated, "High GPA/toughness of class goes into it also," "taking intellectually stimulating classes," "Taking advanced courses and recieving [sic] A's and B's in the class," and "the classes you take."

Another sub-category for grades was recognition which seems to be similar to praise; however, these comments are placed as a sub-category for grades because of their direct tie to grading procedures. Students offered that they achieve academic success when the school recognizes them. Several students referred to the school's Honor Roll program. One student wrote that he felt academically successful "When you get to be on

honor role [sic]." This program identifies students with a grade point of 3.0 or higher in the newspaper. *Good* grades, coursework and recognition all lead to another predictor of success according to students: graduation.

Students were also asked about their school's definition of success. In response to this question, students made the following comments. Students identified grades as a way their school defines academic success. One hundred eighty-six students returned a survey; however, for this particular question thirty-two respondents either did not attempt to answer the question, had responses which were not legible or the responses did not match the question being asked. Of the one hundred eighty-six student respondents, one hundred one identified, at some point in their written response, the importance of grades. The category of grades encompasses the following factors: honor roll, completion of courses, academic progress, credit completion, GPA and grades received.

One student stated that grades matter even if a person does not understand the material, "Getting an A on something no matter [sic] you got it or if you even understand it. Just getting an A [sic]" another student implies the same, "Success is defined by whether or not you get good grades. School is not about charactor [sic]." Other students bring the passing or failing issue in relation to grades received: "Are [sic] school defines academic success as if you pass, your [sic] successful," "passing classes, just enough to "techniquly" [sic] pass," "In order to pass you have to have a better grade then [sic] a F," and ". . . by having a D and higher." One student made a comment about the easiness of receiving certain letter grades, "Probably a B+ or A [is a good grade]. I think like the A grades are going through an inflation right now, and it's not really that hard to get an A."

Grade point average and being on honor roll is also another factor students identify as ways the school defines academic success. Twenty-five respondents allude to either honor roll or grade point average as predictors of success. Students who identified a specific grade point average ranged from 2.5 to 4.0. One student felt that the administrators in school "think that to have an academic success would be to have 4.0 all 4 years." On the grading scale which this school uses, a 2.5 equals a C+ average and a 4.0 equals a straight A average. However, this school does not weight pluses or minuses into the grade point average, so anything less than a 4.0 is averaged based on the straight letter grade. Other students identified specific grades as determinates of success.

The specific grades ranged from a D- to an A letter grade as being successful. Seven respondents stated the letter A as being successful; three students identified the letter B, two identified C, four identified the letter D and two recognized anything higher than an F is academically successful according to the school. Two of the former respondents identified both A and B letter grades: "getting A's & B's," "My school defines academic success as receiving good grades, such as A's and B's in core subject areas." One respondent for the letter A grade stated, the school defines academic success as "Being amazing A+ and all that." On the contrary, a student who recognized both A and B grades defined the school's definition for academic success stated there is "not too much emphasis on getting A's & B's (except adv. Classes) [sic]" in the school. Sixteen students offered "passing classes" as a way the school defines an academically successful student. Passing classes in a timely manner often leads to graduation which was another recognized theme.

Questions eight and ten on the student survey asked students to define their most successful and least successful letter grades respectively. For each question the students were allowed an area to explain their choices. Table 5 shows the students' choices of most successful letter grades, and following the chart is a breakdown of responses the students offered.

Table 5 Most successful letter grade

	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F	No Response
Males	43	12	8	11	1	1	3	1	0	1	0	0	2
Females	61	13	11	8	2	2	3	0	0	0	1	2	0

These responses were systematically coded in the same manner as the academic success definitions. Four themes emerged from the student responses: highest grade, knowledge, effort, and difficulty of class. Other comments which only had singular responses or did not fit into one of the more recognized categories have been placed into an *other* category.

Many students commented that they were proud of their most successful grade due to the fact that it was the "highest grade you can get." Students said this about grades which ranged from the highest on the scale, A, to a D letter grade. One student commented that, "B- is not "successful" enough to me, but sadly this was my highest grade." These types of comments presented themselves throughout the responses.

Some students not only said it was the highest they could get but also that they worked hard for it. The effort theme was consistently demonstrated in responses such as: "Because I push myself to do well on everything and to get an A, NO EXCEPTION!,"

"This is successful because I tried hard and met my goals," "I've worked hard to attain this grade" and "It feels really good to me when I have an A because it makes me feel like I'm working hard."

Other students cited the difficulty of the class being a factor into their most successful grade. One student stated, "It's not my highest, but it is a tough college class and I'm proud of the A- that I'm earning." Others said, "High school is much harder than middle school and I always had A+'s and B's in middle school so an A is amazing for high school," "Sometimes it is a hard class but if stay focused and remain on taks it becomes easy for me," "Because the class is sort of hard," "It's in algebra, and I don't understand math well," "This is in AP Spanish, a difficult, college level course that I have to work at," and "Well I would like to be higher, but I consider it most successful based on how difficult my classes are."

The least amount of responses stated knowledge as a factor in why their grade was most successful. Responses were typical of "Cause [sic] it's an A and it pretty much means that I understood everything and class and did all my work," "Because I get [understand] the work that he is giving us," "...would mean that I am completely confident in what I've earned," ". . . can't get an A if you don't understand the material, at least at the time."

Other responses which did not fit into an emerging theme were "I enjoy the class," "[teachers]. . . always help us when we need help and we never have homework so that's why this is my most successful grade," "A "B" is a solid grade for me cause [sic] no matter how hard I try I can never just get that "A," "it's not failing," "I like seeing A's

and it makes my parents happy as well," "because I was proud of being the smarter one in the class," and "I've missed a lot of days so I'm behind in all of my classes."

On the other end of the spectrum, students were asked to identify their least successful grade and were given an opportunity to offer an explanation for the grade they selected. Table 6 illustrates the least successful grade breakdown as offered by student responses.

Table 6 Least successful letter grade

	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F	No Response
Males	2	1	2	3	5	2	9	4	4	6	7	36	1
Females	1	7	2	7	6	5	7	8	10	6	7	37	0

One student responded that he had no least successful grade which then allows the chart to equal the 186 students who participated in the survey. Again, the responses were systematically coded and similar themes emerged as the most successful grades: lowest grade, effort, class and knowledge.

For this question, students identified items dealing with effort as a factor for why their grade was the least successful for them. Comments were typical of statements such as: "I don't try much in there," "I didn't work at all for it," "I didn't do anything and I put things off," "I know I can do better than that," "I didn't try my best as I need to," "need to put more effort in the class," "I need to take the time to understand it [the class]," "It's not horrible but isn't that good . . . shows I didn't put in as much work as I could've," "I didn't have to do a lot to earn it," and "I was not living up to my full potential." There were several responses which were very similar to these responses.

Many students identified that they chose a specific letter grade due to the fact that it was the "lowest." In some regards *lowest* was due to the fact that the grade was an F, "I am very disappointed in myself for getting F's." Some students identified the grade was their personal lowest, "It's the lowest grade I have [C-] but it is still passing," "It [B] is my lowest grade," "So close to an A [B+]," and "Because I didn't get an A [B+]."

I have combined the comments for both class and knowledge in this section because both seem to be referring to the course content: Some of the comments seem to overlap between the two themes. Many students seemed to blame the class or the material, ""Because I don't do that good on tests," "I associate this grade with a class I don't care about," "it is a very challenging course," "Because I kinda [sic] struggle in this class," "Because I'm not understanding the material, and I receive drastically little help at home," "hard class," "French is very hard," "Spanish sucks!," and "I struggle with the material and failing makes all that work not even worth it." Very few students identified knowledge as a reason for their least successful grade: "I am not only failing this class, but I don't understand the material," "I don't understand what we're doing at the time," and "because I walked away from that semester knowing nothing."

Few students commented that they had no unsuccessful letter grade due to the fact that they had all A's. Other students made comments that did not offer a specific explanation for the letter grade, but more of student dismay at a low grade, "I have never gotten an F in my life," "because it's affel [sic] [awful]," and "I don't want to be labeled as dumb."

Teachers also identified grades as being a predictor of success. Teacher responses for grades include the sub-categories of successful completion of coursework, academic progress, credit completion and the most apparent grades. Responses were comparable to that of the students in regard to grades: "grade point averages," "grades," "standard grading procedures (A,B, C. . .)," ". . .a grade higher than a D," "GPA," "class rank," "No Fs," and "Our school uses the standard A,B,C,D,F grading system for most classes. F is the only failing grade, so anything above that is success."

Also, teachers identified that checking the academic progress of students offers another way academic success is defined. This sort of checking involves checking grades periodically in any of the student's classes, mid-term reports, or student-teacher conferences. This is also true of course completion, they were "Successful completion of advanced courses," "Improvements in grades over time," "Yearly academic progress," and "credit completion."

Graduation. Several students viewed graduation as an indicator of academic success. Many students who identified grades as a predictor of success also hinted that the end result would be graduation: "Passing all my classes and then granduating [sic] in May," "To graduate," "graduate," "doing what I have to do to graduate," and "Graduation."

Alongside this, students also identified post-secondary plans as a predictor. "By getting a high school and college education," ". . . and graduation – going on to college and being successful," "going on and being successful in a job," "making it to college with the grades possible," "Graduating and having post high school education,"

"Graduating from colleg [sic]," "Graduating from a 4 year university," and "Being accepted and completing a 4-year university." In this school district, students know they must pass a Reading and Math standardized test in order to be eligible for graduation. This also presented itself as a theme in student responses.

Twenty-two students identified graduating at some time during their response to how the school defines academic success. Only one student offered a different perspective to the idea of graduating, "The school doesn't care about your grades they just want you to graduate."

As with the students, teachers also stated graduation is a predictor of success. These responses were ultimately tied to grades and the completion of coursework. "Completing required number of credits to graduate (40-44)" was a response of one teacher who referred to the actual number of credits a student must receive in order to graduate. Other teachers stated the school defines academic success as the "number of students who graduate" as a predictor of a success rather than individual graduate rates.

Three respondents stated factors which dealt with the amount of time in which one graduates as a way for the school to define an academically successful student: "graduating with original classmates (if possible in 4 years)," "graduating on time," and "graduating on time with the courses needed to get admitted to a four-year college." Another teacher stated, "progress towards graduation."

Testing. Few students acknowledge the idea of testing as a predictor of success; however, because of the graduation requirement as stated earlier, it is important to identify those who outwardly recognized this factor. Most respondents offered generic

responses regarding test scores, such as: good test scores, high test scores, and passing tests. One student went into more detail, "receiving a good score on the ITEDs and ACTs."

Eleven students identified testing as an important factor in regard to their perspective of the school's definition of academic success. Responses ranged from, "the bare minimum needed to meet federal levels. . .," "receiving a good score on the ITEDS and ACTs," and "also passing iteds."

Testing placed second in the amount of responses by the teachers as a standard for the school's predictors of success. All teachers who readily identified testing as a predictor cited the district's mandate of passing the standardized test in order to be eligible for graduation, for example: "we have proficiency markers on standardized tests," Passing (251) ITEDSs [sic] by graduation in reading/math (scores)," "ITED scores," or "251 on ITED's – math and reading to graduate." One teacher also identified the ACT test that students may use as a college admission requirement.

Acquiring knowledge. The last predictor of success, acquiring knowledge, identified by students relates to all of the aforementioned categories. Many students referred to learning as a predictor of success. The statements ranged from understanding to application of knowledge. One respondent stated "actually felling [sic] good about learning" was a predictor of success. Another respondent stated "Acquiring the intelligence and experience necessary to establish my foundation adequately to have a successful future" and yet others had similar responses, "Truly understanding a subject, and being able to remember it later and put it to use" and "Understanding concepts and

knowing how to use them." Teachers did not recognize acquiring knowledge as a way the school defines academic success for students.

Other. I created this category because in many cases teachers had singleton responses. These responses were difficult to fit within the other categories. For example, one teacher responded, "I am not sure we do [have a definition for academic success as a school]. . . but we do not have much to do with identifying academic success." Comments which encompass the *other* category are dropout rate, attendance, skill level, higher education, interaction with teachers. These responses varied, "eligible for higher education if they wish to go on," "continue on to post-secondary success," "drop out rates," "attendance rates," "maturity, organization, participation, ability to memorize and regurgitate information dispensed, goal setting. . .," "worksheets – texts- assignments," and "probably better interactions with teacher."

There was one instance of a student offering more insight to her opinions about predictors of academic success in an interview. Those items in brackets are additional questions I asked to clarify or have her give more detail on a certain subject, she stated:

> I think it depends on the teacher too. A lot of the time. I know there is no such thing as a bad teacher just the way they teach I think if they don't have control of the classroom then it's a hard environment to learn in. I've struggled with that in some of my classes it just frustrates the heck out of me. [the culture in the classroom?] yeah. I think it is important. [what would be the ideal classroom then?] um I think the teacher, a classroom which respects the teacher and has respect for them while they are talking, but they still have that rapport, they can still connect with them in a way that is not too strict like I am your teacher up here. It should be interactive. I think that they aren't supposed to be your friend, but they could have a relationship with you. [do you want to learn more from a teacher who can do those things?] You can see they genuinely care and you want to learn about the subject they are teaching.

This last comment about the teacher was the only direct quote which specifically noted that the teachers themselves affect the culture of the classroom. This leads to survey questions which only teachers were asked.

Teacher Only Questions and Responses

Teachers were asked two different questions regarding student characteristics they find in students who appear to be more academically successful than others. They were then offered an opportunity to explain their answers. The following data is taken from questions five through nine on the teacher survey.

The teachers were asked: *What specific behaviors do you observe in students who fit your description for academically successful students?* Responses varied from assignment/course/credit completion, attendance, motivation and attitude, preparedness and parental or family support.

Fourteen responses dealt with assignment, course or credit completion as a behavior which may predict success. Eleven responses dealt with attendance, twenty-eight with motivation and attitude, seventeen for preparedness and two for parental or family support. Each teacher response may have had more than one category present; therefore, the amount of responses exceeds the number of teacher participants.

In order to take these ideas one step further question number six on the teacher survey probed the teachers with this question: *Are there particular groups of students you believe to fit your definition of academic success more than other groups of students?* Eleven teachers said yes, nine said no, and two said I don't know. Because this question

offered only three possible fixed responses, the respondents were given an opportunity to explain their opinions.

Overall, the theme that anyone can succeed was apparent through most of the responses. However, those who stated yes there are particular groups of students mentioned students who are involved in extra curricular activities, active in class discussions, good attendance, responsible for their own learning, organizational skills, positive attitude, homes that value education, and those who have academic support; all of which support previous research concerning students' learning and success.

There were other responses that identified middle to higher socio-economic status, Caucasian or Asian ethnicities. These respondents all used the words to "generalize" or "generalizations" in their responses. Those who stated that no, students cannot be categorized into particular groups, explained that kids from any group can do well. Also, they cited the words "specific behaviors" students have but were less inclined to group the students by behaviors. Specific responses included: "I think any student can fit my definition of success, and there is no set of circumstances that will predict with 100% accuracy who will succeed," "I don't think there are particular groups, but I do think there is a relationship between early childhood preparation and success," "I don't classify my students by groups. Some students have one or more areas of difficulty (attendance, org. skills, reading, etc) to work on – but I don't believe their ability to be successful academically depends on a "group" to which they belong but rather on their ability to improve areas of difficulty which prevent them from succeeding as an

individual," and "Any student, regardless of group affiliation, can be successful with motivation and determination."

> One of the two, *I don't know* respondents, had a similar response: "Generalizations do not hold true for entire groups, so I'm hesitant to say that the jocks or Emos [a title given by kids or self-appointed by students who are considered emotional. Many of these students appear to be *gothic,* but students will point out that there is a big difference between the two groups, mainly the emotional side] do well or poorly. I think kids who do the things listed in #5 do well, no matter what group they are perceived as being a part of."

The other respondent who stated I don't know offered: "I don't know if you're referring to race, gender, G.P.A., etc." The responses from the teachers offered a look into teachers' perspectives about student academic success and the possible predictors of success.

Summary

Through surveys and interviews, students and teachers offered insight into the predictors of academic success and their perceptions of how academic success was defined, personally and by the school. After systematically coding the responses of both the students and teachers, many of the same themes emerged from the research. It appears as though the depth that each group delved into the themes was different. The responses from both the students and teachers had similarities which led me to believe that communication was occurring between the staff and students. Closer analysis of the responses is offered in the next chapter; it also offers explanations for the responses based on my fieldwork as a teacher.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

I began this research focusing upon the student voice and how students might define academic success for themselves. I thought that asking for their perspectives may allow for some insight as to why some students seem more apathetic each year. In my heart, I was hoping I might find some sort of educational utopia: A system in which students truly wanted to learn to prepare for their future, to become better people and in essence to become educated. While some of these themes (i.e. knowledge, to better one's self) did present themselves within the research, overwhelmingly the themes presented an idea of *just getting by.* How disheartening to think that today's youth truly just want to *get by* with only doing the bare minimum. Even more disheartening is that the comments from the teachers tended to support the students' beliefs.

So where did this idea come from? It is the chicken or the egg question: Were teachers or students the genesis for this ideal or was it someone else, something else? The answer to this question may never be answered, but what we can learn more about this idea of *getting by* is how it relates to success and perhaps how the culture of this school plays a role in the communication of academic success standards.

Themes

The research question posed was *What themes or patterns will emerge from the research in reference to students' perspectives of academic success?* Table seven shows the emergent themes and whether the students or teachers had responses that fell into those categories. An X in a column signifies at least one comment toward the emergent

themes. The *other* category has been broken down into sub-categories based on the singleton responses or very few responses. These categories do not have individual numbers for each response as do the main categories. The tallies were created when a person's response fell into one or more categories. A response which fell into more than one category is represented in the table as well. The tallies come from the questions on each survey concerning defining academic success—two questions from the student survey and one from the teacher survey. The primary themes of grades and motivation will be discussed further in light of the literature review presented in Chapter II.

Table 7 Emergent Themes

	Students	Teachers
Personal Or motivational Incentives	X 88	X 18 (praise/clubs)
Grades	X 213	X 30
Graduation	X 37	X 14
Testing	X 18	X 11
Acquiring knowledge	X 28	NA
Other: Sub-categories	Students	Teachers
Other	X 14	X 12
Dropout rate	NA	X
Attendance	X	X
Skill level		X
Higher Education	X	X
Interaction with teachers	X	X
Parental Support/ Involvement	X	X

Grades

By glancing at the chart, one can see that grades were mentioned by students as the majority of responses. A grade is an end result of a task, test, assignment, et cetera. (In my analysis, I will refer to a grade as an end product) This leads me to believe that learning is not about the process of acquiring knowledge for many students, but the mere grade, the most tangible part of education for a student. I have heard students say, "at least I passed" countless times in the classroom. In other words, students appear to care more about the end than the means, or the letter grade rather than the knowledge that may or may not be gained from learning. This longing for a passing grade is definitely an extrinsic motivator that leads the student to do tasks which ensure them a grade—which I suppose, in a way, is better than a student not wanting to get any grade—in essence a zero.

Why is there such emphasis on *the grade*? Students mostly named A's and B's for their most successful grades, and also for their measure of defining being the most successful. A few students mentioned that learning and gaining the knowledge was more important than the grade, but from my interpretations of the data, students stated more often than not that "to pass" was good enough. Grades do not do much for one in life unless the grades are equivalent to a 4.0 on a grade point scale. In these instances, many students may be eligible for scholarships and admission to colleges than their counterparts who receive lower grades. Students were able to identify grades as being important, but contradicted themselves when it came to *real life.* But in real life, seventy-three students identified an F as their least successful letter grade. Seventy-three F's—

almost half of the student participants had reported that at some point during their high school career they had received an F. That in itself should send out an alarm to educators and parents.

Motivation

According to research in the literature review (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1997; Olina & Sullivan, 2002), intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can be predictors of success. Most of the responses listed by teachers fall under the intrinsic motivation category because the behaviors must begin with the person rather than have an external force guiding the behavior. These guiding behaviors could encompass assignments, course or credit completion (grades) and parental or family support.

I suggest, based upon the findings that students achieve for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. However, I would say that the extrinsic rewards outweigh the intrinsic rewards based on this research. Grades appear to be the most likely reason why students achieve in a classroom. Secondly, graduation, which is also an extrinsic reward, places a far second based on student responses. Much like the question posed earlier about students' beliefs about *getting by,* the discussion of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is similar to the chicken and egg theory. Which comes first? Intrinsic or extrinsic motivation? Does one affect of effect the other?

Pride is an intrinsic motivator and given that Bandura's (1977, 1997) research suggested students will take more pride in a task if the reward comes from within, the brief responses from most of the students in the current study suggest pride is not commonly being developed in these students. Although pride in a grade can entice a

student to work for a certain grade, there were students who worked only to earn a passing grade, no matter how low. There is not a lot of pride in the grade being received, but more simply that a passing grade is achieved. So, in instances such as this, grades are simply an extrinsic motivator although it could in turn be an intrinsic motivator.

Bandura (1977) also believes that most intrinsic motivation begins with extrinsic motivation. In this case let us assume a student is working only for a passing grade, no matter how high or low, perhaps the student will do well and receive an A—this possibly unexpected letter grade may trigger a positive feeling, causing the student to sustain the grade. In a separate instance perhaps the student receives an F and this triggers a negative feeling, this in turn may cause the student to continue working harder to raise the grade.

Comments from an interview participant support this idea: "When I started out here, I got a couple of F's and then got a couple more then I turned it around and started getting my grades up." This interview participant indicated he was scared of receiving more F's because he would not graduate on time. Some students did mention they want the higher letter grades for a variety of reasons; for example, in many instances when students had an opportunity to explain their least successful letter grades, some stated they knew they could do better. This signals an intrinsic motivation to do better in the future, or at the very least, the acknowledgement that the student identifies she can do better in the future.

Bandura (1997) also states that when others assign goals for us we may very well attempt to achieve these goals, but he implies that even reaching these goals is merely for immediate satisfaction and that it does not translate into wanting to do well. Again, the

chicken or egg theory. Does extrinsic motivation truly create intrinsic motivation in one's will? Maybe. It probably depends on the individual. But it is safe to say, based on the current study that students who identified external factors as being a motivating force were sincere in acknowledging these factors.

One example of extrinsic motivation that appeared to influence some students was parental support or influence. Witmer (2005) found direct links to parental involvement and success or motivation in student academic success. Most interview participants in the current study mentioned their parents as being an influence for them wanting to do well in school. Few respondents also stated their parents wanted them to do better in life than they had in their own. Growing up with these types of values being instilled in children can affect the beliefs of students when they enter an educational system.

Getting By

After interpreting the themes and their sub-categories, I felt that the feeling of students doing the bare minimum to *just get by* was very prominent in many of the students' words and even the words of some of the teachers'. Therefore, I thought that a more specific discussion about this idea was important to the current study.

Glasser (1986, 1997) believes educators must teach the process of figuring out a problem in order to solve it, or to understand the need that is not being met in order to fulfill that need and then succeed. Teaching by Glasser's theory, a teacher would first explain to students their basic needs; survival, power, belonging and power, and knowledge. Then if a conflict arises in the classroom, a teacher would be able to say to the student, which of your basic needs is not being met? Once the student is able to

identify the need, he can then figure out a way to solve the problem rather than merely reacting to the problem, usually based off of raw emotion.

I am a proponent of Glasser's teachings. I believe if these ideas and techniques were used in the classroom, we might find different outcomes: Students may become more aware of the rationale and process of doing a task well, and teachers may reconnect by emphasizing the process rather than the product. This district does not follow the beliefs of Glasser. However, there are individual teachers who try to implement his beliefs in their classrooms.

If a program such as Glasser's Choice Theory, is adopted wholeheartedly by a district, the students begin to internalize the ideas because of the repetition of hearing about basic needs on a continuous basis. This district has adopted the beliefs of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation or William Dagget which puts more focus on teaching life-skills, but in reality it is the standardized test scores that truly drive the district's curriculum and belief system.

In a country which idealizes competition and always getting a step ahead of the *next person,* most of the results of this research seem to make sense and unfortunately fit into our United States culture and attitude. In many cases, finding jobs, going to school, getting to work, or even doing a good deed is not about going through the process, but rather what is the quickest, most efficient way one can get there, or the attitude of what will I get in turn. The emphasis put on grades in education is comparable: As long as a student does the work and gets a passing grade, all seems to be well. But I wonder if it is all well. Some might argue that the end product can very well be acquiring knowledge,

but from many of the responses given by the students and teachers in the current study, strongly imply the end product in high school is the letter grade. In a world of competition and globalization, how will our students compete with students from other countries who are taught that the process is just as important as or more important than the end product?

Our own government stands by the end product with the *No Child Left Behind* legislation. The end product is testing. If students do not score high enough on standardized test the school becomes a School In Need of Assistance. Truly how much accurate information can be gained from small numbers of tests given to a student? In this school the test that matters is the ITED (Iowa Test of Educational Development). The test is given to all students (except students with an IEP, individualized educational plan that states the individual does not need to complete the test) in the eleventh grade. If the student does not receive a score of 251 (8^{th} grade level) then the student cannot be eligible for graduation.

What happens next is even more frightening. The student has to retake the part of the test he did not pass, either Math, Reading or both. Again if the student does not pass with a 251 on the retake, he continues to retake over and over again until he passes the test. The student is pulled out of class for the test retake(s). This affects the student's learning in the core classrooms and could in turn affect his grade. The student may also feel frustration, embarrassment, anxiousness or helplessness as a result of not passing the test initially. According to Glasser (1986, 1997) and Bluestein (2001) these emotions are not going to benefit the student or the school. The emotions could result in disciplinary

problems or worse dropping out. This type of culture being created in the school, in part by the school and in part by the government, is not a learning-conducive environment.

Barriers

The culture in the school and the identity of students is directly related to all of the parts which play a role in education: administration, teachers, secretaries, students, parents, society, and government. When I look at the emergent themes, think about my fieldwork as a teacher, and the society in which we live, I found some links between the comments, the culture and identity of the school and students, and today's culture in the United States. I believe that in this study, the predominant fast-pace U.S. culture that focuses on end-products is a barrier to students' learning. Instead of making them more competitive or driven to learn, it seems to generate student identities of settling for getting by. It hurts students' ability to take advantage of education for knowledge's sake rather than the rush to get out, possibly go to college and get a job to make money.

Culture

In this section I will discuss these barriers in reference to the literature review's section on culture and identity. The culture of any group is influenced by its members: In this specific instance the culture is influenced heavily by the concept of grades and the concepts proposed in politics, and finally by those who are present in the schools day in and out: administration, teachers and students. I found that the culture in this school is one of its biggest barriers. The idea of *getting by* and what appears to be a good amount of teachers who subscribe to this idea are part of the culture. Perhaps it was because the surveys were given during the second semester of the academic year and students were

planning on graduating and teachers were doing their best to *get the students graduated,* but it seems as though this over emphasis during one part of the academic year must also be present and influence during the first semester. One example of *getting by* is by getting a passing grade and receiving enough credits to move on.

Somewhere along the line, grades and graduation are being communicated between administration, teachers and students as being extremely important in this school. Because of their implied importance, grades and graduation appear to be embedded values that the participants in the culture have subscribed to (Schein, 1985; Hatch, 2000). I am not saying these items are unimportant—I too, would like to see every student who comes into my classroom receive a passing grade and graduate with their original class, but I also know that there are some students who will choose not to pass.

Schein (1985) states that the values must be first identified and realized or influenced by its members in order for the values to be present. The values that are present in this organization are grades and graduation. I believe what has happened is that these values have become so embedded in the organization that they are almost second nature to all of the facets in the school, causing them as Schein states to "drop out of consciousness" (p. 16). Unfortunately, this over emphasis simply on a grade and graduation seems to be the problem.

The academia utopian world I had hoped to find does not exist and never will exist when all we do is emphasize grades and the end product of "walking across the stage" in this type of school culture. I am not an idealist either; utopia is not possible because of all of the different opinions in the world. However, there must be something

better, something more that we, as educators, should be focusing upon: The idea that no child will ever be *left behind* is unrealistic. Perhaps the graduation process needs to allow for failure — that sometimes one has to fail in order to succeed—because that is real life (Bluestein, 2001).

As I stated earlier, grades and graduation are important, but in order to change the emphasis on grades is to redefine what a grade is or what a grade signifies. From my fieldwork in the classroom, speaking to colleagues, sharing lesson plans in department meetings, I feel that grades are awarded to students after completing a task, such as: test, project, presentation or homework. Some teachers take points away from students for lack of participation, turning in late work, or effort. What if education in the United States began to redefine *grades* in education? What if a grade was not the actual end product, but a product of an actual process? Perhaps grades could be assigned only at the end of a semester or quarter, in essence when a class is completed. Or portfolios, which have been glorified by education and then again lost in education, could make their way back and be used in the manner they are actually intended for – to show progress over a course of time in a specific area. These ideas are pretty radical if we look at education, which is the one thing in our society that seems to resist major change. There are other less radical ways we could redefine the concept of grades. We could refocus our classes to incorporate putting the most emphasis on the learning of knowledge, being competent in an area, knowing how to problem-solve and most importantly being a critical thinker. Grades could be awarded based not only on assignments, tests, projects or presentations, but also on these life-skills that seem to be the drive for much of the initiatives taking

place in this district. In reality, however, when the day ends it is the test scores that make the newspapers and are focused upon in staff and department meetings. This identity the school is creating for itself must be confusing for the students.

Identity. How does a high school student establish their identity in relationship to academia? Past researchers (Deemer, 2004; Granstrom, 2004; Reese-Durham, 2005) believe there is a correlation between being comfortable in a classroom and community building. This community building which occurs in a classroom influences the culture that develops (Schein, 1985). In the current study, students (during the interviews) commented that teachers influence their successfulness in school. One student has mentioned that without her ability to speak comfortably with her teachers, she would not have been able to achieve what she had thus far in her educational career. This type of comment links directly to Social Constructionism Theory – a theory which is based upon the relationship of self and society through daily interactions (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007). Again, we can come back to the chicken and egg theory. Is it the attitudes the students bring into the classroom from home, friendships, and other interactions that cause them to want to form relationships with the teachers or is it the culture the student becomes immersed in when entering a specific classroom?

Ruddick and Fielding (2006) also found that community can aid in individuals creating identities. This too would confirm that the developed culture in a classroom can play a significant role in influencing a student's successfulness. For example, if a student feels comfortable in a class, enough so to ask questions, participate, work collaboratively with others, and speak with the teacher independently then the student is creating an

identity for himself which is conducive to the learning environment, and in the end is creating more avenues for himself to become *successful.*

This on-going process and give and take between the students and teachers seems to be a key element in student success. However, from my experience in the classroom, I have had the pleasure of teaching students who do not choose to establish this type of relationship with teachers and are still successful in academics. I think then this type of student fits into the beliefs that individuals create their own identities through their daily interactions, in essence she chooses when to interact or when not to interact.

Also, in my experience, it appears that students' identities can vary on a daily basis. Students who have good, open relationships with a teacher may very well be shut off the next. However, this type of behavior tends to be based on emotion rather than culture or community in the classroom. Inconsistent identities could affect these students' success in school. Glasser (1986, 1997) would relate this emotional identity inconsistency with a basic need not being met. He states that until these basic needs are met, nothing else can be gained by a person, i.e. rational behavior, positive communication, or even learning, etc. I think then this type of student fits into the beliefs of social construction theory that the individual creates her own identity based on the daily interactions she has prior to coming to class, during class and after class (Gergen, 1994).

Acquiring Knowledge. Incredibly not one teacher focused on acquiring knowledge as a predictor of success for a high school student. Some students did mention that acquiring knowledge was a predictor of success for themselves. To be fair, teachers may have implied that acquiring knowledge is present if one graduates and proceeds with post-

secondary academic work (college or university). But, I question -- to what extent? Overwhelmingly, teachers cited "grades," "graduation" and "grade point average," "course completion" or "credit completion" as predictors of success. From the mouths of students, we know that the grades and credit completion may be completed at the bare minimum. What knowledge, then, are our students truly gaining? How to *just get by*. It seems cyclical in nature, a Pandora's box, a Catch-22, a let down.

Limitations

Like every study this study too had its limitations: The sample was a sample of convenience and may not accurately reflect the entire school's population. Conclusions based on data from this study were restricted to the sample and may not be applicable to other classrooms or schools, and the conclusions are solely my interpretation and may not be the same opinions of the teachers or administration in which the research took place. Unfortunately, there were circumstances beyond my control in student or teacher availability, student mood, willingness.

It was not possible to expect participation by the students for a variety of reasons: Student attitudes and views of success vary day to day and from class to class; some students did not return their parental permission slips and some phone contacts were ineffective due to disconnected or incorrect phone numbers; student responses may be inaccurate due to students' possible misinterpretation of the questions, or respondents may not have given answers that truly reflect their attitudes.

As stated in the methodology section, qualitative research and triangulation may have more obstacles to overcome; however, the data which emerges is usually much

richer than sticking only to one methodology. And although the list of limitations seems to be outstanding, it does not take away from the overall ideas which emerged from the research.

Future Recommendations

In order to stop this popular mentality of *getting by* we have to break the cycle. More research needs to be done in certain areas.

Theoretical Research

A plethora of other theories could be used to test the ideas in this research, one specific theory I have mentioned before, but may not necessarily be limited to is Social Constructionism Theory. This theory would bring a different perspective to the themes and concepts discussed in the current study. I would focus more upon the idea of students only doing the bare minimum in future research while testing these theories. Some respondents mentioned that how hard they work is dependent upon who is in their classes. This idea links to Social Construction Theory in that researchers (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007; Gergen, 1994) believe that meaning is constructed and not merely given to individuals.

Methods. I would suggest that qualitative methodology drive any future research of this kind due to the human aspect of education. I would also recommend the use of interviews and open-ended surveys that students and teachers could respond to about these beliefs. Interviews allow for more explanation to responses rather than a stricter, choose an answer survey.

Pragmatic. It may be interesting to ask veteran or recently retired teachers for their viewpoints regarding the presence of government in education since they would have taught during several different types of governing bodies. These teachers could also offer insight to morale, communication styles, and if their perspectives of student academic success had changed over the course of their career.

It would also be interesting to follow a group of students from elementary into their high school years to see what type of progress or barriers the students encounter in terms of academic success. A more focused study on a smaller group of students may give even more insight into the specific details that influence a student's educational journey.

Immediate. On the other hand, survey-type research which questions a larger number of students may uncover different themes unfounded in this research or possibly confirm the themes found in the current study.

Long-term. I think it would also be important to focus upon the culture of schools post *No Child Left Behind.* It would prove interesting if *NCLB* is affecting more schools than this one in the research. Does government influence student attitude through their stressing the importance of standardized testing? I would focus that type of research on the *getting by* attitude that seems to be embedded in this school's culture. Perhaps it is a mirror of the United States' culture or only the culture of this school due to the focus upon the end product.

Other future research could be conducted in different core classrooms to determine themes of success for students in specific courses. Other researchers may want

to investigate how individual teachers affect student success in classroom. Then in-services for teachers on communicating success or units for students on how to be successful could be designed for implementation based on the results.

Finally, more research about youth attitude toward education would provide insight to the educational world. Youth attitude could encompass concepts such as: effort, apathy, goals, importance of education (to themselves, to their family).

Conclusion

In spite of the limitations, the findings do identify how many students in one school define academic success and offer insight to the communication of values within the school. The results demonstrate that student perspectives should be considered when defining academic success. As cliché as it may be, students are the future of our country. If we do not listen to what they are saying about their educational experiences, we cannot make changes to their education to fit the every-changing world. The communication between those who are considered lowest on the hierarchy of education (students) and those who are highest (administrators) can be strengthened to allow for more communication to take place regarding academic standards in school.

The results would hopefully show a stronger and reformed educational system in the United States. We would have more academically sound students, better speakers, quick thinkers, people who can perform tasks rather than fill in a bubble on a standardized test scantron. Our students would be better equipped to compete in today's job market and could possibly re-establish faith and pride in many facets of our country: education, business or politics.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPLICATION

University of Northern Iowa: Standard Application for Human Participants Review
Title: Student and Teacher Perspectives of Academic Success
Project: Thesis
Name of Principal Investigator (PI): Heather Bentley
Status: Graduate Student
PI Department: Dr. Melissa Beall, Faculty Advisor
PI Phone: (319)833-8673 PI Email: hbentley@uni.edu
PI Campus Mailing Address: 1345 Jersey Lane, Waterloo, IA 50701
Source of funding: None
Agency's number: NA
Data Collection dates: When approved through February 2008
Project: New

Please provide the date that the PI and faculty sponsor (if applicable) completed IRB training/certification in Human Participants Issues and attach a copy of the certificate if not already on file with the IRB.

PI	On File X	DATE SEPTEMBER 2006	On File X
FACULTY SPONSOR		DATE MAY 2004	On File X

SIGNATURES: The undersigned acknowledge that: 1. this application represents an accurate and complete description of the proposed research; 2. the research will be conducted in compliance with the recommendations of and only after approval has been received from the UNI IRB. The PI is responsible for reporting any serious adverse events or problems to the IRB, for requesting prior IRB approval for modifications, and for requesting continuing review and approval.

Principal Investigator:	Heather Bentley, November 12, 2007
Faculty Sponsor:	Melissa Beall

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITY. In **lay language**, answer in spaces provided (add numbered and referenced sheets when necessary). Do not refer to an accompanying grant or contract proposal.

A. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH. Explain **1)** why this research is important and what the primary purposes are, and **2)** what question(s) or hypotheses this activity is designed to answer, and **3)** if this is a class project, explain whether and how the data will be used or presented outside the classroom.

1) The purpose of this study is to seek how students define their academic success in comparison to the teacher's expectations of success.
2) Students' definitions of success will vary for a number of reasons. What explanations can be given for the varying definitions of success? How do teachers define overall academic success for students? How do the definitions compare/contrast? What can this tell us about how teachers communicate expectations?

B. RESEARCH PROCEDURES INVOLVED. 1. Provide a complete description of: a. the study design, and b. all study procedures that will be performed (e.g., presentation of stimuli, description of activity required, topic of questionnaire or interview, name of psychological test). Provide this information for each phase of the study (pilot, screening, intervention and follow-up). Attach study flow sheet, if desired.

Attach questionnaires, interview questions/topic areas, scales, and/or examples of stimuli to be presented to participants.

The study intends to identify if academic success standards are communicated between teachers and students. This information will be gathered through open-ended surveys and possible interviews. Attached are a survey, possible interview questions, and a letter of assent for the student participants.

Before the actual research begins, the student survey will be given as a pilot study to one class, where the researcher is the teacher. This pilot study will allow the researcher to reword any question which may be confusing to the student.

C. DECEPTION: If any deception or withholding of complete information is required for this activity, explain why this is necessary and attach a protocol explaining if, how, when, and by whom participants will be debriefed. Attach debriefing script.

No deception or withholding of information will be used during this study.

D. PARTICIPANTS

1. Approximately how many participants will you need to **complete** this study?

Number 35-70 students/teachers Age Range(s) 14-18+ students; 22+ teachers

2. What characteristics (inclusion criteria) must participants have to be in this study? (Answer for each participant group, if different.)

The participants of this study must be students who are currently enrolled in a public high school. The adult participants must be currently teaching in a public high school.

3. Describe how you will recruit your participants and who will be directly involved in the recruitment. Key personnel directly responsible for recruitment and collection of data must complete human participant protection training. (Attach all recruiting

advertisements, flyers, contact letters, telephone contact protocols, scripts, web site template, etc.)

The participants of this study must be students who are currently enrolled at West High School in Waterloo, Iowa.

Students:
Participants will be surveyed in their Student Personal Advisory classes. The class is mandatory for all high school students. Student recruitment will begin with the researcher giving the selected SPA students the parental permission form. At that time the script will be read to give the students information about the research project. Students will be asked to bring the form back to their SPA mentor prior to the survey date. All students in the selected SPA classes will receive a permission form. Students will sign the student consent form on the day the survey takes place.

Interview participants may be recruited one of two ways:

1. By giving their name (optional) on the survey form, the researcher will make future contact asking if the student would like to participate in the interview session, or
2. The researcher will make a visit to the same selected SPA classes and inform the students that interviews will be taking place. The researcher will then offer a sign up sheet for the students to show interest. The researcher will also offer her contact information in case the student wants time to think about it or is too embarrassed to sign the sign up sheet.

The privacy of all interview participants will be upheld by allowing the students to choose an alias which will identify any responses used in the final research paper. All actual names will be omitted from the research.

Parents:
Parents will receive the consent form from their child(ren) who attend the selected SPA classes. The consent form will be returned by the student and given to their SPA instructor on a date prior to the survey.

Teachers:
Teachers will receive a copy of informed consent along with the teacher survey. They will return both items to the researcher after completing the survey.

4. How will you protect participants' privacy during recruitment?

Prior to the survey day, seating charts will be coded with a "w" for white and a "y" for yellow. White surveys will be handed out to students who returned a parental permission slip and yellow to those who did not.

The students will be instructed that there are two different surveys being handed out. However, all surveys will contain the same information, but the white surveys will

provide the data being collected for the research. This will avoid embarrassment for the students who were unable to obtain permission or forgot their forms.

Interview participants will be informed of the opportunity to participate, but will not be offered incentives or penalties regardless of participation. Students may either sign up or seek out the researcher to participate, eliminating any feeling of coercion.

5. Explain what steps you will take during the recruitment process to minimize potential undue influence, coercion or the appearance of coercion. If participants are employees, students, clients, or patients of the PI or any key personnel, please describe how undue influence or coercion will be mitigated.

The PI will avoid coercion at any cost. The PI will not force anyone to be involved in the study. The PI could be or possibly become a teacher of those being asked to participate. The researcher will not require names to be given. The class in which the survey will be taken is not a graded course. The class is merely for students to reflect on their grades and to learn and build character traits.

6. Will you give participants gifts, payments, services without charge, or course credit? If course credit is provided, please provide a listing of the research alternatives and the amount of credit given for participation and alternatives.

No

7. Where will the study procedures be carried out? If any procedures occur off-campus, who is involved in conducting that research?

The Waterloo Community School District must approve the research proposal (pending), but no other collaborators will be involved in recruiting procedures.

Do offsite research collaborators involved in participant recruiting have human participants protection training?

NA

E. RISKS AND BENEFITS

1. All research carries some social, economic, psychological, or physical risk. Describe the nature and degree of risk of possible injury, stress, discomfort, invasion of privacy, and other side effects from all study procedures, activities, and devices (standard and experimental), interviews and questionnaires. Include psychosocial, emotional and political risks as well as physical risks.

   There is little to no social, economic or physical risk to be involved in this study. Psychological discomfort may present itself if the participants feel discouraged by their success.

2. Explain what steps you will take to minimize risks of harm and to protect participants' confidentiality, rights and welfare. (If you will include protected groups of participants which include minors, fetuses in-utero, prisoners, pregnant women, or cognitively impaired or economically or educationally disadvantaged participants, please identify the group(s) and answer this question for each group.)

   The school district will be requested by the PI to grant permission for the research to take place. The participants will be asked to fill out the survey. If they decline, they will experience no adverse punishment. Any one on one interview that takes place will be at the consent of student and parent.

3. Study procedures often have the potential to lead to the unintended discovery of a participant's personal medical, psychological, and/or psycho-social conditions that could be considered to be a risk for that participant. Examples might include disease, genetic predispositions, suicidal behavior, substance use difficulties, interpersonal problems, legal problems or other private information. How will you handle such discoveries in a sensitive way if they occur?

   There is little to no chance of unintended discoveries. Should a participant feel uncomfortable, the survey or interview may be ended.

4. Describe the anticipated benefits of this research for individual participants in each participant group. If none, state "None."

   None.

5. Describe the anticipated benefits of this research for society, and explain how the benefits outweigh the risks.

   As a result of this research, educators will better understand the students' perspective of what success means to them. The results will also show how student views of academic success compares to that of teachers. The benefits of these findings outweigh any risk that may be at hand, as stated in number one.

F. CONFIDENTIALITY OF RESEARCH DATA

1. Will you record any direct participant identifiers (names, Social Security numbers, addresses, telephone numbers, locator information, etc.)

   X Yes — If yes, explain why recording identifiers is necessary and describe the coding system(s) you will use to protect against disclosure.

Names giving at the discretion of the student will be kept confidential. Students who participate in interviews will choose an alias for the researcher to use in the research findings.

2. After data collection is complete, will you retain a link between study code numbers and direct identifiers after the data collection is complete?

   X Yes — If yes, explain why this is necessary and for how long you will keep this link.

   The link will be retained until the completed thesis has been submitted, accepted and approved.

3. Describe how you will protect data against disclosure to the public or to other researchers or non-researchers. Other than members of the research team, explain who will have access to data (e.g., sponsors, advisers, government agencies) and how long you intend to keep the data. If data will be collected via web or internet, please include information on security measures, use of passwords, encryption, access to servers, firewalls, etc.

Dr. Melissa Beall and other advisers will have access to the data and research materials. The school district will also retain a copy of the research findings at their request.

4. Do you anticipate using any data (information, interview data, etc.) from this study for other studies in the future?
   No

G. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. Will you need access to participants' medical, academic, or other personal records for screening purposes or during this study?
   No
2. Will you make sound or video recordings or photographs of study participants?
   Yes.Consenting participants will have interviews audio-recorded; the recordings will be kept until final submission and approval of the thesis.

H. CONSENT FORMS/PROCESS

Written Consent

Attached are copies of written consent forms.

APPENDIX B

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW
PARENTAL PERMISSION

Invitation to Participate: Your child has been invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to allow your child to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate.

Nature and Purpose: This research will investigate how students identify their academic success.

Explanation of Procedures: The students will fill out a short open-ended survey during SPA. SPA meets on Wednesdays between 3rd and 4th hour. The class is used for reflection, goal writing, grade charting and other school-related tasks. All names will be omitted from the research so all responses will remain confidential. The results will neither harm nor benefit your child in any way.

There will also be an opportunity for your child to participate in a follow-up interview. The interview will be audio taped, but all names will remain confidential.

Discomfort and Risks: There are no foreseeable risks to participation. If the student will not be participating in the survey, he/she will hand in a blank document or a document which will not be recorded for the research findings.

Benefits: There is no benefit or compensation for taking part in the survey.

Confidentiality: Information obtained during this study which could identify your child will be kept strictly confidential. The summarized findings with no identifying information may be published in an academic journal or presented at a scholarly conference.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw: Your child's participation is completely voluntary. He or she is free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all, and by doing so, your child will not be penalized in any way.

Questions: If you have questions about the study or desire information in the future regarding your child's participation or the study generally, you can contact Heather Bentley at 319-939-2409 or the project investigator's faculty advisor Dr. Melissa Beall at the Department of Communications, University of Northern Iowa, you can also contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-6148, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.

Agreement:

I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my child's participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to allow my son/daughter to participate in this project. I have received a copy of this form.

_____

(Signature of parent/legal guardian) (Date)

_____

(Printed name of parent/legal guardian)

_____

(Printed name of child participant)

_____

(Signature of investigator) (Date)

_____

(Signature of instructor/advisor) (Date)

APPENDIX C

ADULT CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW
Adult consent form

Project Title: **Student and Teacher Perspectives of Academic Success**

Name of Investigator(s): Heather Bentley

Invitation to Participate: You are invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

Nature and Purpose: This research will investigate how students identify their academic success.

Explanation of Procedures: You are being asked to fill out a survey based on your opinions of student academic success and the predictors of academic student success. Your name will be omitted from research findings and will be kept confidential. The data collected will be used in the research findings for this project.

Discomfort and Risks: There are no foreseeable risks to participation.

Benefits and Compensation: There is no benefit or compensation for taking part in the survey.

Confidentiality: Information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept confidential. The summarized findings with no identifying information may be published in an academic journal or presented at a scholarly conference.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw: Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all.

Questions: If you have questions about the study or if you desire information in the future regarding your participation or the study generally, you can contact Heather Bentley at 319-939-2409 or the project investigator's faculty advisor Dr. Melissa Beall at the Department of Communications, University of Northern Iowa, you can also contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-6148, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.

Agreement:

> I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement. I am 18 years of age or older.

_____

(Signature of parent/legal guardian) (Date)

_____

(Printed name of parent/legal guardian)

_____

(Printed name of child participant)

_____

(Signature of investigator) (Date)

_____

(Signature of instructor/advisor)(Date)

APPENDIX D

COLLEAGUE CORRESPONDENCE

Dear Colleague,

Currently, I am gathering research for my thesis at the University of Northern Iowa. I am gathering research on the area of academic success. Attached is a survey probing you for your opinions about academic success. If you would, please take some time to fill out the survey. If you prefer not to participate, that is fine. By completing the anonymous survey, you are consenting for your opinions to be used as data in my research.

Thank you in advance for your participation. When completed, please place in my mailbox in the mail room.

Heather Bentley

APPENDIX E

TEACHER SURVEY

Please answer the following questions as fully and honestly as possible. If you would like to provide extra information, you may do so on the backside of the survey. Thank you for taking the time to consider how you define academic success.

Teacher Survey

By completing this survey, I am consenting to having my ideas be used in the research results.

1. M F

2. How many years have you been teaching? _____

3. Of what department are you a part? _____

4. How does your school identify academic success for students?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. What specific behaviors do you observe in students who fit your description for academically successful students?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. Are there particular groups of students you believe to fit your definition of academic success more than other groups of students? Yes No I don't know

7. If you answered yes, please explain or identify these types of students:

_____

_____

8. If you answered no, please explain:

_____

_____

9. If you answered I don't know, please explain.

_____

_____

APPENDIX F

STUDENT SURVEY

Please answer the following questions as fully and honestly as possible. If you would like to provide extra information, you may do so on the backside of the survey. Thank you for taking the time to consider your academic success.

Student Survey

1. M F Name (optional) _____

2. Age 13 14 15 16 17 18 19+

3. What grade level does the school recognize you as? 9 10 11 12

4. After high school, which of these do you plan to do right away? Please circle.

Military 2 year community college 4 year university

Career Vocational program (18+ months hands-on education)

Other: _____ (please identify)

5. How does your school define academic success?

_____

_____

6. How do you define academic success for yourself?

_____

_____

7. Choose the letter grade you have actually received that you would say is **most** successful for you.

A A- B+ B B- C+ C C- D+ D D- F

8. Why do you consider this your most successful grade?

_____

_____

9. Choose the letter grade you have actually received that you would say is **least** successful for you.

A A- B+ B B- C+ C C- D+ D D- F

10. Why do you consider this your least successful grade?

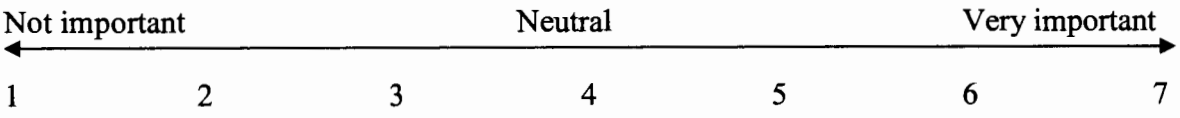
_____

_____

11. Do you feel as though you identify with your school or are truly a part of your school?

Yes No Sometimes

12. On the following scale, please mark how important you believe your academic success is to you.



APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The interview will begin with the following introduction:

How are you? How are your classes going so far this semester? As you know, you chose to be interviewed to complete the research process for last semester's work. Thank you for your participation. For research purposes, the interview will be tape recorded. The tape will be destroyed after the research is no longer needed. Please answer the questions as honestly and completely as you can. If at anytime you want to stop the interview or feel uncomfortable with a question, we can stop. Do you have any questions?

1. How would you define success in school?
2. Do you believe you have a personal responsibility in the amount of success you experience in school? If yes, how so? If no, why not?
3. What influences your academic success in school?
4. What takes away from your academic success in school?
5. What, if anything, motivates you to aim for academic success?
6. How successful were you in the last grading period? Please explain.
7. Do you feel as though you identify with your school? Why or why not?

Possible prodding questions:

1. How did your peers play a role in your academic success?
2. How did your teacher play a role in your academic success?
3. Do you think students care about their education?
4. What do you think is considered a poor grade to most students?
5. Is it embarrassing to get a poor grade?
6. Do some people flaunt doing poorly? If yes, why do you think that is?

7. How do parents react to failing or poor grades?
8. Why do you think they react in that way?
9. What could entice a person to get good grades?
10. What do you think is considered a good grade (or good grades) to most students?
11. What happens when a student gets a bad grade? Is there a domino effect or does it stay contained for that one class?
12. How does one get out of a bad grade - in other words - how does one improve?
13. What resources are there for students to improve academically?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add that I have not asked you about your experience in the classroom regarding success?

This concludes our interview. Thanks again for participating. Good luck with your classes this semester.