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exploring underachievement in students from high socio-  
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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

UNDERPERFORMING STUDENTS IN HIGH-PERFORMING HIGH SCHOOLS:  
EXPLORING UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN STUDENTS FROM HIGH  
SOCIO-ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Jennie A. Wright

July, 2013

Linda Purrington, Ed.D – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

Jennie Ann Wright

under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the causes of underachievement in secondary students from high socio-economic status (SES) communities attending high-performing high schools in Los Angeles County. This study is a consideration of three variables through which this phenomenon was examined: (a) parenting, (b) peer influence, and (c) social-emotional well-being.

McCall, Evahn, & Kratzer (1992) defined underachievement as “ school performance, usually measured by grades that is substantially below what would be predicted on the basis of student’s mental ability” (p. 54). As Luthar and Sexton (2005) indicated, few studies have highlighted high SES students since the 1950s. Much of what is known about underachievement has been examined in students from urban, low-SES backgrounds and has largely ignored the high SES population and the problems they face in today’s schools. While the number of students failing in high-performing, high income schools is significantly lower than those in urban schools, these students continue to face similar issues, absent parents, psychological disorders, and substance abuse. In some cases, students from high SES backgrounds experience these phenomena more than students from lower SES backgrounds do (Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). Even though socio-economic status is one of the leading factors in educational attainment in children, it does not exist in isolation (Willie, 2001). A number of factors contribute to academic achievement (e.g., parenting, motivation, and peer influences).

Many of the factors affecting academic and personal success can assuage the effects of socio-economics (Marzano, 2003; McLoyd, 1998). Recently, Luthar conducted

several studies with high SES students as the focus. However, additional research is needed to explore the reasons high SES students are underachieving.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background

Socio-economic status is an important factor for predicting student achievement. It influences a child's life inside and outside of the classroom. Individuals with the highest median income levels view life differently. These adults also have a different set of values, for example the desire for perfection and privacy, which crosses over into children (Levine, 2007; Payne, 1996). Some children at the highest and lowest ends of the socio-economic spectrum exhibit similar characteristics, which are different from their middle-class counterparts. However, often their schooling experiences vary significantly (Luthar & Sexton, 2005). The literature surrounding urban students from low SES backgrounds often compares the schooling experiences to their higher SES counterparts and focuses on how to provide them with similar schooling experiences (Payne, 1996; Willie, 2001). Luthar and Sexton (2005) claimed that students who grow up in high SES families exhibit characteristics similar to their peers in extreme poverty, and have a relationship with the world that is disparate from their middle-class counterparts (Pittman & Pittman, n.d.). These characteristics include psychological disorders, substance abuse, behavior issues, and distant relationships with their parents.

The focus of much education reform and research concerns low performing, low-SES schools. This is because year after year some of these schools are not meeting annual growth targets set forth by the federal government. Under No Child Left Behind, the goal of the federal government is for *all* students to be proficient in the core subject matter areas by 2014. Often schools not meeting their growth targets intend to model those schools with the highest APIs, those in the top 10%. Students in these high-

performing, high SES schools often have access to a greater number of resources and enhanced resources, such as tutors and educational outings. There is little research concerning the students in these schools who perform below average. The existing research surrounding students from high socio-economic backgrounds tends to focus on substance use, stress levels, and mental health of the highest achieving students (Ablard & Parker, 1997; Flacks & Thomas, 1998; Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Becker, 2002).

The current statistics on youth living in poverty are staggering. Therefore, it is logical that research resources are used to focus on examining those students to improve their educational outcomes. Approximately 16 million children under 18 currently live in poverty. Many of these children attend this nation's public schools. In California alone, there are nearly two million children living in poverty and another two million living in low SES families. With approximately six million students in the state of California, many of those live in families that face difficult economic situations every day (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2010).

Statewide, high schools continue to work diligently to increase academic achievement. Nonetheless, many high and low socio-economic status schools still leave many students behind. According to the United States Department of Education (2010c), 5% of California's students dropped out of high school, the 11<sup>th</sup> worst rate in the country. A large discrepancy still exists between white students and minority students in the rates at which they are dropping out of school. Whites accounted for 3.2% of dropouts, African Americans 9.2%, Hispanics 6.2% and Asians/Pacific Islanders 2.4% (United States Department of Education, 2010b). Additionally, racial minorities are underrepresented in high-performing, high socio-economic schools where Whites

continue to dominate the ethnic composition of these sites (Willie, 2001). It is easy to see from these statistics that a large population of students in the public education system do not meet minimum standards of achievement.

Recent educational research largely has ignored more than half of the student population by focusing only on those students from low SES backgrounds (Luthar & Sexton, 2005). However, students at the highest end of the socio-economic spectrum require just as much consideration in the literature as those at the opposite end (Pittman & Pittman, n.d.). Schools with a large population of students from high SES backgrounds have many problems as well. Upon closer examination, high SES, high-performing schools have students who are failing, falling behind, experiencing psychological problems at increased levels, and abusing drugs and alcohol at the same as, or higher levels than, their peers from lower SES backgrounds. To remedy the problems facing underachieving students in high-performing schools it is necessary to understand the dilemmas and obstacles that prevent student academic and personal success.

In Los Angeles County, there are approximately 3,500 high school students and 800 high schools. Approximately 36 of those high schools have an API of 850 or higher. There is room for improvement in many areas and many students are not reaching proficient levels even in these very high-performing high schools. The pervasiveness of this underachievement and the factors leading to it have not yet been studied.

### **Problem Statement**

Examining at-risk factors in isolation does not provide educators with a solid foundation to help under-performing students succeed (Leroy & Symes, 2001). In spite of this, many studies examine a single factor for determining potential underachievement

and do afford equal attention to all subgroups (Luthar & Becker, 2002). With much focus on urban students from low SES backgrounds, and a one size fits all model for reform, the unique needs of students at the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum are largely unmet. For that reason, there is a need to study the factors of parenting, peer influence, and social-emotional well-being together, focusing on under-performing students from high SES communities in high-performing high schools

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of 10 to 12 high school students in 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade with cumulative academic grade point averages below 2.0 from high socio-economic communities attending high-performing comprehensive high schools in Los Angeles County. More specifically, the researcher intended to develop an in-depth understanding of these students with regard to parenting, peer influence, and social-emotional well-being and why these students perform below average.

### **Research Questions**

Four research questions guided this study:

1. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their elementary, middle, and high school academic and social experiences, academic motivation, and factors perceived as contributing to their underperformance in school?

2. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their home life and parent involvement in their education?
3. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their peer relations and participation in organized school and community activities?
4. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their social and emotional well-being?

### **Importance of the Study**

This study is intended to provide useful information concerning why students from high SES communities are not performing at higher levels in schools where the majority of students are achieving well above average and have many resources available to them.

Second, this study is intended to inform educators about the teaching strategies and psychological variables that underperforming students may find most effective. The relationship between a teacher and student is imperative to raising achievement (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). By identifying these factors and their importance in enhancing student



achievement, it is hoped that educators will be better prepared to help students who need the best teachers.

Finally, by identifying each risk factor and the strategies and psychological variables most effective for overcoming risk factors, this study is intended to provide educators and preparation programs with valuable information for teacher preparation for preparing new teachers. Given that teacher quality is essential to student success, better-prepared teachers may provide the best opportunity for students from high SES backgrounds to overcome challenges and develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be successful in high school, college, and beyond.

### **Delimitations**

According to the California Department of Education, there are 47 high schools in Los Angeles County with an Academic Performance Index over 850. This study will only examine those schools that are public, comprehensive high schools with more than 1,000 students and have Caucasian and Asian students comprising 50% or more of the student population. Additionally, only two school districts and high schools that reside in towns with a median household income above \$78,000 or more located in Los Angeles County will be used for the purposes of this study. The participants were also limited to those who have resided in and attended a district school since at least 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Lastly, this researcher only examined the mental health disorders of depression, and anxiety, specifically, generalized anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and panic disorder.

### **Limitations**

This study had several limitations that may affect the generalization of the findings. The first limitation is that this study had a small sample size restricted to

public, comprehensive high schools in Los Angeles County. A second limitation was that participants reported their perceptions of their relationships with parents and peers. Their perceptions may be skewed and not an accurate representation of the actual existing relationship. The final limitation centered on the participants' interpretation of mental health and the possibility of under- or over-reporting of such disorders.

### **Assumptions**

This study is operated under several assumptions because the objective was to understand the lived experiences of high school students in high SES areas performing below average academically. The first assumption was that all participants provided honest responses. Because interviews were the method of data collection, this study relied on student self-reports of their perceptions. Therefore, the researcher assumed that all responses provided by the students were honest, as they know it. Because this study was not an examination of those students with documented disabilities, the researcher concluded that none of the participants had a disability of any kind. It was assumed that the participants did not have an unidentified or undocumented disability of which the school and/or the family and student may be unaware. The final assumption of this study was that each participant fully understood the disorders examined in this study (i.e., depression and anxiety).

### **Researcher's Relationship to Study Focus**

Over the last 10 years, I have worked in a high-performing, affluent high school as a Spanish teacher and as an assistant principal. As an assistant principal, I have overseen curriculum, testing, master schedule, special education, discipline, safety, and just about every aspect of running a high school. I knew from a very early age that I

wanted to become a teacher and make a difference in the lives of students. Having a significant effect has always been my goal. When I first entered the field of education, I thought I would be a classroom teacher forever. That quickly changed when I entered a Master's program. In this program, I saw for the first time that becoming an administrator would help me accomplish my goals of influencing more than just the students in my classroom but the school as a whole. Helping students achieve at higher levels and overcome their barriers—be they social, emotional, academic, familial, mental, or anything that hinders their ability to succeed in the classroom—has become my professional goal.

As an educator in a high-performing school, I assumed that all students had everything they needed to be successful. I remember being in the classroom and thinking that students who were not doing well just were not interested or did not care about school. I rarely took the time to get to know these students to determine what was happening. When I became an administrator, I was astonished at how many students were struggling. As I began to investigate these students, I determined that many of them were dealing with so much outside of school. They all wanted to do well in school but other things were getting in the way. I reflected on my own high school experience and remembered one year I was struggling because of things going on at home and not one teacher knew me well enough to ask if I was okay. My grades had slipped but since they were only Cs, rather than Fs, no one took the time to see if I had something interfering with my ability to focus in the classroom. At that point, I dedicated my professional efforts to students who needed support at school. Coming from a middle-class, suburban neighborhood that was mostly Caucasian, there were students, myself included, who

struggled to manage outside influences affecting performance in school. Students in this community were dealing with physical and sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, divorced homes, and many other factors affecting performance at school. It is important that researchers also focus on students in middle- and upper class neighborhoods because they have struggles as well. The reality is that we are leaving some students behind in every school regardless of the socio-economic status of the community.

Over the last five years, I have designed interventions to help students labeled at risk or those students who are lacking important developmental assets. It is common knowledge that there are achievement gaps along race and class lines, but there is an assumption that all Caucasian, Asian, and/or affluent students are successful. I have focused my professional efforts to help students in need, regardless of color and socio-economic status, to provide for them the assets they need to experience success in school and life after school.

#### **Operational Definitions and Key Terms**

504 plan—provides free and appropriate education to those students who have a qualifying disability under section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act so that the needs of the student are met as adequately as those of a nondisabled student (United States Department of Education, 2010a).

Academic achievement—student performance in the core academic areas as reported bi-annually by teachers (Guay, Boivin, & Hodges, 1999).

Academic Performance Index (API)—“a single number, ranging from a low of 200 to a high of 1000, which reflects a school’s, a local education agency’s, or a

subgroup's performance level, based on the results of statewide testing" (California Department of Education, n.d.a).

Anxiety disorder—"when anxiety becomes an excessive, irrational dread of everyday situations" (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.)

Below average—For this study below average was defined as those students with a cumulative academic grade point average below 2.0, as 2.0 is the minimum requirement for the majority of colleges and universities.

California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE)—an exam containing English and math sections, which all students in California must pass to earn a high school diploma (California Department of Education, n.d.b).

California Standards Test (CST)—"criterion-referenced tests that assess the California content standards in English Language Arts, mathematics, science, and history-social science" (California Department of Education, n.d.c).

Cumulative academic grade point average (GPA)—a calculation of all of the grades earned in courses that are deemed college preparatory.

Depression—"experience a severely depressed mood and activity level that persists two weeks or more. Their symptoms interfere with their daily functioning, and cause distress for both the person with the disorder and those who care about him or her." (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.)

English learners—"a student identified as EL based on the results of the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) or a reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP) student who has not scored at the proficient level or above on the CST

in ELA for three times after being reclassified” (California Department of Education, n.d.e).

High socio-economic status—those with a median income above \$78,000 the mean household income for the top two quintiles. (United States Census Bureau, 2009)

Individualized Education Program (IEP)—an individualized document for each student who receives special education services (United States Department of Education, n.d.).

Lived experience—conscious experiences reported by individuals (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). For this study, lived experiences were defined as the reported experiences of high school students’ academic, social, familial, and mental health experiences throughout their education.

Low socio-economic status—those living in the two lowest quintiles of median income, below \$29,000. (United States Census Bureau, 2009)

Mental health—internalized problems such as depression and anxiety (Luthar, 2003).

Mental health disorder—According to the National Institute of Mental Health a disorder is a seriously debilitating mental illness, such as a mood disorder, depression, anxiety, panic disorder, eating disorder, or conduct disorder (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.)

National school lunch program—“to qualify for free lunch the family income must be at or below 130% of the federal poverty level; to qualify for reduced lunch the family income must be between 130-185% of the federal poverty level” (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

Parenting—for this study the researcher used the components of Simons-Morton and Chen’s 2009 study on peer and parental influences to define parenting as encompassing the following components, involvement, monitoring, and expectations of their child.

Poverty—total family income is lower than the established family threshold as set by the United States government. The weighted average threshold for a family of three is \$17,098 and for a family of four \$21,954 (United States Census Bureau, 2009).

Psychological disorder—“ a psychological or behavioral condition associated with distress or disability which is away from the normal development or culture” (Depression Guide, n.d.).

Similar school ranking—“shows a school’s relative placement compared to 100 other schools with similar opportunities and challenges” (California Department of Education, 2007).

Socioeconomically disadvantaged—“a student neither of whose parents have received a high school diploma or is eligible for free and reduced lunch, also known as the National School Lunch Program” (California Department of Education, 2007).

Underachievement—“school performance, usually measured by grades that is substantially below what would be predicted on the basis of student’s mental ability” (McCall, et.al., 1992, p. 54)

### **Organization of Study**

This study is organized in five chapters. The first chapter comprises the background and basis of the study. Chapter 1 includes a brief description of California’s youth and the statistics of poverty. The importance of socio-economics in our society

and for school-aged children is detailed in Chapter 1. It also contains the purpose of the study, the importance of the study, limitations, and assumptions, and a definition of terms. Chapter 2 is a thorough review of the relevant literature related to socio-economics, parenting, peers, and mental health. Chapter 3 is an explication of the methods that will be used in this study. It includes a review of the research questions, is a presentation of the sites where data collection will occur, and the study population. It also is an outline of the human subjects consideration, the methodology for data collection, the instrumentation that will be used, and how the data will be managed and analyzed. Chapter 4 is a presentation of the findings of the collected data. Finally, Chapter 5 contains a detailed analysis of the major findings of the study. Additionally, in chapter 5, explicit conclusions and proposed recommendations for additional study are highlighted.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of 10 high school students in 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade with cumulative academic grade point averages below 2.0 from high socio-economic communities attending high-performing comprehensive high schools in Los Angeles County. More specifically, the researcher intended to develop an in-depth understanding of these students with regard to parenting, peer influence, and social-emotional well-being and why these students perform below average.

This chapter includes a review of the relevant literature concerning the following four topics and their influence on children from high and low SES backgrounds and communities: socio-economics in our society and in education, family structures, and parental influences, peer influences on adolescents, and mental health. The first section includes the relevant literature of the history of wealth in society and in education including the effect it has had on life and student achievement throughout the years, disparity among races and schools, and community effects. The second section is an examination of the literature about the family structure and parental influences of children from high SES backgrounds and the effects socio-economic status has on educational attainment, outcomes, and motivation. The third section is an investigation of peer influences on adolescents and the negative and positive effects of peers on academics and behavior. In the fourth section, research on the social-emotional well-being of adolescents in today's society is highlighted. It is an examination of the effects

of social-emotional well-being on the adolescents' education and their outcomes later in life. Many of the studies researched for this literature review are examinations of one factor in isolation. Consequently, there are conflicting findings from many of the studies depending on the isolated factor investigated.

### **Wealth has Always Mattered in our Society**

The desire for wealth is infectious and addictive (Pittman & Pittman, n.d.). Since the ancient Greek philosophers, Aristotle and Epicurus, people have been obsessed with wealth, and strived to obtain more. This is because of the advantages one can gain from living in the highest socio-economic group (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Levine, 2007). They can gain advantages because of the materials they possess. This translates into those without as much wanting to be like those who have many material possessions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

**How does socio-economic status affect an individual's life?** Adults with high incomes tend to value perfection (Levine, 2007) and style over safety and sensibility (Pittman & Pittman, n.d.). Happiness and doing the right thing may be sacrificed to uphold the impression of perfection. These values and beliefs may also lead the individuals from high SES backgrounds to have distorted views of the world and the people around them. They also have a sense that money can fix the problems they face, and an ultimate sense of disillusionment.

The belief that money can fix one's problems is also shared among individuals from extremely low SES backgrounds. For example, the common ideology is that money can create a sense of happiness, help find the perfect mate, and solve other problems that one may be experiencing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, Pittman & Pittman, n.d.). In reality,

an abundance of money can actually hinder the development of healthy relationships as well as the ability to solve problems. This is because individuals from high SES backgrounds tend to pay their way out of bad situations when they arise (Luthar, 2003). This way of life is not isolated within the individual or to his/her behavior in the community but permeates his/her children and their schooling (Marzano, 2003; Pittman & Pittman, n.d., Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002).

**Socio-economics influence children.** Researchers attribute a child's ability to learn and be successful to single factor indicators. For example, factors such as income, race, gender, or home environment are considered individually rather than looking at the whole child (Willie, 2001). Within each variable, individual children's experiences vary significantly (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Yeung, et al., 2002) especially among different aged children (Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002). Therefore, a single factor cannot be the only contributor to student achievement (Leroy & Symes, 2001). A host of factors, such as motivation (Marzano, 2003; Mendler, 2009; Price 2008), rigor of the curriculum (Adelman, 1999), home environment (Canter & Canter, 1993; McLoyd, 1998), and ability (Baker, 2009; Mistry, et al., 2002) all affect student achievement. This highlights the importance of educators knowing each of their students so that educators implement the most effective methods to reach each child (Lindsey, Jungwirth, Pahl, & Lindsey, 2009).

Socio-economic status is a strong indicator of a child's educational experience, outcome, and attainment (Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009). It may affect everything from the way they behave to the way they learn and their education beyond the K-12 classroom. Individuals from high SES backgrounds bring different values, such as the

desire for perfection and privacy, and beliefs and have more access to resources particularly higher performing schools (Payne, 1996). For example, in the educational realm, higher SES parents and students have more access to educational resources such as books, tutors, and educational outings.

Children feel the effects of their parents' income from the time they are born. They experience life differently than others do and have numerous advantages over the rest of society (Baker, 2009). For example, Baker (2009) indicated that students from higher SES backgrounds are more likely to have parents with college degrees, attend higher performing schools, and can afford tutors and educational outings. Exposure to these elements from a young age tends to prepare students better for school from the time they enter kindergarten. Many of the schools located in areas where the median household income is in the highest SES quintile produce standardized test results that rival some of the highest performing nations worldwide. However, these same schools also produce students who are disengaged (Flacks & Thomas, 1998; Mendler, 2009; & Price, 2008), unmotivated (Mendler, 2009), and only see education for the economic advantages it can provide (Flacks & Thomas, 1998; Levine, 2007). This culture of student disengagement is just as pervasive among students from high SES backgrounds as the dropout crisis occurring in many of the nation's poorest schools (Price, 2008). These students earn the requisite grades to be successful and progress through school and beyond. Nevertheless, learning and attaining knowledge for the sake of learning is not of interest to some students from high SES backgrounds. They have the knowledge but do not want to fully engage and do the work that comes with reaching that next level of attainment (Mendler, 2009).

The research indicates that when it comes to youth educational attainment, socioeconomic factors play an enormous role, with family income being one of the strongest indicators (Baker, 2009; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009; McLoyd, 1998; & Yeung et al., 2002). However, Adelman (1999) argued that the quality of the curriculum and the academic resources a student possesses weigh stronger than socioeconomic status on a child's achievement. Most researchers do attribute some effects on educational outcomes to SES, even if they do not consider it the single most important factor. Yeung, et al., (2002) found that income and income stability contributed largely to a student's academic success and school behavior. For example, those students from higher SES backgrounds had higher cognitive test scores and showed fewer behavior issues in school than those from lower SES backgrounds. Children experiencing pervasive poverty from a young age are at the highest risk for low academic achievement and deviant behavior problems. However, socio-economics do not solely affect a student's future success. It is difficult to narrow exactly what factors students from higher SES backgrounds have that contribute to these higher scores, but it is evident that family income plays a large role (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; McLoyd, 1998; Yeung, et al., 2002).

It may be difficult to best service students from high SES backgrounds because of a discrepancy that exists between what individuals say they want and the way they behave (Mayer, 1997). Researchers find a negative relationship between the school attended and a student's future income (Levine, 2007). Despite this evidence, many students, especially those from high SES backgrounds, continue to apply to the most elite colleges. An example of this discrepancy is Jacob and Lefgren's (2007) study, which

showed that more parents cite the desire for their children to have a positive educational experience, where student satisfaction and happiness is more important than learning and advancing at an appropriate rate. Conversely, among parents of the high SES group in particular, the drive is for the best-named college, not necessarily the best fit for the child. To gain entrance into the best college a student must demonstrate superior grades, which may cause students to have increased psychological disturbances rather than happiness (Luthar & Sexton, 2005).

During this age of instant gratification (Pink, 2005), students want high grades while putting in very little effort (Mendler, 2009). They often fail to see a connection between academics and the future outside of its economic advantages (Flacks & Thomas, 1998). The number of students applying to and attending colleges and universities is on the rise because of this increased awareness of the economic advantages of higher education (Easterbrook, 2004). With the increasing number of students applying to colleges, the focus for students and parents has shifted from one where classroom learning is most important to one where the grade on a transcript takes precedence (Flacks & Thomas, 1998). Many high SES communities embody this ideology.

**Racial disparity exists in education regardless of socioeconomic status.**

Drastic discrepancies still exist between minorities and their White peers, both socio-economically and in their educational attainment (Grossman & Aneess, 2004). This study by Grossman and Aneess (2004) is an illustration of higher scores and higher academic performance across all races in schools that have a concentration of higher SES families attending the local school. Racial minorities attending these schools or, who live in a higher SES family themselves, are performing above their counterparts from lower

SES, inner-city backgrounds. Nevertheless, the majority of SES schools comprised of individuals from high SES backgrounds are still predominantly White as highlighted in Willie's (2001) study in Charleston, South Carolina. He found almost twice as many Whites as racial minorities in these schools. White and Asian-American students continue to outperform their racial minority counterparts by a substantial amount in spite of drastic reform efforts or placement in similar schools (Olson, 2006; Willie, 2001).

Within the same high-performing schools, White students continue to outperform their racial minority counterparts. Nevertheless, the lowest performing schools still contain a heavy concentration of racial minorities. Furthermore, this nation's high dropout rate contains mostly ethnic minorities and socio-economically disadvantaged children (Price, 2008) despite the reform efforts throughout the last few decades. Black and Hispanic students continue to make up very small portions of the student population in high-performing schools in high SES areas where the curriculum is noticeably more rigorous and more students go on to complete college (Adelman, 1999).

Kaushal and Nepomnyaschy (2009) found the average net income of White families is 4.5 times greater than Black families and 2.4 times greater than Hispanic families. Despite this information, Adelman (1999) indicated the tremendous influence that an academically strong high school curriculum has for determining college degree completion, particularly among racial minorities. Included with a strong curriculum, the level of math completion has also been a good indicator for future success for all students (Grossman & Ancess, 2004) with levels above Algebra 2 correlating strongly with degree completion post-high school (Adelman, 1999). It is evident that education and the

learning environment provided at home (Marzano, 2003; Yeung, et al., 2002) can assuage the effects of socioeconomics.

**The community plays an important role in the development of children.**

Today, more than ever before, students are coming from two income families where parents are not present in the child's life a great deal of the time, even those who *want* to be actively involved in their children's schooling (Price, 2008). It is important that communities actively promote school success and create ways to celebrate those students who succeed. Raising children to be successful adults cannot be the job of parents and educators alone. It takes good parenting, good teachers, good schools, and a supportive community that will look after the children when they are not in their home (Nokali, Bachman, & Vortuba-Drzal, 2010). It is not just a general lack of supervision that creates a rise in poor behavior in adolescents; rather, it is when children spend time unsupervised in communities that do not monitor the neighborhood children (Beyers, Bates, Pettit, & Dodge, 2003).

Research highlights the importance of community involvement in child development for personal and educational success (Beyers, et al., 2003; Price, 2008). At times the beliefs, morals, ethics, and principles of the community affect student achievement and their desire to perform well academically (Price, 2008). Incorporating the community into the efforts of improving student achievement by communicating the standards and ideologies of the school can create stronger students and proficient educators. Nationwide, community members who do not have school-aged children are not joining the fight to improve student achievement, and educational reform platforms are missing community efforts. For schools to foster this relationship and reap its



benefits learning about the communities that they service needs to be a priority (Lindsey, et al., 2009).

This lack of involvement by community members without school-aged children is not just a problem of high SES communities but of all communities across America. The dominant culture in high SES communities highlights this idea with their preferred lifestyle of privacy and secrecy (Levine, 2007). The extended layout of many high SES communities where homes are far apart and gates are in front of each house fosters the private lifestyle high SES adults desire, and the notion of keeping to one's self rather than appearing intrusive. While this does not describe all high SES communities nationwide, many demonstrate this pattern and arrangement.

**Parenting.** Despite a student's socio-economic background; parents, parenting skills, and the resources available to parents are some of the biggest factors affecting children around the world (Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Mistry, et al., 2002; Nam & Huang, 2009; Pittman & Pittman, n.d.).

**Parents have significant influence on their children.** Research shows that the socioeconomic makeup of the home can have considerable effect of the parents' ability to provide stability and the resources needed for children to grow up feeling confident, secure, and successful (Flanagan, 1988 as cited in McLoyd, 1989; Leroy & Symes, 2001; Mistry, et al., 2002). This is especially true at both extremes of the socioeconomic spectrum. When parents are experiencing economic hardship (McLoyd, 1989) or other symptoms of anguish (Mistry, et al., 2002) children's school performance and behavior suffers. McLoyd (1989) discovered that during difficult economic times for American

families, many students, whose families were affected by job loss and other financial troubles, had significant academic performance decreases. Many similarities, behaviorally and academically, existed in comparison with the financial difficulties faced by families during the Great Depression and the 1980s. Children in this situation exhibited increased symptoms of maladjustment such as: petulance, sulkiness, decreased self-esteem, and decreased motivation (Elder, Caspi, & Nguyen 1986). These are significant findings for educators and researchers today as the United States currently lives through some of the toughest economic times this country has faced since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Parents have a tremendous effect on the educational attainment of their children (Ablard & Parker, 1997; McNeal, 1999), their well-being (Luthar & Sexton, 2005; McLoyd, 1989), and their behavior (Beyers, et al., 2003; McLoyd, 1989). A parent acts as a valuable resource to help a child through the trials and tribulations that life throws at each of us, especially during the turbulent times of adolescence (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009). However, each child is individual and the relationship that each has with his/her parent is different. Those children who perceived an emotionally distant relationship with their parents demonstrated lower academic success rates and more behavioral issues than children who had close relationships with their parents (Bogard, 2005; Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Luthar & Becker, 2002). Wentzel (1998) argued that motivated students naturally have a good relationship with their parents and peers and that leads them to be successful. In addition, students who demonstrated academic difficulties often came from homes with parents who had poor schooling experiences, or the home itself

was not a place where there was positive interaction between child and parent (Canter & Canter, 1993; Price, 2008).

Often, life outside of school is the main contributor to poor school performance, which ultimately leads children to drop out. Gewertz (2006) discovered that many students who dropped out were more inclined to cite reasons such as lack of motivation, lack of challenge, or difficulties outside of school as opposed to lack of achievement. With this in mind, teachers and schools must make a concerted effort to know and understand each of our students so that they can identify these at-risk factors and work with students to prevent them from dropping out (Lindsey, et al., 2009).

The gender of the child may also influence the relationship with his/her mother or father, as well the perceived closeness to each parent individually. Parent involvement may have more effect on the academic achievement of boys than girls (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007) although this does not mean it is unimportant for girls. These feelings of closeness profoundly affect a child's development throughout early childhood and adolescence. There is also a great deal of research showing the positive effects for closeness to both parents as it relates to children's outcomes throughout their life (Beyers, et al., 2003; Bogard, 2005; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). Regardless of socioeconomic status, parenting style and the relationship that parents have with their children are two of the biggest factors in child development.

**Parental involvement in children's education plays a large role.** Parents' positive presence in their children's lives can lead to higher educational attainment (Glasgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg, & Ritter, 1997; Gordon & Louis, 2009; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Nokali, et al., 2010; Wentzel, 1998). Teachers cite a lack of parental

involvement as one of the most influential factors leading to underachievement (Beyers, et al., 2003; Leroy & Symes, 2001; McNeal, 1999; Price, 2008). Another potential link of parent involvement to higher student achievement is that teachers tend to give more attention to children whose parents participate actively in the school setting (Epstein & Becker, 1982). Nokali, et al. (2010) suggested that parents' involvement does not affect educational outcomes, only behavioral and social matters. Similarly, researchers have argued that parental involvement may indirectly relate to academic success because their involvement leads to motivated children (Wentzel, 1998) that challenge themselves and persevere through difficulties (Nokali, et al., 2010). Parental involvement is a goal of educators and politicians across the nation. It is one of the six areas of reform in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and continues to be a goal of teachers and school administrators (Pomerantz, et al., 2007). While, there is extensive literature concerning the effect of parent involvement in the early years of school, there is significantly less for the role of parental involvement on adolescents (Nokali, et al., 2010).

The way parents involve themselves in their child's education can have a significant effect on educational and future outcomes (Gordon & Louis, 2009; Pomerantz, et al., 2007). For example, some parents choose to be involved at home and at school, while others choose not to participate at the school site but do support their children at home (Nokali, et al., 2010; Pomerantz, et al., 2007). Even within each of these settings, different types and levels of involvement exist. At the school, parents can volunteer, attend parent meetings, interact with teachers, or participate in a decision-making board, among other activities. At home, parents can help with homework, read to

their child, or take them on educational outings (Gordon & Louis, 2009; Pomerantz, et al., 2007).

Conversely, a school, its leader, and the district can also influence the level of parent participation in their schools. The school and its leadership communicate their desire for parent involvement through their policies and procedures (Gordon & Louis, 2009). Schools and districts play an integral role promoting increased parental involvement by creating structures where parents can participate at a deeper level than just speaking to individual teachers. According to a study by Pomerantz, et al. (2007), approximately 70% of parents help their children with homework each week and the most frequent school-based involvement is attendance at parent meetings and interactions with teachers. However parents choose to involve themselves in their child's educational life, the most important issue to remember is that interaction and involvement must always be positive, supportive, caring, and motivational, not overbearing and product driven (Ablard & Parker, 1997; Halle, et al., 1997; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Pomerantz, et al., 2007; Simons & Morton-Chen, 2009).

**Positive parent involvement.** Children who perceive a close, positive relationship with their parents tend to show higher levels of success, lower incidents of misbehavior, and other maladjustment problems shown by those children with unfulfilling parental relationships (Ablard & Parker, 1997; Beyers, et al., 2003; Bogard, 2005; Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Glasgow, et al., 1997; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Pomerantz, et al., 2007; Simons-Morton, & Chen, 2009; Wentzel, 1998). Parents who are actively involved in their child's education support their children's academic endeavors and set realistic expectations and goals (Ablard & Parker, 1997). Jacob and

Lefgren (2007) posited that involved parents often prefer their children to have an educational experience that promotes pleasure before academic progress (Jacob & Lefgren, 2007). This may be an example of a discrepancy between what people say they want and the way they actually behave (Mayer, 1997). Positive parental interaction and involvement are mitigating effects for children with behavior issues (Yeung, et al., 2002). The key to parental involvement is that the interactions between children are positive and do not focus on perfection and performance.

**Hypercritical parent involvement.** When parents become overly critical and controlling of their children and their academic performance, many troublesome behaviors manifest themselves academically and psychologically (Pomerantz, et al., 2007). The overall happiness and academic performance decreased for children who perceive their parents as highly critical (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). These children also contributed their successes to ability over effort and were more likely to set goals connected to grades or other extrinsic motivators instead of mastery of content (Pomerantz, et al., 2007).

When parents connect affection for their children to their academic performance, a host of problems can begin to surface (Pomerantz, et al., 2007). For example, some children become increasingly worried about errors in their work, disappointing their parents, and losing self-confidence (Ablard & Parker, 1997). This type of behavior can lead students to sabotage their own achievement as they begin to focus intensely on performance and become hesitant to challenge themselves or try new things. This is not to say that parents should not set high expectations for their children. They *do* need to check themselves that what they are setting is not unreasonable and demanding toward

the nature of perfectionism. A focus on effort and the rewards of accomplishing difficult tasks is the level where parent involvement may be most beneficial (Pomerantz, et al, 2007).

The attitude that parents convey during their involvement can have long-term academic effects including decreasing motivation, creating a lack of interest, or lowering the child's self-esteem (Pomerantz, et al., 2007). It is imperative that parents set expectations that are reasonable for their child's level of attainment. Students may act up in class because they need to hide their feelings that their classmates believe them to be unintelligent (Mendler, 2009). Children of overly critical parents will also sabotage their own scholastic performance so that they can grasp power and control in the family. By refusing to work, earning poor grades, and not performing to their potential, students gain control when they feel their parents are dominating their life. Parents and students must create a balance where the desires of both parties are met to provide the best opportunity for success (Price, 2008). While it is evident that parent involvement can contribute greatly to academic outcomes, how they participate can determine if the outcomes are positive or negative.

**Parenting Style Affects Student Outcomes.** It is important that parents accept the role of parenting and the responsibilities that come along with that most important of jobs (Levine, 2007). Several studies cite the importance of eating meals together (Levine, 2007; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005) as well as fostering discussions between child and parent (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; McNeal, 1999) in promoting healthy, successful children and families. Parental presence plays the most significant role in child development. This presence is still one of the most influential factors in a child's

educational attainment and remains a top priority of schools nationwide (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). However, the type of parenting style that parents use with their children can have profound effects on all aspects of their life, especially their educational experiences.

What children need are parents who set boundaries, yet show a high level of caring and value their children for who they are over what they can do or accomplish (Ablard & Parker, 1997; Huber, 2003; McLoyd, 1989; Price, 2008). A style of parenting where parents are in control and children must follow rules that inherently make them feel valued and safe is optimal for the development of a healthy child (Levine, 2007). Levine (2007) posited that this style of parenting is dissipating. This is one factor leading to a generation of children who are not prospering as well as children of prior generations (McLoyd, 1989). The parenting trend, especially among high SES parents, is a laissez-faire approach that can prove more harmful than productive (Marzano, 2003). Children who are offered too much autonomy and freedom from their parents are not as successful academically as those children who come from more structured homes.

Much research highlights an authoritative style of parenting to be the most effective. This type of parenting establishes high expectations and is strict, yet allows for autonomy and independence while remaining warm (Glasgow, et al., 1997; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Schaefer, 1965; Simons-Morton, & Chen, 2009; Steinberg, et al., 1992; Wentzel, 1998). It can promote responsibility for self and to society (Glasgow, et al., 1997), can increase motivation (Pomerantz, et al. 2007), and increase school participation (Simons-Morton, & Chen, 2009) while decreasing the desire to associate with poorly behaved peers. However, Steinberg, et al., (1992) found that Asian-American students



outperformed their peers yet their parents are the least authoritative and the least involved. They found White students had the most exposure to this type of parenting. Hispanic and African-American children do not see the level of academic achievement that White students do even when this type of parenting style is present. This may be related to the belief that White students raised like this will tend to associate themselves with others from a similar background. African-American and Hispanic children, alternatively, do not believe they have that option because they are more likely to associate themselves with students of their ethnic group over their academic performance group. Nonetheless, Hispanic and African-American children who come from this type of home outperform their peers who do not have parents who employ these techniques.

Parents adopting this style of parenting consistently tend to be more involved in their child's education throughout K-12 (Steinberg, et al., 1992) and their children tend to perform better throughout their schooling years (Pomerantz, et al., 2007). The parent is not trying to control the child and their educational outcomes. When parents become too focused on controlling their child, goals that are performance-based, and do not believe their child has high potential, academic success can be negatively influenced by parental involvement. A parent-child relationship that is supportive, positive, and caring is the most valuable in promoting children's educational success.

Parents who did not use an authoritative style of parenting saw substance use, poor behavior increase, and motivation decline among children (Simons-Morton, & Chen, 2009). Students from families who did not use an authoritative style of parenting were more likely to blame outside influences instead of effort, as the primary reason for

poor school performance (Glasgow, et al., 1997). Nevertheless, parenting and parenting practices exert great influence over a child's schooling experiences.

**High SES parents do not spend more time with their children than parents from lower socio-economic groups do.** An overall assumption exists that correlates wealth with high-quality parenting skills and that students from high SES families have more engaged and involved parents, and spend considerably more time with their parents than their counterparts from low SES backgrounds do. There is no evidence of this in the research (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Pittman & Pittman, n.d.). Casper and Smith (2002) conducted a study of approximately 6,000 parents and their children (aged 5 to 13). They found that children from high SES families are more likely to take care of themselves, than both minority and poor children in each focus group cohort: 8 to 10 year olds and 11 to 13 year olds. They found that by age 13 nearly half of Caucasian children took care of themselves in comparison to a third and a quarter of African-American and Hispanic students respectively. To take care of oneself means a child comes home to an empty home because his/her parents either work or are involved in other activities outside of the home. In each age group, children of parents whose monthly income was \$4500 or greater accounted for a vastly larger number of those taking care of themselves than children whose parents earned \$1500 or less. This study also found that greater quantities of children whose parents had at least some level of college education cared for themselves more than children whose parents only had a high school diploma or less. Studies by Luthar and Latendresse (2005) and Luthar and Sexton (2005) also supported these findings. However, Pomerantz, et al. (2007) concluded that the levels of parent participation in school increased as the SES of the parents increased. They found that

higher SES parents also tended to participate more comprehensively through volunteering, becoming school board members, or participants in other decision-making bodies of the school. Their study does not state that parents participated more frequently only that the way in which they involved themselves was deeper than lower SES parents.

**Motivation is a large determining factor in student success.** Motivation plays a key role especially in adolescence. This is when they have an enormous desire to belong with their peers (Price, 2008). Motivated students generally perform better academically than unmotivated students do (Marzano, 2003; Simons-Morton, & Chen, 2009). In addition, motivated students attempt new endeavors knowing the benefits they can incur from success, whereas unmotivated students avoid challenges fearing possible failure and other emotions that come along with failure (Marzano, 2003). Motivated students fare better academically because their desire for success leads to a stronger work ethic and the ability to persevere through difficult tasks (Pomerantz et al., 2007; Schultz, 1993; Steinberg, et al., 1992). However, Steinberg, et al. (1992) found that all students value education and grasp the future benefits of education regardless of their level of academic motivation.

Minorities and children from low SES backgrounds show lower levels of motivation than their White, high SES counterparts (Price, 2008). Because minority students had a tendency to feel that their academic efforts would not wield long-term results, they showed lower levels of academic motivation (Steinberg, et al., 1992). However, these students had a tendency to demonstrate too much confidence in their ability. This may inhibit their success because they are not exerting the level of effort required to succeed at high levels. While minority students have too much confidence, a

fear of failure over success drives Asian-American students to work hard. This fear of failure or overconfidence prevents students from progressing and getting out of their negative vortex.

Teachers and parents have an equal responsibility to increase student motivation (Wentzel, 1998). By increasing motivation, student misbehavior decreases while academic achievement increases (Mendler, 2009). Teachers have a professional duty to create lessons and a curriculum that can invigorate even the most detached student. When students feel emotionally connected to the material and excited by what it has to offer their motivation to learn increases, as does their performance (Price, 2008). The importance of creating this atmosphere becomes more important, yet more difficult during adolescence, when the desire to belong is more important than doing well academically. Most young children enter schools hard-wired with inquisitiveness and interest to learn. Mendler (2009) indicated that this tends to disappear throughout the schooling years. This is where the importance for teachers to create a learning environment that supports and promotes this innate curiosity increases.

Parents contribute largely to their child's level of motivation (Pomerantz, et al., 2007), as do teachers. Thus, it is important that parents become actively involved in their child's education from the time they enter kindergarten through their completion of high school to ensure success at each level. Pomerantz, et al. (2007) indicated that positive parental interaction has a great effect on child motivation, among other areas. They contended that to increase motivation parents make school experiences amiable to help promote an innate desire to succeed. Often, when parents became hypercritical the opposite occurred, children began to think of school and schoolwork as distasteful. To

foster intrinsic motivation parental expectations of their children's abilities should be realistic and that message should be conveyed consistently to the child (Halle, et al., 1997). The parent-child relationship can largely influence the degree to which students are academically motivated to perform; however, there are other contributing factors to student success and motivation as well.

### **Ways in Which Peers Influence Adolescent Behavior and Academic Achievement**

Adolescence is a time of change. As children grow into young adults, their need for close relationships with their peers increases and the amount of time they spend with their parents decreases (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Children begin to develop a sense of individuality and autonomy, and experience a host of physiological changes that can greatly affect their education (Ryan, 2001). Parents continue to exert considerable authority over the social (Beyers, et al., 2003; McLoyd, 1989) and educational outcomes of their children (Ablard & Parker, 1997; McNeal, 1999) and can possibly mitigate some of the negative effects of peer influence (Mounts & Steinberg, 1995).

**Peers negatively influence one another.** Research exists documenting the relationship between peer groups and adolescent misbehavior (Mounts & Steinberg, 1995). The research shows a strong influence of peers over each other as inciters of poor behavior, drug and alcohol use, smoking, decreased academic performance, motivation (Ryan, 2001), and disconnection to school (Radziwon, 2003). Research also illustrates the negative effects that a lack of peer associations can have on an individual's social-emotional well-being (Field, et. al., 2001) and their academic performance (Greenman, Schneider, & Tomada, 2009; Lopez & DuBois, 2005; Radziwon, 2003; Steinberg, et al, 1992; Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004).

Individual friendships are important to adolescents. However, the larger peer group may more widely affect an individual's feelings about school. Radziwon (2003) proposed that individual friendships are more personal and contend with problems apart from school. He also suggested that acceptance into a peer group may be more tied into one's sense of worth, thus, inclining adolescents to align themselves to the views and behaviors of peers. One close friend is more strongly associated with positive behavioral outcomes than negative ones. The perception of the large group has more of an effect on the negative behaviors of adolescents; whereas, individual friendships play a more important role educationally. Bissell-Havran and Loken (2007) postulated that while close friendships that exhibit positivity and warmth can lead to increased student achievement among motivated students, the opposite is also true. When students had close friendships with individuals not interested in school, their performance was more apt to suffer. Hence, students have a propensity to align their achievement levels to those of their peers (Kindermann, 1993; Steinberg, 1996). If students have high achieving friends, they will exert more effort to perform at a higher level and vice versa.

Conversely, academic achievements are primarily where those individuals consistently rejected by their peers experience the negative effects (Greenman, et al., 2009). Adolescents suffering long-term rejection by their peers performed considerably worse than those with a social network. In the same way that adolescents need the presence and support of their parents to increase their academic achievement so too do they need the presence and support of peers (Greenman, et al., 2009; Wentzel, 1998). For example, peers may produce negative outcomes in adolescents; the lack of friendships also produces negative outcomes.

**Peers positively influence academics.** Much research posits that peers can influence each other positively increasing their academic achievement and motivation (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Epstein & Karweit, 1983; Greenman, et al., 2009; Kindermann, 1993; Radziwon, 2003; Ryan 2001; Wentzel, 1998). When an individual has friends who achieve highly the individual tends to perform higher than before. The opposite can also happen when an individual has friends whose achievement is below average. However, Wentzel, et al. (2004) found no relationship between peers and academic outcomes. Some have argued that this phenomenon occurs because adolescents tend to associate with others like themselves (Radziwon, 2003; Ryan, 2001). Other studies have shown that students with comparable levels of intellect saw more achievement gains when they aligned themselves with higher performing peers (Bissell-Havran & Loken, 2007; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995).

The improvements and positive effects of peers could possibly be a superficial perception. Adolescents were inclined to tie their friends' inherent worth of school to the worth they assigned school themselves (Bissell-Havran & Loken, 2007). The perception that an adolescent had did not necessarily match that of their peers yet equated to their own fundamental feelings of school and academics. In reality, peers may share a similar basic view of school but the two perspectives may not be as close as adolescents perceive.

Mounts and Steinberg (1995) and Wentzel (1998) posited that no one single entity alone has total influence over adolescents; rather parents, peers, and teachers influence the overall educational outcomes of children. However, Wentzel (1998) noted that each

of these plays a separate influential role over an individual adolescent. Adolescents need support and encouragement from multiple sources to experience long-term success.

While peers have considerable influence over one another, both academically and socially, how each individual reacts to peer influence is quite complex (Radziwon, 2003; Ryan, 2001). Peers do influence adolescent views of school, but not the inherent value they place on educational attainment (Ryan, 2001). Whereas peers may alter their friends' enjoyment of school, their influence will not change their beliefs toward the significance of a good education. This indicates that peers do not influence every aspect of their friends' lives, only certain areas. What makes one child experiment with drugs and alcohol because of peer influence may lead another to study more diligently (Kindermann, 1993; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995). Despite the substantive effect of peers on educational performance, they do not completely transform students' thinking to follow that of their peers (Radziwon, 2003). However, over time many adolescents begin to assimilate their behavior to be more like those of their peers; thus, whom they choose to associate with becomes more important during the latter stages of adolescence (Mounts & Steinberg, 1995).

### **Social-emotional Well-being is Increasingly Important to Student Success**

This nation has witnessed a dramatic rise in children's mental health issues over the last several decades. The reported incidences of depression, anxiety, and suicide have dramatically increased (Buss, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Levine, 2007; Robertson, & Simons, 1989). The last half century has seen suicide rates more than double, and it is one of the leading causes of death among today's adolescents with boys committing suicide at a higher rate than girls do (Huber, 2003; Robertson & Simons, 1989).



Modern research identifies depression as a medical condition that can stay with teens well into adulthood. However, experts acknowledge that the normal moody behaviors of adolescents make depression difficult to recognize (Romito & Weinstock, 2012). In the past, depression and/or symptoms of depression among teens were viewed as natural associations with adolescence. Doctors believed that teens would eventually outgrow this condition (Robertson & Simons, 1989).

Research also indicates that adolescents from high socio-economic families experience depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations at a higher level than their counterparts from lower SES backgrounds (Bogard, 2005; Cameron, Racine, Offord, & Cairney, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Huber, 2003; Levine, 2007; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Nesse & Williams, 1994). Research actually demonstrates a negative relationship between material wealth and overall happiness for adults and teens alike (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Levine, 2007; Luthar & Sexton, 2005).

**Why have psychological disorders increased in today's society?** The causes of depression, anxiety, and overall unhappiness stem from increased societal pressures to achieve and be perfect, (Ansary & Luthar, 2009; Buss, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999), at school (Buss, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Huber, 2003; Luthar & Sexton, 2005), and at home (Bogard, 2005; Levine, 2007; Robertson & Simons, 1989).

In an age of technology and instant gratification, almost every human being is able to see, read, or hear about the accomplishments, riches, and beauty of celebrities and other individuals who possess more than the average-income household does. The media has real influences over society (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). With the increasing number of tabloids at every supermarket and drugstore and beauty advertisements at

every commercial break, men and women continually compare themselves to an unattainable image of perfection (Field, et al., 2001; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). In addition to continual media images of perceived perfection, society also is obsessed by money and fame, for example, people such as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Richard Branson, and the numerous reality television stars becoming celebrities because of their money. Society unrealistically compares themselves with these individuals (Buss, 2000). This comparison to an unlikely level of fame and fortune leads one to feel as if he/she is a failure, which leads to a decline in one's overall social-emotional well-being. Our ancestors lived with far fewer conveniences, comforts, and commodities than today, yet increased levels of depression, anxiety, suicide, and general unhappiness appear predominantly in the people of the wealthiest nations of the world (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). A person's value is no longer based on his/her character, but rather on what he/she can give to another. One's value is a measure of worth to an employer, spouse, friends, and others one encounters. Adults are not the only ones feeling the effects of increased pressure; students nationwide feel the crunch in classrooms everywhere.

Numerous factors lead to increased pressure on adolescents to succeed academically. For example, the introduction of federal mandates, such as No Child Left Behind, and a growing emphasis on high stakes testing increase stress to achieve in the classroom. Students also see a connection between a lifetime of comfort and academic achievement. This may lead them to pressure themselves to achieve at the highest rates possible to attain economic comfort (Easterbrook, 2004; Levine, 2007). Similarly, the most elite colleges are seeing the number of applicants increase year after year, while the number of available spots for students remains the same (Easterbrook, 2004). With an

increasing number of high school students attending four-year universities directly out of high school, pressure has increased to earn the highest grade point average, the best SAT score, and the most number of volunteer hours.

Students from high SES backgrounds feel more pressure to achieve and therefore experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and other psychological maladies (Huber, 2003). Children of high SES parents often feel the need to impress their parents. This may mean getting the best grades and acceptance into the best college. When they do not achieve these levels, they perceive rejection from their parents (Robertson & Simons, 1989). Some students simply cannot perform at the level expected of them. Consequently, students experience poor behavior, decreased grades, and increased psychological issues (Ansary & Luthar, 2009). Academically low performing students from high SES backgrounds are more likely to experience a decline in psychological well-being than students from lower SES areas are (Ansary & Luthar, 2009; Quiroga, Janosz, Bissett, & Morin, 2013). This may be due to the elevated levels of pressure placed on these students to have more than their parents do. When they cannot reach those levels, their feelings about themselves decline severely. However, students are not the only ones putting pressure on themselves to achieve; parents and the perceived relationship with them greatly influence a child's social-emotional well-being.

The relationship between parent and child is one of the leading factors in adolescent psychological well-being (Bogard, 2005; Robertson & Simons, 1989). The perceived relationship that a child feels with his/her parents is a strong indicator of their social-emotional well-being through early childhood and into adolescence (Bogard, 2005; Gate et al., 2013). The closer the familial unit the fewer instances of childhood

depression occurred. Conversely, the more emotionally distant the family is the higher the likelihood of maladjustment. These findings were consistent regardless of the gender of the child. The perceived relationship with the father had a positive relationship to symptoms of depression for boys and girls. Depression symptoms increased when they perceived their paternal relationship to be distant and depression symptoms were not as frequent when they perceived the relationship to be close. The relationship with the mother only showed psychological effects for girls but not boys. These findings were indicative of behaviors in students from high SES backgrounds but were not consistent in students from low SES backgrounds.

The closeness of the familial unit plays a large role in adolescent mental health. However, more compelling sources of social-emotional problems stemmed from parental denunciation, criticism, controlling behavior (Monshouwer et al., 2012; Robertson & Simons, 1989), conflict within the family (Mazza, Fleming, Abbott, Haggerty, & Catalano, 2008), and other family stressors, such as divorce. This type of family structure denies children of the most important affections necessary for positive psychological well-being (Levine, 2007). Children exposed to high levels of conflict within the family demonstrate increased symptoms of depression (Bond, Toumbourou, Thomas, Catalano, & Patton, 2005; Gate et al., 2013; Mazza et al., 2008). However, Grant and Osho (2012) did not find a connection between family structure and depression.

Living within the highest SES quintile and highly educated parents are factors that support high levels of achievement (Ansary & Luthar, 2009). However, these circumstances may inadvertently have the opposite effect of the desired outcome. For

example, when an individual does not believe he/she is meeting his/her parents' expectations or those of society, he/she may shut down, demonstrate internalizing behavior, or act out defiantly. Adolescents view their parents' success as a minimum level of attainment to consider themselves a success. This leads them to push themselves beyond their expectations, leading to high levels of anxiety. Each of these family factors may be contributing to the increases in occurrences of clinical depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and overall maladjustment among today's students. In a study of 69 of Toronto's homeless youth, Cameron, et.al. (2004) found that many of these students dropped out of school and had poor school experiences due to their psychological troubles. Additionally, students experiencing psychological disturbances tend to have low self-esteem, which can adversely influence their academic achievement (Schultz, 1993).

**Individuals who are most at risk for psychological disorders.** Adolescents from high SES backgrounds are most at risk to experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders (Ansary & Luthar, 2009; Bogard, 2005; Buss, 2000; Cameron, et al., 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Huber, 2003; Levine, 2007; Luthar & Sexton, 2005). A study by Csikszentmihalyi (1999) denoted that children living in the lowest socio-economic group demonstrated the most elevated levels of happiness. While several researchers found poverty to cause increased psychological disorders (Flanagan, 1998; McLeod & Nonemaker, 2000) others argued that this is due to the stress that poverty causes rather than poverty itself (Barrera, et al., 2002). Cameron et al. (2004) conducted a study among Toronto's homeless youth and found that most of

these adolescents had high-SES parents. These teenagers presented themselves with elevated thoughts of suicide, poor home life, and unpleasant incidents at school.

Students demonstrate the desire and need to talk about their social-emotional well-being. They believe it can help them deal with their emotions (Huber 2003). Adolescence is a difficult time where children experience changes physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Ignoring these changes is not the answer. In spite of teenagers' appeal to express their feelings, Huber (2003) found it was difficult for adults to talk about or face the issues surrounding adolescent psychological disorders (Levine, 2007). Parents in the high socio-economic group covet discretion to maintain the impression of perfection. When they admit there is a problem, that image of perfection may be destroyed.

An adolescent's level of emotional stability influences academic performance (Luthar & Sexton, 2005). When teens display emotional disturbance academic performance may suffer (Gate et al., 2013). That low academic performance often leads to problems later in life (Ansary & Luthar, 2009). However, because adolescents who were unhappy with their academic performance were at greater risk for psychological disturbances, it is difficult to determine whether low performance or the maladjusted behavior occurs first. Mazza, et al. (2008) surmised that early intervention might decrease psychological symptoms later.

### **Chapter Summary**

Numerous factors contribute to the educational outcomes of adolescents. These factors include socio-economic status, family structure, parenting style, peer influences, and mental health. None of these factors exist in isolation (Willie, 2001), but rather they

intertwine to shape adolescents into the type of student and adult they will become later in life.

Much attention is paid to socio-economic status regarding children's educational attainment. The socio-economic group in which a child grows up plays a profound role in the child's educational attainment and may have lasting effects. Children from high SES backgrounds have more access to resources, such as tutors, educational outings, and books. The influence of socio-economics on attainment is up for debate as there is conflicting research concerning what role it plays in a child's ability to learn and be successful. Some argue it is a leading factor in a child's overall attainment, while others argue that a strong curriculum or the home environment may assuage the effects of socio-economics.

While family income levels are one factor, parental influences and parenting style play immense roles in the educational and psychological well-being of children. Parents' physical presence in the lives of their child is important as it provides a nurturing relationship that supports positive education. In addition to parental presence, the style of parenting adopted has vast influence over children with research supporting an authoritative style to show the most positive effects on children's academic and personal outcomes. This style of parenting is firm yet warm, demanding yet comforting, and allows the child to have input in his/her own decisions. It provides a delicate balance that maintains the parent-child relationship without becoming too controlling or too permissive. Each of these parental factors and influences is a key part to the overall success of adolescents. Each of these can help or hinder a child's motivation, educational attainment, and social-emotional well-being.

Parents remain the primary influence in the life of children but as they enter adolescence peers become a key force as well. Peers can have both positive and negative influences over their friends in the social arena, as well as the academic one. Research reveals that students assimilate to their peers and often achieve and behave at the same level. When adolescents become friends with students who are high achieving their grades increased, and when they had friends who were lower achieving their grades declined. In addition to studies on the effects that peer groups have on one another, there is also research documenting the effects of peer rejection. This consistent rejection leads to a decline in academic achievement and an increase in psychological disorders among adolescents. There is debate among researchers if, in fact, peers influence academic achievement as they may inaccurately perceive their friends' success in school.

Across the nation instances of adolescent suicide, depression, and anxiety, eating disorders, and many other psychological disorders rose dramatically in the last 50 years. The appearance of these disorders predominantly has affected adolescents from high SES backgrounds who feel the excessive pressures to achieve, attend the best colleges, and earn the best grades. These disorders negatively influence educational outcomes and have long-term effects throughout adolescence and into adulthood. These students experience a decline in academic achievement and difficulties socializing with their peers. Rates of suicide have more than doubled, as have the instances of violent crimes. The modern luxuries currently in existence have caused a decline in the quality of life for everyone, including children. A negative relationship has been found between income and happiness.



### **Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology**

#### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of 10 high school students between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade who had cumulative academic grade point averages below 2.0, resided in high socio-economic communities attending high-performing comprehensive high schools in Los Angeles County. More specifically, the objective of the researcher was to develop an in-depth understanding of these students with regard to parenting, peer influence, and social-emotional well-being and why these students perform below average.

This study had four questions guiding the research:

1. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their elementary, middle, and high school academic and social experiences, academic motivation, and factors perceived as contributing to their underperformance in school?
2. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their home life and parent involvement in their education?
3. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high

schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their peer relations and participation in organized school and community activities?

4. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their social and emotional well-being?

Phenomenology was an appropriate form of qualitative research for this study. It allowed the researcher to focus on several students who all experienced the same phenomenon, and sought to describe what they each had in common, as it related to this phenomenon. As Creswell (2007) indicated “the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 58). Moustakas (1994, as cited in Creswell, 2007) stated “the description consists of ‘what’ they experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it” (p. 58). Specifically, in this study the researcher employed transcendental phenomenology to conduct research. The basis of transcendental phenomenology is related to the individual experiences of the participants and does not include personal researcher bias (Moustakas, 1994). This type of phenomenology required the researcher to be open to the perceptions of the participants and to allow their experiences to shine through as opposed to the researcher’s experience or possible partiality. Transcendental phenomenology was founded on the belief that truth can only be found within one’s own experiences, perceptions, and thoughts. In this study, the researcher used the basic tenets of this form of qualitative research to discover the commonalities among the students experiencing this phenomenon.

## Sites

For this study, the researcher invited four Los Angeles County high schools, with APIs at or above 850, to participate. Each participating school was a public, comprehensive high school located in an area with a median income above \$78,000. In this study, the researcher did not incorporate charter, magnet, or private schools. Each of the sites that participated had a total student enrollment of at least 2,000 students. Each school was in the top 5% of public high schools in the state of California. Not only did each school perform in the superior range on the California State Standards test, they also performed well above the state average on the California High School Exit Exam. These schools performed in the superior range on the California Standards Test (CST), and well above average on both sections of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). On the English portion of the exam, 84% of students passed on the first attempt at each school, and on the mathematics portion, at least 82% passed on the first attempt. The schools each offered an array of advanced placement classes (AP). Roughly 30% of the students took at least one AP class at each site. The average SAT score ranged from the upper 1600s to the mid-1700s out of a possible score of 2400. Overall, each of the schools performed in the superior range in all measurable academic arenas.

The representation of ethnicities at these sites was primarily Caucasian and Asian American. The schools ranged from 6% to 63% Caucasian. Additionally, they ranged from 11% to 53% Asian American. Each site had less than 25% of the student body considered socio-economically disadvantaged. Socio-economically disadvantaged is defined as “a student neither of whose parents have received a high school diploma or is eligible for free and reduced lunch,” also known as the National School Lunch Program

by the California Department of Education. In addition, each site had less than 15% of the student population classified as English learners.

The schools were located in Los Angeles County. The schools were located approximately 20 miles apart. Each of the cities in which the schools resided, had a median family income over \$90,000. While these cities represented differing areas within Los Angeles County, it was apparent that there were ample similarities in demographics among the four schools. A detailed table of each site's demographics is shown in Appendix A. The researcher changed the name of each school to a pseudonym to protect the identity of the school and the participants of the study.

### **Study Population**

For the purposes of this study, the researcher used purposeful sampling. Each of the participants in this study met certain criteria and the researcher invited each because he/she fit into the demographics set forth below. Creswell (2007) indicated that criterion sampling is a common approach in a phenomenological study because one ensures that all participants experience the phenomenon. Criterion sampling falls under the category of purposeful sampling and it is most appropriate for this study. It is important that all of the participants in this study have similar backgrounds, characteristics, and demographics.

The sample size included 10 students from grades 10 to 12 who lived in high SES areas across all school sites. The sample included an even representation of males and females. The students who participated in the study had a cumulative academic grade point average below 2.0. In addition, the students were general education students. None of the students had a documented disability on file through a 504 plan or an

individualized education plan. Additionally, each of the participating students resided in the district, and attended a district school since at least the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. This ensured that each of the students experienced a continuous curriculum within the district. Therefore, curriculum inconsistencies from district to district were not a factor in underachievement. At each site there were four to six participants representing a relatively even distribution of 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders and males and females.

**Human subjects protection.** This study was conducted in accordance with all regulations set forth by Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board and followed all federal guidelines in the protection of human subjects. The researcher participated in the Pepperdine University human subjects investigator training and received a certificate of successful completion. After obtaining permission from the superintendents or their designee of the selected districts participating in the study, the researcher also acquired permission from the school site principals or their designee to conduct the study. After successful completion of a pre-IRB methods review, as is required by Pepperdine University for research studies classified as expedited, the researcher applied for an expedited review through IRB as there was minimal risk presented to the participants of this study. These risks were boredom, fatigue and the stigma of being identified as an underachiever. Students were asked to participate in a face-to-face interview in a quiet room on the school campus, or a location of the students' choice after attending school all day or a weekend morning, which could have caused the participants to be tired. The interview had 14 questions and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The lengthy process after an entire school day could have caused students to become bored. The last potential risk for the participants was the possible stigma associated with being an underachiever.

The students may become dejected, apathetic, or unmotivated knowing their school performance was below average. The researcher provided the students with local counseling resources if they began to demonstrate any of the feelings above or other feelings in which they felt the need to speak to a professional. No student demonstrated noticeable fatigue or felt stigmatized. In addition, students were told they could opt out of the study at any time.

In this study, there were 10 participants aged 15-18. The students were of both genders, male and female, and were general education students. The subjects also had attended a school within the district since at least 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Special education students were not used for this study because the researcher intended to use participants with no known risk factor that could lead to underachievement. The researcher recruited students to participate in the study through an administrative designee who provided student information for those students who met the criteria. Once the researcher acquired approval from the site principal and superintendent or designee she spoke to an administrative designee who helped to identify students who met the study criteria. The email/phone script used to recruit schools can be found in appendix B. Once the students were identified as meeting the criteria, the researcher contacted students' parents by email and/or by telephone to obtain their consent prior to speaking with students. When necessary, the researcher called and/or emailed students to explain the study and asked them to participate.

During the phone calls, the researcher began by introducing herself and providing her background. She then explained the purpose of the study, the role of the participant in the study, and the potential effects of the study. The researcher provided a follow up

email further explaining the study and provided the parents with informed consent forms. The email and phone script used can be found in Appendix C. The researcher answered all questions of the participants and their parents.

The study was open to any student at the sites who met the specified criteria. Subjects who met study participation criteria, were interested and willing to participate in the study, and were less than 18 years of age completed an informed assent form and their parents completed an informed consent form. The forms can be found in Appendices D and E respectively.

Each subject completed a background profile, which is shown in Appendix F, and participated in a 30-minute interview. The interview protocol is shown in Appendix G. It contains 14 questions that were reviewed by a team of experts for validity.

Only the researcher knows the identity of each participant, because the researcher collected the informed consent and assent forms and conducted the interviews. On any documentation surrounding the interviews and background profile pseudonyms, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to each subject to protect his/her identity. Each site was also given a pseudonym to protect the participants in the study further. Below, the researcher outlines in detail data management and security to protect the identity of each individual and site participating in the study.

The potential benefits to the subjects were to provide important insight into understanding underachievement of students from high SES backgrounds in high-performing high schools. With the information provided by the subjects, the school may be able to provide or create programs that will service their needs and tailor curriculum and instruction to help these students reach their potential. This may benefit the

education community to improve the curriculum and instructional strategies for these students and programs in schools that could better serve them as well. The participants in this study in 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade could participate in pilot programs for students with the factors they identify as problem areas. This could possibly lead to more and better programs throughout the education community.

### **Instrumentation**

A transcendental phenomenological design was used as the core of this study. Because qualitative methods were most appropriate, to address an area that has gaps in the research or in areas where much research is simply unavailable, this design was most appropriate for the proposed research problem (Richards & Morse, 2007). Much of the research to date on underperforming students was focused on urban schools, students with low socio-economic status, or students who lacked the fundamental tools needed to be successful in school. In this study, qualitative methods were used to fill the gaps in the research on underperforming students in high achieving, high socio-economic areas. Therefore, the data were collected to search for an explanation for this chronic underachievement. Denzin and Lincoln (2005, as cited in Creswell, 2007) stated “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 36). By going to the various sites and speaking directly with the students who experienced this phenomenon, qualitative research, specifically a phenomenological approach, was the most fitting design to discover the lived experiences of underperforming students in high achieving high schools.



**Interview.** Interviews are a primary source of data collection in a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007, Richards & Morse, 2007). Richards and Morse (2007) discussed the use of a more informal interview process where the questions are not prepared in advance of the interview session and the interviewer will go where the participant may take him/her. In this study, the primary data gathering technique was audiotaped interviews with each of the participants conducted by the researcher after school or on the weekend. The interview took place at the students' school locations in a private, quiet room or at the public library. The researcher consulted with school officials to determine an appropriate interview location upon arrival. This room was located away from the main office so that school officials did not know the identity of the participants.

Before each interview, each participant completed a background profile for the researcher. The background profile was composed of four categories asking participants their gender, grade level, ethnicity, and parental situation (i.e., if their parents are married, divorced, not living with them, or another situation). This instrument is shown in Appendix B. The background profile questions were to describe the sample and the representativeness of the sample in terms of the larger population.

In this study, 14 structured questions as well as unstructured questions were used to clarify participant responses further. The interview questions were organized into four sections. The first section consisted of four questions that addressed student background related to experiences, attitudes, and feelings toward school. More specifically, the first four questions measured the participants' attitudes and feelings toward school from an academic and social perspective from elementary school to the present. The second section consisted of three questions that addressed student perceptions of parenting as it

relates to their education. These three questions inquired about the participant's home life, perceived relationship with his/her parents, and the level of his/her parents' involvement in their education. The next set of interview questions was made up of three questions surrounding the students' perceptions of peer influence. The first question asked the participants how many friends they perceive they had. The next question was how their peers performed in school. The last question in this section surrounded the participants' involvement in school or other activities. The fourth and final section of the interview included three questions. These three questions examined student perceptions regarding their mental health and self-esteem. These questions asked the participants how they viewed their ability level in school, what made them happy and/or sad, and if they thought they had a mental health issue. The list of interview questions is shown in Appendix G.

The questions designed for this interview protocol were created in alignment with the research questions guiding this study. Questions 1, 3, 4, and 5 in the interview protocol were aligned to Research Question 1 related to students' attitudes, experiences, emotions, and motivation about school. These questions particularly focused on their academic and social experiences during their schooling years and how those experiences influenced their current achievement levels. The objective of these questions was to understand participants' views through the experiences of students from a high SES background and/or a high-performing school.

The next three questions, 6, 7 and 8 surrounded the second research question related to the participants' perceptions of their parents, the relationships with parents, and their life outside of school. The intention was to understand how this description

influenced academic achievement now and in the past to consider the link between difficulties or perceived problems in the home as they affected performance at school.

Questions 2, 9, 10, and 11 were devised with the intention of understanding the participants' descriptions of their peer group, if they had one, and how those individuals performed at school. Many students align their performance at school to that of their peers. However, some students may have a distorted perception of the actual levels of achievement of their friends (Bissell-Havran, & Loken, 2007).

The final three questions were designed to evaluate the participants' mental health status as they perceived it. In the literature, researchers contend that in many instances students from high SES backgrounds experience higher levels of psychological disorders than do their peers from lower SES backgrounds (Luthar & Sexton, 2005). These questions are intended to understand if this was concentrated within individuals of all achievement levels from high SES backgrounds, as well, as its influence on these participants' performance level. A detailed table outlining the alignment of the interview protocol to the research questions and the literature is shown in Appendix H.

**Validity.** The validity of this methodology came from a comprehensive review of the literature on parenting, peer influence, influence of mental health on adolescents, and the influence of socio-economics on children. This instrument consisted of 14 structured interview questions for adolescents aged 15-18. An interview protocol was created to capture their perceptions concerning the influences parenting, peer influence, and mental health, namely depression and anxiety have on academic achievement (Appendix G). The interview questions were designed to encapsulate the key findings in the literature.

The questions also served to capture participants' perceptions of their academic achievement and the possible contributing factors of their achievement.

Once the interview protocol was created, the researcher contacted three educational professionals with expertise related to the focus of this research study. The use of experts helped provide feedback to ensure the instrument measuring the research questions was clear and unbiased. The researcher contacted the three professionals by e-mail to ask for their participation in the validation of the instrument. Once all three agreed to participate the researcher arranged the best way of communication for each expert. The researcher conducted communication with two experts via e-mail and the third via a face-to-face meeting. The first professional is a graduate education professor emeritus with expertise in parent involvement. She has published several books and articles related to family school connection. She has held leadership positions both at the school site and in parent education groups. The next professional who the researcher invited to validate the instrument was a psychology professor with expertise in mental health with children and families. Lastly, the researcher invited an experienced school psychologist holding a doctorate in psychology who worked in a high-performing school located in a high SES area.

After conversing with each expert the researcher analyzed the suggestions made and incorporated them into the interview protocol to strengthen the questions and ensure that interview questions measured the research questions. The experts' suggestions were as follows:

Expert one suggested changing wording to make the question clearer and less leading. She suggested adding supplementary questions to several of the questions and including examples to help the participant understand the nature of the questions

Expert two suggested clarifying some of the wording and also suggested adding other family members to Question 8 for students who may come from non-traditional homes.

Expert three made suggestions for questions 1 and 2. She suggested creating a page of adjectives that subjects could choose from rather than just asking them to use two to three adjectives to describe their academic and social experiences in school. She suggested creating a page that had positive and negative adjectives that students could select to help focus their thinking and find more patterns among the selections. She also suggested adding a question about why they chose those words. Lastly, she suggested adding a question asking subjects to describe their own academic performance.

The researcher used the experts' feedback to revise the interview protocol to clarify wording, add follow-up questions, and create a page of adjectives from which the participants could select. The number of total questions was not altered but follow-up questions were added to five of the questions. The time needed to complete the interview did not change because of these revisions.

### **Data Collection and Management**

Each interview took place at the participant's current school site after school or at the public library. In the beginning of each interview, the participant filled out the background profile (Appendix F). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Each participant was interviewed individually. These interviews took place in a private

room at the school site or library so that no interruptions or distractions influenced the responses and the identity of the participants remained confidential. The researcher worked with school site personnel to identify a room on the campus that was available and appropriate for the interview process. The room was located on campus away from the main office so that staff members could not see participants entering a room and deduce their participation in the study. Each participant was asked the same 14 questions in the order they are presented in Appendix G. During the interviews, however, the researcher asked questions that were not predetermined based on answers provided from the prepared questions. To understand more fully the participants' experiences, the unprepared questions were different for each participant.

After the interviews, the researcher transcribed each interview for easier access to the data. After transcribing each interview, the researcher provided a copy of the transcription by mail and/or email to each participant. The participants were given one week to read the transcription for accuracy and respond to any necessary changes by email with the researcher. The researcher provided each of the participants with an email address at which they could contact the researcher to respond to the accuracy of the interview transcription. Three of the participants responded with their approval of the transcription. The other seven participants did not respond to the request. Therefore, it was assumed they did not have any edits to the transcription.

Creswell (2007) discussed the importance of data storage. He indicated that it is a topic not addressed fully by qualitative researchers. For this study, the researcher kept records of all data collected in multiple locations to protect the identity of all participants and to keep accurate account of all data collected. Each transcribed interview was in both

hard copy and electronic versions. Each participant had his/her own file to keep a hard copy of each transcribed interview. All files were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home. Each file was coded with a pseudonym for each participant so his/her identity was not revealed to anyone other than the researcher.

In addition to a hard copy of each participant's transcribed interview, the researcher maintained electronic copies, one on a USB flash drive and another in a Dropbox folder. The researcher also coded all files and names with pseudonyms to safeguard the identity of the participants to anyone other than the researcher. The researcher had the USB flash drives in her possession at all times. Additionally, the Dropbox file was private and the researcher changed the password to the file monthly for added security and protection. Any device with a Dropbox or that contained information regarding this study was password protected.

In addition to copies of the transcriptions, the researcher stored separately the original audiotaped conversations from the hard copy files in a locked filing cabinet in her home. A separate hard copy and electronic copy of a master list of pseudonyms was stored apart from the filing cabinet, USB drive, and the Dropbox to protect further the identity of the participants. The researcher also kept a master file of all of the types of data collected, and the dates that data collection occurred to keep an accurate account of all documents and recordings. Data management was essential to maintaining accuracy and anonymity during this study. The researcher was diligent in data management to preserve exact records and protect the participants with the utmost care. The researcher will destroy all records three years beyond the completion of the study.

## **Data Analysis**

Once all of the data were collected, the researcher organized and analyzed it to uncover common themes through a process of coding (Creswell, 2007). The researcher followed Moustakas' process for analyzing data through transcendental phenomenology as originally laid out by Edmund Husserl. The core of transcendental phenomenology is epoche. Moustakas (1994) defined epoche as "the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide-open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego" (p. 33). The researcher achieved this by reading and rereading each transcribed interview several times. The researcher highlighted key words and phrases while working to achieve epoche. The researcher then created a table to categorize the key words and phrases highlighted from the interview transcriptions. The researcher organized this by interview questions as well as thematically through what appeared in the data. The purpose of the coding was to begin to make sense of the massive data to simplify it systematically (Richards & Morse, 2007). During the process of creating general themes and categories, the researcher familiarized herself with all of the data collected so that she could analyze it more thoroughly.

Once epoch was achieved the researcher move toward "transcendental phenomenological reduction" (Moustakas, 1994 p. 34). Here the researcher examined each of the participant's experiences individually to gain a fresh perspective and a textural description of the phenomenon studied. To accomplish this, the researcher reread the interview transcriptions and analyzed the categorized keywords and phrases to uncover anything she may have missed during the first analysis. Once the researcher



formed the general categories, she described what happened to the participants regarding the phenomenon studied. The researcher then grouped the main ideas into themes for further analysis. The researcher examined the interviews and tables a minimum of three times to ensure that everything had been analyzed from a fresh perspective without bias or judgment.

Lastly, the researcher reached “imaginative variation” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 35). In this stage of analysis, the goal was to combine imagination with intuition to reach all of the tangible with the viable explanations of the phenomenon. This process involved reflecting on where each of the participants experienced the phenomenon. In addition, a setting and a context were created for the reader to understand more fully the way in which the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Once the researcher analyzed completely both the textural and structural descriptions, she formed the synthesis of the research. The researcher formed a final synthesis of the data collected and analyzed to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of what and how the participants experienced the phenomenon.

The researcher enlisted two graduates with formal coding experience as external coders to curtail any possible researcher bias and uphold the trustworthiness of data coding as described in this chapter. These external coders were asked to code the data independently from the researcher. Once the researcher and the two external coders completed their independent coding analyses, the researcher discussed the analysis with each. The researcher spoke by phone with the first external coder to discuss the findings and negotiate differences. The researcher communicated via email with the second external coder to discuss the analysis and negotiate differences. After discussions with

each of the external coders, the differences were negotiated and the findings presented were agreed upon by two or more of the coders. One of the external coders identified a new sub-category for interview Question 13. One of the external coders found that three of the participants referenced grades as something that made them sad. Therefore this code was added for use in the presentation of findings.

The process of analyzing the data was not linear but repetitive. The researcher had a deep understanding of the data to create a final synthesis that depicted an accurate representation of the lived experiences of the participants regarding the phenomenon studied. This process took an in-depth analysis of the data during several stages of the writing and analyzing process. This created the most in-depth understanding and the clearest picture of the participants' experiences with this particular phenomenon. The researcher analyzed carefully all of the data using the steps outlined above to create a final synthesis that will help readers gain an understanding of why some students become chronic underperformers in high-performing high schools.

## **Chapter 4: Results of the Study**

### **Restatement of the Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade high school students with cumulative academic grade point averages below 2.0 from high socio-economic communities attending high-performing comprehensive high schools in Los Angeles County. More specifically, the researcher intended to develop an in-depth understanding of these students regarding parenting, peer influence, and social-emotional well-being and why these students performed below average.

### **Restatement of the Research Questions**

Four research questions guided this study:

1. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their elementary, middle, and high school academic and social experiences, academic motivation, and factors perceived as contributing to their underperformance in school?
2. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their home life and parental involvement in their education?

3. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their peer relations and participation in organized school and community activities.
4. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their social and emotional well-being?

### **Review of the Research Design**

In this study, the researcher used a qualitative phenomenological methodology to examine and describe participants' general attitudes, feelings, and experiences in school as well as the perceived effect of parenting, peer influence, and social-emotional well-being on students' academic performance throughout their schooling years. The research was conducted at two Los Angeles County High Schools from an eligible pool of 24 public, comprehensive high schools that were not classified as charter or magnet high schools. The 2 participating high schools had an API above 850, were located in towns that had a median income above \$86,000 with an enrollment over 2,000 students. The ethnicity of the majority of students was Asian or Caucasian who performed well above the state average in all academic areas. The researcher collected data from 10 students from an eligible pool of 283 students at two different high schools in Los Angeles County. These students were in grades 10 to 12, had a cumulative academic grade point average below 2.0, had no documented disability on file with the school through a 504 plan or an IEP, and had attended a district middle school.

**Nuances**

The researcher contacted the superintendents of each of the 24 eligible high schools. Many declined, stating they do not allow graduate research to be conducted in their district. Three superintendents agreed to allow research but the site administrator declined participation. The remaining superintendents never returned emails or phone calls from the researcher. Four superintendents and site administrators agreed to allow research conducted at their sites with their students. The researcher was initially given IRB approval to contact the parents of qualifying subjects at four high schools in Los Angeles County.

Upon approval, the researcher contacted each of the schools to acquire a list of eligible subjects. Two of the schools quickly provided me with a list of eligible subjects with their information and parent contact information for recruitment. One month after contacting the schools, one of the schools contacted me to let me know that they did not have the capacity in their computer system to compile a list of qualifying subjects, and therefore, would not be able to participate. The fourth school wanted to contact the students to give them the forms and then pass along information to me once they received permission from the parents. After five months of trying to contact the principal for updates, the school told me they could not get any subjects to agree to participate. The researcher attempted to reach out to five additional high schools that met the criteria for the study. One principal initially agreed to participate. That principal also wanted to contact students for permission to be contacted by the researcher. After one month of attempted contact for updates, the researcher and her chair changed the study only to include two high schools from which to recruit subjects. The researcher had personal

connections with personnel at the two participating high schools, which helped her to obtain lists directly from the school rather than the school contacting the subjects, which did not work.

Once the researcher obtained lists from 2 schools with contact information for qualifying subjects she contacted approximately 100 parents for which she had email addresses. From these emails, only two parents responded. She sent a follow up email approximately one week after the initial email. This generated two more responses, both declining participation. The researcher remained in contact with the initial respondents from email. After corresponding with these parents for over a month one subject refused to participate and the other failed to attend both meetings the researcher set up for the interview.

Because of the low response rate, the researcher changed her recruitment strategy. She began calling the parents of qualifying subjects. In these attempts, many phone numbers were disconnected, no longer belonged to the parent listed, or messages were not returned to the researcher. The researcher then began calling cell phone numbers that were listed. These numbers too were often inaccurate, disconnected, or messages could not be left. However, the researcher did obtain permission from six parents and subjects for participation. During the phone recruitment of students, the researcher encountered a thought-provoking trend. When the researcher spoke with the parents of potential female subjects, the parents all volunteered their daughters to participate. However, the parents of potential male subjects all said to the researcher that the parent needed to ask their son if he was interested and/or willing to participate in the study. Within two months of initial approval, the researcher had two interviews completed. A third interview was

conducted. The researcher discovered through the course of the interview process that the subject did not meet all of the eligibility criteria. Therefore, that interview was not used in the final data analysis. Over the next month, the researcher worked with four more students and parents to set up interviews. Within three months, the researcher conducted and completed six interviews at the two initial sites. The researcher tried for two more months to use the third school. After finally working with her chair to change the scope of the study to two sites, she attempted to recruit six more subjects.

The researcher contacted the two schools for updated lists of eligible subjects to see if there were any additions or deletions from the initial list, as six months had passed and a new school year had begun. The researcher used the lists once again to contact the parents of eligible participants. During this recruitment effort, the researcher had one student who did not attend his scheduled interview time. When contacted for another time, the subject decided no longer to participate. The researcher gained permission from the parents of two additional subjects. When those subjects were contacted by the researcher, they hung up. The researcher worked to recruit subjects from West Coast High School because the pool of subjects was smaller. She attempted all students and was looking for one additional male and one additional female participant. She gained permission from one male but no females granted permission. The researcher worked with her chair and they agreed to recruit additional participants from Park High School. In the end, she could only interview 10 participants, four from West Coast High School, and six from Park High School. In total, the researcher spent 7.5 months recruiting subjects and collecting data.

### Participant Demographics

Overall, this study involved 10 participants aged 15-18 in grades 10 to 12 at 2 different Los Angeles county high schools. Table 1 shows the participant demographics.

Table 1

<i>Participant Demographics</i>				
Pseudonyms	Grade	Gender	Ethnicity	Parent Status
Andrew	10	M	Pacific Islander	Divorced
Claire	11	F	Asian American	Married
Finn	11	M	Caucasian	Married
Hannah	12	F	Hispanic	Married
Lewis	10	M	Asian American	Married
Robert	12	M	Asian American	Married
Samantha	10	F	Caucasian	Married
Summer	11	F	Caucasian	Divorced
Victoria	10	F	Caucasian	Divorced
Will	12	M	Caucasian	Married

### Presentation of Data and Report of Findings

**Research Question 1 findings.** Research Question 1 asked, “how do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their elementary, middle, and high school academic and social experiences, academic motivation, and factors perceived as contributing to their underperformance in school?” Interview questions 1, 3, 4, and 5



related to this research question. These questions were: Please circle two to three adjectives using the blue pen that describe your academic experiences, particularly your classroom learning experiences in elementary school. Please take your time and try to remember back in time. Now, please use the red pen to circle two to three adjectives that describe academic experiences, particularly your classroom learning experiences, in middle school. Finally, please use the black pen to circle two to three adjectives that describe your academic experiences, particularly your classroom learning experiences, in high school. Please share why you chose the adjectives you circled. What aspect(s) of school do you like? Why? What aspect(s) of school do you not like? Why? How would you describe your academic performance in school? What motivates you to do well in school? What do you think is preventing you from doing well in school?

Table 2 indicates the adjectives chosen at each level.

The participants selected 4 negative words, 24 positive words, and 1 neutral word to describe their academic experiences in elementary school. Conversely, for middle school they selected 21 negative words, 4 positive words, and 4 neutral words. Lastly, 8 negative, 8 positive, and 12 neutral words were chosen to describe high school. Question 4 asked “what aspects of school do you like and why? and what aspects of school do you not like and why?” The responses and themes from questions 1 and 4 overlapped and are reported together. From the responses to these two questions nine themes emerged, structure of schools, teachers, experiences in elementary school, feelings about elementary school, experiences in middle school, feelings about middle school, experiences in high school, feelings about high school, and social life.

Table 2

*Adjectives Describing Participants' Academic Experiences in Elementary, Middle, and High School*

Adjectives	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Total
Anxious	0	0	1	1
Boring	1	4	1	6
Caring	0	1	0	1
Challenging	0	1	5	6
Collaborative	0	0	0	0
Comfortable	1	0	0	1
Difficult	0	2	0	2
Discouraging	0	0	1	1
Easy	2	0	0	2
Embarrassing	0	0	0	0
Encouraging	2	0	1	3
Energizing	0	0	0	0
Engaging	0	1	1	2
Enjoyable	7	0	0	7
Exciting	0	0	2	2
Exhausting	1	1	1	3
Fun	4	2	0	6
Frustrating	1	1	2	4

(table continues)

Adjectives	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Total
Hard	0	0	1	1
Helpful	3	0	1	4
Important	1	0	3	4
Impossible	0	2	0	2
Interesting	0	0	2	2
Lonely	1	1	0	2
Motivating	2	0	0	2
Necessary	0	2	0	2
Negative	0	0	0	0
Organized	0	1	0	1
Overwhelming	0	1	0	1
Pointless	0	1	1	2
Positive	2	0	1	3
Stupid	0	0	0	0
Successful	1	0	0	1
Supportive	0	0	0	0
Terrible	0	0	0	0
Tough	0	0	4	4
Uninteresting	0	6	0	6
Unsuccessful	0	2	0	2
Unsupportive	0	0	0	0

Five of the participants identified difficulties with the structure of school. The structure of school considered the length of classes, the number of classes, the type of work they were asked to complete, and the classes they took. Hannah, a 12<sup>th</sup> grader, and Summer, an 11<sup>th</sup> grader, referenced going from one classroom in elementary school to six classrooms in middle school and each teacher in the six classes giving as much homework as they used to have in total in elementary school. They each believed that this contributed to their academic decline in middle school. Two other participants, Andrew and Finn, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, discussed the school system as boring. They did not like the fact that there was very little choice available to students regarding what classes they took. This disinterest led to feelings of boredom and disengagement from the classroom experience. Will, a 12<sup>th</sup> grader, believed that classes in high school were too long, making it difficult to focus and stay on task for an extended period.

Another common theme identified was teachers. All but one participant talked about teachers. The participants mentioned good teachers and bad teachers often. They defined good teachers as having the following characteristics: flexible, helpful, answers all questions, easy to talk to, teach in a way that is fun, and willing to work with students. They defined bad teachers as having the following characteristics: boring, strict, not engaging, teach from the book, grade too hard, give a lot of homework, mean, and they yell. Each of the participants indicated performing better for teachers they perceived as good. When asked what aspects of school they liked, participants indicated learning and teachers that made learning fun and interesting. <sup>1</sup>Robert, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, indicated “some teachers, they actually interact with you and you feel like they actually care for you.”

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<sup>1</sup> All data obtained from personal communication with participants.

Alternatively, participants tended to shut down and put forth very little effort for teachers they perceived as poor. Victoria, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, explained:

It's like my teacher doesn't want to put the effort into giving me more of an option or a chance to succeed in the class, then there is no point that I should even try. If you're not going to give me the chance to pass your class, then I'm not going to try to.

Claire, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, asserted "I also like classes sometimes if they have good teachers. If it's a bad teacher I just don't like going there because it's just a drag and I feel like I'm not learning anything. And, it's just boring."

The next most common themes among the participants were the experiences in elementary school and the feelings about elementary school. As illustrated in Table 3, participants had positive experiences and feelings about elementary school. Most often, participants described elementary school as fun and enjoyable. They cited reasons such as content not being overly difficult, not as much pressure, not as demanding, more hands-on experiences, and they experienced academic success. Overall, they perceived elementary school to be completely different from the other school levels. Not one participant experienced or felt something negative. Two participants, Summer and Andrew, believed that classes were boring but went on to indicate that it was more of a personal issue than one related to school.

The next two common themes revolved around middle school. These two themes were experiences in middle school and feelings about middle school. Participants had strong memories of middle school, but they were negative feelings and experiences. The feelings and experiences of the participants reflected the opposite of their experiences and feelings about elementary school. Uninteresting and boring were the words most often

selected to describe the participants' academic experiences in middle school. The participants reported failing their first class in middle school. Claire reported "I think middle school was the worst academic experience for me. I got really bad grades. I never found it interesting or fun at all." Five other participants reported a decline in their academic performance at some point during middle school. They perceived boring teachers, boring material, and too much homework to be the causes. Only one participant stated something other than negative feelings and experiences about middle school. Lewis, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, had a neutral to positive experience and feeling about middle school but his response was less about his academic experience and more about the social experiences he had during that time. Samantha, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, attributed her decline in academic performance to social struggles in middle school. The remainder of the participants attributed their lack of success to teachers, content, or outside commitments.

Next, two common themes emerged surrounding experiences and feelings about high school. The participants had mixed feelings and experiences in high school. The majority of responses selected were neutral descriptors. For example, important, challenging, and tough were most often chosen. These words could be perceived as positive or negative and further meaning was developed when participants were asked to explain their choice. Six of the participants discussed high school's importance for the future. They deem high school necessary for what it can provide in the long run. They cited college and life for what high school prepares them. However, they also found it challenging because there were additional stressors. Extra-curricular activities, for example, added pressure to achieve and balance the academic load. Will stated "it's a lot of work, especially with outside stuff. You get really tired all the time. It's hard to deal

with.” Claire reported “I chose tough because high school is tough, but it’s also important. It’s also frustrating because it’s a lot of stress and with extra-curricular activities; it’s stressful and frustrating at times.” Seven of the participants indicated that high school was harder, both the workload and the content. Samantha described high school as “pretty much the same as middle school, only everything’s a lot harder.”

The last common theme from questions 1 and 4 from the interview protocol was social life. This was primarily in response to Question 4 when participants were asked what aspects of school they like. Seven participants indicated that what they liked about school was the social aspect while one reported the social scene as an aspect he did not like about school, and one indicated the social aspect was something she liked and did not like about school. Samantha stated “and I like to hang out with the few people who do sort of talk to me.” However, she also reported she did not like “all the rumors and how quickly everything spreads.” Finn stated “most of it is having to be around people my age.” The other seven participants referenced friends as the primary reason they enjoy school.

Question 3 asked, “how would you describe your academic performance in school?” From the participant responses, five common themes emerged. These themes were; homework, effort, motivation, academic decline in middle school, and external factors. Mendlar (2009) indicated that students have the knowledge but do not want to fully engage and do the work that comes with reaching that next level of attainment. Additionally, it may be difficult to best service students from high SES backgrounds because of a discrepancy that exists between what individuals say they want and the way they behave (Mayer, 1997). None of the participants were satisfied with their academic

performance. They used words such as lacking, unfulfilling, inconsistent, and “pretty bad” to indicate their personal feelings about their academics. Three participants cited homework as a factor in their poor performance. Hannah expressed “I’ll know the concepts and the work that we will be working on, but I won’t get around to the homework.” Victoria articulated “I get bored with homework, so I just don’t do it.”

Six of the participants discussed effort as a contributor to their academic performance. They indicated they were lazy and/or procrastinated with schoolwork. They conveyed trying hard periodically or if they cared about the class. Robert revealed “elementary I did good. In middle school, I did good but I didn’t really pay attention. In high school, I didn’t really pay attention that much; I didn’t really care.” Andrew discussed not taking school very seriously and not seeing the importance of it until recently; therefore, he did not put forth much effort into school. Five of the participants referenced motivation as a key factor in their poor academic performance. Summer discussed not trying her hardest. The researcher asked her what trying her hardest looked like. She responded:

I don’t know...studying and trying to somehow find an interest in a subject. For me, trying to do History homework, I don’t like history, so what is the point in me doing this homework. I just have that going through my head the whole time. Then you are not going to get anything done. So if I could find some kind of interest in the subject. So if I could get some help with the homework, then I just don’t BS the homework and just fill in the answers to just get it done. That’s what I do a lot. That doesn’t help a lot.

Four participants discussed becoming unmotivated in middle school and that feeling carrying into high school. Now, they believe they do not have the strategies to overcome the poor habits they acquired in middle school. During that time, they fell behind in their academics but were not worried because they did not care about middle school. Now



they see the importance of high school but struggle to overcome this obstacle to succeed. They understand the need to do their work but do not appear to have the tools necessary to follow through with their desires. One participant expressed that extrinsic motivators helped motivate her to reach the goals set forth by her parents. Victoria stated:

Something to work for is being able to stay with my mom and my little siblings. Also, we will make deals. I can get my belly button pierced if I pass my summer school class. Which I did, it's a goal and I achieved it and not only because my parents are proud of me, but I get something I've wanted. When I get a goal set, then I have something to motivate me to work harder.

The other participants indicated the need for intrinsic motivation knowing they just needed to do their work. However, they lacked intrinsic motivation to reach their goal of higher academic performance.

As stated above, four participants indicated becoming unmotivated in middle school. This led to a significant decrease in their academic output from elementary school to middle school. Seven participants discussed doing well until middle school. They had memories of good grades and positive experiences in elementary school. They then went on to explain how the situation changed in middle school. The grades fell. For each participant, the decline began at a different stage of middle school. Lewis explained, "elementary was good, I had a lot of A's. Then middle school, I didn't have as much As." They distinctly remembered doing well academically until middle school. The participants perceived this decline in academics led to poor study and work habits, which carried into high school and now are difficult to overcome.

The last common theme to emerge from this interview question was external factors as an influence in their academic performance. Two participants perceived outside factors as contributors to their academic performance. Andrew perceived his lack

of understanding about school led to his poor performance. His parents are first generation immigrants and the schooling system in their home country is very different. Without their support, he did not understand school and, therefore, found it to be pointless. Recently, he discovered the need for education but now believes it is too late. Summer perceived her busy home to contribute to her poor academic performance. She stated:

There is too much going on at home. I have three brothers and sisters and my mom works all day. My grandma lives with us and I sometimes find it overwhelming to do work at home. I couldn't get my work done. I couldn't get much help. My mom couldn't really help me all that much because she has too much stuff to do. She didn't get home until like 7:00 and she was exhausted and she had my little brother and sister and my other sister too.

These two participants both perceived external factors to be major contributors to their lack of achievement in school. For Andrew, this external factor started at the onset of schooling. For Summer, this began in middle school and continued into high school.

Question 5 was the last question to address Research Question 1. This question asked, "what motivates you to do well in school? What do you think is preventing you from doing well in school? From this question, three themes emerged as motivators and four themes emerged as obstructing performance. These themes were: family, future, school activity, laziness, homework, friends, and do not care. Four of the participants cited family as a motivator. They wanted to make their parents happy with their grades and that helped them to want to do better in school. Andrew stated, "so when my family says get good grades and we'll be happy, that motivates me." Further, Claire expressed "my parents motivate me the most because they just want what is best for me."

Impressing their parents and making them happy was a primary motivator for four of the

participants. They realized that their parents wanted what was best for them and they wanted to be able to give something to them in return.

The next theme to emerge as a motivator was future. Four participants referenced their future as a motivator in school. Will stated, "I want to go to college and get a job. I don't want to be a homeless person." Robert indicated, "I just want to graduate with a high school diploma and get a job and raise a family." Lewis also indicated wanting a good job in the future as a motivator to perform well. Claire stated her future in general pushed her to do better in school. Being able to support themselves and have a good job in the future were large motivators for four of the participants.

The last theme to emerge related to motivation was school activity. The students must maintain a certain grade point average to remain eligible to participate in competition. Two participants indicated school activity as a motivator to perform well. It was important to them to be able to compete in their sporting events. Each of them understood the importance of maintaining their grade point average to continue participating. Summer had experience in the past of losing that privilege because of grades and did not want that to happen again. Both participants were keenly aware of the exact grade point average they needed to maintain to be eligible for the team. For each of them, this was their primary motivator to perform well in school.

Each of the participants indicated that there was something preventing them from doing well in school. Seven of the participants indicated laziness was getting in the way of their success. Finn stated, "not wanting to do my work, by my definition of whether it's superficial and/or important." They understood the need for intrinsic motivation. They expressed desires and attempts to overcome the laziness but it always came back.

They could give effort for a few weeks but then over the course of a semester, they slowly began not doing work or studying again and the same outcome resulted. Will stated:

Suck it up and do it. I had a job this summer and it made me realize you had to stick with it. You can't give up randomly. Just mentally try to overcome it. Just do it. Even though it might be boring and hard, you just have to do it anyways.

The participants identified the need to overcome laziness but also indicated they were looking for other things to do aside from schoolwork.

Homework was also a leading factor in what was preventing the participants from doing well in school. Four of the participants identified homework. They found whatever else they could do instead of doing homework. They simply expressed they did not do it. They knew they needed to but could not seem to find the motivation to do so. Lewis stated, "I have a lot of things to do and I don't think about work that much, but I'm trying." Much like those participants who indicated laziness, these participants understood the need to do and start a semester well after getting bad grades. However, the old habits tend to come back after time and the participants end up with the same academic performance as before.

Two of the participants indicated friends as a barrier to their success. Victoria expressed that friends were a distraction, in a positive way. She would rather hang out with friends and spend time with them than do homework. Samantha perceived her negative social experiences with peers as a hindrance to her ability to focus on school. The consistent bullying and rumors she experienced made it difficult for her to focus on academics. The participants both indicated friends as a distraction from school. The

participants' social lives, both positive and negative, had negative effects on their academic performance.

Lastly, one participant indicated he did not care about school. Robert stated "I don't really care about school that much. I'm starting to change. Freshmen year I did okay, then at the middle and end I just stopped caring." When the researcher probed deeper for Robert to define further what not caring looked like, he shared "not paying attention in class, not doing work, and not studying." Robert also indicated that he wanted to do better but it has been hard because of the habits he developed during the first years of high school.

**Key findings.** Nine of the participants had negative experiences or feelings about middle school from an academic standpoint. The participants selected a negative word to describe their academic experience in middle school 21 times while only selecting 4 positive words and 4 neutral words. During the middle school years, the participants experienced a decline in academic performance, motivation, and effort. They attributed this decline to the content being boring and un-engaging. In addition, they perceived the homework and the class activities to be boring and by the book rather than interactive and engaging. They also perceived the teachers to be strict, unhelpful, and boring. They indicated that during this time, they developed poor work and study habits because they began not to care, pay attention, or take school seriously. These habits contributed a continued underperformance academically in high school.

All of the participants portrayed positive memories of elementary school. They perceived it to be engaging, fun, less stressful, helpful teachers, and having good grades. The participants chose positive words to describe their academic experiences 24 times,

whereas only 4 negative words were chosen and 1 neutral word. Participants perceived elementary school to be fun and easy while finding the activities engaging. They found the content to be easy and found it easy to catch on quickly to the concepts. Elementary school was a positive memory for participants where they felt successful academically.

There were no definitive findings surrounding motivation; rather, the participants were varied in their responses. Four of the participants indicated their family was a motivator. They believed seeing their family happy and impressing their parents encouraged them to perform in school. Four of the participants referenced their future as a motivator. They knew they needed good grades and a good education to have a good job and/or go to a good college. The last two participants cited their co-curricular activity as their motivator. They kept their grades up so they could participate in their sport. This encouraged them to earn at least a 2.0 overall grade point average. The participants cited three different factors as motivation to perform better at school family, future, and participation in co-curricular activities.

Seven of the participants indicated laziness was a key contributor to their academic performance. The participants were aware that they needed to find motivation to do their work or to begin caring about school but they could not sustain the motivation over long periods. They wanted to be able to do their work but could not find the intrinsic motivation needed to complete it on a regular basis. This lack of motivation, or laziness as they described it, was the principal barrier to the participants' academic success.

All of the participants were dissatisfied with their academic performance overall. They did not believe that it accurately represented their capability. They believed that the

grades they earned were below where they could be if they gave more effort or had more motivation. The participants believed that if they completed the work, studied, or cared about the material that they would do better. They indicated intrinsic motivators as the necessary catalysts to success; however, they lacked intrinsic motivation to accomplish their goals.

**Research Question 2 findings.** Research Question 2 asked participants, “How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their home life and parent involvement in their education?” Interview questions 6, 7, and 8 asked the participants about parenting. These questions were: In the bottom section of the paper, please circle the words that describe your home life. Circle as many as you would like, but not less than three. Can you share more about why you chose the words you circled? On a scale from 1-5, where 5 is very close and 1 is not close at all, where would you rate your level of closeness to your mom and where would you rate your level of closeness with your dad? In what ways do your parents involve themselves in your education or at school? For example, do they read the emails/newsletters from school? Do they attend open houses? Do they attend conferences at school? Do they ask you about school and how you are doing? In what ways do other family members involve themselves in your education or at school?

Table 3 indicates the adjectives selected by participants to describe their home life.

Table 3

*Adjectives Describing Participants' Home Life*

Adjectives	Number of Responses
Angry	1
Arguing	4
Busy	3
Caring	4
Chaotic	1
Cold	0
Combative	1
Comfortable	4
Cooperative	0
Demanding	3
Enjoyable	5
Frightening	0
Helpful	5
High-expectations	4
Involved	0
Kind	2
Lonely	0
Loving	5



The participants choose a negative word to describe their home life 13 times, a positive word 40 times and a neutral word 12 times. When asked to explain why they chose those words, seven common themes surfaced. Those themes were parent involvement in education, mother's relationship with daughter, mother's relationship with son, father's relationship with daughter, father's relationship with son, academic expectation, and a positive or negative family dynamic.

Two participants discussed their parents' involvement in their education when asked about home life. They each discuss their parents' involvement in their education differently. Lewis discussed how his mother helps him with schoolwork and his father will get him tutors. He goes on to describe how his mother is sometimes annoying because she asks him too much about school, especially when he is not doing well. Alternatively, Finn has the complete opposite experience. His parents have completely removed themselves from his school life. Finn stated, "after my middle school years, when I was a real piece of shit, my parents became uninvolved. This is a good thing for me because my Mom used to be very overbearing and very all over things." Both indicated that they did not like their parents being overbearing and demanding about schoolwork.

Four participants, all female, discussed their relationship with their mother.

Summer indicated:

My mom is also demanding. She wants things done and if it's not done then she will be heated. I feel unorganized, my room is a mess. My backpack is unorganized. That's how my older sister is; unorganized. My mom if I get bad grades, or I don't do well on something, all I hear is the negative aspects of what I did. She will say you got an F in this and when I point out that I got a B in something else. She will go only see the bad things. We argue a lot. I will argue with my mom all the time.

Victoria stated “I definitely feel more comfortable with my Mom. When you’re a daughter you’re going to want your Mom growing up.” Claire also discussed her mother and how she helps her with her future and what she wants to do after high school. However, she also indicated there is a lot of fighting in her house but it does not occur between she and her mother. Hannah is very close with her mother and tells her almost everything. She indicated she and her mother get along very well and she is open and honest with her. All four participants have unique relationships with their mother.

Two participants, Lewis and Finn, mentioned the next theme, mother’s relationship with son. Lewis discussed his mother helping him with work but also being demanding. She often demanded that he do things, which became annoying to him. He expressed that there is no fighting between the two of them but a lot of annoyance. Finn described his mother as overbearing and incapable of living her own life. He expressed this was frustrating, especially to a. Each of these participants experienced something different with Lewis’ mother being demanding and continuing to do so while Finn’s mother was disengaged after spending years being extremely demanding.

All five female participants discussed their relationship with their father. Samantha explained how her father expected her to have straight A’s and had specific rules at the house regarding school and homework. Victoria indicated:

My stepdad, he’s not my real father, but I hate to say this, but he is there for me more than my own dad is. My dad doesn’t have the money like my step dad has. My step dad is there for me for everything that my dad can’t be there for me for.

Claire discussed her father helping her with schoolwork, namely projects. She also discussed how he supported her by coming to her sporting competitions. Summer conveyed:

My dad moved away. He moved to Pittsburg two years ago. My dad has never been there for me. I never liked my dad when I was little. When they separated, my mom would force me to see him. Even before they were separated, I can remember running around the house yelling at him saying I can't wait until mom divorces you, I hate you. I never really seemed to like him very much. I had a birthday party when I was 10 and all the friends were over for a pool party in our backyard, and he was sleeping. He wouldn't do anything really. Sometimes he would come to my basketball games. He has been to one of my surf contests. He has never been very supportive. I didn't like the choices he made. When I was little, I would find his marijuana pipes and stuff. I knew that stuff wasn't cool. He made my mom unhappy a lot. That was tough for me. My little sister is the only one that talks to him that much. My older sister and I don't have anything to do with him.

Hannah discussed her father being away a great deal because of work commitments. She indicated that he is sometimes gone for weeks at a time and misses important family events such as birthdays and holidays. Hannah feels close to her father, but expressed that her father's absence may be why she is closer to her mother. Each of the participants feels different and has a different relationship with her father. Some indicated they were close while others perceive their relationship with their father is not close.

Three participants discussed the relationship between father and son. One of the participants, Claire, indicated that her brother and her father were not close. She expressed that they argued a lot. She perceived her brother to have a temper and that he became easily upset, especially with her father. Robert indicated his father blows things out of proportion and starts arguing with him about insignificant things. He does not like to ask for help anymore because he does not believe his father is helpful. He keeps to himself at his home perceiving a distant relationship not just with his father but also with his entire family. Finn described his father as "very supportive but in an uninvolved way." He indicated their relationship was enjoyable and did not believe that his father made choices for him but guided him to make choices for himself.

Five of the participants indicated an academic expectation by their parents. Will stated “I feel like my parents set too high of goals for me. That’s kind of like stressful.” Victoria also perceived that her parents had high expectations for her when it came to school. She perceived they set high expectations so she could do things they were not able to do. Robert expressed “when I got to high school my parents expected a lot of me, they expected me to get good grades, do good in school.” Summer believed her mother only pointed out the negative in her academics and never acknowledged the positive. Samantha believed her father had very high expectations of her in school and wanted her to have straight As, especially because of the high-performing nature of the school she attended. The participants acknowledged that their parents set high expectations for their academic achievement and believed this caused stress and tension in the household because they had not achieved at the level expected by their parents.

Lastly, the participants discussed the family dynamic in the household. Four of the participants indicated a positive family dynamic while five indicated a negative family dynamic. One participant did not discuss the family dynamic in the household. The participants who indicated a positive family dynamic chose positive words from the possible selections and described their house as a positive environment overall. The participants who indicated a negative family dynamic chose positive and/or negative words but described the household in a negative way stating that arguing occurred frequently and generally feeling not close to one parent or both. The homes in which there was a positive family dynamic were loving supportive homes while those that were negative had a lot of arguing and fighting among the members in the household.

Interview Question 7 asked, “on a scale from 1-5, where 5 is very close and 1 is not close at all, where would you rate your level of closeness to your mother and where would you rate your level of closeness with your father?”

Table 4 indicates the ratings the participants chose for each parent.

Table 4

*Participants' Self-Rating Level of Closeness to Mother and Father*

Participant	Mother	Father
Andrew	3	2
Claire	4.5	2
Finn	0	3.5
Hannah	5	4
Lewis	4	4
Robert	2.5	2.5
Samantha	5	2
Summer	3	2
Victoria	4	4
Will	4	5

The average self-rating for closeness to mother was 3.5. The average rating for closeness to father was 3.1. The female participants felt closer to their mothers than their fathers. The male participants felt closer to their fathers than to their mothers. On average, the female participants rated their closeness to mother as 4.3 versus a 2.7 for males. The male participants rated their closeness to their father as 3.4 versus a 2.8 for

females. Both males and females rated approximately the same for the opposite sex parent 2.8 and 2.7 respectively, while females rated higher for closeness to mother than males did closeness to father with 4.3 and 3.4 ratings respectively.

When asked to explain the ratings, they selected five of the seven same themes emerged as from interview Question 6. Those themes were mother relationship with daughter, positive or negative, mother relationship with son, positive or negative, father relationship with daughter, positive or negative, father relationship with son, positive or negative, and academic expectation. From this interview question, the themes of family dynamic and parent involvement in education did not transpire.

The female participants perceived a close relationship with their mother. They all indicated feelings of closeness to their mother with only one participant rating their closeness lower than a four. Samantha confided in her mother and told her what was going on in her life. Her mother was aware of the social struggles she has endured. Claire and her mother discuss almost everything. Her mother has kept her informed of what has been going on between her mother and father. Claire tells her mother most of what is going on and conveyed her mother finds out the rest, such as boyfriends. She believes they are close. Victoria stated “my mom since day one of the divorce has been by my side for everything. My parents divorced when I was four years old so ever since then I always wanted to be with my mom.” She indicated they have always been close and she can talk to her about anything. Hannah stated, “because we are very close, I tell her everything, and if I don’t tell her everything, I feel like I should, so I do. I know she needs me so I try to be really close with her.” Summer was the only female participant who indicated a relationship that was not wholly positive with her mother. She stated:

I don't tell my mom everything. I don't think she expects me to tell her everything. I get annoyed with her kind of easily; we also take a lot of trips together. We spend a lot of hours in the car together. I love my mom and she is my number one fan. I do things behind her back.

The females perceived close relationships with their mother and perceived them to be someone they could talk to about what was going on in their life.

The male participants perceived a distant relationship with their mother. Only one participant indicated a positive relationship with his mother. Will believed he and his mother were close even though they fight. He perceived his mother as the disciplinarian in the house. The other four male participants expressed a negative relationship with their mother. Robert expressed that he and his mother do not talk often as he tends to spend much of his time at home in his room alone. Lewis stated, "I feel like my parents don't understand me and I don't understand my parents either." Andrew perceived his mother to be distant and not willing to engage in conversation with him. He indicated that they do not talk often. Finn stated:

It's an interesting case; we are of completely different minds. She is in everyone else's business. She is very overbearing and awful, so we constantly disagree on everything, which is why I don't talk to her much. I can't have a conversation with her without her thinking I'm crazy. And, I don't want to talk to her about what she thinks, because her opinions are just way out there. Way crazy. She used to be very over protective, then I grew up and I was able to form my own ideas and she didn't like that. She is very, very wanting to be in control of things. When I grew up and it has gotten very distant recently. We live together and that's about it.

With an average rating of 2.7 out of 5, the male participants did not perceive a close relationship with their mothers.

The female participants perceived a distant relationship with their father. Two of the participants live in divorced homes where their fathers have not lived with them for at

least eight years. The other three participants come from families living together. Only one participant indicated a positive relationship with her father. Hannah perceived that she and her father were not as close as she and her mother. She perceived him to be an overprotective father but still found that she told him most of what was going on in her life. Summer did not feel close to her father. She did not see him or talk to him often and preferred it that way. She did not perceive him to be involved in her life. She indicated that she did not get excited to see him nor will she go out of her way to see him.

Victoria stated:

He always tells me to come out this weekend, I want to see you. But, when I do come out, the only thing he focuses on is his wife. So, I end up sitting in my room by myself. It sucks, because I miss my dad all the time since I don't get to see him. When we come over, when we do anything, his wife is there and I don't get to spend one on one time with him, which sucks 'cause I miss my dad. I don't get to spend time with my dad. Just me and my dad. It's not like I don't like his wife. I love his wife and everything but at the same time, there is always that moment where you guys are together every day and I'm here every couple months. It would definitely help if he could pay more attention to me; take more interest in me. I get it, he's newly married, and you're going to want to be with your wife. But at the same time, I'm your daughter; you haven't seen me in forever. Pay more attention to me. We used to have a really strong relationship, but since I don't live with him anymore, I don't see him all that often so our relationship just tended to fall over.

Claire perceived her father to be busy. She stated:

I just think, he's really busy and I don't really know how to connect with him. Maybe it's cause he's a guy and I'm a girl. I just don't know how to talk to him. Talk about my feelings, because I don't think he'll understand.

Lastly, Samantha perceived a growing distance between she and her father, particularly since her academic performance declined. She believed they were not as close and that he was the disciplinarian in the house and that was why she did not believe she could talk to him the way she spoke with her mother. The female participants rated their level of



closeness to their fathers 2.8 on average. They did not perceive a close relationship with their fathers.

The male participants perceived a closer relationship with their father than their mother. However, three participants indicated a negative relationship with their father while two indicated a positive relationship with their father. Robert, Lewis, and Andrew each portrayed a negative relationship with their father. For Robert, he and his father argue frequently and he believed that his father yelled at him regularly. Therefore, he chose to disengage from his father and not speak with him. Andrew does not speak with his father as well. His parents are divorced and his father moved back to his home country. Andrew does not see him or speak to him any longer. Lewis believed the same way about his father as he did with his mother, that they simply do not understand one another. Alternatively, Will and Finn indicated positive relationships with their fathers. Each believed they shared common hobbies and mindsets. They talk frequently and did things together that they both enjoyed. On average, the male participants rated their level of closeness to their father a 3.4 out of 5.

The last common theme to emerge from this interview question was academic expectation. Three participants again discussed their parents' academic expectation for them when discussing their levels of closeness to each parent. Will and Samantha discussed their parents' academic expectation as a contributing factor to their negative relationship with that parent. For Will, his mother is the more involved parent in school. She asked about schoolwork and grades, which lead to fights between the two of them. Samantha discussed her father's strict rules about schoolwork and grades. Her steady underperformance over the last four years has created distance between she and her

father. Victoria stated that both of her parents had high expectations for her even though her parents are no longer married.

Interview Question 8 was the last interview question to address research Question 2, it asked, "In what ways do your parents involve themselves in your education or at school? For example, do they read the emails/newsletters from school? Do they attend open houses? Do they attend conferences at school? Do they ask you about school and how you are doing? In what ways do other family members involve themselves in your education or at school? From the participant responses, seven themes emerged. These themes were setting up conferences, attending conferences, email, talking with teachers, asking about homework, checking homework, and checking grades. Two participants indicated that at least one of their parents set up conferences at the school. Summer and Lewis both indicated that their mothers set up meetings at school. Lewis expressed that his mother "makes appointments with my teachers and my counselors." Summer shared a time her mother set up a conference with her history teacher to discuss her progress and concerns that Summer was having in the class. However, six of the participants indicated that their parents attended conferences when the school set it up. Each of the six participants stated that their parent had attended a conference at school when the school contacted them and asked them to come in. Victoria stated "if it's a serious thing where the teacher wants to talk to them, then yeah they will go." Andrew also stated, "she does talk to my counselor when my counselor brings her in." These six parents did not take the initiative to make contact with the school but did follow up with them when the school requested their presence to discuss concerns of their child.

Seven of the participants communicated that their parents received and read emails from the school. Hannah indicated her mother would read an email if it was from a specific staff member at school but not if it was a generic email about school activities. Four of the participants indicated their parents read the emails that came from the school, including the newsletter emails providing news and events on campus. Finn perceived his mother wanted to be involved in his education and this was one way in which she could continue to be involved. Victoria conveyed that her mother and stepfather received emails and checked them when it came from one of her teachers. When they received emails from the teachers, they would check her grades online. Email was the primary mode of involvement for the parents of the participants.

Two participants, Summer and Andrew, indicated their parents communicated with their teachers. Andrew indicated his mother talked to his teachers but only when they initiated contact. He believed that his mother was more involved in his younger brother's education. He indicated that she attended his conferences and Back to School Nights. He believed that because he was not as into school as his younger brother that she was not as involved with him. Summer shared that her mother frequently spoke with her teachers. She also indicated that she spoke with her counselor a lot. Both of these parents had contact with teachers at their child's school. However, only one initiated contact. The other communicated with teachers when they reached out to her first.

The parents of nine of the participants asked their child about their homework. However, only two parents checked the homework about which they asked. The participants indicated, on a regular basis, their parents asked them if their homework was finished. They also conveyed this was a yes or no question in which they frequently

responded yes even when the homework was not completed. Four participants stated their parents asked to see it and they responded by telling them to leave them alone or telling their parents that they would do it later. The parents did not follow up further.

Victoria stated:

Sometimes for a week or so when I get in big trouble for my grades, she will check my homework and check my planner, just to make sure. Then she would check the grade the day after. After a week, we both gave up on it because it took too much effort. We both are pretty lazy about that. So, that lasted for about a week, and that stopped and she just took my word for it, because she just didn't want to check it every night.

The others simply stated their parents ask about homework, they tell them that it is done, and their parents believe them. Will and Lewis indicated that their mothers regularly checked their homework for completion. Will expressed that his mother asked him about his homework and he always replied that it was done. When she did ask him to see it, he yelled and then had to complete the homework. Lewis conveyed that recently his mother began checking his homework daily. Before, she would ask if his homework was completed but never asked to see it. Now that his grades had declined, she asked to see his homework every day. The parents of nine participants asked if the homework was complete but only two parents asked to see the completed homework.

Lastly, checking grades emerged as a common theme from this interview question. Five of the participants communicated that their parents checked their grades. At both sites, there was an online system for parents to check grades. Each of the five participants indicated that their parents checked the online system with regularity. Will expressed that his mother checked his grades online and printed them so she could see what he had done. Victoria stated, "they will do a weekly/monthly check just to make

sure I'm on track and everything is going good. The participants expressed their parents regularly checked their grades online to see how they were doing.

**Key findings.** Each of the participants perceived a closer relationship with the same sex parent. Females were closer to their mothers and males were closer to their fathers. Females believed they could talk to their mothers about almost everything that was going on at school and in life. The males did things together with their fathers. Mostly, they shared hobbies and interests and did those things together. All participants had an average rating under three for the opposite sex parent. Three of the participants had parents who were both uninvolved in school. Five of the participants' opposite sex parent was the disciplinarian, particularly for schoolwork and grades. Two of the female participants came from divorced homes and lived with their mother; therefore, the mother was involved in their schooling.

Nine of the participants had parents who asked them regularly if their homework was completed while only two participants' parents asked to check the homework. The participants expressed that their parents would ask if they completed their homework and they would often lie and tell them it was completed even when it was not. When they were asked to show their work, which was rarely, they deflected the question and were left alone with no further questioning to see the work. Two of the male participants regularly had to show their completed homework to their mother. For one of the participants, this was a new occurrence since his grades had declined. For the other, his mother asked to see his homework most of the time. The parents asked about homework but rarely followed through to ensure its completion even though they were aware of their academic progress.

**Research Question 3 findings.** Research Question 3 asked participants, “how do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their peer relations and participation in organized school and community activities?” The interview protocol had 4 interview questions 2, 9, 10, and 11 that were aligned to this research question. The interview questions were: Please circle two to three adjectives; using the blue pen; that describe your social life, friends, friend groups, and interactions with other classmates in elementary school. Now, please use the red pen to circle two to three adjectives that describe your social life, friends, friend groups, and interactions with other classmates in middle school. Finally, please use the black pen to circle two to three adjectives that describe your social life, friends, friend groups, and interactions with other classmates in high school. Please share why you chose the adjectives you circled. Tell me about your relationship with your friends and other people in your classes? Do you have many friends, best friends? What do you do together? How would you describe your friends’ academic performance in school (i.e. grades)? Do you participate in any activities, groups, etc., inside and/or outside of school? If so, please describe the groups, what kinds of activities, how often you participate, and where you participate? If you do not participate in any groups or activities, please share why not.

Interview Question 2 related to this research question asked the participants to select adjectives from a list to describe their social experiences at each schooling level; elementary, middle, and high school. Table 5 shows the participants selected responses.

The participants perceived positive social experiences in all three schooling levels. The participants chose positive words 23 times to describe their social experiences in elementary school while only choosing 2 negative words and 2 neutral words. In middle school, they chose positive words 17 times, negative words 7 times and neutral words 3 times. For high school, they chose 20 positive words, 2 negative words and 2 neutral words.

When the participants explained their selected words, five common themes emerged among their responses. These themes were social life outside of school, friend groups in the different schooling levels, friends' effects on academics, school involvement, and friends' academic performance. Four of the participants discussed their social life outside of school when asked to describe their social experiences in school. They talked about what they do with their friends outside of school. Andrew discussed going out with his friends to do different. Victoria and Hannah discussed similar activities. When they discussed their friends, they expressed "hanging out." Hannah stated, "We always hung out together and they would invite me over to their house and we would go out. If they to the nail salon they would take me with them." These participants equated their social life outside of school and in school as one in the same.

Table 5

*Adjectives Describing Participants' Social Experiences in Elementary, Middle, and High School*

Adjectives	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Overall
Adventurous	1	0	2	3
Aggressive	0	0	0	0
Anxious	0	0	0	0
Awkward	0	2	0	2
Big	0	0	0	0
Boring	0	1	0	1
Bullied	0	1	0	1
Busy	0	0	0	0
Caring	1	1	2	4
Comfortable	2	2	0	4
Cruel	0	0	0	0
Demanding	0	0	0	0
Depressing	0	0	1	1
Exciting	2	1	1	4
Friendly	3	4	1	8
Happy	4	2	3	9

(table continues)



Adjectives	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Overall
Horrible	0	0	0	0
Important	1	1	0	2
Involved	0	2	2	4
Jealous	0	0	0	0
Lonely	0	1	0	1
Lost	0	2	0	2
Loyal	3	1	4	8
Manipulating	0	1	0	1
Mean	0	0	0	0
Non-existent	0	0	1	1
Painful	0	0	0	0
Fun	4	3	2	9
Party	0	0	0	0
Pleasant	1	1	2	4
Popular	0	0	0	0
Pressure	0	0	0	0

(table continues)

Adjectives	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Overall
Sincere	3	0	1	4
Small	0	1	0	1
Supportive	0	0	2	2
Unpopular	2	0	0	2

Eight of the participants discussed friend groups in the different levels of school. They indicated that throughout the levels their groups of friends changed for one reason or another. Samantha discussed having many friends in elementary school and then losing them all in middle school. Robert, Summer, Lewis and Victoria discussed losing friends when they changed schools. Summer and Victoria moved to their current schools in elementary school and lost their old friends. Robert and Lewis each attended a different middle school than their elementary school friends and had to start making new friends again. They each found this experience to be difficult and to cause a time of loneliness or feeling lost at school. Nevertheless, they formed new friendships in a short amount of time and had new positive social experiences. Claire stated:

Elementary I wasn't with that popular group of girls, but the girls I was with were sincere and true friends and that made me happy. Middle: It was kind of an awkward stage for me. I started hanging out with another group of friends. That group of friends was not the best group of friends that I should have hung out with because they were manipulating just a little. As in they told me I should do this because it would be cool, so it was just an awkward time for me. It was also comfortable because it was just comfortable. I think high school was the best time for me for a social life, because I'm not popular but I do have more variety of friends. You get to meet more people. My friends are really loyal, and you find your true friends in high school, but you also lose a lot of friends. You really

know who your true friends. Exciting because high school life should be exciting. Involved because I'm on basketball right now and I did dance drill team. I think just being involved is a really good time in high school because it's all your memories.

These eight participants discussed changing groups of friends in the various schooling levels because of change in residence, change of school, or a change in who they were. However, overall they indicated positive social experiences.

Three participants indicated their friends had an effect on their personal academic achievement. The academic effect on each of three was a negative one. Because of social issues, their academics declined. Victoria expressed:

I actually got pretty good grades in middle school 6<sup>th</sup> grade because I didn't have friends. I get worse grade when I actually do have friends because that's all I focus on is hanging out with my friends. So, it helped not having friends.

Claire explained that befriending the wrong group of girls negatively affected her academic achievement in middle school. Samantha's academics declined after enduring several years of bullying, which began in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. These girls experienced a decline in academics in middle school because of social experiences. One participant related it to positive social experiences leading her to be distracted from school, while the other two indicated that negative social experiences affected their academics in the classroom.

Three participants discussed activities in which they were involved at school when asked about their social experiences. Two of the participants shared their involvement on school athletic teams as a large part of their social experience in high school. For each of these participants, the involvement on an athletic team improved their social experiences in high school and helped them connect with a positive group of peers in which they shared similar interests. Lewis discussed his friends' involvement in

school activities leading them to be happy while in middle school. These participants had personal experience with positive social experiences during school activities, either personally or seeing the effect on their friends.

The last common theme to emerge from this interview question was the participants discussing their friends' academic performance. Summer stated:

I liked my friends in middle school. Everyone seemed all nice. I almost felt like I didn't fit in, they were all good kids and got good grades and I struggled to get C's. It was like I didn't fit in.

Lewis, again, discussed that his friends doing well in school made them happy. He explained that in middle school there was not a great deal happening so his friends were happy when their work was completed. That made life. These two participants related their social experiences to their friends' academic performance, particularly as it related to their own academic performance.

Three of the five themes from Interview Question 2 also emerged in Interview Question 9. Those themes were social life outside of school, friends groups in the school levels, and school involvement. This question asked, "tell me about your relationship with your friends and other people in your classes? Do you have many friends, best friends? What do you do together?" All of the participants discussed their social life outside of school in high school. They did not discuss previous social experiences before high school. They each discussed doing different activities around town. Lewis liked to go to the mall with his friends. Finn liked to play online video games with his friends. Victoria and Summer talked about driving around town or getting something to eat with friends. Samantha and Finn discussed that friends outside of school are the only ones they have. Neither had a friend group at school; they only had friends from different

schools. They discussed informal, innocent activities with their friends. However, they did stress the importance of these relationships on their social experiences both inside and outside of school.

The participants discussed how many friends they had and how many they considered best friends. Two of the participants indicated having three or fewer best friends. Six of the participants stated they had three to seven best friends. Two participants stated they had 10 or more best friends. They all stated they got along well with most everyone. However, each participant did indicate there were people at school with whom they did not get along or with whom their friends did not get along. They each indicated they ignored or avoided those people. They did not perceive that these negative relationships affected their academics because they simply avoided or ignored these people.

One participant discussed friend groups in the different schooling levels. Hannah again discussed a close friend that she had in middle school and then parted from in 9<sup>th</sup> grade but has since become close again. She explained that there was no bad incident between the two of them. She stated they did different activities during 9<sup>th</sup> grade but toward the end of that year, they had a mutual friend who reacquainted them. She expressed that in high school they became closer than they were in middle school.

One participant, Will, discussed school involvement as it relates to his social experiences. He discussed having different friend groups at school. One of those groups is the people who are on his team. He indicated that they were very close. He stated, "I have two sets of friends and I'm really good friends with both of them. Then I have

friends on my sports teams that I play and that's really good." For him, school involvement has had a direct effect on his social experiences at school.

Interview Question 10 asked, "how would you describe your friends' academic performance in school?" From this question, three themes emerged. The participants perceived their friends' performance was the same as their own, their performance was below that of their friends, or their performance was in the middle of that of their friends. None of the participants described their friends' academic performance to be below their own. Only one participant, Victoria, had one friend whose performance she perceived to be the same as hers. Victoria expressed, "but, my friend Rachel, she gets pretty good grades. But, at the same time, she can fail a couple classes. Me and her are at the same academic level."

Seven of the participants perceived their own academic performance below that of their friends. Samantha stated, "they are really high. I'm pretty far below them." Claire indicated, "they are all good. They all get 3.5's, 4.0's and I'm just the one on the side. They always talk about their grades. They get crazy when they have like a B." Summer expressed:

They all get good grades, like B's and A's Then there is me. They try to help me. One of my friends, she gets straight A's, sometimes a B. She will help me with school; she'll help me study. But she can only help so much, because she has her own homework to do. They care about me and they care about my grades. But, it doesn't really affect me like how close we are because I get bad grades. It doesn't really change anything like that. They just tell me "you're a dumb ass, just try."

While not all of their friends were earning straight A's, they did believe that even those friends who did not get those grades performed better than they did. They indicated these friends did their work and at least passed their classes. Finn explained his friends

performance stating, “good enough to make me look like shit! They go to a private school and they are both straight A students.” These students perceived their academic performance to be well below that of their friends.

Three participants indicated their academic performance was in the middle of that of their friend group. They perceived they had friends who performed better than they performed, but perceived they had friends whose performance was below their own as well. When asked where he would put his academic performance among his friend group Will stated, “In the lower part, but not the stupidest.” He indicated his better performing friends did discuss school often. He did not discuss school as much with his other friends. About conversations with his high-performing friends he indicated:

It kind of sucks, cause they are a lot better. But, then at the same time, when they are talking about stuff, they watch Jeopardy and I’ll know as many of the answers as them, so it’s stupid because I’m almost as smart as them, so I could be getting the same grades. It’s kind of frustrating.

Lewis and Robert also believed they had some friends who performed better than they did and other friends who performed worse. Lewis rated himself a 3.5 out of 5 in comparison to his friends. These three participants believed their academic performance was in the middle of that of their friend group.

Interview Question 11 asked participants, “do you participate in any activities, groups, etc., inside and/or outside of school? If so, please describe the groups, what kinds of activities, how often you participate, and where you participate? If you do not participate in any groups or activities, please share why not?” From the responses, five themes emerged, participants participate in an activity inside of school, participants participate in an activity outside of school, participants attended activities only when their

friends brought them along, they used to participate in an activity, and they want to participate in an activity.

Five of the participants are involved in an activity at school. These activities range from lunchtime clubs to athletic teams. Four of the five participate in the athletic program at their school. Will participates on two teams, although only one is considered a sanctioned sport; the other he participates in as a club. Samantha currently participates on one team but wants to join another team in a different sports season. Summer participates on one sports team that competes year-round. Claire participates on one team now and is competing and participating in this sport for the first time. The participation on an athletic team was a commitment for them as each of them spends approximately two to three hours per day practicing or competing. Summer, Will, and Finn are all members of various lunchtime clubs at their schools as well. These clubs usually require a meeting once per week and a few hours of volunteer time outside of school periodically. School involvement is a time commitment but something that the participants valued in their social experiences at school.

Three of the participants participated in an activity outside of school. They do a variety of activities from volunteering to taking classes. Andrew stated that he took martial arts lessons. Lewis discussed volunteering at the park. He helps them unlock the gates in the mornings on certain days. Summer works with an organization called Wounded Warriors. She also participated on two youth league sports teams in basketball and soccer. Each of these participants took pride in their activities outside of school.

One participant was not involved in any activities inside or outside of school but did indicate that he periodically attended club meetings when his friends brought him



along. He explained that he went along and listened but did not participate in the activities. When asked why he previously had not participated in any activities Robert stated, "I don't know. I never really tried it. I've never done it."

Two participants, Hannah and Victoria, expressed that they used to participate in activities but they did not any longer. Hannah used to participate on a softball team for her father's car club. She also indicated she was a member of a club during 10<sup>th</sup> grade but did not sign up to be a member of the club in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. She indicated that she enjoyed the volunteer work in the club and did not have a reason why she did not sign up the following year, simply that she did not. Victoria previously was on a team at school. She stated, "I did cheer at school and then I got a bad grade and I couldn't get it up in time and they kicked me off." These two were actively involved in a school activity at some point during their high school career but were no longer involved because of grades or an undisclosed reason.

One participant expressed that she wanted to be in a club at school. Hannah expressed, "inside school I want to join Wheels club, 'cause I want to do something." She did not give a reason why she did not join that club. Hannah only indicated that she wanted to join that club.

**Key findings.** The participants perceived positive social experiences at each level of schooling, elementary, middle, and high. They selected positive words to describe their social experiences in elementary school 23 times versus 2 negative words and 2 neutral words. The participants chose positive words 17 times to describe their social experiences in middle school while only choosing negative words 7 times and neutral words 3 times. Additionally, in high school they selected 20 positive words, 2 negative

words and 2 neutral words to describe their social experiences. While the participants chose more negative words to describe their social experiences in middle school, than the other levels, the results overall demonstrated positive experiences from their perceptions.

Seven of the participants perceived and described their academic performance to be below that of their friends. The students believed their friends far outperformed them and in two instances, the participants did not enjoy discussing academics with their friends because they did not believe they fit in with their friends. While three participants perceived their academic performance to be in the middle or the same as that of their friends, none of the participants expressed that their academic performance was above that of their friends.

Five of the participants participated in a school activity, either an athletic team or a club. These participants participated in a range of athletic teams and participated in lunchtime clubs at school that require meetings and community service. These participants spent two to three hours per day practicing for their athletic team. They perceived it to be a major commitment and indicated it did add stress to their already busy schedule. However, they also indicated its importance to them socially. Additionally, three participants were involved in an activity outside of school requiring time away from schoolwork. Two of the participants volunteered for different organizations and the third was involved in martial arts outside of school.

**Research Question 4 findings.** Research Question 4 asked, “how do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their social and emotional

well-being?” The interview protocol had 3 interview questions, 12, 13, and 14 that aligned to this research question. The three interview questions asked, “on a scale from 1-5, where 5 is very smart and 1 is not very smart, where would you rate yourself? Why? What makes you happy? What makes you sad? On a scale from 1-5, where 5 is happy all the time and 1 is sad all of the time, where would you rate your level of happiness? Please explain your rating. Have you ever been to or thought about going to see a counselor or therapist about depression, anxiety, or other reason related to the way you feel? If so, what were you experiencing?”

Question 12 aligned to research Question 4 asked, “on a scale from 1-5, where 5 is very smart and 1 is not very smart, where would you rate yourself? Why?” Table 6 shows each participant response.

Table 6

<i>Participants' Level of Smart Self-Rating</i>	
Participant	Self-Rating
Andrew	4
Claire	3.5
Finn	3.5
Hannah	4
Lewis	3
Robert	3
Samantha	3.5
Summer	4
Victoria	3.5
Will	3.5

On average, the participants rated themselves a 3.5 out of 5, rating themselves slightly above average. They perceived they had a slightly above average rate of intelligence. When asked why they rated themselves what they did, four themes emerged, laziness, effort, difficulty, interest in the subject.

Two of the participants indicated that laziness was a barrier to their success.

Claire stated:

I think I consider myself a 3ish 4, because I think I am smart, I think I have the ability to get good grades. It's just my laziness, homework and being lazy to study for tests. When I actually do my homework and I study I do get good grades on my tests.

Will also indicated, "3-4, I know stuff. I'm just lazy. Kind of stupid. I'm smart. I can remember things. Just lazy." These two believed their grades were not a reflection of their academic capabilities and that their laziness was what led them to earn the grades they had not their level of intelligence.

Six of the participants indicated that effort was a barrier to their academic achievement. Finn indicated that the material was not difficult but he did not do work because he did not want to. Victoria stated:

I don't get the best grades, but I don't get the worst grades either. I get average I get C's B's and an A every now and then. I definitely think it's just because I don't try as hard as I know, I don't do the best that I know I can do. It doesn't pay off for me. I know throughout the rest of my high school year I do definitely want to do better because I just want to be able to impress my parents. Not only just do it for my parents, but do it for myself.

Hannah also believed that her current academic achievement was not a true measure of her capability but her grades were more of a reflection of her effort. She expressed, "my grades show that I am not capable of much, but I know I am. I know I can achieve

something if I want to if I push myself.” These participants perceived that effort was interfering with their academic achievement and believed they were more capable than their current grades reflected.

The next common theme was difficulty. Five of the participants discussed having difficulty with school material. Hannah stated, “I’m pretty smart. I get a lot of the material at school; I just don’t get all of it, like fractions and graphs, they give me chills.” Summer indicated, “I don’t think I’m stupid, I just think it takes a lot more for me to learn and I need to try a lot harder than most people.” Andrew and Lewis believed that they were of average intelligence but their classes were lower than their friends and that material was, at times, difficult for them. Samantha indicated, “because in some classes I feel like I’m pretty smart and in others, I feel like there is no hope basically.” These participants perceived themselves to have an average to above average level of intelligence. However they did believe, at times, that learning was difficult for them particularly in comparison to their peers.

The last common theme to emerge was interest in the subject. Two of the participants indicated that their level of interest in a subject determined how much effort they put forth and how successful or unsuccessful they would be in a class. Robert stated, “It kind of depends on what type of subject it is. If it’s something I’m interested in a lot I’ll pay attention. However, if it’s Science or English, I’ll zone out.” Robert indicated that his interests were history, military, and war. These topics piqued his interest and he performed better in these classes. Finn also perceived his level of interest was a contributing factor. He indicated:

I feel like I am quickly if not more that quickly able to learn concepts, mostly abstract concepts, because I don't like subjects like math where there are rules and you have to do this, this, this and this. I like lot of thinking and interpreting, which is why I like Psychology and Philosophy and things stuff like that.

The level of interest the participant had in a subject determined how much effort or how much they paid attention in that class. For the classes they perceived as uninteresting they would not perform while they would perform in the classes where there interests were.

Interview Question 13 asked, "what makes you happy? What makes you sad? On a scale from 1-5, where 5 is happy all the time and 1 is sad all of the time, where would you rate your level of happiness? Please explain your rating." Table 7 shows the participants self-rating level of happiness.

Table 7

<i>Participants' Level of Happiness Self-Rating</i>	
Participant	Self-Rating
Andrew	4
Claire	4
Finn	3
Hannah	4
Lewis	4
Robert	4
Samantha	2.5
Summer	3.5
Victoria	5
Will	4

The average participant rating was 3.8 out of 5. The participants indicated they were more often happy than sad. From the participant responses about the things that made them happy and sad, eight themes emerged. Those themes were family, friends, entertainment, sports, fighting within or among family, disappointing their family, grades, and loss or grief.

Four of the participants indicated that family made them happy and one indicated that family made her sad. The participants who indicated family made them happy enjoyed talking with family, spending time with them, and seeing them happy. Hannah stated, “my family, my friends. Knowing I have family and friends that I know are so in my life and I know I won’t be losing them anytime soon.” Victoria indicated, “just hanging out with my siblings. Just because I enjoy hanging out with my little brother and my older brother. My older brother is always real fun.” Claire indicated that when her family was happy that made her happy. One participant, Summer, indicated that her family made her sad. She did not give specific details on what aspects of her family made her sad. She stated, in general, her family sometimes made her sad.

Nine of the participants discussed friends made them happy. They enjoyed talking with friends, hanging out with friends, and other activities with them. Lewis indicated he was happy when he was out with his friends. He stated, “I go to the mall or some other places with my friends; that makes me happy.” Claire stated she was happy when her friends were happy. The participants enjoyed the company of their friends and knowing they had friends was something that made them happy overall.

The next common theme to emerge was that entertainment made the participants happy. Five of the participants discussed that movies, games, computers, or music made them happy. Samantha stated, “music. I listen to it and I sing and I’m learning to play the guitar.” Four of the participants discussed computers and games. Andrew indicated, “entertainment, like movies and stuff.” These various forms of entertainment made these participants happy.

The last common theme to emerge around happiness was sports. Three of the participants discussed sporting activities made them happy. Summer and Victoria indicated specific activities that made them happy while Will stated that playing sports made him happy. Victoria discussed wakeboarding as an activity she really enjoyed. Summer indicated that surfing made her happy. For these participants, participating in sports made them happiest.

The next common theme, fighting within or among family, was indicated by participants as something that made them sad. Four of the participants discussed fighting with their parents or their parents fighting as something that made them sad. Claire stated, “I feel sad when my parents are fighting.” Robert and Will both indicated that fighting with their parents made them sad. Lewis indicated, “my mom is screaming at me to stop, I’m not really happy.” Fighting with family or families fighting made the participants unhappy.

One participant identified disappointing her family as something that made her sad. Victoria stated, “the only thing that makes me sad is disappointing my parents.” She also stated that something that made her sad was not spending as much time with her father as she would like. She indicated:



Probably not seeing my dad as much as I want to. Definitely sucks not seeing my dad and my other little brother, my step brother. My step brother and me get along really well, he's like blood to me almost, I wish he was. I don't get to see my oldest brother that much, so and that definitely makes me sad sometimes, I have a really close relationship with him. So not being able to see him does kind of suck a lot. I also mainly miss hanging out with my dad, before I moved, me and my dad had a really, really strong relationship. Our relationship still is strong, just not as strong as it used to be ever since he got married. I'm not saying I wish he didn't get married, I'm happy for him, I'm glad he's happy. That's all I want for my dad. It just does suck every now and then not being able to see him and I do miss him.

For Victoria, her family was very important to her and while she indicated that they made her happy, there were family scenarios that made her sad as well.

Three of the participants discussed grades were something that made them sad. Disappointments and underperformance at school made them unhappy. Samantha stated, "if I'm doing my math homework and I think about it, and I can't do it, then I get really down and then it's like I can't do this." Will also indicated that doing poorly in school made him sad. Summer stated, "sometimes bad grades make me sad. Because it's depressing when I actually try then I'm expecting a good grade or a passing grade and I end up getting a D. That's also discouraging. There nothing worse than trying and not getting a good grade." The participants indicated when they put in effort into schoolwork and did not see reward that led to feelings of sadness.

Lastly, two participants discussed loss or grief leading to feelings of sadness. Both Hannah and Summer discussed losing pets. They both indicated that the loss of their pet was sad as they felt close to their pets. Hannah also indicated that losing a family member was difficult and created sadness for her. She stated, "more recently, it would be my cousin because he committed suicide. Just knowing he's not here. It got

hard for his daughter. She is only nine and they were really close, Daddy's little girl. So that's what makes me sad. But knowing he is in a better place kind of makes me happy." Losing a loved one caused sadness for these two participants.

The last interview question, 14, asked, "have you ever been to or thought about going to see a counselor or therapist about depression, anxiety, or other reason related to the way you feel? If so, what were you experiencing?" The participants indicated yes, no, or they stated no but indicated they had experienced feelings of depression or anxiety.

Three of the participants indicated that they had seen or are currently seeing a therapist. Each of the three indicated they visited a therapist for depression or depression-like symptoms. Hannah indicated that she had visited a therapist shortly after her cousin passed away. She also indicated that she had seen a therapist as a child. She stated:

When I was little I had a counselor a therapist. I didn't talk to her, I didn't like her. A little kid is supposed to be happy and like everybody but as soon as I walked into that therapist office with her, I didn't like her, I never talked to her.

Samantha expressed that she was recently diagnosed with chronic depression. After many discussions with her mother, they decided to see a therapist this past summer where she received the diagnosis and medication. Finn experienced depression with suicidal ideations in the past. He explained:

My girlfriend at the time, last year was already a bad idea to begin with. She was very similar to the girl that I date before that. She goes out one night and comes over to my house stoned out of her mind and I feel betrayed. That's not something I do, that's not something she does. We had talked about it and expressed out views that we don't really like people who use drugs. I was very upset and very angry. Needless to say, we split. Then I was very depressed for the next five months.

Finn indicated that he spent several days in the hospital during this period but since then has not experienced these feelings. Each of these participants experienced depression in a unique way. They each dealt with it differently and have moved past it differently.

Five of the participants indicated they had never seen a therapist or thought about seeing a therapist. They were familiar with them and one participant, Summer, indicated that many of her friends had therapists. She stated, “my friends have therapists; they said it’s just someone to talk to. I don’t think I need one to spend money for someone to talk to.” The other four simply indicated they had never seen or thought about seeing a therapist for depression, anxiety, or other feelings.

Two of the participants indicated they had not seen a therapist but were experiencing or had experienced feelings of depression and anxiety. Claire indicated, “recently, I have been having anxiety. I can’t breathe well, my hands start shaking a lot. I’ve never had those symptoms before.” She perceived that it may be tied to having never played basketball before but was not sure. Lewis stated, “when I was really sad every day I was thinking about talking to somebody about it, I just talk to my friends.” He indicated that recently he has not experienced those feelings. He stated, “I have a girlfriend now and that helps. My friend also told me how to ignore it. Then after a while when everything was better, homework and stuff like that my parents stopped.” These participants had never seen a therapist but did indicate feelings of depression or anxiety.

**Key findings.** Nine of the participants indicated that friends led to feelings of happiness. The idea of having friends, being with them, participating in activities with

them, and their friends being happy led to the participants feeling happy. Their friends were important to them and played a key role in their happiness or sadness.

Five of the participants have dealt with feelings of depression or anxiety currently or sometime in the past. Four of the participants indicated feelings of depression with one expressing suicidal ideations that previously led to a hospital stay. Three of the participants had seen or were seeing a therapist for depression while the other two had not seen a therapist about their feelings. Social and family issues were at the center of the depression in each of the four participants. The one participant who indicated feelings of anxiety perceived it to be related to participating in a new activity.

### **Summary of Findings**

A total of 10 participants aged 15-18 in grades 10-12 at two different Los Angeles county high schools were interviewed using a protocol that contained 14 interview questions. These questions were aligned to the researcher's four guiding research questions. An analysis of the interview responses yielded nine key findings among the four research questions.

Four key findings were identified for Research Question 1 regarding participant perceptions of attitudes, feelings, experiences, and motivations. The first key finding was that 9 of the 10 participants expressed negative academic feelings and/or experiences in middle school. They described middle school as boring and un-engaging. They believed the curriculum and the lessons created by teachers were not interactive and not creative. This created apathy among the participants leading to a decline in academic performance as they increasingly became disengaged from academics. This lack of engagement led to the participants developing poor work and study habits, which followed them into high

school. These obstacles were difficult to overcome, which led participants to perform poorly in high school as well. The second key finding was all 10 participants recalled positive academic experiences and feeling about elementary school. They perceived elementary school to be fun and easy. They recalled academic success at this level leading to a positive self-image and self-confidence. This success led to the participants believing that they were capable of more now than they demonstrated.

The next key finding related to factors contributing to underperformance. Seven of the participants indicated that laziness was the reason they were not earning better grades. They believed that if they just did their work each night they would be better off academically. Mayer (1997) indicated that servicing students from high SES backgrounds presented difficulties because a discrepancy existed between what the individuals say they want and the way they behave. This is true of these participants. They understood the need for motivation and the need to complete schoolwork but did not do, and in some cases actively avoided, doing it. Mendler (2009) stated that students wanted high grades without putting in the effort needed to earn those grades. These participants wanted better grades and believed they were capable of better grades but were not putting forth the necessary effort to earn the grades they wanted. While the participants were aware of the factors leading to their underperformance, they did not have the ability to overcome these barriers to do the necessary work needed to improve their academic performance.

The last key finding related to Research Question 1 was that all participants indicated they were dissatisfied with their academic performance. They perceived their capability did not match their output. They believed motivation, effort, and laziness

interfered with their academic performance and if they could find intrinsic motivation, their overall performance would be higher than they had currently.

Two key findings were identified for Research Question 2 related to the influence of parenting on academic achievement. The first key finding was that each of the participants perceived a closer relationship with the same sex parent. The female participants perceived a closer relationship with their mothers than their fathers. The females believed they could talk to their mothers about almost everything that was going on socially and academically. Additionally, the male participants perceived a closer relationship with their fathers than their mothers. The males participated in activities with their fathers. They had similar hobbies and would engage in those hobbies together. For five of the participants, the opposite sex parent was considered the disciplinarian in the household. Two of the females came from divorced homes and only lived with their mother. Therefore, the mother was the disciplinarian and the parent who was involved in their education. The second key finding was 9 of the 10 participants had parents who regularly asked them if their homework was completed but only two participants had parents who checked the homework for completion. At times, the participants' parents would ask to see the homework but the participants did not comply and the parents never asked again. The participants admitted they frequently lied to their parents about the status of their homework completion knowing that any response would satisfy their parents.

Three key findings were identified for Research Question 3 related to peer influence on academic achievement. The first key finding related to social experiences in school. The participants perceived positive social experiences at each of the school

levels, elementary, middle, and high school. There was a slight increase in the selection of negative words to describe social experiences in middle school. In elementary school and high school, the participants chose two negative words for each level. However, in middle school they selected negative words seven times. Overall, at each level a positive experience was perceived by all but two of the participants. The second key finding related to the comparison of the participants' academic performance to that of their friends. Seven of the participants communicated that they perceived their academic performance to be below that of their friends. The participants believed their friends far outperformed them academically. However, the participants did not believe their friends were smarter than they were, just that they earned better grades than they did. Three of the participants indicated their academic performance was in the middle of their friend groups, meaning they had friends that were above them and below them, or the same as theirs. None of the participants indicated their friends all performed below them academically. The third key finding was participation in school or outside activities. Five of the participants indicated involvement in a school activity, either an athletic team or a club. Those participating on an athletic team indicated it required a two to three hour daily time commitment for practice during season, which took them away from schoolwork. Those involved in lunchtime clubs typically met weekly and had a community service component as well. Three of the participants indicated involvement in an activity outside of school. They volunteered for organizations or participated in outside classes. These activities did not require as much of a time commitment as the in school activities; however, they did require time away from their schoolwork. The

participants valued these activities greatly and believed they were important to their social life inside and outside of school.

Two key findings were identified from Research Question 4 related to mental health, specifically depression, and anxiety, and its influence on academic achievement. The first key finding related to friends. Nine of the 10 participants indicated friends contributed to their happiness. They perceived knowing they had friends, having friends who were happy, and spending time with their friends provided them with feelings of happiness. The second key finding identified five of the participants experiencing depression or anxiety currently or at some point in the past. Four of the five participants indicated that family and social issues triggered these feelings. Three of the participants had seen or currently saw a therapist for depression while two participants indicated they experienced these feelings but never spoke to a mental health professional. One participant indicated symptoms of anxiety disorder recently but did not know exactly what triggered these feelings.



## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of 10 high school students in grades 10 to 12 with cumulative academic grade point averages below 2.0 from high socio-economic communities attending high-performing comprehensive high schools in Los Angeles County. More specifically, the researcher intended to develop an in-depth understanding of these students with regard to academic and social experiences in school, academic motivation, factors perceived as contributing to underperformance in school, home life, parent involvement in their education, peer relations, participation in organized school and community activities, and social-emotional well-being, to discern why these students might be performing below average academically.

Four research questions guided this study:

1. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their elementary, middle, and high school academic and social experiences, academic motivation, and factors perceived as contributing to their underperformance in school?
2. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their home life and parent involvement in their education?

3. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their peer relations and participation in organized school and community activities?
4. How do underachieving 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County describe their social and emotional well-being?

In this study, this researcher used a qualitative phenomenological methodology and personal interviews as a means for data collection. The research was conducted at two Los Angeles County High Schools from an eligible pool of 24 public, comprehensive high schools that were not classified as charter or magnet high schools. The 2 participating high schools had an API above 850, were located in towns that had a median income above \$86,000 with enrollment over 2,000 students. The ethnicity of the majority of students was Asian or Caucasian and they performed well above the state average in all academic areas. The researcher collected data from 10 students from an eligible pool of 283 students at 2 different high schools in Los Angeles County. These students were in grades 10 to 12, had a cumulative academic grade point average below 2.0, had no documented disability on file with the school through a 504 plan or an Individualized Education Plan, and had attended a district middle school.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Ten participants aged 15-18 in grades 10 to 12 at 2 different Los Angeles county high schools were interviewed using a protocol that contained 14 interview questions.

These questions were aligned with the researcher's four guiding research questions. An analysis of the interview responses yielded nine key findings.

**Research Question 1.** Four key findings were identified from an analysis of the interviewees' descriptions of their academic and social experiences in school, academic motivation, and factors perceived as contributing to their academic underperformance:

1. Participants described their elementary academic and social experiences as very positive overall.
2. Participants' described their middle school academic and social experiences in mostly negative terms. Participants provided three factors as motivation, family, future, and participation in a co-curricular activity.
3. Participants expressed laziness as the key contributor to their lack of performance.
4. Participants' acknowledged and expressed dissatisfaction with their personal academic performance.

The first key finding was that 9 of the 10 participants expressed negative academic feelings and/or experiences in middle school. They described middle school as boring and un-engaging. Price (2008) posited that when students connect to the material on an emotional level and are excited about what it can offer their motivation to learn increases, which in turn improves their performance. These participants believed the curriculum and the lessons created by teachers were not interactive or creative. Teachers have a responsibility to create lessons and a curriculum that can stimulate the most unengaged student (Mendler, 2009). This lack of connection to the curriculum created apathy among the participants leading to a decline in academic performance as they increasingly became disengaged from academics. This lack of engagement led to the

participants developing poor work and study habits, which followed them into high school. These obstacles were difficult to overcome which led participants to perform poorly in high school as well. This supports the findings of Simons-Morton and Chen (2009) who indicated that students who do not try to achieve and do not have motivation are not likely to earn grades comparable to their capability. While these students indicated they were unhappy with their performance, they did not put in the necessary effort to achieve the grades they wanted.

Additionally, all 10 participants recalled positive academic experiences and feeling about elementary school. This perception was in stark contrast to their perceptions of middle school. Where they perceived positive experiences with teachers and the curriculum in elementary school, they perceived the exact opposite in middle school. Price (2008) discussed how students enter school with an innate curiosity and desire to learn. The findings from this study support that view. The participants perceived elementary school to be fun and easy. They recalled academic success at this level leading to a positive self-image and self-confidence. This success led to the participants' believing that they were capable of more now than they demonstrated.

The second key finding related to motivation. There were no definitive findings surrounding motivation as the participants cited three different motivators, family, future, and co-curricular participation. Adolescence is a pivotal time and motivation plays a substantial role during this age when the desire to belong with peers is strong (Price, 2008). The participants indicated that making their parents happy motivated them to perform and research supports the role of the parents in a child's motivation (Pomerantz, et al., 2007). However, while these students indicated this motivated them, their behavior

was not changing to perform better. The participants also indicated their future, getting a good job, or getting into a good college motivated them. Flacks and Thomas (1998) found that students often fail to see a connection between academics and the future apart from its economic benefits. This aligns with the beliefs of the participants of this study. They wanted to do well in school to have a well-paying job not because of an intrinsic desire to learn. The participants also referenced participation in co-curricular activities as a motivator. They wanted to compete with their athletic team and were aware of the grade requirements for participation. This desire to participate and belong motivated them to perform academically. Motivated students generally outperform unmotivated students academically (Marzano, 2003; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009). Nevertheless, students value education and understand the future benefits of education regardless of their level of academic motivation (Steinberg, et al., 1992). These studies align with the findings of the current study.

The last key finding related to Research Question 1 was seven of the participants indicated laziness was the key factor in their underperformance. Mendler (2009) stated that students have the knowledge but do not want to put forth the effort needed to reach the next level of attainment. The findings from this study align with Mendler as the participants demonstrated capability but did not want to do homework and study for the tests to earn the high grades they desired. The participants were acutely aware of their own shortcomings and lack of effort but did not appear to have the skills necessary to overcome this obstacle. They understood what needed to be done but could not do it. Mayer (1997) indicated that it might be difficult to help students from high SES backgrounds because what they say they want and the way they behave are not aligned.

Laziness, which the participants described as not doing homework, not studying, and not caring or engaging in school, was the key factor leading to their underperformance academically.

Furthermore, all participants indicated they were dissatisfied with their academic performance. They perceived their capability did not match their output. While Glasgow, et al. (1997) found that students with non-authoritative parents, as these participants did, were unlikely to see their academic performance within their control but tended to blame external factors. However, these participants did perceive their own motivation, effort, and laziness interfered with their academic performance, rather than external factors, contributed to their low academic achievement. These participants were acutely aware that their own output was the primary factor in their underperformance. They were not inclined to blame external factors for their performance.

**Research Question 2.** Two key findings were identified from a detailed analysis of the interview responses related to the influence of parenting on academic achievement:

1. Participants' perceived a closer relationship with their parent of the same sex.
2. Participants' parents' involvement in school was limited to asking about homework but not checking homework for completion.

The first key finding was that each of the participants perceived a closer relationship with the same sex parent. Feeling close to parents emotionally was imperative to students' ability to adapt in multiple domains (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). Additionally, children who did not perceive a close relationship with their parents tended to achieve lower academically (Bogard, 2005; Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Luthar & Becker, 2002). The

female participants perceived a closer relationship with their mothers than their fathers. The females believed they could talk to their mothers about almost everything that was happening socially and academically. Additionally, the male participants perceived a closer relationship with their fathers than their mothers. The males participated in activities with their fathers. They had similar hobbies and would engage in those hobbies together. However, it is interesting to note that the males did not feel as close to their fathers as the females felt to their mothers. While they rated their closeness to fathers closer than their mothers, there was only an average rating for both parents of the male participants. Greenman, et al. (2009) found that academic performance suffered for students who did not receive the emotional support they needed from the relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. The findings from this study support the previous research. For five of the participants the opposite sex parent was considered the disciplinarian in the household. Two of the females came from divorced homes and only lived with their mother; therefore, the mother was the disciplinarian and the parent who was involved in their education. Parenting, the styles and practices in which they engaged, influence adolescents' development and ability, particularly their educational attainment (Glasgow, et al, 1997).

This leads to the second key finding from this research question where 9 of the 10 participants had parents who regularly asked them if their homework was completed but only 2 participants had parents who checked the homework for completion. Parent involvement is crucial and can be a factor in academic achievement. However, the manner in which they participate may determine if the achievement is positive or negative (Price, 2008). The participants indicated at times parents would ask to see the

homework but the participants did not comply and the parents never asked again. The participants admitted they frequently lied to their parents about the status of their homework completion knowing that any response would satisfy their parents. This autonomous approach to parenting may be more harmful than productive (Marzano, 2003). In the case of these participants, the limited parental involvement in education at school and at home contributed to their underperformance. Additionally, the hands off approach to parenting negatively influenced their academic outcomes. The participants had developed coping mechanisms and knew what to expect from their parents and how to handle each situation to get what they wanted. The participants articulated that they knew what to say to every question their parents had to avoid being responsible for their work. It is thought-provoking to note that these parents did check their child's academic progress and spoke with teachers leading one to believe they were aware their child was not completing homework regularly; however, this did not change the parent behavior or level of involvement surrounding homework completion.

**Research Question 3.** Three key findings were identified for Research Question 3 related to peer influence on academic achievement:

1. Participants perceived positive social experiences and peer interactions in all schooling levels, elementary, middle, and high school.
2. Participants perceived their friends' academic performance to be above their own.
3. Participants were actively involved in school activities and organizations as well as community activities and organizations.

Peers represent a particularly important force during adolescence and influence their beliefs and behaviors (Bissel-Havran & Loken, 2007; Ryan, 2001). This is particularly



true during adolescence where they desire to spend more time with friends than family or other adults (Ryan, 2001). Greenman, et al. (2009) found that belonging to social groups was a key component in children's academic development. However, this did not appear to be the case with these participants. The participants perceived positive social experiences at each of the school levels, elementary, middle, and high school. There was a slight increase in the selection of negative words to describe social experiences in middle school. In elementary school and high school, the participants chose two negative words for each level. However, in middle school they selected negative words seven times. Overall, at each level a positive experience was perceived by all but two of the participants.

The second key finding related to the comparison of the participants' academic performance to that of their friends. Ryan (2001) posited that adolescents were inclined to associate with others who had a similar academic performance to their own. In this study, however, seven of the participants communicated that they perceived their academic performance to be below that of their friends. The participants believed their friends far outperformed them academically. However, the participants did not believe their friends were smarter than they were just that they earned better grades than they did. This finding is in contrast to studies that concluded an increase to students' grade point averages when they had higher achieving friends and demonstrated more motivation and an increased desire to succeed academically (Epstein & Karweit, 1983; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995). These participants did not benefit from having high achieving friends even over a period of years. Three of the participants indicated their academic performance was in the middle of their friend groups, meaning they had friends who were

above them and below them, or the same level as theirs. None of the participants indicated their friends all performed below them academically. The findings in this area contrast much literature that indicates the benefits of having higher achieving, more motivated friends (Alternatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Epstein & Karweit, 1983; Kindermann, 1993; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995; Ryan, 2001). These findings do support the findings of Wentzel, et al. (2004) who indicated that the academic achievement of friends was not likely to influence academic performance or motivation of an individual.

The third key finding was participation in school or outside activities. Five of the participants indicated involvement in a school activity, either an athletic team or a club. This finding is in contrast to the literature, which intimated that students who connect with school have a stronger desire for success and show higher levels of motivation (Radziwon, 2003). It is interesting to note that for those participating on an athletic team they indicated it required a two to three hour daily time commitment for practice during season, which may interfere with their schoolwork. Those involved in lunchtime clubs typically met weekly and had a community service component as well. Three of the participants indicated involvement in an activity outside of school. They volunteered for organizations or participated in outside classes. These activities did not require as much of a time commitment as the in-school activities; however, they did require time away from their schoolwork. The participants valued these activities greatly and believed they were important to their social life inside and outside of school. This type of involvement was a social connection to school, which has been shown to have a positive effect on student academics. Yet, in this case, it may have the opposite effect.

**Research Question 4.** Two key findings were identified from a detailed analysis of the interview responses related to mental health, specifically depression and anxiety, and its influence on academic achievement:

1. Friends were a primary contributing factor to the participants' overall happiness.
2. Half of the participants experience or have experienced depression or anxiety currently or at some time in the past.

The first key finding related to friends. Nine of the 10 participants indicated friends contributed to their happiness. In the literature, researchers discussed the importance of parental involvement and the relationship between parent and child as a factor to positive mental health in adolescents (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Pomerantz, et al., 2007). They perceived knowing they had friends, having friends who were happy, and spending time with their friends provided them with feelings of happiness. These participants discussed friends with greater importance and higher frequency than parents, which could explain the increased instances of depression and anxiety among this group.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services found in a study from 2009 that the incidence of depression among adolescents 12-17 years of age was approximately 8% (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010). The second key finding identified five of the participants experiencing depression or anxiety currently or at some point in the past, which is well above the national average. Four of the five participants indicated that family and social issues triggered these feelings. As stated above, parental involvement and parental relationship can contribute to poor mental health (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Pomerantz, et al., 2007). Three of the participants had seen or currently see a therapist for depression while two participants

indicated they experienced these feelings but never spoke to a mental health professional. One participant indicated symptoms of anxiety disorder recently but did not know exactly what triggered these feelings.

### **Conclusions**

Five conclusions resulted from the findings of this study:

1. Middle school is a particularly critical and potentially pivotal time for adolescent academic and social-emotional development. Negative academic experiences in middle school can outweigh any prior positive elementary school experiences and lead to decreased motivation and long-term academic underperformance.
2. Parenting style is a critical component in educational attainment and achievement. A non-authoritative, autonomous style of parenting, even when there is a perceived close relationship between parent and child, may lead to decreased academic performance and motivation.
3. Students who are underperforming academically give greater importance to friends and co-curricular experiences to feel the acceptance and success they do not feel academically. These peer interactions keep the students connected to the school. The absence of these opportunities may lead to worse academic performance.
4. Students may not perform better academically even if they have high achieving peers within their close social group.
5. Students who are underperforming academically, live in high SES communities and attend high-performing high schools, who also indicate strained relationships with peers and/or family, may be at higher risk of depression.

The first conclusion addressed participants' attitudes, feelings, experiences, and motivation in school. This conclusion states, middle school is a particularly critical and potentially pivotal time for adolescent academic and social-emotional development. Negative academic experiences in middle school can outweigh any prior positive elementary school experiences and lead to decreased motivation and long-term academic underperformance. Middle school students who demonstrate high academic capability graduate from college at twice the rate of high SES students with modest capability (Baker, 2009). Table 2 shows that participants selected a negative word to describe their academic experiences in middle school 21 times. The participants selected boring and uninteresting with the highest frequency, four and six times respectively. They shared that during middle school they became unmotivated and disengaged from school because the teachers did not create an environment that was interactive and exciting. While socioeconomics may play a role in this, Adelman (1999) countered that the quality of curriculum weighed stronger than socioeconomic status on a child's academic achievement. Price (2008) indicated the importance of creating a classroom atmosphere where students felt emotionally connected to the material and enthusiastic by its offerings. He continued that the importance of this atmosphere increased during adolescence. Additionally, these students developed poor study habits that continued throughout middle school and into high school. At this time, they stopped doing homework, studying, and taking an interest in school. These feelings stayed with them long into the future with continued underperformance years after leaving middle school. Students who do not put forth effort and are unmotivated will likely not achieve to their capability (Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009). Middle school is a critical time for

adolescents. Their experiences in middle school, particularly negative experiences outweigh positive elementary school experiences and may lead to long-term underperformance.

The second conclusion, parenting style, is a critical component in educational attainment and achievement. A non-authoritative, autonomous style of parenting, even when there is a perceived close relationship between parent and child, may lead to decreased academic performance and motivation. The participants indicated limited parental involvement in their education. Marzano (2003) labeling this parenting trend among high SES parents a *laissez-faire* approach. He described this as extending too much independence and freedom. These students did not have as much academic success as students from homes with more structure. Nine of the 10 participants shared that their parents frequently asked them if their homework was completed. They indicated their parents did not ask to check it or if they did, the participants knew what to say or do to avoid the confrontation. The parents would only ask once and not follow up after an avoidance tactic was used. Glasgow et al. (1997) found that parenting styles and practices shaped adolescent development, particularly in the area of educational achievement and school experiences. Children need parents who set boundaries coupled with a high level of caring and value for the individual over their accomplishments (Ablard & Parker, 1997; Huber, 2003; McLoyd, 1989; Price, 2008). The parents from this study were involved in their child's education at a minimal level. The parents asked if homework was completed with no follow through, spoke with the school when the school initiated contact, and checked their child's grades. The participants indicated they frequently fought with their parents about their academic performance but never

discussed consequences. However, the participants perceived close relationships with the parent of the same sex. While Luthar and Latendresse (2005) found closeness to parents to be fundamental in students' ability to adapt in multiple domains, it appears this may not be enough to achieve higher academic performance and motivation. Adolescents need parents who are in control and have rules that need to be followed but who also develop a sense of responsibility and a feeling of value and safety (Levine, 2007).

Conclusion three states, students who are underperforming academically give greater importance to friends and co-curricular experiences to feel the acceptance and success they do not feel academically. These peer interactions keep the students connected to the school. The absence of these opportunities may lead to worse academic performance. Nine of the 10 participants shared that friends were one of the primary things that led to their happiness. Peers and the relationship that they have with each other are extremely important particularly during adolescence (Bissel-Havran & Loken, 2007). During this time of life, adolescents have an increased desire to spend more time with peers than with family (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Radziwon (2003) suggested that acceptance into a peer group may be more tied to an individual's sense of worth. The greater emphasis placed on peers from the adolescents from this study align with this finding. Additionally, 8 of the 10 participants discussed their involvement in an organized activity either inside or outside of school. The participants were involved in athletics, clubs, outside classes, and outside community service organizations. Their academic performance is contrary to what Radziwon (2003) found. He stated it is believed that students who connect with school have more desire to be successful in school and demonstrate higher levels of motivation. The participants in this study

deemed their involvement critical to their social experience. However, it did not lead to higher achievement or motivation. The success and acceptance they felt through this involvement increased their self-esteem and their perceptions of their social experiences but it did not lead to improved performance or a desire to work harder in school.

The fourth conclusion also is related to the influence of peers on academics. It states that students may not perform better academically even if they have high achieving peers within their close social group. Wentzel, et al. (2004) believed that peers' academic performance likely had little influence over an individual's academic performance or motivation. Each of the participants indicated that some to all of their friends performed better academically than they did. This is counter to several studies, which cite a connection between friends' performance and motivation on others within the social circle (Alternatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Kindermann, 1993; Mounst & Steinberg, 1995; Ryan 2001). Seven of the 10 participants in the study indicated that all of their friends outperformed them academically with 5 of them stating their friends had all A's and B's. The other three participants indicated some of their friends had better grades than they did but some did not. Mounst and Steinberg (1995) found improved grade point averages for adolescents who had academically successful friends. This is in contrast to the findings of this study. Ryan (2001) also indicated adolescents' tendency to associate with others who had similar academic achievement. However, in this study the participants affiliated with others whose academic performance did not match their own and felt close to those individuals expressing the importance of their friendships with all of their friends regardless of academic performance.



The fifth conclusion states, students, who are underperforming academically, live in high SES communities and attend high-performing high schools, who also indicate strained relationships with peers and/or family may be at higher risk of depression. The national average incidence of depression among adolescents aged 12-17 is approximately 8% (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010). Forty percent of the participants in this study indicated depressive episodes or symptoms currently or sometime in the past. Several studies found higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among high SES adolescents (Bogard, 2005; Cameron, et al., 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Huber, 2003; Levine, 2007; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Nesse & Williams, 1994), particularly in those adolescents who were underperforming academically (Ansary & Luthar, 2009). Csikszentmihalyi (1999) stated that having access to more material items demonstrated a negative relationship with happiness. Rather, parental involvement in education and close relationships between parent and child show benefits to children's mental health (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Parker & Benson, 2004; Pomerantz, et al., 2007). The participants who indicated feelings of depression stated that family and social issues triggered these feelings. The parent-child relationship is a leading contributor to adolescent social emotional well-being (Bogard, 2005; Robertson & Simons, 1989). With the participants experiencing depression at a rate five times the national average, the findings of this study correlate to previous studies. Students who underperform academically live in high SES communities, attend high-performing high school that have perceived distant relationships with family and/or peers may be at a greater risk of experiencing depressive episodes or symptoms.

**Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Further Study**

**Policy.** Following the research findings and conclusions, a recommendation for future policy would be to explore a possible change in the minimum grade requirements for student participation in co-curricular activities. The participants from this study placed a large emphasis on their participation in their co-curricular activities. These activities were critical to their social development and their desire for acceptance and success. Knowing that there is a positive relationship between participation in co-curricular activities and self-esteem (Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006; Gilman, Meyers, Perez, 2004) taking away the ability to participate in these activities because of poor academic performance could be detrimental and lead to worse academic performance and decreased motivation. Organizations should examine the possibility of alternative interventions to allow students who are struggling academically to maintain their involvement and participation in co-curricular activities.

Another recommendation for policy would be to explore the value and purpose for homework. There is conflicting research on the value of homework. Mikk (2006) found student achievement to be lower in countries where homework was part of the grade, classroom discussion, and student correction of homework. Swank (1999) also found no differences in math test scores for students whether they did homework. For the students in this study work habits not intelligence is what led to their academic underperformance. Schools need to look at the amount of homework that is given nightly and the type of assignment that is given to ensure the value and connection to the curriculum. By decreasing homework, there may be an increase in academic performance by those earning the lowest grades.

**Practice.** School principals and other school administrators must provide instructional leadership to ensure that teachers are providing effective and engaging and all students are learning at high levels. As instructional leaders, principals and co-administrators must be willing to explicitly teach and coach teachers for the purposes of: creating and implementing engaging instruction, creating classroom environments where students feel comfortable asking questions and asking for help, and promoting a culture of caring in which teachers are flexible and put student needs first. Principals and co-administrators must also provide other professional development opportunities for continuous learning and improvement. Finally, and for accountability purposes, principals and co-administrators need to document those teachers who are not showing improvement and possibly dismiss teachers who have been given substantive time, resources, and opportunities to improve but who have not improved their practices.

To improve and possibly prevent students from underperforming academically, long-term middle schools should look to create and implement a system to identify potentially at risk students in sixth and seventh grade to catch them before the poor work habits and school disengagement sets in long-term. Christenson and Thurlow (2004) found the most effective intervention programs sustained a concentration on student's academic progress and addressed issues of student engagement. By identifying students with low grades early on and focusing on the areas outlined, the school may be able to prevent long-term academic underperformance.

Schools with co-curricular programs should explore a mentoring program for underperforming students who participate in co-curricular activities. Schools should look to involve adults other than teachers and counselors to act as mentors for these students.

Community involvement is an important component for children's development for personal and educational success (Beyers, et al., 2003; Price, 2008). Price (2008) indicated that parents and educators couldn't be the only people involved in raising children to be successful adults. For this reason, schools should look to involve coaches or other community members to provide mentorship in addition to other academic interventions. Because the participation in these activities is so critical to adolescents, as is the involvement of the community in helping children become successful adults, schools should find alternative means of intervention rather than taking the activity away because of underperformance.

Lastly, schools should work with counselors and community organizations to provide workshops to parents that teach them explicit, research-based parenting practices that aid in improving children's educational outcomes, motivation, and mental health. Parenting, parenting skills, and the resources parents have are some of the key contributing factors to children (Halle, et al., 1997; Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Mistry, et al., 2002; Nam & Huang, 2009; Pittman & Pittman, n.d.). Additionally, the way in which parents involve themselves in their child's education can have an effect on educational outcomes as well as other future outcomes (Nokali, et al., 2010). By providing parents with the necessary tools to work with their children effectively, students' academic performance may increase along with their motivation, social emotional well-being, and improve the relationship between parent and child.

**Further study.** When examining the possibility of further research on the topic of underperforming adolescents, the population included in the study should be larger and

the study should be conducted in a different region. This would be important to increase the generalizability of the findings. Another study could be conducted to examine more closely the middle school structure and its effectiveness in adolescent academic performance. Middle school is a pivotal time and further research should be conducted to determine if the current model of middle school is most effective to promote and enhance student academic achievement and behavior.

### **Final Thoughts**

As indicated in Chapter 1, students who attend high-performing high schools located in high SES communities have been largely ignored in the literature. Yet, there are a large number of students in these high schools who are failing and not making the grade academically. In the schools from this study the percentage of students who met the criteria ranged from 5-10% of the overall school population. When you add the students who did not meet the criteria but are still underperforming that percentage nearly doubles. There is a need to uncover what may be influencing this academic underperformance in students who have access to the most resources.

Prior to this study, many factors had been considered in isolation. This study is intended to examine several different factors in connection with one another. From the findings of this study, each of these factors: experiences, feelings, attitudes and motivation, parenting, peers, and mental health contribute to each child based on their unique backgrounds and relationships. This study had several different findings related to each of these factors that have great implications for schools and parents. Schools must identify at risk students early, provide interventions, and build relationships with these adolescents to discover their diverse needs.

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## APPENDIX A

## Participating Site Demographics

School	Park	West Coast
Enrollment	2187	2359
API	868	913
% CAHSEE English	84	84
% CAHSEE Math	82	89
% White	6	63
% Asian	53	11
% SE Disadvantage	22	5
% EL	12	2
% in AP	35	27
Average SAT	1688	1747
Median Income	\$93k	\$154k

## APPENDIX B

## Email Script to Superintendents and Principals

My name is Jennie Wright and I am a doctoral student at Pepperdine University. I am currently working on my dissertation and am asking your permission to recruit students at your high school to participate in the study.

The main objective of my study is to explore the reasons why students from high SES backgrounds who attend high-performing high schools perform below average. I am looking to interview male and female students in the 10th-12th grades who have cumulative academic GPA's below 2.0 and do not have an IEP or a 504. My goal is to uncover the root causes of this underachievement to help all of our students succeed. I am asking schools that have an 850 API or higher, a median income of \$100,000 or higher, and an ethnic makeup of primarily Caucasian and Asian students to participate. I would really enjoy the opportunity to conduct this study with students from your high school and hope you will grant me permission to include students from your school district. I am happy to answer any further questions that you may have regarding this study, the manner in which I will conduct it, or any other questions you may have. You can contact me by email or by phone at (310)-863-0572.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jennie Wright

## APPENDIX C

## Email/Phone Script for Parent Permission

## DOCTORAL STUDY

## STUDENTS WITH 2.0 ACADEMIC GPA OR LOWER IN HIGH-PERFORMING HIGH SCHOOLS

My name is Jennie Wright and I am a doctoral student at Pepperdine University. I am contacting you because your son or daughter meets the criteria of the study I am conducting and I am asking for your consent for their participation in the study. Your son/daughter's school has granted me permission to contact you and my university has approved my study as safe for student participation. Your child's identity will never be revealed to the school or to anyone else but myself. Additionally, the name of the school will be given a pseudonym in any and all reports written to further ensure confidentiality of all participants.

Each student will be asked to participate in 1 interview, 14 questions, that will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview questions are listed below so that you may peruse them. I am investigating students' experiences in school and looking for ways to improve their overall school and academic experience. While your child may not feel the direct effects of these improvements they may help shape future programs at his/her school. This is a great opportunity for your son/daughter to express their experiences and help those in similar situations after them.

Please email with any questions or clarifications you may need. If you are willing or interested to allow your child to participate and/or would like more information I will email or mail you forms for you to look over and fill out. Please feel free to contact me by email at [Jennie.Wright@pepperdine.edu](mailto:Jennie.Wright@pepperdine.edu).

Sincerely,

Jennie Wright

## APPENDIX D

## Assent Forms for Use With Minors

**Understanding Why Students from Wealthy Communities Are not Performing Well in School**

My name is Jennie Wright, and I am an Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy Program doctoral student at Pepperdine University. Your parents have given me their permission to speak with you about a study I am conducting. I am exploring the lived experiences of high school students with average and below average academic performance that are enrolled in comprehensive high schools that are classified overall as high-achieving. I want you to know that the choice to participate is completely up to you. No one is going to force you to do something you are not interested in doing. Even if you start the study and decide that you are no longer interested in continuing, just let me know and we will discontinue the study.

Let me tell you about what you will be asked to do if you decide to participate in this study. You will be asked to participate in one interview session that will take place after school on one school day and it will last about 30-45 minutes. The interview will be audio-taped and then put into written form. I will ask you to review the written form of your interview to make sure I got everything you said correctly and make any changes. This will occur by email or in person if you would prefer.

If you get bored or tired during our meeting, just let me know, and we can take a break. If you are bothered by some of the things we talk about, let me know so we can talk about what is bothering you. Most of the time what you say to me will not be repeated to your parents or the school unless you wish for me to do so. However, as a researcher I must act as a mandated reporter. As a mandated reporter certain information provided by you would require me to notify your parents and/or Department of Child and Family Services and/or local law enforcement. These instances include but are not limited to abuse, neglect, or other situations causing harm. If such information comes up, we will talk about it before I speak with your parents or the authorities.

Your participation in this study may not provide information that will be helpful to you, but what is hoped is that what I find out from you may be of help in the future to others who are undergoing a similar experience.

When the results of this study are published or presented to professional audiences, the names of the people who participated in the study will not be revealed.

If you have any questions, you may contact me at: [Jennie.Wright@pepperdine.edu](mailto:Jennie.Wright@pepperdine.edu)

You may keep a copy of this form if you wish.



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Youth's signature

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Date

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Researcher's signature

## APPENDIX E

## Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator: Jennie Wright \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Project: Underperforming Students in High-performing High Schools:  
Exploring Underachievement in Students from High Socio-economic Communities \_\_\_\_\_

1. I \_\_\_\_\_, give permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in the study being conducted by Jennie Wright under the direction of Dr. Linda Purrington.
2. The overall purpose of this research is:  
to discover the possible reasons for underachievement in students from high SES communities that attend high-performing high schools, particularly considering parenting, peers, and mental health.
3. Your child's participation will involve the following:  
One 30-45 minute interview at my school site and one follow up to review the interview transcription and provide feedback.
4. Your child's participation in the study will occur on one school day after school. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The study shall be conducted in a private room at your child's school site.
5. I understand that the possible benefits to my child or society from this research are:  
To help educators understand the possible reasons for underachievement. This may lead to the creation of classroom interventions or teaching strategies that will better suit students with similar backgrounds.
6. I understand that a copy of my child's interview transcription will not be made available to me or any school official. It will only be given to my child for review and to ensure its accuracy.

7. I understand that there are certain risks and discomforts that might be associated with this research. These risks include:  
Boredom, fatigue, stigma of being identified as an underachiever
8. I understand that my child's estimated expected recovery time from boredom or fatigue would be immediate or within a few hours after the interview process. The estimated recovery time from the stigma of being identified as an underachiever, if it would occur, would be immediate or within the time frame it takes to discuss an issue with the feelings.
9. I understand that my child may choose not to participate in this research.
10. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that he/she may refuse to participate and/or withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the project or activity at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which he/she is otherwise entitled.
11. I understand that the investigator(s) will take all reasonable measures to protect the confidentiality of my child's records and my child's identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this project. The confidentiality of my child's records will be maintained in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. I understand that the researcher is a mandated reporter and will act in accordance with California law. Under California law, there are exceptions to confidentiality, including suspicion that a child, elder, or dependent adult is being abused, or if an individual discloses an intent to harm him/herself or others. I understand there is a possibility that my child's medical record, including identifying information, may be inspected and/or photocopied by officials of the Food and Drug Administration or other federal or state government agencies during the ordinary course of carrying out their functions. If my child participates in a sponsored research project, a representative of the sponsor may inspect my research records.
12. I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact Dr. Linda Purrington if I have other questions or concerns about this research. If I have questions about my rights and the rights of my child as a research participant, I understand that I can contact *Dr. Yuying Tsong*, Chairperson of the Graduate and Professional Schools IRB, Pepperdine University, at (310) 568-5753 or [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu)
13. I will be informed of any significant new findings developed during the course of my child's participation in this research, which may have a bearing on my willingness to continue in the study.
14. I understand that in the event of physical injury resulting from the research procedures in which my child is to participate, no form of compensation is available. Medical treatment

may be provided at my own expense or at the expense of my health care insurer which may or may not provide coverage. If I have questions, I should contact my insurer.

- 15. I understand to my satisfaction the information regarding my child's participation in the research project. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have received a copy of this informed consent form which I have read and understand. I hereby consent for my child to participate in the research described above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent or legal guardian's signature on participant's behalf if participant is less than 18 years of age or not legally competent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the subject has consented to participate. Having explained this and answered any questions, I am cosigning this form and accepting this person's consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX F  
Background Profile

GENDER	<input type="checkbox"/> Male	<input type="checkbox"/> Female	GRADE LEVEL	<input type="checkbox"/> 10	<input type="checkbox"/> 11	<input type="checkbox"/> 12
ETHNICITY	<input type="checkbox"/> Caucasian	<input type="checkbox"/> African-American	<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian/Pacific Islander	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Other (Describe)	_____					
PARENTS	<input type="checkbox"/> Married	<input type="checkbox"/> Divorced	<input type="checkbox"/> Do not live with them	<input type="checkbox"/> Other		
(Explain	_____					

## APPENDIX G

## Interview Protocol

Today you will be asked several questions about you, your friends, your family, and school. Please take your time in answering each question and answer honestly. These answers will not be shared with anyone unless I hear something that falls under mandated reporting. These answers will not be shared with your parents or your school and your name will be changed to maintain the confidentiality of your identity. Today I am going to start by asking you to fill out a brief questionnaire to find out basic information about you. Please complete the brief background information form.

1. Now we are going to start the interview. Please circle 2- 3 adjectives using the blue pen that describe your academic experiences, particularly your classroom learning experiences in elementary school. Please take your time and try to remember back in time. Now, please use the red pen to circle 2-3 adjectives that describe academic experiences, particularly your classroom learning experiences, in middle school. Finally, please use the black pen to circle 2-3 adjectives that describe your academic experiences, particularly your classroom learning experiences, in high school. Please share why you chose the adjectives you circled.
2. In the next section down, we are going to do a similar exercise; focusing on your social experiences, your friends, and other classmates. Please circle 2- 3 adjectives; using the blue pen; that describe your social life, friends, friend groups, and interactions with other classmates in elementary school. Please take your time and try to remember back in time. Now, please use the red pen to circle 2-3 adjectives that describe your social life, friends, friend groups, and interactions with other classmates in middle school. Finally, please use the black pen to circle 2-3 adjectives that describe your social life, friends, friend groups, and interactions with other classmates in high school. Please share why you chose the adjectives you circled.
3. How would you describe your academic performance in school?
4. What aspect(s) of school do you like? Why? What aspect(s) of school do you not like? Why?
5. What motivates you to do well in school? What do you think is preventing you from doing well in school?

I am now going to ask you some questions about your home life.

6. In the bottom section of the paper, please circle the words that describe your home life. Circle as many as you would like, but not less than 3. Can share more about why you chose the words you circled?
7. On a scale from 1-5, where 5 is very close and 1 is not close at all, where would rate your level of closeness to your Mom and where would you rate your level of closeness with your Dad?
8. In what ways do your parents involve themselves in your education or at school? For example, do they read the emails/newsletters from school? Do they attend open house? Do they attend conferences at school? Do they ask you about school and how you are doing? In what ways do other family members involve themselves in your education or at school?

Now I am going to ask questions about you and your friends, friendships, and social life

9. Tell me about your relationship with your friends and other people in your classes? Do you have many friends, best friends? What do you do together?
10. How would you describe your friends' academic performance in school i.e. grades?
11. Do you participate in any activities, groups, etc., inside and/or outside of school? If so, please describe the groups, what kinds of activities, how often you participate, and where you participate? If you do not participate in any groups or activities, please share why not?

We only have a few more questions left and these are related to how you feel about yourself.

12. On a scale from 1-5, where 5 is very smart and 1 is not very smart, where would you rate yourself? Why?
13. What makes you happy? What makes you sad? On a scale from 1-5 where 5 is happy all the time and 1 is sad all of the time where would you rate your level of happiness? Please explain your rating.
14. Have you ever been to or thought about going to see a counselor or therapist about depression, anxiety, or other reason related to the way you feel? If so, what were you experiencing?

Adjectives describing academics

Motivating	interesting	challenging	difficult	stupid
Engaging	overwhelming	discouraging	fun	easy
Helpful	encouraging	positive	boring	pointless
Anxious	unsupportive	comfortable	tough	caring
Organized	successful	impossible	important	negative
Uninteresting	embarrassing	collaborative	terrible	lonely
Energizing	frustrating	exhausting	supportive	exciting
Unsuccessful	enjoyable	necessary	hard	

Adjectives that describe social life

Loyal	lonely	unpopular	caring	party
Non-existent	important	pleasant	lost	bullied
Supportive	adventurous	jealous	boring	friendly
Manipulating	sincere	happy	cruel	painful
Popular	depressing	involved	mean	small
Comfortable	awkward	horrible	big	busy
Aggressive	pressure	exciting	fun	anxious
Demanding	happy			

Adjectives that describe home life

Loving	busy	chaotic	cold	safe
High expectations	unsupportive	cooperative	troubled	strict
Uninvolved	enjoyable	positive	lonely	scary
Structured	frightening	supportive	angry	warm
Comfortable	demanding	unorganized	involved	caring
Helpful	negative	combative	arguing	kind



## APPENDIX H

## Alignment of Research And Interview Questions To Literature

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Literature Sources
1. How, if at all, do underachieving 10 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES communities and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles County perceive that attitudes, feelings, experiences and motivation has influenced their academic achievement?	1	Adelman, 1999; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Kaushal & Nepomnyashchy, 2009; Levine, 2007; Marzano, 2003; Mayer, 1997; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995; Payne, 1996; Wentzel, 1998; Yeung, Livner, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002
	3	Baker, 2008; Buss, 2000; Easterbrook, 2004; Levine, 2007; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston & McLoyd, 2002; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995, Wentzel, 1998
	4	Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Flacks & Thomas, 2000; Levine, 2007; Mayer, 1997; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995; Wentzel, 1998; Willie, 200; Yeung, Livner, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002
	5	Flacks & Thomas, 1998; Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Levine, 2007; Marzano, 2003; Mendler, 2000; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009; Pomerantz & Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Price, 2008; Schultz, 1994; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992; Wentzel, 1998
2. How, if at all, do underachieving 10 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES backgrounds and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties perceive that parenting has influenced their academic achievement	6	Beyers, Bates, Pettit, & Dodge, 2003; Bulanda & Majumdar, 2008; Canter & Canter, 1993; Casper & Smith, 2002; Glasgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg, & Ritter, 1997; Gordon & Louis, 2009; Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009; Leroy & Symes, 2001; Levine, 2007; McLoyd, 1998; McLoyd, 1989; Marzano, 2003; Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Pittman & Pittman, n.d.; Robertson & Simons, 1989; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992
	7	Ablard & Parker, 1997; Beyers, Bates, Pettit, & Dodge, 2003; Casper & Smith, 2002; Bulanda & Majumdar, 2008; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Gordon & Louis, 2009; Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Payne, 1996; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Price, 2008; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009
	8	Flacks & Thomas, 1998; Levine, 2007; Marzano, 2003; Mendler, 2000; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Price, 2008; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009; Wentzel, 1998

3. How, if at all, do underachieving 10 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES backgrounds and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties perceive that their peers have affected their own academic achievement.	2	Bissell-Havran & Loken, 2007; Field, Camargo Jr., Barr Taylor, Berkey, Roberts, Graham, & Colditz, 2001; Greenman, Schneider, & Tomada, 2009; Guay, Bolvin, & Hodges, 1999; Kindermann, 1993; Lopez & DuBois, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995; Radziwon, 2003; Ryan, 2001; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009; Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997
	9	Greenman, Schneider, & Tomada, 2009; Guay, Bolvin, & Hodges, 1999; Lopez & DuBois, 2005; Ryan, 2001
	10	Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Bissell-Havran & Loken, 2007; Epstein & Karweit, 1983; Kindermann, 1993; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995; Radziwon, 2003; Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004
4. How, if at all, do underachieving 10 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade California high school students from high SES backgrounds and who attend comprehensive high-performing high schools with API scores of over 850 located in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties perceive that mental health has influenced their academic achievement.	11	Flacks & Thomas, 1998; Greenman, Schneider, & Tomada, 2009; Guay, Bolvin, & Hodges, 1999; Kindermann, 1993; Lopez & DuBois, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002; Radziwon, 2003; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997
	12	Ansary & Luthar, 2009; Buss, 2000; Canter & Canter, 1993; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Mandler, 2000; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007
	13	Ansary & Luthar, 2009; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Buss, 2000; Cameron, Racine, Offord, & Cairney, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Huber, 2003; Robertson & Simons, 1989
	14	Ansary & Luthar, 2009; Buss, 2000; Cameron, Racine, Offord, & Cairney, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Field, Camargo Jr., Barr Taylor, Berkey, Roberts, Graham, & Colditz, 2001; Huber, 2003; Luthar, 2003; Robertson & Simons, 1989