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Success in the Time of NCLB:

A Description of a Successful Charter High School

By

Laura Kay Lyons

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Chairperson Dr. Mary Lynn Hamilton

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Dr. James Carothers

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Dr. Heidi Hallman

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Dr. Sherrill Martinez

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Dr. Steve White

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study presents a description of the experience of students and teachers in

a charter high school in an urban school district during the time of the implementation of No

Child Left Behind (NCLB). The school is defined as successful in NCLB's accountability terms

because it has made AYP in reading and math for eight years. This study describes the factors

that contribute to that success. Using qualitative research methods to acquire descriptions from

students and teachers about their experiences that lead to and relate to their feelings of success,

this study allowed an understanding of the relationships among students and teachers as those

relationships promote engagement, motivation, and growth that lead to the success of both

students and teachers.

Key words: relationships, engagement, motivation, phenomenology, NCLB, charter

schools

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"I think that school should be fun, especially because most of us are still kids,

that just putting the iron fist down and just telling you, 'Learn this. Learn that,

and learn that'. It doesn't teach you much of real world experience.

It doesn't teach you that thing that you need to know when you're out there.

That's what most high schools don't give you."

--*Aspire Academy senior* (S3R2K3GI5-2012 p. 3)

The American high school was designed to accomplish certain goals: give children a

place to prepare to go to college or to work in a factory (Everhart, 1977; US Secretary of

Education High School Leadership Summit, 2004), and to prepare young people to be an

educated populace (Bestor, 1960), one that could govern the nation by participation in the

democratic process (Parker, 1903). A survey of the historical documents included in Hillesheim

and Merrill's (1980) readings on the history of American education illustrates the shifts in the

purposes of high schools to prepare students for college and vocation throughout the past 130

years, placing the American high school in a vacillating fishbowl between the goals of the

populace that has paid taxes to educate children and the aspirations of educators and parents who

want the best education for students and children (Everhart, 1977).

Background

More recently, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was published, calling into question the

preparedness of American high school graduates for post-secondary experiences and outlining a

list of courses that all high schools should require of students. In 1994, *Goals 2000* required

states to establish standards for the core academic subjects of English, math, science, and social

studies; these standards described what students would know and be able to do upon high school

graduation. In 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) added an element of accountability to the

standards written by states to meet *Goals 2000*, changing the way that the public looked at the

American public high school by including measures of academic achievement, specifically, test

scores and graduation rates. Under NCLB, public high school success was measured by a state-

determined level of student performance on assessments of reading and math knowledge and

skills, as well as a state-determined level of graduation rate. School districts and individual

school buildings were labeled as making *Adequate Yearly Progress* (AYP) or failing to make

AYP. Although schools that allowed for greater parental choice had a several decade-long

history when NCLB was enacted, these schools, including charter schools, were brought to the

forefront as options for parents of students whose schools had been labeled as failing to make

AYP.

Specialty schools like charters were subject to NCLB's provisions for accountability

(Stillings, 2006) in states in which these schools receive public funds. However, specialty

schools like charter schools were defined under Title V Part B of NCLB, entitled "Promoting

Informed Parental Choice and Innovative Programs" as public schools of choice; charters were

given more autonomy from the state and local regulation because they were accountable to the

terms of their charters despite being measured by the accountability of NCLB. This designation,

a public school choice, or alternative to a traditional public schools, made charter schools an

option for parents who were not satisfied with the assessment scores and graduation rates of the

traditional high school (attendance rates for middle and elementary schools) that their student

was required to attend based on the location of their residence (NCLB, 2001). Determining the

success of a school was an integral part of parents' making decisions about where their student

would enroll; thus, test scores and graduation rates were made public by NCLB.

As the curriculum coordinator of a charter high school, I found that the progression of reports and legislation outlined above heavily influenced how my school was perceived by the public. I was concerned, as many high school teachers and administrators have been, that this emphasis on two factors, reading and math test scores and graduation rates, to determine the success of a school, left many factors of successful high schools unpublicized, and therefore hidden, from the public from taxpayers to parents. I also questioned the defining of a school as successful because it was making AYP, not only because of the limited number of measures considered, but because those measures were only quick, albeit specifically timed, snapshots of the experience of teaching and learning at my school. I hypothesized that an extended look at the experience of teachers and students in my school would be a more appropriate opportunity to reveal the factors that contributed to the success of my school because factors that were more deeply embedded might emerge from this prolonged kind of examination.

I had been responsible for teaching English, including re-medial reading, to high school students, as well as administering and coordinating the administration of the NCLB assessments for 10 years when this study was initiated. From a practical stance, my view of academic success was heavily skewed by the factors that NCLB forced me to use to explain my school's success to members of the public that I encountered. After those many years of looking at my work with students and teachers as successful if my school made AYP, I realized the limitations of these three measures (reading scores, math scores, and graduation rates) as determining factors of success in my school. Instead, it seemed to me that my school was successful in spite of the pressure that those measures put on the administration, teachers and students in my school. Another part of me did not want to admit that high school teaching and learning success could be defined by such a limited list of accountability measures, yet I could not attribute the success that

I felt as a teacher and leader in my school to specific elements. Unsure of what made my school successful, even in NCLB's terms, I went in search of answers that could shed light on what might have been happening in my school that made it successful in NCLB's terms and the broader terms that I suspected were at work.

Methodology

Because I had the unique experience of talking to both students and teachers about their learning and teaching experiences, I hypothesized that the ways in which they described their experiences may provide insight into what was making this high school successful. Access to these experiences could be gained through the description of experience in either speaking or writing. Making meaning of these descriptions led to my employment of a qualitative methodology for gathering data. Because this data was primarily descriptive, phenomenology allowed me to use the words of the participants to construct meaning about the experience of teaching and learning as a whole. Phenomenology allowed me to gather the words that students and teachers used to describe their intuited experience (Husserl, 1981/2002), as that experience related to teaching and learning in the setting of this charter high school. From those descriptions, meaning was made by reading, transforming and revisiting the data (Giorgi, 2012) to support the construction of the multi-vocal story of the experiences of the students and teachers. Through multiple reviews of the descriptions, phenomenological structures (Giorgi, 1997) emerged as elements of the phenomenon. These structures allowed me to describe the experience of teaching and learning at Aspire Academy, the successful charter high school that served as the setting for this study.

Research Questions and Plan

Believing that the phenomenon that I expected to explore was the charter high school within the urban school district, I crafted research questions and initial interview questions that included language about the school. These research questions were among those that initially drove the research:

- How did Aspire Academy find success as defined by NCLB with the students served there?

- Which of the factors that promote academic success or limit academic failure in urban high school were present at Aspire Academy?

- What happened at Aspire Academy that made students who had struggled in the past become academically successful enough to graduate?

As the research plan was executed, I found that another research question seemed more consistent with the descriptions of the students and teachers.

- What did Aspire Academy teachers do that changed students' ability to achieve?

In the end, the phenomenon that was revealed by the data was less about the setting of the study, and much more about the participants who were studied, reminding me that the place in which education occurs was less important than the people between whom the educative experience was shared.

This research gathered descriptions through writing prompts, group interviews, and a few individual interviews when group interview participation was unfeasible for participants. The data were gathered in three cycles, called spirals, with two rounds of data collection in each

spiral, totalling six rounds of data collection. These data were gathered from the principal, 13 certified teachers, and 17 students who had been enrolled at the school for one year or more, all of whom were either juniors or seniors.

Definitions

NCLB is the acronym for the No Child Left Behind law, which is a re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. This version of the act put a great deal of focus on accountability in schools for students' reading and math skills, as well as attendance and graduation, through quantitative measures such reading and math test scores, and attendance and graduation rates.

AYP is the acronym for Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by NCLB. Adequate Yearly Progress was defined by each state in their plans to meet the federal NCLB law as progress on measures of students' skills in reading and math as well as attendance and graduation rates. Both school districts and individual school buildings were evaluated by these measures. The state in which the school studied is located wrote a plan for a waiver of AYP under NCLB, which was accepted by the federal Department of Education during the summer after this study was conducted. The revised system still includes measures of reading and math skills and attendance and graduation rates, but the term AYP is now obsolete in this state.

The messy realities of teaching do not lend themselves simply to the selection and

implementation of curricula and methods produced by experts from afar. Ambiguities,

uncertainties, and unpredictability are the substance of teaching.

-- Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006, p. 682.

Chapter Two: Background and Literature

To contextualize the evolution of school reform, taking a brief historical look at perspectives on what schools should be in order to be successful is important. One political tension that affects schools is the difference between the ideal, which is a quality educational experience for the child, and the real, which is the fact that taxpayers pay for the education of the child in public schools. Beginning with an early look at the purpose of schools during the progressive movement of the early 20th century, one can gain some idea of how the era of NCLB has caused such change in the definition of schools' success. An advocate of NCLB at its inception, Diane Ravitch traces more recent educational history in her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (2010). Outlining the roles of the teacher and the student within the educative experience allows the connections between the past and the present to emerge. Dewey (1938) and Rodgers (2002) address the relationships between teacher and student in terms of their interactions and relationship.

Perspectives on Successful Schools

The tenets upon which public education stood for many decades are familiar. A knowledgeable teacher talks from a podium at the front of the room, providing information for students to hear, to practice, to parrot back as verification of their having become acculturated (Everhart, 1977). The quality of students' recitation is paramount in the teacher's evaluation of

her performance as teacher. According to Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938), "The subject matter of education consists of bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore, the chief business of the school is to transmit them to the new generation" (p. 17). Students do not question teachers; students do not speak to one another because the teacher is the bearer of the information that is important to gain in school, which makes her the person in the room that should be listened to. The characteristics that mark a good student are "docility, receptivity, and obedience" (p. 18). Rodgers (2002) describes the role of the learner through reflection, "a meaning making process that moves the learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas" (p. 845). Dewey believes that the teacher should know the learners well enough to anticipate and plan how they might progress through meaning-making experiences during learning.

Dewey, at that time, calls the school "a kind of institution sharply marked off from the other social institutions" (Dewey, 1938, p. 18) in particular contrast with the family. Teacher and student building a relationship is not the business of school even though it may be the model in the family home. In the classrooms of 1938, "Teachers are the agents through which knowledge and skills are communicated and rules of conduct enforced" (Dewey, 1938, p.18). Dewey explains that young people learn through experience, which may or may not occur in a classroom. He redefines the role of the teacher from the great imparter of wisdom to the person who should be able to anticipate based on her experience the kinds of educative experiences that would precipitate students' learning of the knowledge and skills that are important to have for life outside school.

Basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate

contacts between the mature [teacher] and the immature [student] than ever existed in the

traditional school, and consequently more, rather than less, guidance by others. The

problem, then, is: how these contacts can be established without violating the principle of

learning through personal experience. The solution of this problem requires a well

thought-out philosophy of the social factors that operate in the constitution of individual

experience. (Dewey, 1938, p. 21)

This shift from traditional education to progressive education, for Dewey, redefines the

relationship between teacher and student. Rodgers (2002) explains this relationship further as

interaction between the students and their world that results in a change in both; therefore, one of

the ways of defining the success of schooling is to provide continuity to a leaner's experiences.

"Interaction and continuity, the elements of experience, are the x and y axes of experience.

Without interaction learning is sterile and passive, never fundamentally changing the learner.

Without continuity learning is random and disconnected, building toward nothing either within

the learner or in the world" (Rodgers, 2002, p. 847).

Dewey defines the social factors that are necessary for his philosophy of individual

educative experiences. First, he explains that experience and education are different in that not

all experiences are educative; in fact, some are mis-educative (p. 26). Educative experiences are

defined by both their agreeableness or disagreeableness and their ability to leave one open to

further experience. "The effect of an experience is not borne on its face. It sets a problem for the

educator. It is his business to arrange for the kind of experiences, which, while they do not repel

the student, but rather engage his activities are, nevertheless, more than immediately enjoyable

since they promote having desirable future experiences" (p. 27). This concept changes not only

the view of the relationship between the teacher and student, but also the nature of subject matter from a set of knowable facts and skills to a process that is contingent on both the student-teacher relationship and the teacher's awareness of sequencing of experiences with an attention to the engagement of the learner. In this way, Dewey outlines his first criterion of experience, which is continuity or the experiential continuum (p. 33). Based on this experiential continuum, the teacher must be aware of experiences that promote not only the learner's growth, but the direction in which growth takes place (p. 36). In addition, the teacher is responsible for utilizing "the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile" (p. 40). Rodgers (2002) explains that experienced teachers have an ability to capture in their awareness an infinite number of elements of the classroom. Hampton and Gruenert (2008) call teachers' dedication to students important to a student-oriented school climate. Teachers in their study claimed that a school should not be about what is convenient for its teachers, but about its students performing well.

Dewey's (1938) second criterion of experience is interaction, which embodies the equally important objective and internal factors of an experience for the individual. Several elements comprise the objective factors: the subject matter, the instructional methods, the texts and teacher, and the social environment. Interaction allows for the mature [teacher, parent or other experience guider] to regulate the educative experience with an awareness of the internal factors that are at play in the mind of the immature [learner], governing the educative quality of the experience. This process implies that the individual is constantly interacting within a situation that provides an experience. The internal factors are those that traditional education did not consider according to Dewey's critique:

The trouble was that they [traditional educators] did not consider the other factor in

creating an experience: namely, the powers and purposes of those taught….The

responsibility for selecting objective conditions carries with it, then, the responsibility for

understanding the needs and capacities of the individuals who are learning at a given

time. It is not enough that certain materials and methods have proved effective with other

individuals at other times. (Dewey, 1938, p. 45)

Why is the criterion of interaction important to Dewey's theory? Interaction clarifies the

responsibility that both teacher and student have to participate equally in the process of educative

experience: "The principle of interaction makes it clear that failure of adaptation of material to

needs and capacities of individuals may cause an experience to be non-educative quite as much

as failure of an individual to adapt himself to the material" (p. 47). Rodgers (2002) calls this

teacher attitude *whole-heartedness*, explaining that it requires that teachers have a genuine

enthusiasm for their subject matter, including not only their content, but also the learner's

learning of it and their teaching of it, a part of which is how their teaching is affecting the

learner's learning. A more recent study calls this type of teacher and student relationship

meaningful participation (Shepard, Salina, Girtz, Cox, Davenport & Hillard, 2012). Students

who had struggled within and outside school found meaningful connections with school adults

that lead to participation in school assignments and programs, athletics, and outside life

experiences like church involvement, child-rearing, and employment.

Dewey's then progressive, now foundational, perspective on the education of young

people reflects ideas that many teachers even today still hold. How did education become an

institution that needed modification because of it lack of effectiveness? According to Ravitch

(2010), "Where did education reform go wrong?...All roads eventually lead back to a major

report released in 1983 called *A Nation at Risk*" (p. 22). The report outlined changes that need to

be made to American high schools exclusively; all other levels are unaddressed by the report. "*A*

Nation at Risk was a response to the radical school reforms of the late 1960's and early 1970's"

(Ravitch, 2010, p. 23). Changes to high schools were needed because SAT scores had fallen for

over a decade (Ravitch, 2010). The report recommends increased graduation requirements,

academic course rigor, instructional time, and standards for teachers entering the profession

(National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). While *A Nation at Risk* makes

specific recommendations about how the American high school should work to promote the

success of students, the perspectives on academic success that it promotes do not immediately

permeate high school policy. The role of teacher as it relates to students' learning is not

addressed in this report. What students are to learn is defined as a list of courses to be taken in

preparation for post-secondary experiences.

       The standards movement. Enter the pressures of the standards movement of the 1990's.

Amid concerns about still declining test scores, lawmakers move toward holding states

accountable for the definitions of success in American schools when they pass the Goals 2000:

Educate America Act in 1994. Under Goals 2000, the US Congress attempts to define how states

should put educational reform into practice. In particular, states are to develop plans for

improving schools as well as a set of state standards, or specific statements about what students

should know and be able to do (1994). Often, these state standards are to be measured by

assessments, but much of the agenda was voluntary for states, so measures of academic success

are not comparable from state to state. Still, one of the goals of Goals 2000 is to have all

students reach proficiency in core subject areas by 2000. For the second time, and in a more

coercive way, content is the focus of defining the success of students in the American high school when Goals 2000 passes.

Goals 2000 brings this discussion to the accountability stage of the standards movement, during which the emphasis on standardized testing comes to dominate the classrooms of the year 2002, all thanks to the renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), or The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Even though this renewal is the result of the American public's desire to assure the education of every child, a host of changes take place in classrooms because the standards that are written by the states are to be measured by assessments at grades three through eight and again in high school. An emphasis on reading and math, born out of a new requirement that districts' and buildings' scores on these assessments are to be made public, began to take hold of the time element of school. Instructional time in these subjects dominates time that had been allocated to other subjects, even science and social studies (Cawelti 2006; Tracey 2005). In part, due to the increase of graduation requirements advocated for by *A Nation at Risk,* the American high school remains somewhat intact as the standards movement and NCLB take hold because time is allocated to all subjects by nature of the requirement of specific numbers of credits in required subjects: English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and even physical education. While elementary school teachers struggle under the pressure of having their students evaluated by standardized tests in multiple subject areas each year, they watch the instructional time for reading and math eat up the time that had been devoted to sciences and the arts. The time devoted to other subjects erodes as schools begin to miss targets in reading and math at any given grade level. High schools still remain somewhat untouched because they are evaluated at only one grade level for reading and math (NCLB, 2002). Resilient in the isolation of their subject area classrooms, teachers in

subject areas outside of those assessed remain relatively unaffected by the pressures of standardized testing under NCLB.

High schools' measures of success and failure under NCLB. How do high schools measure success? In the era of NCLB, the success of a school has been defined and limited to annual assessments in reading and math, and the graduation rate. While this new definition has become the standard across the nation, states have set their own plans for meeting NCLB based on their own reading and mathematics standards and using their own formulas for calculating graduation rates. Recently, these measures have moved toward more standardized national measurements as the graduation rate formula, or the Compact Formula, has been defined for and adopted by 45 states for use by 2011 (Curran & Reyna, 2009) and the Common Core standards in reading and math have been adopted by 44 states, the District of Columbia and the US Virgin Islands (Common Core Initiative website, September 2011). Increasingly, the success of high schools is defined with more precision by entities outside schools across the country.

While the agenda of NCLB is translated at administrative and building levels into actions that influence classroom curriculum and instruction, administrators and teachers have taken on some of its responsibility in their practice of making decisions that shift the curriculum toward the standards measured in the assessments; sometimes, this results in a narrowing of the curriculum (Abernathy, 2007; Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Crocco & Costigan 2007; Dee & Jacob, 2010; Jerald, 2006; West, 2007). Instructional practices are evaluated based on their support by the educational research base (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2004), making teachers increasingly both aware and fearful of the evaluations of their practice by the research that supports, or does not appear to support, that practice. This apprehension leads to a host of responses in classroom teachers: a narrowing of the curriculum the knowledge and

skills which are assessed (Abernathy, 2007; Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Crocco & Costigan 2007; Dee & Jacob, 2010; Jerald, 2006; West, 2007), increased professional isolation bred by mistrust of teaching professionals that leads to "close the door and teach", and a general sense that what teachers have been teaching is insufficient and must be replaced with other curricular emphases and often top-down imposed, designated research-based instructional strategies (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2004).

An article in *Educational Leadership* addresses the improvements that NCLB has brought to urban districts in contention for the *Broad Prize*, which is given to urban school districts that both increase student achievement and reduce the discrepancy in achievement between ethnic groups and students of varying socio-economic status. The curriculum in these districts is improved in three ways: providing "curriculum guides and pacing charts, aligning curriculum between grades, and monitoring curriculum implementation through frequent school and classroom walkthroughs" (Zavadsky, 2006, p.70). Instruction is also improved by the rigorous generation and examination of student achievement data; these districts have monitored instruction by creating district benchmark tests, created systems for monitoring those tests, modified instruction based on the data collected, and facilitated conversations about under-performing student groups (Zavadsky, 2006). All of these improvements are designed to make the curriculum and instruction more visible to testing coordinators, building administrators, and district administrators.

The agenda of accountability is both imposed and assumed, first placed upon educators by federal and then state curricular agendas designed to meet NCLB, and then taken on by teachers and administrators as tests identify deficiencies specific to individual standards. In the same way, the graduation rate is defined for high schools by states, but the graduation rate has

always been a factor that haunts building and district administrators. Recently however, most states have adopted a more uniform calculation for graduation rate during the implementation of NCLB (Curran & Reyna, 2009).

In October 2006, the *Phi Delta Kappan* published an article about the ten big effects of NCLB, which enumerated the changes that were identified in a four-year review by the Center on Education Policy (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). These effects included a rise in student achievement on state tests, schools spending more time on reading and math, schools aligning curriculum and instruction and analyzing test data, low-performing schools undergoing makeovers, progress in demonstrating teacher quality, students taking a lot more tests, schools paying more attention to achievement gaps, schools being identified as 'needs improvement' holding steady, the federal government playing a bigger role in education, and state governments and school districts expanding their roles in school operations. Later in NCLB implementation, Dee and Jacob (2010) found that the increase in achievement was primarily in elementary mathematics, but that no evidence could substantiate the same increase in reading performance. Dee and Jacob (2010) also found that more teachers earned master's degrees during the time of NCLB, and that school expenditures increased by nearly $600 per pupil. The caveats provided to this list of effects are also numerous: it's not clear what rising student achievement means in terms of gains in learning; sometimes the extra time devoted to reading and math has been taken from non-tested subjects; and federal funds are often lacking to support the expanding roles of state governments and school districts. What does all of this mean? Schools may be doing more with the same or less, but what is gained by students in learning is unclear at best.

Even as gains in student achievement in math are being made, some wonder if success can be measured by improved scores alone. According to a 2006 Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll,

78% of the public was concerned about reading and math being the only subjects used to evaluate a school's performance's influence on the teaching of other subjects like art, music and history (Rose & Gallup, 2006).

Making public high schools' success and failure under NCLB. What is the relationship between success and failure under NCLB accountability? Because NCLB was meant to hold schools accountable for not leaving any children behind, accountability was defined in high schools by two academic measures: the percentage of students demonstrating proficiency in math and reading, and graduation rate. Over time, the success of high schools has been defined by meeting these two measures for two causally related reasons: AYP data is reported publicly in newspapers and on-line in building and district report cards (NCLB, 2002), and schools are being labeled as failing at a rate that is alarming to the tax-paying public (Ravitch, 2010).

First, because AYP data is reported publicly, parents, students, and other community members are able to determine which schools are successful schools and which schools are on improvement schools (Gray, 2012). Making this information public was designed to give parents access to information in order to make choices about enrolling their children in the most successful schools under NCLB (2002). In districts in which the high schools are successful at having the target percentage of students reach the proficient level on math and reading assessments as well as a sufficient percentage of students graduate; parents, students, and community members assume that those measures are sufficient for determining success. Questions about the academic measures themselves tend not to be asked because the school is making AYP under NCLB (2002). Likewise, in districts in which the high schools are unsuccessful in having the target percentage of students reach the proficient level on math and

reading assessments as well as a sufficient percentage of students graduate; parents, students, and community members assume that those measures are sufficient for determining failure.

NCLB did allow for schools that perform at the very top levels on the AYP measures be recognized as *Standard of Excellence* schools. These high schools were recognized each year for their outstanding performance on the AYP measures of reading and math scores and graduation rate. Schools that were labeled as *On Improvement* were provided support from state departments of education. However, these schools were also subject to sanctions by the state departments of education if their AYP measures did not show consistent improvement during years after their being designated as on improvement. The gap between these two designations allows for many schools that made AYP, whether consistently or sporadically, to be subject only to the public scrutiny of having their results published each year on state department of educations' websites and in their local newspapers.

Literature on High School Success Under NCLB

A host of factors are cited as those that can make a school successful under the mandates of NCLB's AYP indicators. Some of those factors that seem obvious, and are not often discussed in the literature, are the reciprocal of the school characteristics that have been brought to light as struggling to achieve by NCLB reporting: having students of middle to high socio-economic status, having fairly homogenous student bodies that are primarily of Caucasian descent, having predominantly students who are native speakers of English, and having a high percentage of students of either gifted or regular education status, paying teachers more than the state average, having low student mobility rates (Wood, 2004). The subgroups defined by NCLB have disaggregated the reading and math scores by those groups of students that tend to score in the

proficient range less often: low socio-economic status, special education status, English language learners, gender, and all cultural and ethnic groups (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Other factors emerge as related to school success in general. Those factors can be grouped into building characteristics, like school or class size, as well as teacher and student factors, like qualifications and engagement. A look at these factors in the literature provides background on those factors that participants in this study described as part of the charter high school studied.

Linda Darling-Hammond (2006) lists a number of documented factors that influence student achievement, including smaller high schools, well-qualified teachers who are allowed to collaborate, personalized learning for students, a common core curriculum aligned with performance assessments, and support for struggling students. These factors are echoed by researchers examining high-performing urban high schools (Zavadsky, 2006) and previously under-performing high schools who have adopted these factors to sustain improvement (Chrisman, 2005).

District and school factors. Zavadsky (2005) itemizes three factors in her study of urban high schools that have won the Broad Prize for high academic performance: improving curriculum, collecting and using assessment data, and supporting struggling students. The factors that affect curriculum in these schools are development and monitoring of curriculum documents such as pacing guides, and the alignment of curriculum across grades. The support of struggling students is only elaborated upon in Zavadsky's article by one example of a program that targets students with lacking skills, but support for those students' teachers is an element of that example. Overall, the monitoring of the curriculum and instruction by spending time in

classrooms, giving frequent assessments, and facilitating teacher conversations about achievement data are the dominant themes.

Chrisman (2006) studied California schools that demonstrated gains in student achievement as measured by NCLB over two years, comparing and contrasting them with schools that had demonstrated increased student achievement for only one year. After acknowledging that the more successful schools had higher mobility rates, smaller percentages of highly qualified teachers, and tended to be larger schools rather than smaller, Chrisman itemizes teacher, principal, and district leadership qualities that were present in more successful schools. Teacher-level qualities included teachers' autonomy in decision-making, specifically in terms of collaborating on lessons, selecting professional development, conducting action research, and developing support structures for each other. Principals' qualities included support for teacher collaboration time, implementation of programs, and comfort with making data-driven instructional program decisions. District leadership qualities included support for effective programs, strategic placement of principals based on their experience, and distribution of assessment data disaggregated by teacher and student. Chrisman's work corroborates the emphasis on teacher collaboration in planning and instructional decision making, as well as the use of assessment data to make instructional decisions.

The size of the school and the size of a class tend to be related to student achievement. Darling-Hammond (2006) has done extensive research on smaller high schools' affecting a host of factors related to success, but in particular, those related to NCLB's accountability measures: higher achievement and lower dropout rates. But not all small high schools are effective, even on these two measures (Darling Hammond, 2006; Ravitch, 2010). Smaller high schools tend to have fewer resources to support and encourage students such as special education services, limited

English proficiency services, and fewer arts programs (Ravitch, 2010). Class size has been

studied for more years than school size. According to Nye, Hedges and Konstantopoulos (2000),

"research on the effects of class size suggests positive effects of class size reduction on

achievement" (p. 124). In addition, this research found that small class sizes had even greater

effect on students if those students experienced them for more than one year (p. 146). One caveat

that Nye, Hedges and Konstantopoulos made in their conclusions about class sizes' effects on

students was that "It is not yet clear *how* small classes lead to higher achievement" (p. 150),

although Darling-Hammond (2006, p. 645) explains that personalization of learning can occur

when teachers work with smaller numbers of students for longer blocks of time.

Teacher factors. The literature provides several teacher factors' effects on student

achievement. Teacher factors include qualifications and the ability to build relationships with

students. Teacher qualifications were outlined specifically by NCLB. Building relationships has

proven to be particularly effective with at-risk students (Shepard, Salina, Girtz, Cox, Davenport

& Hillard, 2012).

The first of these elements is teacher qualifications. Since NCLB (2002) mandated that

teachers be highly qualified to teach in a subject area, many states adopted stricter guidelines for

teachers entering the profession; in addition, states' accountability systems report include

percentages of teachers who are highly qualified in individual schools to the public and parents.

Highly qualified means that teachers are certified in a subject area at a grade level span, which is

connected to coursework and assessments of subject matter and teaching practice. NCLB posed

that teacher preparation programs focused too much on teaching practice to the detriment of

subject matter knowledge. However, researchers report that this assumption is incorrect but agree

with NCLB that teachers are a very important factor in student success (Akiba, LeTendre &

Scribner, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Talbert-Johnson, 2006). Research does support

that a teacher who has a strong set of credentials, including teaching experience, certification in a

specific subject, and an advanced degree from a competitive college, tended to have students

who performed better on assessments than a teacher with a weaker set of credentials (Clotfelter,

Ladd & Vigdor, 2007). One of the impacts that NCLB has had on teacher qualifications is that it

has increased the share of teachers with master's degrees (Dee & Jacob, 2010). An international

study of the correlation between teacher quality and national student achievement also showed

that "higher achieving countries had a higher percentage of students taught by teachers who had

met their country's criteria for full certification, had majored in [a relevant subject area], and had

accumulated at least three years of teaching experience" (Akiba, LeTendre & Scribner, 2007). In

addition to credentials, Talbert-Johnson (2006) posited that teachers must also have the proper

disposition for teaching in an urban district. Students have weighed in on teacher quality, but

after some research on the definitions of a highly qualified teacher by NCLB standards, they

identified other factors that were more important to them (Garcia, 2006). These factors included

planning of varied instructional experiences, having high expectations of students, monitoring

students' progress, being respectful, culturally sensitive and responsive to students.

     Relationships that teachers build with students are an established factor in promoting

school success (Hampton & Gruenert, 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004; Rodriguez, 2008; Shepard,

Salina, Girtz, Cox, Davenport & Hillard, 2012). The ways in which these relationships provide

support differ. According to Klem and Connell (2004), "teacher support is important to student

engagement in school as reported by students and teachers" (p. 270). The link between the

teacher support and engagement relies on teachers' creating caring and well-structured

environments with high expectations. In turn, students who exhibit high levels of engagement

tend to have higher attendance and test scores. Rodriguez (2008) characterizes student-adult relationships through the lens of recognition of the other in which students are perceived as the other. Within his framework, Rodriguez (2008) found that students felt recognition from their teachers within their relationships in four ways: knowing and feeling known by adults, talking with school adults, experiencing a sense of personal support from a school adult, and feeling encouraged by adults to strive beyond students' limits. When students feel known by a school adult, they mean that their teacher knows them on a personal level, not only an academic level, so teachers may know about the personal issues that the student has and acts as an advocate for the student. This relationship may serve as "a safety net" (Rodriguez, 2008, p. 445) for the student in personal situations. Students who felt known by teachers tended to believe that talking to their teachers was central to their relationships with them. Feeling known by and talking to teachers lead students to feel a sense of not only academic but also personal support from those teachers (Shepard, Salina, Girtz, Cox, Davenport & Hillard, 2012). Having this sense of support for students meant that their teachers were perceived as resources when needed. Building relationships with students that allowed these types of support allowed students to feel genuinely encouraged by their teachers. Students believed that their teachers "encouraged them to not have any limits" (Rodriguez, 2008, p. 447), which demonstrates the teachers' ability to perceive the students' abilities and set expectations that would move students to go beyond them.

Student factors. The factors that students bring to bear on their academic success or failure are numerous. NCLB requires states to disaggregate data by demographic indicators that have been associated with being at risk of low achievement, hence the name, No Child Left Behind. These factors include socio-economic status of the family, limited English proficiency, special education status of the student, race and ethnicity, and gender. These factors are given, so

they are difficult to address for teachers; still, assessment data is disaggregated by these

subgroups in addition to the 'all students' group. Related to these at-risk indicators, students'

identities and beliefs play a role in influencing either academic success or failure. Other student

factors are more easily influenced by teachers in the pursuit of student success. These factors

include motivation and engagement, both of which are not easily defined and often create great

challenges for teachers, but net excellent results in terms of student achievement.

     At-risk identity. At-risk status is a quality that all students at the school studied share.

Generally, these students are at risk of not graduating because they are behind in credits, but at-

risk status extends much beyond not graduating. At-risk factors as defined by NCLB (2002)

include low socio-economic status, limited English proficiency, as well as non-white race and

ethnic groups. Fassett and Warren (2005) found that at-risk educational identity is not as simple

as these static qualities (race, socio-economic status), but can be made evident by listening to

students talk about themselves. However, in terms of identity, the academic self cannot be

separated from the static qualities. While many students labeled at risk educationally attend

alternative schools, those students see attendance at an alternative school as an opportunity to re-

invent themselves so that they can find academic success (Fraser, Davis & Singh, 1997). In my

experience with students in alternative and charter high schools in two states, I have found that

students in alternative schools tend to shift their academic identity from their home school to

their alternative school by distancing themselves from both their previous school as well as the

perceived identity of the alternative school as one for disruptive, pregnant, or lower-performing

academic levels of students. Instead, alternative school students embraced the flexibility of

schedules, feeling more personal responsibility for their work and social affairs, unique qualities

of accessibility and caring of their teachers, and accepting attitudes of their peers. These students

tended to contrast their experiences of their alternative school with their experiences of their home school.

In urban high schools, some students characterized marginalization even as those students expressed the tension between their views as negative toward their own educational experiences and their positive attitudes toward education and learning (Payne, Starks & Gibson, 2009). In this study, African-American males felt disrespected and unprepared for life by teachers and other school adults because of their perceived identity as thugs and hustlers by those adults even as they expressed their value of getting a good education and graduating from high school. In a study of at-risk, low-income high school students, teachers rank below parents/adult caregivers and friends as a source of support related to school success, even though the students did acknowledge that teachers worked to provide support (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1999). The authors speculated that teachers' behaviors of support may have been dismissed by students as an expected part of the school experience.

Based on the literature, students' identity and beliefs about their at-risk status play a complex part in school success, both in the ways that students perceive themselves and the ways that students perceive school adults such as teachers and administrators. Certainly, NCLB was enacted under the auspice of better serving those students who might be identified as at risk of not finding academic success, but reaching those students may be of greater challenge than lawmakers anticipated. Teachers must respond to NCLB's demands for helping students to learn, particularly those students who have been identified as at risk. Perhaps more importantly but less overtly defined is the teacher's responsibility of building relationships with students that bring about a re-conceptualizing of the at-risk student's identity that allows academic success to emerge.

Motivation. This student factor in academic success depends on interplay between the factor within the student and the methods that the teacher uses to engage the student in learning, which should produce academic success. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002) summarize four key components of student motivation as they relate to academic success: academic self-efficacy, attributions, intrinsic motivation, and achievement goals. Each of these has implications for teachers instructionally as they attempt to help students find motivation to learn.

First, self-efficacy influences achievement because it relates to effort and persistence in learning tasks. Students with higher self-efficacy tend to work harder and persist in learning, leading to increased engagement. In addition, students with higher self-efficacy tend to continue to take more challenging course work throughout high school. "Self-efficacy is best facilitated by providing opportunities for students to succeed on tasks within their range of competence and through these experiences actually develop new capabilities and skills" (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002, p. 316).

The second component of motivation is attribution, which is a process through which students examine the causes of their successes or failures, attributing the results to a certain factor (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Students who attribute their success to effort or skill build self-efficacy; students who attribute their failures to lack of effort can use self-regulating strategies to change the outcome of a similar future learning task. Teachers can influence students' attribution through their reactions to students' performances on tasks as well as the feedback that teachers give students during the process of attribution after a learning task is complete.

Intrinsic motivation is a third important component of motivation for teachers to capitalize on to maximize students' success. Finding uniquely engaging instructional methods

capture students' interest at the outset of a learning task can motivate students to learn, as can demonstrating the relevance of the learning to students' interests or goals (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). "Academic achievement, study skills, and engagement can be increased by tapping into students' interests" (p. 319).

Fourth, goal orientation can influence academic success through motivation. Students who set goals related to mastery of new skills, understanding new material, or improving their abilities tend to be more motivated to achieve than those students who set goals to surpass others in achievement or receive recognition for their achievement. Teachers can empower students to set goals related to mastery by giving students autonomy in the classroom, focusing on individual achievement and providing praise for students' reaching a learning goal privately instead of publicly (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002).

Alonso-Tapia and Pardo (2006) corroborate some of the previous ideas, but elaborate on teaching practices that have negative effects on student achievement as well. Students indicate that curiosity stimulated by novel tasks, usefulness of the material, time devoted by the teacher, organization of the presentation of information by the teacher, stimulation of participation, and projects that extend learning to deeper understanding motivate them when new learning is initiated. The teaching practices that decrease motivation for secondary students are time limits, assessments administered only once, the use of technical vocabulary, the suggestion of supplemental reading, and ungraded tasks.

To capitalize on motivation to promote students' academic success, teachers must know their students well enough to determine which of the components of motivation will be most effective for each student. Developing relationships with students in smaller classes would be important to motivating students.

Engagement. The level of attention to and participation in school activities, or

engagement, has received growing attention as a potential antidote to poor academic motivation

and achievement during the time of implementation of NCLB (Fredericks, Bulmenfeld & Paris,

2004). The general assumptions that have been explored are that high engagement tends to lead

to academic success; whereas low engagement tends to lead to low achievement or dropping out

in NCLB terms. However, the dynamics of engagement must be first described before they can

be analyzed or correlated with achievement, so the research has begun in description. In general,

engagement in academic work is lower as grade level increases (Marks, 2000), making high

school students' engagement less than that of elementary and middle school students'

engagement. Marks also found that "measured by their comparatively low level of academic

success (grade point average), and their comparatively high level of alienation, high school

students report the least positive orientation toward school" (p. 166). Engagement appears to

present a greater hurdle for teachers of high school students than for teachers of other levels.

More encouraging elements of engagement relate types of engagement with specific school

success factors. Fredricks, Blumenfled, and Paris (2004) found that three types of engagement

are important to school success: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Behavioral engagement is

characterized by appropriate school conduct, the absence of disruption, participation in learning

and school-related activities. High behavioral engagement is linked to academic achievement and

not dropping out. Emotional engagement is related to other student factors previously mentioned

such as teacher support and student identity. Cognitive engagement is related to motivation, tied

to the desire for challenge, exertion of effort, and selection of strategies for learning by students.

Engagement, then, is generally linked to other student and teacher factors, making the

isolation of a single variable to connect to academic success uniquely difficult with this student

factor. While engagement is the more recent addition to the research on student achievement, it appears to be heavily influenced by motivation, teacher-student relationships, and perhaps even identity and beliefs about teachers and school for high school students.

Charter Schools as Choices under NCLB

As the renewal of ESEA of 1965, NCLB moves forward two ideas that are rooted in the 1960's: desegregation of schools (Rabovsky, 2011; Stillings, 2006) and the war on poverty of Johnson's administration as it promotes alternative, magnet, and charter schools as an educational choice (Sanders, 2008). Beginning with Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, education was addressed from an equity perspective, focusing on providing all students with an equal education regardless of race or socio-economic status. Charter schools were created to provide options to families to attain this equal education, but NCLB expanded this use of charters to include options for parents who wanted to take their students out of under-performing schools under the accountability system of NCLB (Gant, 2006; Stillings, 2006).

Charter legislation was first passed in Minnesota in 1991, but several other states quickly followed suit (Stillings, 2006). Charter schools are defined as public legal schools of choice that are subject to the accountability of NCLB, which has reduced the flexibility that they were initially designed to have in order to provide opportunities for innovation that could improve traditional schools (Corngold, 2010; Gray, 2012; Loeb, Valant & Kasman, 2011; Stillings, 2006; Wilson, 2010). Under NCLB, charter schools are an option for parents of students who would normally be forced to enroll in schools that have been identified as not making AYP for three or more years. In such a situation, enrollment in another school is the choice of the parent.

Research on how parents make the choice to enroll their students in charter schools indicates a conflicting variety of factors are work in the process of decision making (Betebenner,

Howe & Foster, 2005). Ni and Arsen (2011) found that socio-economic status is more important than academic achievement in parents' decisions to move their students to charter schools. With regard to race, white parents tended to choose a charter school for its academics; whereas, black and Hispanic parents tended to exercise their choices because of the school context and extracurricular expectations (Saatcioglu, Bajaj & Schumacher, 2011). Rabovsky (2011) found that the factors for parents transferring students out of schools tended to be reactions to personal disciplinary problems or concerns about campus safety; however, the most important factor influencing parents' decisions about which schools their children should transfer into was academic performance or quality (p. 93).

Others have examined the influence of charter schools and other schools of choice on cities, other schools, and students' achievement. Merrifield and Gray (2013) found that regions that adopted schools of choice like charters found economic growth, as urban areas retained vitality and suburbs did not appear or grew more slowly than they otherwise would have. Traditional schools in districts that were threatened by the opening of a charter school responded with increased student achievement as readily as they did to NCLB sanctions (Gray, 2012). In terms of their influence on students' achievement, schools of choice demonstrated improved achievement with only students in the lowest quartile (Betebenner, Howe & Foster, 2005). Loeb, Valant & Kasman (2011) found that charter schools did not affect students' achievement until their students' second or third year of enrollment, and then only marginally.

Charter schools were designed and implemented with the hope of creating greater innovation in education by giving parents choices as to where their students may be enrolled. While the research on charter schools is limited by their short history, the findings to date do not consistently bear out the hopes of charter school innovators. How, then, might a charter high

school, in an urban district be finding the success that the one of this study is finding under

NCLB? The relationship of the charter high school in this study to the high schools within the

district that they are all a part of is not one of a threat as some are as mentioned above, but one of

collaboration. Aspire Academy works in concert with the high schools within the district of

which it is a part. The first step in the enrollment process in this charter high school is a referral

from the student's home high school counselor, social worker, or principal. This step acts as the

traditional school's endorsement of a student and parents' plan to consider transferring to the

charter high school.

Chapter Three: The Problem

An Urban *On Improvement* District

Our story begins in school district labeled as *on improvement* by NCLB's definition. In an urban setting, surrounded by rural and suburban districts that are making AYP, we find a school district that has not made AYP for a sufficient number of years to be labeled *on improvement*, which means that the state has a list of options to levy as potential consequences both on the district and on individual failing school buildings. One characteristic of urban districts that may account for this district's label is that "schools serving poor, minority, and LEP [limited English proficiency] students and those with a greater number of subgroups for which they are held accountable are disproportionately identified as 'needing improvement' (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 11-12). Within this school district, we find a charter high school that has made AYP in reading and math for the last eight years and has made AYP in graduation rate for the last three years. Within this district and this high school, we find educational institutions struggling under the consequences of accountability. Let us zoom in to understand how success, failure, and accountability affect teachers and students.

The most observable indicators of the effects of NCLB's accountability measures manifest themselves in reading and math curriculum and instruction because these two subjects are those assessed as AYP indicators. Even early in the implementation of NCLB, Jennings & Rentner (2006) conclude that two of the ten biggest effects of NCLB relate to curriculum, instruction, and data analysis, in reading and math. Their conclusions are based on data collected on the implementation of NCLB by the Center on Education Policy: "Schools are spending more time on reading and math, at the expense of subjects not tested," (p. 110) and "schools are paying more attention to the alignment of curriculum and instruction and are analyzing test score data

much more closely," (p. 111). Even early in NCLB implementation, teachers in urban schools both on improvement and not on improvement agreed that the curriculum would be narrowed by NCLB. In a 2004 survey of teachers in Fresno, CA, and Richmond, VA, teachers indicated that eight to one of the Fresno teachers and five to one of the Richmond teachers believed that AYP requirements caused teachers to de-emphasize or neglect untested topics (Tracey, 2004, p. 91).

Years later, these trends continue in the urban district to be studied. When teachers attend district and building professional development, they are being told how to manage their curriculum and instruction in ways that are consistent with the research-based strategies that have been chosen by their administrators. "NCLB, by standardizing curriculum and assessment, undermines the kinds of reforms which have occurred over the last several decades, such as small schools, authentic formative assessments, and interdisciplinary curriculum that have improved student's learning, particularly students in urban schools (Hursh, 2007, p. 295).

For example, after preliminary test data was released by the state, teachers in the district in which I work were asked to unpack the standards on which their students fell short on the most recent state reading and math assessments. What this activity entailed was an in-depth look at the language of the standard in order to identify or draft lessons that would address the skills required for demonstrating proficiency in that knowledge or skill. While this activity had merit if the goal was focusing curriculum and instruction on reading and math across the curriculum, it also applied peer pressure that caused teachers to focus their curriculum on the knowledge and skills that appeared to be deficient in students and to adopt an instructional strategy to address the lacking skills in students. Either way, a bit of teachers' individual curricular and instructional decision-making power was co-opted by both the group-interaction approach to curricular decision making and the limited, district-imposed instructional strategy choices offered as

solutions. The standards that were dissected had been identified as deficient in students taught in the building, so teachers who may have been using effective instructional strategies were silenced by that attention to what they perceived was ineffective instruction of that knowledge and skill set. Back at the classroom, teachers felt obligated to spend more time on assessed knowledge and skills, using an unfamiliar strategy, having to sacrifice how they had chosen to teach so that students might demonstrate proficiency on NCLB assessments in reading and math. This feeling of eroding autonomy in teachers' decision making was not unique to this district. "Teachers across the map complain that the joy is being drained from teaching as their work is reduced to passing out worksheets and drilling children as if they were in dog obedience school" (Wood, 2004, p. 39). Olsen and Sexton (2009) also underscored the effects of increased pressure to standardized teaching practice, saying that teachers reported that developing mandated curricular maps "constrained their teaching work...their professional autonomy suffered, and their expertise was slighted" (p. 25).

As a building leader in curriculum and instruction, I could not curb the tide of the pressure to narrow the curriculum and focus instruction on a few district-designated instructional strategies (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2004), although I listened to my teachers who felt that they were bowing under the pressure of accountability. At the same time as the narrowing of curriculum and instruction was taking place, a district-wide agenda to promote *professional learning communities* (PLCs) (Dufour, 2004) was advanced from the district level to the building level, promoting teacher collaboration groups. Hampton and Gruenert (2008) found that collaboration is an essential factor in teacher relationships, and in the face of accountability, teamwork that was focused on student learning was important. Through discussion with my building principal, I felt an idea emerge that would utilize the PLC concept to allow teachers to

ask for ideas to modify or make more efficient their practice in response to the pressures of the narrowing of the curriculum. In essence, teachers identified issues of classroom practice related to curriculum and instruction that they investigated within their collaborative groups; then they shared those ideas with one another. This summative act of collaboration drove the professional development agenda for the building.

While most of this collaboration was still focused on a few instructional strategies, we explored together how those strategies could be creatively utilized to enhance engagement among students. More importantly, this collaboration time gave teachers a few moments to vent their professional frustrations with the mistrust felt as these imposed agendas became even more focused on consistency, particularly in reading and math curriculum. Even as this building agenda moved forward as an effort to alleviate the pressure of a narrowing curriculum, the district agenda became more intense in reading and math with new district assessments, more focused in science and social studies, and more about accountability as district administrators viewed new assessments as tools for monitoring the teaching of the prescribed curriculum.

Accountability measures like standards and NCLB imply that teachers must be directed as to what they should teach. If the assertions of reports like *A Nation at Risk* (1983) are guiding principles that govern educational decision-making at the federal legislative level, accountability leads building level professionals to be judged by the test scores of a different group of students each year. A driving force in this agenda is the lack of trust of the professional teacher working at the classroom level, on the front line of educating children. Having heard teachers talk about their curriculum and instruction becoming ever more scripted, squelching creativity in response to students' needs, and depending less and less on their professional judgment, I felt compelled to allow teachers to vent their instructional frustration and to promote their instructional success

stories within small, collaborative groups and then rebuild and promote creativity to one another as a building staff.

A *Making AYP* Charter High School

Aspire Academy is charter high school in a Midwestern state in an urban district that reflects typical urban problems of NCLB subgroups: a high percentage of low SES students, a high percentage of special education students, and a wide variance in the skills of a variety of cultural and ethnic groups. According to Abernathy (2007), urban schools tend to fail to make AYP sooner because of the diversity of their student populations, partly because of "resource inequalities" (p. 57), but also by triggering disaggregation of AYP data into a greater number of student subgroups based on the demographics listed previously, creating a higher number of categories in which a school may not make AYP. One of the benefits that Aspire Academy may have over the large, comprehensive high schools within the urban district that it serves may be its student-body's size. "The apparent advantage of fewer students in a high school may, in part, reflect the fact that high schools with fewer students may face less subgroup accountability" (Balfanz, Legters, West & Weber, 2007).

In this state in which the school studied is located, charter schools are normally part of the district in which they reside, unlike most states' sponsors for charter schools, which tend to be other types of educational or non-profit institutions. However, like most states, after the charter funds are depleted, charter schools must demonstrate their sustainability, or they are often closed by their sponsoring organizations. Aspire Academy has been a charter high school for 11 years because it has demonstrated to the district which is serves that its purpose fulfills a need for approximately 200 students per year who range in grade from those students who are repeating ninth to twelfth. Between 50 and 60 students graduate from Aspire Academy each year, many of

whom, by the testament of the comprehensive high schools' administrators, would not have graduated had they stayed in the comprehensive high schools.

In terms of the broader NCLB ramifications for charter schools, these schools "occupy an interesting position as both targets and solutions under No Child Left Behind. They are subject to the same tests and sanctions as traditional public schools, yet are also one of the options for reconstituting a failing school in the later stages of NCLB implementation" (Abernathy, 2007, p. 76). In an even more ironic twist, Abernathy claims that "charter schools appear to be failing to make AYP at a higher rate than the traditional public schools" (p. 76), although Abernathy acknowledges that charter schools tend to serve populations of students with historically low academic achievement.

One of the most unique qualities of Aspire Academy in terms of NCLB is that the school has been making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in reading and math for the past seven years. While the graduation rate at Aspire Academy has not always allowed the high school to make AYP in all measures for all eight of those years, the reading and math scores continue to meet the levels set out by the state's plan to meet NCLB. However, Aspire Academy has made AYP in graduation rate for the last three years, not because it has reached the state's prescribed level of graduation rate, but because the school's graduation rate has increased by the necessary 5% each year. For this reason, Aspire Academy is often insulated from the school district's agendas in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, simply because of the students' achievement scores and the fact that Aspire Academy is perceived as a school that helps students who would not have graduated at other district high schools. However, the administration and teachers at Aspire Academy are rarely asked by those outside their building what they might be doing that helps their students achieve at these levels.

Aspire Academy students are drawn from the three comprehensive high schools in the district, all of which have enrollments of 1800, 1300 and 1000 students. The students at Aspire Academy tend to be behind in credits earned toward graduation, to have attendance issues, or to need an alternate setting because the comprehensive high school setting is part of their lack of success in some way. Approximately 50 of the 200 students need self-paced, flexible scheduling options that allow them to work on course work at times other than the traditional 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. school day. The remainder, or approximately 150 students, participate in the daytime school scheduling option. These students need accommodations that promote academic success that are not met by flexible scheduling. These accommodations are designed to engage these students in different ways than the comprehensive high school may have been able to engage them. The daytime school option allows students to interact with their teachers daily in each of their seven courses, a factor that is less available in the other scheduling options.

Success in this Charter High School Under NCLB

While these studies illustrate factors that seem to appear in schools that find success or failure on NCLB measures, they do not truly identify how those factors influence that success. The complexity of the experience of success in high school not only is attributed to a multitude of state, district, school, teacher, and student factors, as noted in this literature, but of the interaction between those factors along with any number of factors that are not easily isolated for the purpose of studying them. The flaw in researching success may be in looking at these factors in isolation. Perhaps, an understanding of the complexity of the experience of high school success can be captured through the words of the students and teachers who are living that experience. Only by capturing the essence of the experience of the teachers and students who find success can these factors' influence be understood. Starting on a small scale, looking deeply

into this experience requires capturing the words of those who are living that experience. Then revisiting those words that express the experiences of students and teachers allows an understanding of what connections exist between their success on NCLB measures and the experience of learning in school.

Pursuing this essence of experience, delving into a deep understanding of the teachers and students who are living the experience of success will illuminate the phenomenon of teaching and learning at Aspire Academy. Establishing factors that seem to existent in schools that are successful only promotes the adopting of such factors in hope of success in schools that aspire to that success. Understanding the experience of students and teachers who find success may allow others to conceptualize the difference between implementing programs, and creating a successful teaching and learning experience. A study of this charter high school, during the time of accountability and standards, through a look at the roles of teachers and learners may allow the manifestation of these factors to appear in the description of this school. Thus, how success emerges for students who had not found success in other schools may be more clearly understood.

Purpose of Study

Several questions emerge from a look at the background of this study, which includes not only the literature cited but also the background of this school within this district. My experience of teaching at Aspire Academy uncovered the first set of interrelated questions. Several questions emerged from the literature on successful high schools. Finally, a question emerged from the combination of background and literature.

This question emerged from the researcher's experience in the district: why was a charter high school making AYP, with students who were identified as at risk, from high schools that

were not making AYP, in a district that was not making AYP? The question that drove this study was how does Aspire Academy find success as defined by NCLB with the students served there? One indicator of this success was the school making AYP in both reading and math for the last eight years. Another indicator of this success is that 50 to 60 students graduate from Aspire Academy each year, students who were headed for almost certain failure to graduate in their comprehensive high school settings.

Yet the real essence of this success remained to be uncovered. Do the interwoven factors apparent in the literature work together to promote academic success? If so, how? What is the deal with Aspire Academy? In what ways does this school find success in the time of accountability with students who were on a path to failure? What do the Aspire Academy teachers do that changes these students' ability to achieve? Are students at Aspire Academy truly experiencing learning differently than they were in their previous high schools? In these times of accountability, what happens at Aspire Academy that makes students who have struggled in the past become academically successful enough to graduate?

This question emerged from the literature: which of the factors that promote success or limit failure in urban high schools are present at Aspire Academy? Are complex, interrelated elements at work in high schools that may not yet be clarified by the isolated looks at factors that promote success in high schools provided by the literature? If so, how can we describe how those factors are related in students' and teachers' experience?

Research Questions

Having wrestled with the above questions professionally, I determined that my research should clarify and explore them through this research. Ultimately, these questions guided my inquiry:

- How does Aspire Academy find success as defined by NCLB with the students served there?

- Which of the factors that promote academic success or limit academic failure in urban high schools are present at Aspire Academy?

- What happens at Aspire Academy that makes students who have struggled in the past become academically successful enough to graduate?

As the research plan was executed, I found that another research question seemed more consistent with the descriptions of the students and teachers.

- What do Aspire Academy teachers do that changes students' ability to achieve?

Through the literature, I arrived at a new realization of the complexity of academic success, which evoked the most important question: are there elements of success that are not present in the literature that may be illuminated by a deep, careful inquiry into the lived experience of teachers and students at Aspire Academy because of its unusual position as a successful charter high school? Only a study that seeks this kind of look into the lived experience of teachers and students in this setting will provide the kinds of answers that may reveal interrelationships between success factors and elements of success that are yet to be illuminated by other research. Uncovering a deep understanding of the experiences of success of teachers and students in a unique setting requires a specialized research methodology.

With accountability measures looming, the temptation for educators reading this study may be to capture the essence of what happens for students at Aspire Academy and attempt to duplicate that essence in other settings. Most assuredly, that temptation would have many limitations. Instead, this study will attempt to illuminate a combination of elements of the

teacher/student relationship, those experiences that help students change their behavior, adopt an identity that includes success, engage in their own learning, and achieve at acceptable, perhaps even excellent, levels on accountability measures. Uncovering and describing the essence of the Aspire Academy teaching and learning experience, those things that allow success to emerge, was the goal of this study.

Chapter Four: Methodology

"To the things themselves!"

--Edmund Husserl, (1981/2002), phenomenological theorist

The purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the experience of participants who have in common a specific phenomenon. For this research, the phenomenon is learning and teaching at Aspire Academy, an NCLB-defined successful charter high school. Because the thing itself, as Husserl would say, is the phenomenon of teaching and learning at this school, then the participants must have intuited experience (Husserl, 1981/2002) with this school, and in particular, the acts of either learning or teaching there. Accessing this phenomenon required that the participants reflected on their experiences of learning and teaching and shared their reflections with me through either speaking or writing. Gaining access to the phenomenon required delving into the consciousness of experience of the participants.

The experience of a phenomenon is pre-reflective (Husserl in Laverty, 2003), which means that the participants, when asked to share their experiences, must first reflect on those experiences, then describe them in either writing or speaking. Husserl (1981/2002) outlines how experience occurs as a process: first, something is experienced, then consciousness intuits that thing to be actual or real, then that thing becomes real in the person's consciousness as if the thing is really there within the consciousness. All steps of this process occur before any meaning is made of the thing that is experienced, making the perception of a phenomenon pre-reflective. Moustakas elaborates on the reflective process as one in which "the individual constructs a full description of his or her conscious experience….this includes thoughts, feelings, examples, ideas, situations that portray what comprises an experience" (1994, p. 47). In this study,

participants were asked to take time to consider their experiences before they responded to questions, regardless of whether that response was given in writing or verbally, allowing time for reflection on experience to occur before they provided their descriptions.

Epistemology

Four terms are important to define in order to understand the theory of epistemology in phenomenology: phenomena, perception, intuition and experience. The first term is phenomena, or the plural of phenomenon, the namesake of the theory. "That which appears provides the impetus for experience and for generating new knowledge. Phenomena are the building blocks of human science and basis for all knowledge" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Perception of phenomena within consciousness is how humans know what is real (Husserl, 1981/2002; Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2002). Giorgi (1997) explains perception as consciousness of the phenomenon as it presents itself to those who experience it. Two elements are at work in consciousness: intuition and experience. Intuition is ordinary types of awareness. Experience is the intuition of real objects. Intuition is the more general part of perception, and experience is the more specific. Husserl (1981/2002) says, "Experiencing is consciousness that intuits something and values it to be actual; experiencing is intrinsically characterized as consciousness of the natural object in question and of it as the original: there is consciousness of the original as being there 'in person'" (p. 125). This pairing of intuition and experience in consciousness allows perception of a phenomenon, which is "the presence of any given precisely as it is given or experienced…Phenomenology begins its analysis of intuitions or presences not in their objective sense, but precisely in terms of the full range of 'givennesses,' no matter how partial or marginal, that are present, and in terms of the meaning that the phenomena have for the experiencing subjects [participants]" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 237). Therefore, in phenomenology, the perception of

the participant allows access to the phenomenon. Describing the phenomenon is completely contingent on the descriptions of the phenomenon provided by the participants. Determining the essence of a phenomenon requires looking with increasing depth at the descriptions of multiple participants to understand what insights those descriptions present about the phenomenon itself.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding human experience can occur through deepening inquiries of the reality that exists based on the perception of experience. In order for this understanding to emerge, I had to adopt the appropriate attitude toward my subject (Giorgi, 2012). This process, developed by Husserl, is known as phenomenological reduction or bracketing (Giorgi, 1997; Laverty, 2003) of the researcher's pre-conceived notions of what is known about the phenomenon to be studied. The essence, or givenness, of the phenomenon exists in the pre-reflective perceptions of the participants. As researcher, I gained access to this essence by asking participants to share their perceptions of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997), which additionally caused the participants to reflect on their perceptions. I aspired to describe the phenomenon by bracketing my knowledge of the phenomenon such that I could move more deeply into an understanding of the givenness through the reduction of my knowledge, allowing the phenomenon to emerge from the participants' descriptions of it rather than my theories about it.

In addition to reduction or bracketing, I had to direct my attention toward the phenomenon itself (Laverty, 2003). In order to describe a phenomenon, a phenomenological researcher must establish intentionality toward the phenomenon, which meant that I had to grasp at the essence of the phenomenon through consciousness. "Intentionality means that an act of consciousness is always directed to an object that transcends it" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 238). Intentionality allows the phenomenological researcher to use language to describe the

phenomenon just as it exists. Giorgi differentiates between description of a phenomenon and

interpretation of it. "In description, there is an acknowledgement that there is a 'given' that needs

to be described precisely as it appears and nothing is to be added to it nor subtracted from

it…Interpretation is the adoption of a non-given factor to help account for what is given in

experience" (2012, p. 6). This differentiation reflects the tension between the perspectives of

Husserl and Heidegger in their development of the theory of phenomenology. Heidegger

believed that to be human was to interpret, so that every experience is interpreted through the

individual's background (Laverty, 2003). Heidegger (1994/2005) explains that through attention

to the care for a thing's being within consciousness, we can understand the nature of that thing's

being, and from this understanding, a theory about what is understood can be derived. Therefore,

for Heidegger, interpretation is the way that meaning is made of consciousness.

> Interpretation has as its theme the manner of *taking care of something*. With the
>
> interpretation of taking care of something, this 'something' itself becomes evident as *that*
>
> *which the care is specifically about*, that around which the care revolves. It reveals itself
>
> in the manner in which it is 'there' in the care; what possible being it has as something
>
> encountered in and for this care becomes evident from this manner of being present [in
>
> consciousness]." (Heidegger, 1994/2005, p. 43)

From the consciousness of the participant, then, comes an understanding of the nature of

the phenomenon. In a similar way, attention to the consciousness of the phenomenological

researcher must be paid during analysis of the data provided by the participants. During the

process of analysis, a phenomenological researcher must both describe and find meaning in the

description that participants provide. From the participants' descriptions of their experience, the

phenomenological research must derive a description of the phenomenon itself.

The challenge facing the human science researcher is to describe the things in

themselves, to permit what is before one to enter consciousness and be understood in its

meanings and essences in the light of intuition and self-reflection. This process involves a

blending of what is really present with what is imagined as present from the vantage

point of possible meanings; thus a unity of the real and the ideal. (Moustakas, 1994, p.

27)

Giorgi outlines the process of phenomenological analysis in five steps. First, the

researcher read the description to get a sense of it as a whole; then she re-reads to determine at

which places within the text the meaning shifts. In the third step, the researcher transforms the

data into expressions that reveal the importance of the descriptive meaning units. During this

step, the researcher uses Husserl's "imaginative variation" (Giorgi, 2012, p. 6) to derive meaning

from the text. These meaning units are reviewed in the fourth step so that the researcher can craft

"an essential structure of the experience" (2012, p. 6). That essential structure is used during the

fifth step to clarify and interpret the data. Giorgi, then reconciles the apparent disconnect

between Husserl's reduction and Heidegger's interpretation in this way: "The meaningful object

requires a meaning-conferring act which is lived through but discovered only in reflection. Thus

while experiencing provides interpretations regarding our world, they are lived, and it takes an

act of reflection to describe the role of such acts" (Giorgi, 2012, p. 7).

This study was conducted using phenomenology, a research methodology that allowed

me to capture the essence of the lived experience of a group of people, who, in this case, have the

setting of their charter high school in common. Phenomenology utilizes qualitative research

methods to gather written and oral descriptions of human experience. That description is used to

delve into experience of those participants to access the essence of their experience, which is the

phenomenon as it is perceived. The product of this inquiry is a description of the phenomenon itself, derived from a combination of the process of bracketing my notions of the phenomenon and the gathering of participants' descriptive data, with the intent to forefront the experiences of participants in a setting through the words of those who live (learn, teach, work, build relationships) there. Using methods that captured the words that teachers and students used to describe their lived experiences on repeated occasions allowed me to delve deeply into the teaching and learning experience at Aspire Academy. Believing that the essence of this experience lived deep in the language that teachers and students used to express their knowledge of, feelings about, and understanding of teaching and learning, required repeated, deepening opportunities for participants to revisit their words to share thoroughly an understanding of their experience. Where did description of the phenomenon reflect the essence of lived experience? Among the words and the stories of those who teach and learn at Aspire Academy.

Seeking an understanding of the experience of students and teachers at Aspire Academy required gathering description of what it meant to teach and to learn at Aspire Academy. Much like Heidegger's *Dasein*, or 'the situated meaning of a human in the world' (Laverty, 2003), understanding the learning context of Aspire Academy required discourse about the experience (description) as well as reflection on lived experience (interpretation) to gain meaning about the phenomenon. Most of this understanding lay between the interpretations of two or more people, hovering beneath the pre-reflective consciousness of both; hiding in pre-reflective recollections of lived experience; quietly and patiently blending into the complex labyrinth of learning; unexamined except in descriptions provided to the researcher. Just as the understanding lay hidden between the descriptions of multiple participants, so do the stories of their experience blend together as one story told by many voices.

The theoretical framework of this study must accommodate a desire to understand the essence of the experience of being a student or a teacher at Aspire Academy. Because of this desire, an inquiry method must be utilized that will allow the researcher to uncover that essence. A logical choice with that purpose in mind is phenomenology, which values the lived experience (van Manen, 1997) of those who teach and learn at Aspire Academy. While Husserl's phenomenology forefronts the lived experience, Heidegger's phenomenology emphasizes the "transaction between individual and the world as they constitute and are constituted by each other" (Laverty, 2003, p. 24), which allows for the interaction between these changing entities. The capturing of this transaction required both individual and group data collection opportunities. Since school is a place of relationships, Heidegger's concept of phenomenology allowed for the essence of Aspire Academy to be defined by the learning transactions within the world of Aspire Academy. Heidegger's phenomenology, when the idea of hermeneutics is paired with it, allows for interpretation of lived experience through discourse and reflection. The process of data collection moved forward with discourse and back with reflection; then forward again with more elaborate and informed discourse because of more precise questions, and so on. Therefore, I returned to previously asked questions to garner a deeper understanding of previously explored descriptions; then I wrote more specific questions designed to elicit more detailed descriptions of participants' experience. This movement from general to specific promoted elaboration on those perceptions of experience, which included participants' interpretation through reflection. This cyclical system of data collection promoted the gathering of deepening discourse built on further reflection, which allowed for more detailed description of the lived experience of participants.

Phenomenology

  Husserl's Phenomenology. Husserl's theory of phenomenology was an appropriate choice for this research because he emphasized that the "life-world" is understood as what we experience (1970). The experience of teaching and learning at Aspire Academy appears to cause success for many students who have not previously had success, a phenomenon that many find difficult to understand. Laverty (2003) explains that the "study of these phenomenon intends to return and re-examine these taken for granted experiences and perhaps uncover new and/or forgotten meanings" (p. 22). Since the experiences of students and teachers is not understood, using phenomenology to return and re-examine the experiences that are hidden beneath or being taken for granted is an appropriate choice. Laverty (2003) also explains that Husserl believed that consciousness is co-constituted dialogue between person and world, which implies that the understanding of the experience of teaching and learning at Aspire Academy may lie just below the surface of full awareness, and only need to be uncovered by returning to and re-examining lived experience, which reflection allows.

  Heidegger's Phenomenology. As a student of Husserl, Heidegger built on phenomenology as lived experience, tweaking it slightly at first, calling it, 'human experience as it is lived' or Dasein, which is the mode of being human (Heidegger ,1927/2002; Groenwald, 2004). While his emphasis focused more on the human experience, Heidegger also concluded that consciousness comes from historically lived experience (Heidegger, 1927/2002), clarifying the cumulative effect of lived experience. Heidegger also added an element to the human element of his theory of phenomenology: interpretation. Heidegger (1927/2002) said, "The meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation" (p. 286) Understanding, however, is connected to a given set of fore-structures that cannot be eliminated.

One needs to become as aware as possible and account for these interpretive influences (Kvale,

1996). One way of revisiting these fore-structures, or the essence of the phenomenon is through

the use of the hermeneutical circle (Heidegger, 1927/2002), "which moves from part of

experiences to whole of experiences and back and forth to increase the depth of engagement with

and the understanding of texts" (Kvale, 1996). The viewed end of this spiraling through the

hermeneutical circle occurs when the researcher has reached a sensible meaning (Laverty, 2003).

According to Heidegger, "The expression 'phenomenology' signifies primarily a

methodological conception. This expression does not characterize the *what* of the objects of

philosophical research as subject-matter, but rather the *how* of that research" (Heidegger,

1962/2002, p. 278). If the purpose of this research is to attempt to describe the essence of what

makes students and teachers at Aspire Academy find the successes that they do, I must believe

that at the heart of the experience of those who teach and learn there is an essence that can be

understood through an engagement with and interpretation of the discourse (or text) of that

human experience. Therefore, the process becomes more important than the product in

phenomenological research. Persistent revisiting and re-examining, combined with interpretation

of those fore-structures, lead me to uncover the essence of the human experience of learning and

teaching that leads to academic success at Aspire Academy. From this uncovering of the essence

of lived experience, one structure (Giogi, 1997) emerged from the data during the process of

analysis.

The Hermeneutic Circle Goes Spiral. To conceptualize the hermeneutic circle as it is

embedded in the research plan of this study, I turned it on its side, so that the spiral moved from

left to right, representing the progress of the research process in the pursuit of deeper

understanding of the lived experience of the participants. The first movement forward was the

initiation of discourse, or my asking the first questions of the participants; the first movement

backward was my reflection on the responses of the participants from which subsequent

questions were drafted. The next movement forward pushed past the point at which discourse

stopped within the first spiral, and my reflection began as the participants' responded to more

precise questions. This movement forward came from my asking the second set of questions,

which took the data collection deeper into the participants' experience, which required the next

backward movement, or my reflection on those data, from which the next set of questions could

be developed. After both rounds of the first spiral were complete, I moved forward with the

second spiral and the third spiral in the same way (see Appendix C).

Each spiral represents a data collection cycle with two rounds, during which I moved

forward collecting description from the participants, then cycled backward, reviewing the data

and reflecting on it only deeply enough to make decisions about what to ask in the next round.

Since the hermeneutic circle was chosen to help me reach the essence of participants'

experience, the spirals of data collection moved through the research process, increasing in

richness of description as the cycles of data collection advanced. Therefore, the research process

of the study captured the intertwined nature of description and interpretation of lived experience

by requiring both the participants, through descriptive writing and then interpretive conversation;

and me, as researcher, through drafting questions and prompts to reflect on previous data in

preparation for subsequent data collection activities. All of this moving forward with data

collection and then backward with reflection allowed me to participate in the ebbing and flowing

of understanding the essence of the Aspire Academy experience. Description pushed

understanding of the phenomenon forward; reflection pulled understanding of the phenomenon

back to check for clarity before moving forward in the pursuit of richer description again.

Bias and Trustworthiness

To begin this process, I wrote in my researcher's journal about my assumptions and influences within the setting of Aspire Academy. These preliminary journal entries provided a description of my lived experience as a member of the building leadership, a role which directly affects the lived experiences of both students and teachers in their pursuit of success. This "overt naming of assumptions and influences as key contributors to the research process in hermeneutic phenomenology is one striking difference from the naming and then bracketing of bias or assumptions in phenomenology" (Laverty, 2003, p. 28). Acknowledging my contributions to the success at Aspire Academy was a necessary first step in describing the experience. The essence of the phenomenon of success at Aspire Academy lay somewhere between the description of the lived experiences of success of participants and the making of meaning of those lived experiences by participants. Finding that essence required making assumptions and influences of key participants, including the researcher, transparent through writing and talking about those lived experiences.

Husserl and Heidegger disagreed about the role of bias in phenomenology. While both theorists agreed that bias must be named in phenomenology, they disagreed about the purpose of naming it. Husserl suggested phenomenological reduction, or bracketing, of bias, a process designed to eliminate the bias' influence on the description of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997 & 2012; Husserl, 1981/2002). Because Heidegger saw interpretation as integral to the process of studying a phenomenon, he believed that naming the assumptions that had interplay with the phenomenon was a part of the research process (Laverty, 2003).

Consistent with phenomenology, a qualitative methodology, this study employed a variety of measures to enhance trustworthiness. One measure was the use of a researcher's

reflective journal, designed to assist me in the process of phenomenological reduction (Giorgi, 1997, 2012), reflection and interpretation (Laverty, 2003). Writing about my notions of the underlying factors that contributed to success at Aspire Academy allowed me to see the ambiguity and naiveté of my assumptions about why students and teachers found success there. While I found that the factors that I believed were important, like student-teacher ratios and class sizes, were part of how students and teachers at Aspire Academy perceived their ability to find success, the factors that were more significant to them were undefined and limited in my conception of them at the start of this research. The most startling discovery of the research that I was wrong about in my conception of the study was that I expected teachers and students to perceive the setting, Aspire Academy, to be the most significant factor in their finding success; what I found instead, was that the people and the ways in which they worked together within that place were the most important factor.

In addition to the researcher's reflective journal, people both within and outside of the research setting participated in measures designed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. First, the use of a critical friend (Foulger, 2010; Gibbs & Angelides, 2008; Hamilton, 2002) also served this purpose of identifying fore-structures that hold assumptions and influences of the researcher throughout the data collection spirals. I consulted two critical friends at several intervals within the research. During data collection, I asked these critical friends to review my questions prior to subsequent data collection activities. During analysis, I asked the critical friends to review the data and my summary of it for consistency. During data collection, I stayed true to the intent of participants by implementing participant checks of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) collected occurred during each spiral. After data collection ceased, the

reflective journal and external critical friend measures continued to function as methods for

enhancing trustworthiness in analysis and interpretation phases of the study.

Research Plan

Because I utilized a phenomenological research approach to data collection to capture the

essence of what it is about Aspire Academy that makes students and teachers successful,

qualitative methods of data collection on participants' lived experience were required. A

combination of recurring participant writing prompts designed to obtain description, and

individual and group interviews (Giorgi, 1997) allowed participants to share their experiences in

a variety of formats, capitalizing on anonymity, individual privacy, and dialogue between group

members to broaden the options for sharing perspectives on the research topic. The writing

prompts also allowed me to bracket (Giorgi, 1997; Husserl 1970/2002) my past knowledge and

theory about academic success during data collection. First, I wrote questions for each spiral.

Then I compared what I had asked to my reflective journal to determine if I was excluding

possible elements of success through the phrasing on my questions. Then I asked my critical

friends to examine the questions for their ability to elicit good description from the participants

as well as their appropriateness to the data that had been previously collected in later spirals.

To document completely the responses of students and teachers, I asked them to respond

in writing to a small number of questions that were designed to provide vocabulary that revealed

some insight into the lived experiences of these participants. Phenomenological data may be

collected through description or interview through broad and open-ended questions, but if the

two methods are used together, "description usually comes first and is used as a basis for further

elaboration during the interview" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 242). The use of this sequence as described

by Giorgi allowed me time to reflect on the data prior to initiating subsequent data collection, as well as to draft questions that would elicit deepening description of the phenomenon.

Follow-up interviews asked these participants to explore their responses; this elaboration was important to delve more deeply into the phenomenon and allowed for participant checks of previously collected data. The data collection methods alternated between interviews and writing prompts through subsequent rounds of data collection. In addition, the use of an external critical friend for external conversations (Foulger, 2010) within each spiral of data collection enhanced trustworthiness because the critical friend and participant checks examined data collected at the end of the second and final spirals of data collection.

Spiral One. As described in the conceptual framework, this study attempted to delve into the essence of the experience of success at Aspire Academy for students, teachers, and building leadership. To accomplish this goal, a first spiral, or round, of participant data collection gathered data on which subsequent inquiries were based. Both students and teachers responded to the first set of three questions that asked them to describe their experiences of academic success at Aspire Academy.

To begin, a short list of writing prompts in the form of open-ended questions, about personal definitions of success and experiences in classes or at school were administered to all participants. The purpose of this first part of the first spiral was to gather vocabulary that was echoed among participants' descriptions of success and the lived experience of school at Aspire Academy. Once this data was gathered, a list of vocabulary was generated from the data, and the external critical friend was consulted. Unfortunately, the data that was gathered did not net what appeared to be very elaborate or specifically descriptive data from teachers, in particular. Not until the process of analysis was initiated, and all data was read at once did the richness of this

initial data from teachers emerge. A closer read of the data revealed that students provided

interesting insight into their experience in stories and phrases. After preliminary data analysis

that included multiple reads of the data and simple quantifying of the words that were most

common among participants, I reflected on the data that I had gathered in this spiral and drafted

the questions for the second round of the first spiral.

       To initiate the second part of the first spiral, teachers were interviewed in an effort to

gather more vocabulary about their experience of teaching at Aspire Academy. Seeking data

about support from administration and support for students, teachers were the participants from

whom I needed more data. This second round of data collection was conducted in individual

interviews. To represent varying perspectives on their teaching experience, I chose a female,

veteran teacher who was also the English language arts department chair, and therefore

responsible for NCLB reading testing; and the youngest member of the teaching staff, a male

social studies teacher. To counter bias that may have occurred because of my professional

relationships with these teachers, I conducted the interviews in settings as far from my office at

the school as possible. The interview with the social studies teacher occurred in his classroom;

the interview with the English teacher was conducted at the local library. In addition, I asked the

participants to imagine my removing my professional role's 'hat' and donning my research 'hat'

before the interviews began. The two teachers were interviewed using questions that were more

specific to teaching experience with school administration and students. Data collected in these

interviews was more elaborate than the first round's writing prompt data from teachers, and more

specific to the questions asked about support from administrators and support for students. From

these interviews, preliminary ideas about the phenomenon emerged that directed the subsequent

spirals of the investigation.

Spiral Two. Because phenomenology aspires to first describe lived experience, questions designed to elicit descriptive responses were more prevalent early in the study. Clarifying questions meant to elicit early ideas about the phenomenon comprised the group interviews of spiral two. Since the data from teachers in the first round of spiral one was not as descriptive as I would have liked, I asked a similar question to elicit more detailed responses in the group interview of teachers. The use of metaphor for teaching experience was important in the second spiral as it allowed participants latitude to explain more deeply their perceptions of their lived experiences at Aspire Academy.

To maximize the opportunity for participants to reflect on their experience prior to responding in the group interview, I sent the questions to each participant prior to the group interview. All teacher participants were invited to participate in this round; however, only those who appeared at the appointed times available for participation responded to the question. To minimize bias caused by my professional relationship with the teacher participants in this round of data collection, I sat outside the circle of teacher participants during the group interview; I also printed the question on paper, which I left in the center of the circle on a table. I did not speak during the interview until its conclusion. I took notes on the non-verbal cues that teachers used during the interview to clarify my transcription of the interview in hopes of gaining greater understanding of the participants verbally provided data.

Using the textual data from these group interview sessions fueled individualized writing prompts based on participants' comments in the second part of spiral two. The purpose of the second spiral was to allow participants time to reflect on and interpret their lived experience both with others in their group interview and alone in their writing, moving ever deeper into understanding of the lived experience at Aspire Academy. This round of prompts was sent via

email so that teachers could respond to the questions without my being present during the data

collection. These follow-up writing prompts also allowed for participant checks of the group

interview transcripts. A scarce number of corrections were made as participants saw fit; these

corrections were then verified once more by participants.

       Spiral Three. A third round of a similar structure was necessary to capture data about

assessments and graduation. This round was focused on the descriptions of success that related

directly to the testing and graduation. This spiral allowed the participants who had taken and

administered the assessments to reflect on their experiences in the testing situation with a high

degree of accuracy. Capturing this important data soon after participants had either administered,

for teachers, or taken the NCLB assessments and district assessments, for students, pushed the

study toward the saturation point in terms of data on academic success.

       The first part of this spiral asked all participants to respond in writing to the issue of

measuring success with state assessments and graduation; participants representing assessed

subject area teachers, assessed grade 11 students, as well as graduates and the principal

responded to the writing prompts. The principal and teachers delivered very detailed data on

these topics via email, while only two students responded to these prompts in writing. Therefore,

the second part of this third spiral was a combination of group interviews with graduating seniors

and individual interviews of tested grade 11 students as these participants could fit such

interviews into their very busy spring schedules.

       The data revealed in this spiral lead to more specific understandings about perceptions of

the measures of success identified by NCLB and how performance in those measures manifested

itself in the lived experience of participants. The teachers expressed frustrations about the

assessments more prominently than the students, but consistent with what I expected based on

my experience as assessment coordinator for the school. More surprising were the students'

feelings about the assessments, which ranged from believing that they could show how much

they had learned to feeling tired and clicking through the tests unless teachers told them that the

test was important. Reflection on data in this spiral required conversation with my critical friends

because of my surprise at the students' responses. These conversations with my critical friends

helped me process the ideas that students shared despite their incongruity with my expectations,

which were that students would feel the same way about assessments as teachers did.

Confidentiality and Trustworthiness during Data Collection

My role as the curriculum coordinator and a building leader was clearly differentiated

from my role as researcher for all participants during data collection. Specifically, at no time

during the research plan's execution was the information gathered from descriptive writing or

interviews by student and teacher participants revealed to administrators, so that neither students

nor teachers feared repercussions based on their responses. This level of confidentiality allowed

teachers and students to take risks in sharing their lived experiences at the deepest levels of their

consciousness. During data collection, I found that it was important to indicate very clearly to

participants that I was, at that time, functioning exclusively as a researcher, completely outside

of my role as a colleague within the building, or as a teacher to students. In interview situations, I

either sat outside the circle of interviewees or conducted the interviews in the teachers' rooms or

other settings rather than my office. I left the questions on the table on a sheet of paper or on a

computer screen so that I did not verbalize the questions myself to help participants focus on

what was being asked rather than who was asking. I took notes on participants' gestures and non-

verbal utterances for use during transcription during interviews rather than looking at participants

during interviews. This action prevented me from providing non-verbal cues to the participants during interviews.

Because of the goal of reaching the essence of the lived experience, participants' original writing was kept confidential and was at no time shared with other participants, including no students' writing was shared with administrators or teachers. The purpose of keeping the writing confidential was to promote the most honest, lowest risk personal writing to occur in response to the writing prompts.

To promote the greatest trustworthiness of the data collected during collection, three measures were employed reflective journaling, participant checks, and external critical friend conversations. Reviews of data collected in forms that protect the confidentiality of the participants were conducted by the critical friend after the second and third spirals were complete. External conversations with the critical friend that occurred after the last two spirals allowed the critical friend to help the researcher examine the data to be used in the subsequent spiral and during preliminary data analysis. Participant checks were used with all participants in every spiral. Participants were asked to review transcripts of their words in all interviews, both individual and group. Transcripts were sent to all participants for their review with the exception of spiral three, the transcripts for which were completed after the semester had ended, making access to them via email impossible because all communication in writing with students was done via school email, which students cannot access after the semester ends.

Setting and Participants

Setting. The setting of this study was the school that educated the student participants and employed the teacher participants during school year 2011-2012. This high school is situated in an urban district that maintains three comprehensive high schools, none of which made AYP

on NCLB measures in the previous school year. One of these high schools was on improvement for not making AYP in reading and math for several years consecutively. The high school being studied is a charter high school serving students from all three of the comprehensive high schools in the district as well as a small number of students from surrounding suburban districts, most of whom were failing many of their courses in those buildings, which moved their parents to seek an option like Aspire Academy. Approximately 200 students are served by one principal, 19 certified staff, and 14 classified staff, including four para-professionals (none of whom assist in classrooms), two full- and one half-time custodial staff, two office staff, a campus police officer, a technology coordinator, and part-time school nurse, a cafeteria worker, and a half-time truancy officer. The school is subject to all provisions of NCLB because it is operated by a public school district. The school studied has been a charter high school for 11 years and has graduated approximately 600 students in that time. The school has made AYP in both reading and math for the last eight years and in graduation rate for the last two years. During the year the school was studied, the school won a Standard of Excellence Award in Grade 11 Reading, which is the highest honor for schools on NCLB assessments in this state.

Participants. The participants for this study fell into four categories: building principal, certified teachers, grade 11 students who were assessed in reading and math, and seniors who graduated. The building leadership included the principal and me because I also function as the second in charge in the building. The building principal had been principal for five years at the time of the study; prior to that role, he was a social studies teacher in the building for 14 years.

Teachers. The potential list of participants included all of the certified staff: the principal, three teachers in the each of the business, English, and social studies departments. Math and science each have two teachers and share one, making the full-time equivalent two and one-half

teachers in each subject. Other certified staff included two social workers, a counselor, and one art teacher.

Of the teachers, the participants included two of the three English teachers, all five math and science teachers, all three of the business teachers, two of the social studies teachers, the art teacher, and the principal. Demographically, the teachers represented 68% of the certified staff, slightly more female than male, and both the most and least experienced as well as a balanced representation in between the two extremes. Three teachers had taught more than 20 years; six had taught between 10 and 20 years, and five had taught less than 10 years. Ethnically and culturally, the teachers represented every group on staff. Only five certified staff did not participate; two are male, three are female, all are white. I did not participate in data collection as a participant. All of the teachers are highly qualified in their subject areas by NCLB standards. Eight of the certified staff members have advanced degrees, and two teachers were in the process of completing advanced degrees during the study; six of these participated in the study.

Students. Two student groups were important as participants: students who were in the grade 11 testing cohort and students who graduated in May 2012. Students were also chosen because they had attended Aspire Academy for one year or more. The sample was limited by parental permission for students who were under 18 years old during the study. Participants who were 18 years old during the study were allowed to participate without parental permission, but they signed the adult informed consent form along with all other adult participants.

When initially selected, the students asked to participate included a representative sample of the school, including both genders, and a variety of cultural/ethnic groups. After gaining parental consent the demographic representation shifted slightly. The students were one-third male to two-thirds female, which is a higher ratio of females to males than the school population

ratio, which was nearer to evenly split. Ethnically and culturally, the students represented whites

and African-Americans equally, with slightly fewer Hispanic-Americans, which was a slightly

higher ratio of African-American and Hispanic-American to white students than was found in the

student body, and a proportionately appropriate number of Native Americans to the building's

population. All of the students were considered at risk by most definitions, whether culturally,

socio-economically, or academically.

Chapter Five: Findings

According to Lester (1999), phenomenological researchers should first describe their

findings from the data in a summary in an effort to be faithful to the participants. The findings

should be reported robustly using direct quotations –"both 'soundbites' and more extensive

quotes from participants to illustrate points" (Lester, 1999, p. 3). Summarizing to create a

description of the participants' lived experience requires that I, as researcher, be aware of biases

brought by the inevitable editing process. Therefore, I have made an effort to include as much of

the data presented by participants as possible. The words of the participants are woven together

into a story of the experience of teaching and learning at Aspire Academy. In addition, the

process of analysis, as it is done to create the description in the data summary, is steeped in the

phenomenological research tradition.

Phenomenological Data Analysis

Based on the work of Giorgi (1997, 2012) with regard to description in

phenomenological research, the process of analysis followed with these five steps:

1. I first read all of the data in all spirals in the order in which it was collected to get a sense
   of the whole.
2. I then began to re-read the description, marking units of meaning (phrases or short
   sentences that mark shifts in meaning within the description).
3. I transformed the data by putting it into matrices of data sources and meaning units
   derived from the questions asked, potential gaps in the data, and relevant literature.
4. I summarized the data, connecting descriptions across participants. Giorgi (2012), using
   ideas from Husserl, employs *free imaginative variation*. "Even thought description is

from another, a researcher can reflect on the presented meaning contained in the

description and perceive their unity and come up with an understanding of the world of

the other. This is a description of the world of the other, not an interpretation" (Giorgi,

2012, p. 7).

5. I then returned to the participants' descriptions to find verifying support for my

summarizing statements.

This process was followed for data from each spiral, then across spirals to determine the

structures that emerged (Giorgi, 1997). *Structures* are another name for the essences of the lived

experience of participants as they converge (Giorgi, 1997, p. 244).

During data analysis, two processes were employed related to literacy because of my

background in teaching English language arts: literary analysis using the theory of close reading,

and writing to learn. First, close reading is a method of literary analysis that values support from

the text above all else during the process of making meaning of a text. Readers are to first

determine what a text says, then examine how it is said, connecting the two steps to make

meaning of the text. To argue for a meaning of the text, a reader must support her opinion with

the text itself. According to Thomas (2006), close reading of the data text is an important step in

inductive coding in qualitative studies such as grounded theory, discourse analysis, and

phenomenology (p. 241). Close reading was useful after step two of Giorgi's process, when I felt

unsure about making meaning using *free imaginative variation* to understanding the *structures* of

the lived experience of the participants. Remembering that any statements connecting meaning

must be supported by the description of participants as in close reading, I aspired to assure that

my work in steps four and five of the process was consistent with the close reading process,

which required me to support my inferences with details from the text.

My belief that writing is a thinking activity that allows reflection on experience led me to explore the avenue of writing to examine the meaning that she was making of the description. According to van Manen (2000) phenomenological analysis is primarily a writing exercise.

> It is through writing and re-writing that the researcher can distill meaning. Analysts use writing to compose a story that captures the important elements of the lived experience. By the end of the story the reader should feel that she has vicariously experienced the phenomenon under study and should be able to envision herself coming to similar conclusions about what it means. (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1376).

The story of the participants becomes blended, told by different narrators so that readers can come to understand the lived experience of the participants.

To capture the lived experience of participants, as is the intention of phenomenology, a researcher must ask participants to describe their experience of the phenomenon. Therefore, the first questions to participants in this study asked teachers to describe their teaching experience and students to describe their classroom experience at Aspire Academy. Along with the general question about describing their experience, this set of questions also asked participants to define academic success and to relate their experience at Aspire Academy to their feelings of success in school, according to their role as either teacher or student. This combination of questions was designed to delve into the experience of academic success in this charter high school.

Spiral One, Round One: Academic Success

At first glance, success at Aspire Academy looked a lot like success in high school in general: getting good grades, graduating, and, for students, attending regularly. Of the ten students first asked to write about their classroom experience at Aspire Academy, seven said that

"good grades" or getting "A's and B's" or being on the honor roll were part of their definitions of academic success. For some students, good grades were not the norm prior to attending Aspire Academy:

> Aspire Academy has helped me through so much. I was failing almost every class at [another district comprehensive high school] and when I came here, my grades just shot up, and I started getting good grades for once in my life. I actually got on the honor roll because of Aspire Academy helping me so much (S1R1K6WP11-2011).

Teachers, too, believed that getting good grades was one of the ways in which academic success may be defined; six of 13 said that grades were part of academic success. Graduation, too, appeared high on the list of characteristics of academic success. Half of the students and half of the teachers included graduating in their descriptions of academic success. Ultimately, the feeling of academic success for teachers is the graduation of students who may not have graduated without their attending Aspire Academy. "Every time I sit at graduation, I feel success. I look at the group of kids who are graduating and can't help but think, 'If Aspire Academy didn't exist, they might not have ever graduated.'" (S1R1T11WP11-2011).

Under closer inspection, however, the data contained descriptive language about academic success that did not fit neatly into categories of good grades and graduation. Instead, stories, statements, and phrases about teachers' relationships with students, learning or intellectual growth along with other types of growth, and engagement emerged. What was interesting about this language is how much more of it there was in the data than language about attaining graduation, maintaining consistent attendance, or even earning good grades indicating academic success as it relates to lived classroom or teaching experience at Aspire Academy.

Relationships. The 10 students mentioned their relationships with their teachers 19 times when they wrote about their classroom experience and academic success at Aspire Academy. Statements like, "Teachers help me out," (S1R1K3WP11-2011) and "Teachers do their best to help you with anything that you need," (S1R1K5WP11-2011) characterized students' descriptions of their classroom experiences as they related to their academic success. One senior contrasted her experience at Aspire Academy with her experience in her former high school in this way:

> My academic career at [a different comprehensive high school in the same district] was far from successful…I hated school and school hated me…My academic career at Aspire Academy is a total 180 degrees. I now enjoy the academic part of school. I love my teachers. Not just because they're awesome, some more than others, but because they gave me a chance to start over and worked with me. (S1R1K1WP11-2011)

Sometimes students made these connections between their own academic success and their classroom experiences with teachers even more explicit, "They [teachers] want to see you succeed," (S1R1K5WP11-2011) and "they [teachers/staff] care, so it makes me want to care for my education" (S1R1K8WP11-2011). One senior who had attended Aspire Academy for three years said, "Staff and all the teachers are very helpful; they do a great job on a daily basis" (S1R1K8WP11-2011). For a senior to include the detail that all of the teachers in the school, as well as the non-teaching staff, were helpful to him indicates that he must have felt that he had a feeling of relationship with all of the teachers and some staff members that indicated their willingness to help him and/or other students regularly, as indicated by his inclusion of the detail on their job performance, "on a daily basis." One student summed it up in the concise way that only a young person can, "The teachers actually know who you are" (S1R1K4WP11-2011).

More than half of the teachers addressed their experiences of building relationships with students leading to success, as well. One teacher said, "I feel that teaching at Aspire Academy allows me to build relationships with each student" (S1R1T11WP11-2011). Another teacher shared, "It's wonderful to see that most of the students I work with in my classes are trying to be successful given the opportunity to come to school. I can feel that they just need support and encouragement from teachers" (S1R1T13WP11-2011). These teachers used the word "feel" to describe their experiences, characterizing their emotional investment in relationships with students as part of their teaching experience at Aspire Academy.

Some teachers shared stories of feedback from students helping the teachers feel successful. "Being recognized is not important, but to have the ones [students] who we are really here for say something to you about 'caring means so much'…When that happens, I feel successful and proud that I did something that made a difference in a student's life" (S1R1T10WP11-2011). One teacher defined her success in terms of the relationships she built with students: "I feel successful. I feel that I am a good role model for the student body. I have many trustworthy relationships with many students. I feel successful because I have earned the trust of the students in my classes" (S1R1T8WP11-2011). Having confirmation about their relationships with students years later was also an element of teachers' on-going feelings of success: "I like the feeling of past students' sending email, coming by, seeing them in public, and they thank you years later for being there for them" (S1R1T10WP11-2011). A veteran Aspire Academy teacher who had taught in three other school settings before coming to Aspire Academy shared,

> I feel I have experienced the most success as a teacher at Aspire Academy. I feel
> successful when I am able to make a connection with students who are 'at risk' of not

graduating…I had to work at Aspire Academy a few years before I gained a feeling of success. I began to feel successful when I saw students who had great academic and behavioral difficulties make positive changes and graduate. I also gained a feeling of success when graduates came back and told us their stories of personal, academic, and career success." (S1R1T12WP11-2011)

Growth. Both students and teachers talked about growth using terms like learning, intellectual growth, and other types of growth related to effort, motivation, and enthusiasm for future endeavors in education and the world of work. The 10 students mentioned types of growth as it related to their academic success 16 times, while teachers tended to measure their success more heavily in terms of students' growth. The 15 teachers mentioned growth 24 times in response to questions about their teaching experience and academic success.

Students tended to write about growth in terms of their academic success using phrases that indicated that their success was more about learning than earning grades or test scores. The students used phrases that described their academic success as "learning new things," (S1R1K10WP11-2011) "growing intellectually, growing as a person and discovering new things" (S1R1K1WP11-2011, p. 1) Sometimes the students characterized their academic success in contrast to their previous learning experiences in these ways, "taking my school work a lot more seriously," (S1R1K2WP11-2011) "going through school and actually getting something out of it," (S1R1K6WP11-2011) and "moving forward in my life with the knowledge I get from everybody at Aspire Academy" (S1R1K8WP11-2011).

Teachers also wrote about defining academic success as students' growth in learning: "Aspire Academy is all about learning success" (S1R1T7WP11-2011). One teacher made her definition of success completely contingent on how a student grows:

> Academic success for me means that a student who is struggling on learning a skill acquires the skill after being helped. A student who is not motivated becomes motivated to do his school work. A student realizes that he needs to do something and better his future by deciding to go to college. (S1R1T1WP11-2011)

Sometimes the teachers' awareness of their relationships with students was connected directly to students' growth. One teacher said, "I see the change in them (students). I must have done something to contribute to that change" (S1R1T1WP11-2011). Another teacher's story of her teaching success was told in what was for her, an exemplar story of successful student growth:

> The moments when I reach one or two are those that I strive for. For example, one kid who has a habit of sleeping in class came to me the other day and gave me a big hug. He said, 'Mrs. F., you are my favorite teacher. I'm not going to sleep in your class anymore. Do you know why? It's because you care about me. You show me that you care about me learning, and that means a lot.' The light bulb moments - when a kid says that he finally gets it – are successful ones for me." (S1R1T6WP11-2011).

A business teacher expressed his desire to see students' growth in the classroom continue after graduation:

> I want students to come back and BRAG [emphasis in original] about their success; I want the students always to be as proud of their school as I am of my school…My business sense makes me believe that academic success is achieved when a student

becomes a productive part of society…My teaching sense tells me that success in the classroom comes when a student has mastered a subject and moves to master new tasks. (S1R1T7WP11-2011)

The sentiment of students' growth was often put in the context of one function of school being that it prepares students for future success. For one student, high school is "business that will get you places in the adult world" (S1R1K3WP11-2011). As echoed by a teacher, academic success is "having a student leave Aspire Academy as a better individual, more capable of being a successful contributor to society" (S1R1T4WP11-2011). An eleven-year veteran Aspire Academy teacher summarized her experience of academic success with students clearly:

Perhaps in another school setting academic success would relate to high grades, high test scores, or high GPA. However, at Aspire Academy academic success is related to students' improving their skills and self-esteem. Academic success is not about how one student compares to another student. Academic success is about how individual students grow during their years in school. To gain academic success, students need to rid themselves of previous negative school experiences and the 'I can't' attitude. Students achieve academic success when they realize 'I can' ask questions, get help, learn from my mistakes, and reach my goals." (S1R1T12WP11-2011)

Teachers also wrote about different types of student growth as they described their teaching experience at Aspire Academy. Knowing that students have "confidence in solving problems," (S1R1T3WP11-2011) and that they are "not scared to try new things," (S1R1T5WP11-2011) and that a "student can put a project together without assistance from start to finish, or come in and ask to do more than required or to find out if the program can do a

certain task. I know that they are interested and thinking 'outside the box'" (S1R1T9WP11-2011). One teacher summed up her observations of students' growth when she wrote about academic success, "Students start to realize and appreciate the value of education and being able to connect or relate what they are learning to real life situations" (S1R1T13WP11-2011).

Engagement. While the teachers outnumbered the students in describing academic success as growth, students outnumbered teachers in including class size and classroom environment in their descriptions of their lived experience of academic success at Aspire Academy. Characteristics of the classroom environment and engagement were mentioned by students 18 times, while teachers mentioned students' engagement only a few times. The most commonly mentioned characteristic of the classroom environment mentioned was class size, which tends to be smaller at Aspire Academy, causing both teachers and students to believe that their interactions are more personalized.

Students characterize engagement as being "active in class in a positive way," (S1R1K1WP 11-2011) but their descriptions of the classroom environment include descriptions of the atmosphere, or as some might call it, the culture of the classroom. "The vibe is relaxed but serious…Having a relaxed and fun environment in the classroom makes it less tense for me, which helps me get my work done faster and more efficiently" (S1R1K3WP11-2011). Another student calls the classroom environment "more laid back. The classrooms are less rowdy, so I don't get distracted" (S1R1K4WP11-2011). This environment contributes to learning for several students; said one of them, "I get attention that I need if I don't understand something" (S1R1K6WP11-2011). Another student talked about "one on ones with the teacher that are enabled by smaller classes and more instruction" (S1R1K7WP11-2011). One senior attributed his success to smaller class size directly:

Without small classrooms, I probably would not be doing so well in my classes. I just

can't handle distractions. It's really hard for me to focus if there are a lot of kids or too

many distractions going on in the room. At Aspire Academy, there's none of that; I come

in, sit down, and do my work; of course, I have friends here, and I have a lot of friends

here. But they also know the difference between play and work time. (S1R1K8WP11-

2011).

A senior who had spent his 11th and 12th grade years at Aspire Academy contrasted his previous

experience with his experience at Aspire Academy:

The classroom experience at Aspire Academy is much better than what I found at any

other school. The classes are smaller, so I can concentrate better, and the teachers can

monitor everyone without losing track of who is doing what. The method of hands-on

and interactive teaching makes it much more suitable for a range of students so that way

everyone understands what the lesson is teaching. (S1R1K10WP11-2011)

Another student goes beyond the senior's assertion to emphasize the lengths to which teachers go

to help him: "I feel that here at Aspire Academy you have more opportunity to accomplish

academic success because the teachers help you until you understand the lesson"

(S1R1K9WP11-2011). Academic success was also linked to students' feelings about their

teachers, "You have more instruction and guidance, and it makes you feel like you're more

backed up by your teachers" (S1R1K7WP11-2011). Another student wrote about his feelings

about the classroom environment, tying his success to the classroom environment, including his

relationships with staff:

I feel comfortable in Aspire Academy classes. There are many reasons, too; the staff and all the teachers are very helpful. They do a great job on a daily basis. The classes aren't too big; you get a lot of one on one action, which is great, because that's what my problems were back at [a large comprehensive high school in the district]. Classes were too big and I got no help from the teachers, so I would fail. (S1R1K8WP11-2011).

For half of the teachers who answered the questions about teaching experience and academic success, class size is a factor in their feelings of success. Some teachers described the effect of class size on their ability to interact with each student: "I like to teach small classes. It is not hard to monitor students' progress in learning. There is greater time for student and teacher to interact" (S1R1T13WP11-2011). A science teacher wrote, "The biggest reason for my teaching success at Aspire Academy is the small class size, which helps me focus on the needs of individual students" (S1R1T5WP11-2011). Several teachers attributed their ability to build relationships with student to the class size. One teacher described her experience in this way, "Aspire Academy is small enough for me to get to know each student…Other schools are overcrowded, and some quiet students are left alone in the background. No one can hide in my classroom, and no one is forgotten. I'm able to communicate with each of my students every day. I have room to challenge my students individually" (S1R1T3WP11-2011).

When teachers wrote about their teaching experience, they described students' engagement in terms of their classroom observations of students, but several teachers had to acknowledge that not all students choose to engage, despite the small class size and relationships with teachers:

Academic success to me involves exhibiting an active involvement in learning which is

shown by personal participation in the process and some tangible product being created

that shows that is happening. Being accountable for one's own success or lack of it is a

personal choice that impacts a student's future. Aspire Academy allows great opportunity

to achieve academic success necessary to complete high school but I cannot force any

child to buy into that. (S1R1T2WP11-2011).

This teacher's perspective shows how she envisions academic success, provides for that

opportunity as a teacher at Aspire Academy, yet she is sometimes forced to witness a student's

choice not to take that opportunity to engage in the process. Ultimately, this teacher makes her

concerns about students who fail to engage in their education more explicit: "I am sometimes

disappointed that I am unable to motivate these young people to care about education"

(S1R1T2WP11-2011).

Spiral One, Round Two: Relationships with Administration and Students

Data from this round of collection were generated by individual teacher interviews. The

goal was to delve more deeply into the lived experience of teachers at Aspire Academy to begin

to understand their unique position between the administration and the students. Since teachers

have perceptions of both the experience of the administration and the experience of their

students, they provided unique insights into the interwoven nature of the experience of this

phenomenon which is Aspire Academy.

The questions in this round were asked of two teachers, selected because of their

differences from one another. The first teacher, a female veteran teacher, teaching in her third

setting at Aspire Academy, and the English language arts department chair, had unique

perspectives drawn from the experience of seeing all students who are assessed in reading at grade 11 by the NCLB assessments. Mary also had taught at Aspire Academy for all but one year of its existence as a charter high school; she typically taught all sections of English 11, a section of speech, and a section of a senior English elective literature course. The second teacher is male, in his second year of teaching social studies, had the position of being the most junior member of his department as well as the staff as a whole, and came to Aspire Academy directly after his college graduation. Tim generally taught two sections of ninth grade World History, and three sections of social studies electives that included current social issues, psychology, sociology, or economics.

The questions asked in this round of data collection drew on the data from the first round of this spiral, which addressed definitions of academic success. These questions asked the two teachers to explain their experiences with administrative pressures and support as well as their work with students on overcoming challenges, developing trust, and connecting emotional growth to academic success. In describing their experiences with both students and administrators, teachers talked about their relationships, as well as engagement and motivation, as they related to both groups.

Relationships and Support from Administrators. Teachers' relationships with their administrators included encouragement, positive support, and flexibility to do their work. Engagement with administrators addressed both the kinds of interactions that the teachers found typical with their administrators and the things that the teachers found motivating in doing their work.

When asked about the administration pushing him to do his best, Tim spoke in broad terms: "The administration pushes us simply through encouragement and positive support. Our rewards really come not in a monetary or extrinsic reward, but through encouragement that provides us with a reason to try to do our best and see that there is an end or there is a goal" (S1R2T1I1 p.1). Mary was more specific about how she characterized administrative support, including her ability to be creative and to use her own judgment: "I think the main thing that administrators do in our school is they give us leeway and flexibility to work with students in the way that we feel is best for them, and rarely are we told not to do something, so we have the ability to be creative and use our judgment" (S1R2T2I2 p. 1). Therefore, administrative support allowed these teachers to do their work with students through both support and autonomy in decision making.

Engagement and Motivation from Administration. The teachers also felt that the administration supported them through engagement in their relationships, as well as support for their relationships with students. Interestingly, both teachers contrasted their experience with Aspire Academy administration with either their past experience in other buildings or information about other teachers' experience in other schools. According to Tim, "What's really important is a connection from administration. I talk to teachers who are at other schools who never see their administration or the relationship is very superficial between them. Here, you can get feedback and access to the administration that not only helps you professionally improve your work, but also keep you intrinsically motivated to continue for yourself and your students" (S1R2T1I1 p. 1).

The more experienced of the two, Mary felt supported by being given autonomy that she wouldn't have in another building. "We are allowed to set our own goals. Again, the flexibility

that we're given in our ability to teach is very important to letting us meet goals: we can do some things that are more innovative; we're able to use technology; we're able to work with other staff members to collaborate and team teach, which allow us to meet goals in a way that we wouldn't be able to in other places" (S1R2T2I2 p. 1). Mary's expression of her autonomy seems to be based on her confidence that her administration trusts her to do her work well, so they get out of her way professionally, an action that she doesn't seem to perceive other administrators as taking for their teachers.

Relationships with and Support for Students. The two teachers interviewed talked more about their relationships with students than they did about their relationships with administrators. The teachers seemed very aware of things that they could do to help and support their students as they talked about engaging and motivating their students through challenges. The other side of the success coin also appeared during these interviews. These teachers also articulated the many ways in which their students failed to find academic success even though they were not asked a question about failure.

Helping students overcome challenges to find success is part of building relationships with students for Tim. "I try to recognize the challenge that the student is facing, see it from all different angles," said Tim, "mainly through talking to them, helping them come to their own conclusions, finding the path that's best for them. It comes down to encouragement, allowing them to see a reason for overcoming the challenge" (S1R2T1I1 p. 1). Mary itemized the challenges that she sees her students facing: "They have broken families; they have poverty; those are just a few. I try to help them see that everybody has challenges, and sometimes we fail" (S1R2T2I2 p. 2). But Mary also elaborated on how she talks to her students about persistence through challenges: "Each step is a learning experience whether you get there all the way, or

you get there a little bit, or you step back and try to learn from whatever the experience was and try to use that to take the next step toward meeting the goal or the challenge or overcoming the obstacle" (S1R2T2I2 p. 2). Mary also applied the metaphor of taking steps forward to her instructional practice with students who are struggling to find success. She explained how she builds students' confidence by breaking down fearsome tasks into smaller pieces to build students' confidence in their competence:

> In speech class, we call it 'baby steps'. If there are fears, like the fear of public speaking, we try to give them little doses at a time to build up their immunity before they have to get up in front of the class for what seems like an unreasonable amount of time, but it might be just two minutes. If we've done something for 30 seconds and then a minute, the goal would be to get them to the point where they don't feel like it's impossible for them to get up and deal with speaking to the entire room. (S1R2T2I2 p. 2).

Building trust with students was heavily contingent on the teachers' relationships with their students. Tim summed up his experience of building trust with students, "It's something that has to be built through a relationship, that you show that you care and you show that you understand, and that takes time" (S1R2T1I1 p. 2). Consistency came up for both teachers. Tim said, "You have to show them that you're consistent in trying to help them" (S1R2T1I1 p. 2). Mary qualified her desire to be consistent to build trust, "It would be nice to say, 'to always be consistent,' but I'm not completely consistent because I try to make the decision based on the student and the circumstances" (S1R2T2I2 p. 3). If a conflict arises, Mary does respond with this trust-building relationship intervention, "If there's conflict, being able to give them a clean slate the next day when they come back to class is very important" (S1R2T2I2 p. 3).

Engagement and Motivation of Students. Both teachers characterized their students'

engagement in terms of describing students' behaviors that illustrated maturity. The rewards of

this engagement were evident in their observations of students' setting goals and demonstrating

interest in what comes beyond high school in life. The teachers described their students as having

"learned from challenges, become invested in their education, gained credits so they can see

themselves graduating, and realized that they can do stuff" (S1R2T2I2 p. 1). This engagement in

the educational process lead to outcomes related to motivation like goal setting, thinking about

having a career and making a living, and "proving to themselves that they can do it even with

obstacles," according to Mary (S1R2T2I2 p. 1). Even when students didn't develop these

outcomes, Mary continues to build students' self-confidence. Mary said that she sometimes

"tricks them into graduating by letting them save themselves at the end" (S1R2T2I2 p. 3). When

asked how she tricks them, Mary said that she does not always let seniors know how close they

are to passing her class, or she lets them do an extra assignment to pass in the end (S1R2T2I2 p.

3). Knowing a student's motivation so well that Mary can trick them into finding success by

passing her class must be based on a very thorough knowledge of that individual student, which

must be based on an informed relationship with the student.

Students' Success Contrasted with Failure. Reflecting on perceptions of success

allowed Mary to reveal her perceptions of students who fail at Aspire Academy. As the more

veteran teacher, Mary was able to put into words the behaviors that she has seen in students who

are failing rather than succeeding. Most of her comments were about causes of these behaviors

related to failing. She began by acknowledging that younger high school students show

immaturity. "They're not listening; they're not trying to process; they're still in the battle stage

where it's kind of anything that an adult says has to be wrong, and so they're still trying to

almost defeat themselves at that stage" (S1R2T2I2 p. 2). Older students, too, can experience failure. Mary described some students' circumstances that lead to failure because of their desiring independence from their parents, so they move out of their parents' homes before they graduate. "They fail at school because they have to put all of their energy and resources into surviving and living" (S1R2T2I2 p. 2).

Mary expressed the idea that some students "see the light at the end of the tunnel" (S1R2T2I2 p. 2). She characterized those students in this way, and then contrasted those who fail at the same age:

> They have gained enough credits that they can realistically see themselves graduating. Now, we do sometimes see the reverse. Sometimes when they've gotten to a certain age, they're 17 or 18, and they have not accumulated very many credits. At that point, reality kicks in that, 'gosh, I could be really old when I graduate.' Then sometimes we see shutdown and sabotage…they're afraid of entering the adult world, so I think, or psychologically they think, 'if I don't pass these classes, I don't have the exit into that world.' So we do see that happen, too, which is frustrating. I don't think anyone has come up with a really good solution. (S1R2T2I2 p. 3)

Mary's description of her frustration over students who seem to choose failure is linked to the idea that no one in her experience has found a solution to the perceived problem that some students choose to fail. Her hypothesis of why students don't want to exit high school and enter the adult world is based on her opinion as well as her inferred opinion about what her students are thinking when they choose to fail. Mary seems to find the older students who choose to fail

more frustrating than the younger students, whose choices are simply an element of their

immaturity.

Spiral Two, Round One: Teachers' Celebrations and Struggles

Spiral one round one provided insight into students' perceptions of academic success,

echoed by some detail about teachers' perceptions of teaching success. However, the

descriptions of academic success by the teachers were not as elaborate as that of the students.

Seeking more depth of the teachers' perception was important as they have experience in

common with both students and administrators. During the second round of spiral one, two

teachers provided deeper descriptions of their experience with both administrators and students

in terms of finding success. The two teachers interviewed alluded to the potential breadth of

these perceptions among the teaching staff, the first round of the second spiral sought more in-

depth expressions of teachers' perceptions of the experience of teaching and learning at Aspire

Academy. Looking for resonance (Conle, 1996), not only within the teachers interviewed but

between teachers, I crafted a single, general question for teachers to respond to in group

interviews (Edmiston, 1944; Griffiths, 1996; Watts & Ebbutt, 1987). Utilizing the group

interview allowed me to gain perspectives on teaching experience from both immediate

experience and experience in retrospect (Edmiston, 1944, p. 594). Group interview data from

teachers could be compared to group interview data from students "to see how much they match"

(Griffiths, 1996, p. S28). The question for the teachers' group interviews asked them to use a

single word or metaphor to express their experience at Aspire Academy. This approach allowed

teachers to prioritize their responses to get to the most important experience. In addition, the

question was sent out several days in advance of the group interview to allow teachers to reflect

for an extended period of time before answering the question.

Two group interviews were conducted. The first group interview was of four teachers and the principal; the second was of four teachers, and it contained both of the teachers interviewed individually in round two of spiral one. Lengthy, rich descriptions of the experience of these teachers and the principal, who spoke primarily of his teaching experience at the school prior to his becoming principal of the school, were delivered in these interviews. Words used to describe teachers' experience included blessed (S2R1T1GI2-2012 p.1), fulfilling and rewarding (S2R1T4GI2-2012 p. 2), doubt (S2R1T3GI2-2012 p. 2), diversity (S2R1T6GI2-2012 p. 6), special and safe (S2R1T9GI2-2012 p. 7). Metaphors included phrases and clichés such as "the only thing that surprises me is that there are no more surprises," (S2R1T2GI2-2012 p. 1) "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink," (S2R1T3GI2-2012 p. 1) "it's not just surviving, but making progress,"(S2R1T7GI2-2012 p. 1) "the size of the herd matters," (S2R1T8GI2-2012 p. 5) and "the fishing metaphor" (S2R1T6GI2-2012 p. 6). The descriptions of experience included celebrations of relationships with students as well as engagement with students, as well as struggles in practice and awareness of the struggles of students.

Celebrations. Several of the teachers talked about celebrations of their relationships with colleagues and students. The teacher who chose the word blessed explained her choice with regard to her relationships with others in the school: "For three years of being here, I have experienced that the staff, the teachers, and of course the administrators are very friendly, very supportive, very kind, and easy and fun to work with. And the students, I would say that they're really, most of them are really doing the best they can to deserve the hope that is given to them" (S2R1T1GI2-2012 p. 1). For another teacher, measuring her success depended exclusively on how her students found success: "It's fulfilling and rewarding that you know that you have kids you're working with that were struggling, were not successful, and then when they're here, they

turn around and become better students, and so for me, it's so rewarding to become a part of that success that they have" (S2R1T4GI2-2012 p. 2).

Diversity took on several meanings for the teacher who chose that word to describe her experience. "It's not just ethnic diversity. We have very diverse personalities and skill levels…and different home backgrounds" (S2R1T6GI2-2012 p. 6). She tied the idea of diversity to her understanding of the public's perception of the school and to her teaching experience,

> I think the diversity that's here, some people who might be outside of Aspire Academy might be kind of freaked out by that, but I think that for us, it gives us the opportunity to work with the different types of kids, and learn things from their experiences that they share…I'm amazed at what they'll share during a speaking activity. I think it helps us learn and grow and work with them. (S2R1T6GI2-2012 p. 6)

This teacher believes that her experience at Aspire Academy allows her students to contribute to her perception of her growth as well as the work of her colleagues represents the reciprocity of the relationships between teachers and students at Aspire Academy.

Another teacher talked about Aspire Academy being safe and special because of the people who teach and learn there.

> This is a special place with special people in it, and it makes the kids feel special. All those kids were in another place. I've taught in big, big schools, and they were all there. You just couldn't determine if you had 37 kids in the class; you wouldn't know which one needed that special help, so when they get here, they get that special opportunity to be found, to be safe, to be noticed. This a good place to be noticed." (S2R1T9GI2-2012 p. 7)

The pauses and awkward turns of sentence structure that this teacher took as she contrasted her teaching experience in larger high schools with her experience at Aspire Academy show how she struggled to describe her realization that the size of the schools in her past experience didn't allow her to build relationships in the way that she can at Aspire Academy. Later, this teacher used this metaphor for Aspire Academy: "It's a port along my voyage. It's a nice stopping place, and it's so different from the other ports I've been in. It's a safe port for them [students] for a while. They've got an opportunity if they take it" (S2R1T9GI2-2012 p. 7).

Another teacher used the metaphor of a herd of cattle for high school. She juxtaposed her high school experience with her teaching experience using her herd metaphor.

This is horrible, but I think of a herd of cattle, and if you have hundreds of cattle, you have to treat them all the same, very consistent from one to the next. But if you have a small herd of just five cows, maybe you'd give them names, maybe you'd spend more time with each cow. I think all the big high schools do it the same way. The freshmen come one day, then the next day, they bring in the rest of the herd, and from then on, you are elbow to elbow in the hallway trying to get to class. [In high school] I connected with a few of my teachers, but I was the quiet one in the background, just coasting on through. I didn't build the kind of relationships that I build here with our students. We don't have big herds of kids, but we have time to meet with every individual student probably almost every day. (S2R1T8GI2-2012 p. 5-6).

Struggles. Bridging the concepts of relationships and engagement, two teachers juxtaposed the word doubt and with stories of their persistence as they talked about their relationships' with students helping them engage students in learning. The first teacher, Carl,

expressed this tension with this cliché: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink" (S2R1T3GI2-2012 p. 1). Carl's examination of his teaching was a critique of his efforts to reach every student. "Sometimes I doubt what I can do because I doubt that I can reach every kid. Sometimes I don't reach a high percentage of a certain class. It's pretty disturbing to me…Sometimes I doubt that what I'm doing is as effective as maybe [the administrators of the building] would say. Of course, you know, I'm like most humans that are hardest on themselves" (S2R1T3GI2-2012 p. 2). Later, Carl expressed his willingness to be persistent with his students in the pursuit of success despite their attempts to undermine their own success. He shared what he said to his students: "You guys can act as foolish or as silly as you want here. We're not quitting. And I actually had to call one kid out. I said, 'You can act as big a fool as you want in this class. Look around. Nobody's listening to you. Nobody's paying attention to you while you're wasting your time.' I said, 'The teachers here aren't like the teachers where you came from. We're not quitting.'" (S2R1T3GI2-2012 p. 3). At this point in the interview, one of the other teachers jumped into the conversation, emphasizing the importance of Carl's point about persistence from a student's perspective, "I remember a student when I asked a question like, 'What do you want? What do you expect your teacher to be?' he wrote, 'I want my teacher not to give up on me.'" (S2R1T1GI2-2012 p. 3).

The other teacher who expressed doubt about her teaching practice questioned her ability to reach every student instructionally. "Well, like Carl was saying, the doubt. There's not a day that goes by that I don't think, 'What did I do wrong? What could I do differently? Did I really teach that the best way? Did they get it?" (S2R1T5GI2-2012 p. 3). Then she tells the story of one of her students who feared math class because she hadn't found success in that subject. "

I have one little girl who expressed that she was afraid to take a math class because she'd

never had success in math…but she has an A, and I said to her, 'Have you ever had an A

in math class before?' She said, 'Nope. No, I haven't.' I said, 'Do you feel like you're

understanding math class now?' And she said, 'I do.' And I don't know what it…(she

paused) it's just because we go that extra mile to make sure that they're getting it. And

we kind of get them the opportunity to learn it in a new way. Maybe, I don't know.

(S2R1T5GI2-2012 p. 3)

The doubt that the teacher expressed appeared evident in her pauses and false starts during the

group interview. She soon persisted in her explanation of how she helps students find success. "It

is a challenge. That I would acknowledge. The challenge of just…(she paused again) the

psychological challenge of making a student think they're worthy. That they are successful"

(S2R1T5GI2-2012 p. 3).

Other metaphors for the experience of teaching at Aspire Academy connected the

struggles of and with students to the reward of seeing students find success. The principal

expressed his understanding of what students bring to Aspire Academy in this way:

The kids that come here come from such a wide swath of backgrounds, just totally

different issues, different reasons they haven't been successful, with different excuses

sometimes, and just different obstacles: family, drugs, apathy. The most important thing

to remember is that despite the fact that we have new students that come in every

semester and every year, we really do good work with these kids…fantastic work, I think.

Despite the fact that there are no more surprises, and it is challenging, we continue to

have success with student after student after student. (S2R1T2GI2-2012 p. 1)

A younger teacher chose his metaphor of measuring progress when the ocean is calm from a speech by James Garfield. The teacher summarized Garfield's message as it related to his teaching experience in this way: "He explained to the crowd that it's not about the highs and lows that you measure things. It's about your progress when the ocean is steady…It's not about just surviving, but making progress" (S2R1T7GI2-2012 p. 5). In attempting to sum up the fact that there are highs and lows in his experience, this teacher still acknowledges that progress toward the goal of academic success remains more important than simply surviving the tough days with students.

The fishing metaphor is an extended metaphor, almost an analogy, for the challenges that teachers face as they attempt to engage their students in learning. Mary used this metaphor to describe her teaching experience,

> We [teachers] are fishermen in the boat, and we have various kinds of fishing equipment, but there are kids who are easy to catch with the net, and we can get them in. There are the ones where we've got to figure out the right bait, and try different baits, and sometimes we can reel them in that way; sometimes we have to send the line out many, many times, and sometimes we have to go in a lifeboat to find them; some are in deep, deep water, and are way down deep. Some take the bait, and break the line and swim away, and some never take the bait at all. But we do manage to get quite a few fish in the boat before we go back to shore. Overall, we're decent fishermen at Aspire Academy, but we do have to experiment with our tools and equipment and bait and techniques. (S2R1T6GI2-2012 p. 5).

Through all of this description, the teachers, even when they expressed concern for the

challenges and struggles to help students find success, always came back to the fact that they

find more success than failure. The principal summed up their feelings with his final comment,

"I think that if kids know that we sincerely, genuinely care about them, it makes it harder for

them to fail because they know that you (he motioned to the teachers in the group) care. That's a

large part of why we're able to milk every ounce of motivation out of these kids. The majority of

them want to do well for us, and they want to do well for us because they do know we care about

them" (S2R1T2GI2-2012 p. 4). Feeling successful with students that teachers perceive are

challenging is a reward for their teaching efforts.

Spiral Two, Round Two: The Devil is in the Details

Before the prompts from spiral two round two were sent to the participants, all teachers

were asked to check the transcript of their group interview for any inaccuracies that might have

occurred in the transcription. The teachers were also asked to send any modifications or

elaboration to their responses that they felt were appropriate. Only one participant asked that a

word be changed in the transcription. All other participants agreed that the transcripts were

accurate.

The essence of the phenomenon of this charter school was taking shape as I embarked on

the follow-up to the group interviews of teachers. Seeking any elaboration that may have come

from reflection on their group conversations, I sent each group interview participant follow-up

questions that would allow the participants to add, modify, or retract details of their contributions

to the group conversation. Since these questions were sent as writing prompts, teachers were able

to consider their responses for some time and respond in writing. Much of the data collected

from these writing prompts corroborated the data from the first spiral, but some of the data enhanced the description of the teaching experience at Aspire Academy revealed in the first round of the second spiral.

Immediacy. Two types of needs warrant immediate responses according to Aspire Academy teachers: students' emotional and cognitive needs are responded to by adults in the building as soon as those needs are expressed to teachers. One teacher said, "Aspire Academy is unique in the ratio of caring adults to at-risk students. It is unusual for a school to be able to have these people here and ready to step in at a moment's notice. Immediate help allows the student to feel safe and not alone. This immediacy is also a safety net for the staff and allows quick resolution of issues and smooth sailing for those not involved" (S2R2T4WP3-2012 p. 2). These factors influence the atmosphere of the school. "Aspire Academy creates a secure, helpful, aware environment for learning and growing for the young people who come here. They should feel welcome each day and free to ask for help without judgment. They should know that the building is safe and hurtful behaviors will not be tolerated. Time spent at Aspire Academy should not add to their stress, but give respite from it" (S2R2T4WP3-2012 p. 3). Teachers also give immediate help to students because they know them well through one-on-one interactions. "Students are able to ask questions, clarify confusions, and verify their thought process. Immediate feedback is given, and they quickly apply the process they need to do in order to solve given exercises" (S2R2T5WP3-2012 p. 3). In a unique way, Tim, whose Garfield metaphor expressed measuring progress during the calm, relates to the ability of the teacher to respond to students' emotional responses in the classroom to facilitate cognitive growth.

I love a good storm in the classroom, excitement, emotion, etc., but it is what the students take away from the excitement and learn from the 'calm' where I feel the most impact can be

made. For example, when we have the great debate/Mud-Sil debate…the students get worked up

and if things work out, they are more interested and invested in the ideas, but it is the follow-up

and the breaking down of the ideas when the learning really can make a long lasting impact.

(S2R2T3WP3-2012 p. 2).

Relationships. Teachers again emphasized their relationships with one another and with

their students in this second round. One teacher felt valued because she was recognized and

appreciated by her administrators and her students; she described her colleagues as welcoming,

supportive and helpful (S2R2T2WP3-2012 p.1). Another teacher overcame doubt by getting

"reassurance from my peers that I am not alone in this" (S2R2T6WP3-2012 p. 3). He encouraged

others in a similar situation to take advantage of the people they work with. He described his

colleagues as professional, experienced, and eager to help in any way they can.

Making caring explicit to students was an element of student-teacher relationships for one

teacher. When asked how she let her students know that she cares about them, one teacher listed

several ways: showing interest in their lives outside of school, offering to listen when they need

someone to talk to, greeting them with a smile, offering a hug when they need one, and asking

how their other classes are going. She also tells every class, "When they walk through my

classroom door, they become one of my kids. I tell them explicitly that I care about them and

want them to be successful. I even tell them I love them like they were my own children"

(S2R2T7WP3-2012 p. 3-4).

Students' Relationships with their School. In his follow-up to the group interview, the

principal, once again brought breadth to the description of relationships. He told two stories

about the connection between teachers and students related to motivation. First, he told the story

of a student who had been in his office that day.

> I had a conversation with a graduating senior and his mother; we were reviewing some
>
> credits that he'd earned in the past at [another district high school]. I asked him if that
>
> school had issued him a credit for a class that was in question. His response was, 'Man,
>
> [that school] doesn't care about me.' I think this statement speaks volumes. If a student
>
> believes that a school and its staff doesn't care about him, he will not be motivated to do
>
> his best. (S2R2T1WP3-2012 p. 1).

The other story was of students who had completed NCLB testing that day as they were waiting

for the principal to give them their results. The principal shared,

> I heard one student say to another that he was nervous about how he did, and he didn't
>
> want to let Aspire Academy down. I don't think that students have had that kind of
>
> connection to their school in the past. It all boils down to the positive relationships with
>
> adults that students are able to form while in school. The key is relationships. If students
>
> know you care about them, they will do what you ask of them. (S2R2T1WP3-2012 p.1).

The principal's stories provide insight into both the way that he heard students talk about their

relationships with their past school and the way that he heard students talk about Aspire

Academy. He generalized his thoughts about these two stories in his assertion that relationships

make all the difference in how students feel about their school.

Spiral Three: Assessments and Graduation

The data in this spiral were collected after the NCLB testing window had closed in April, but before graduation in May. In pursuit of teachers' and students' perceptions of these two important events of the school year, the questions for this spiral addressed these two events. Teachers and some students answered the questions in writing. Other students responded in a group interview to save time. Still other students were interviewed individually because their schedules did not permit participation in the group interview. All participants were asked the same questions about assessments' ability to measure academic success and finding academic success in the 'homestretch' of the school year as graduation approached.

The principal and seven teachers responded to the questions. The gender distribution of teachers was equal: four males, four females. There were five experienced teachers (15 or more years of experience) to three less experienced teachers. One senior and one junior responded via email. Two juniors were interviewed individually, and three seniors participated in the group interview. The students in the group included three Hispanic students, two African-American students, one Native American student, and one white student. Five were female; two were male. This distribution was skewed somewhat toward the non-white and female participants, and it represented more non-white and female students than the student body did. All student participants had attended Aspire Academy for a year or more. Gaining access to participants was challenging because of the demands on these participants' schedules during the spring of the school year.

Assessments. The NCLB assessments in reading and math and the state assessment in science were given to juniors in February through April. The state assessment in social studies

was given during the same time to seniors, who had taken the reading, math, and science assessments during the previous school year. In general, the students expressed more positive thoughts about the state assessments than the teachers did. In contrast, the number of problems with or drawbacks to the assessments was nearly equal between the teacher and student participants. Three teachers provided definitions of academic success that they felt were more appropriate measures than scoring well on state assessments.

The teachers had a limited number of positive comments about the assessments. "I was so proud of our students who really tried their best when they took the state science assessment last week. Most of them took it seriously. It will give them a sense of fulfillment/achievement as a student, boosting up their self-esteem" (S3R1T4WP4-2012). In terms of what the assessment meant for teachers, this teacher expressed her belief that the assessment is a very important part of the learning process so as to measure or monitor student progress. Another teacher said that assessments are the only way for outsiders to look at the overall snapshot of an educational institution (S3R1T6WP4-2012). A more experienced teacher declared that assessments' being equated with success is an inevitable part of the educational model (S3R1T7WP4-2012).

The students focused their positive comments on what assessments meant to them personally, although some students thought about how the assessment scores reflected on the building. "We might be a different kind of school, but our test scores are better and meet more standards" (S3R1K2WP4-2012). Another student expressed the purpose of the assessment scores in both personal and building terms: "I feel the assessments not only let the school know how much we've learned, but they also let us know how much we've learned ourselves…It also targets places that we don't know that we could find out more about, as well" (S3R2K2GI5-2012 p. 1). One student expressed how test scores reflected on her teachers, "It shows what we have

learned as a student body and what our teachers are capable of teaching us, and how far we've come along" (S3R2K1GI5-2012 p.1). One senior added, "Remembering everything that you've learned up to that point is a really good way to keep that in your mind and makes you realize that you've still got a long way to go. I think that's a way of being successful: knowing that you can actually remember all of that stuff that you've learned for the past few years" (S3R2K3GI5-2012 p.2). A junior expressed her level of performance as relative to the way that the assessment would reflect on her teachers: "If you guys [teachers] tell me to get good grades [scores] on the tests, I'll try the hardest that I can, but really it's not affecting me, it's affecting you guys [teachers]" (S3R2K2I25-2012).

The problems with the assessments were more numerous for both groups. The students described the experience of taking the assessments in these terms: "They ask questions that I don't even know what they mean" (S3R1K1WP4-2012). "The test doesn't really show how you can do" (S3R2K2I25-2012). "It's stressful because there are so many questions" (S3R2K2I25-2012). "I don't really care about the tests because they're not part of my grade" (S3R2K2I25-2012). "Everybody [students] always says, 'It was okay, but I started getting tired, so I just started clicking [the mouse], because I wanted to get it over with.'" (S3R2K2I25-2012).

Teachers talked mostly about the limitations of a single test as a measure of academic success. "To say that assessments measure academic success is debatable" (S3R1T1WP4-2012). "I don't feel that assessments paint an accurate picture of success because success can be measured in so many ways. Assessments simply measure a student's knowledge at a given point in time, and even then the results are subject to outside factors that can affect students' performance" (S3R1T2WP4-2012). "Academic success seems like an intangible that can't be measured very well on pen and paper, and certainly not on a bubble sheet" (S3R1T3WP4-2012).

"Assessment is part of the whole and can tell you what kids know now, but it can't tell you if they are going to work hard and be a success in life" (S3R1T5WP4-2012). "The elements of human nature cannot be easily quantified, so all results [on assessments] may be suspect" (S3R1T7WP4-2012). "I especially take offense as a teacher having non-educators set what 'academic success' is all about" (S3R1T8WP4-2012). Instead, teachers defined academic success as including self-confidence and empathy, preparation for what comes next in the real world, the ability to overcome adversity and make a life for themselves, and mastery of skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed for a career path.

Graduation and the 'Homestretch' of the School Year. In order to get a sense of how descriptions of academic success changed based on the time of the school year, I asked a similar question to the first question of the study to the participants in the third spiral. At this late date in the year, their definitions seemed to have narrowed to a shorter list, in particular, for the students. The teachers still defined their teaching success based on the performance of their students, however.

Students talked about knowing what they wanted to do [after graduation], staying focused and working hard, and acknowledging their accomplishments. "I've come a long ways, and what I learned here [at Aspire Academy], I plan to carry out in my college life," said one senior (S3R2K1GI5-2012 p.1). "I've even taken career classes to get prepared for out there in the workplace, which really helps me get prepared for the career in my future" (S3R2K2GI5-2012 p.1) "As graduation approaches, it makes me realize how much success I have, how many accomplishments I have completed, and it makes me realize how much I have actually learned" (S3R2K2GI5-2012 p.1). "I've learned a lot over the years, but I feel like I haven't learned enough, which keeps you wanting to learn even more" (S3R2K3GI5-2012 p.2). "I had a whole

plan set out for me. If I were at my old school, I wouldn't be prepared. This school prepared me by taking us on field trips. Teachers ask you what you're interested in, and they'll tell you what you can do; these are the types of fields you can go into, and here are the steps to do it if you're interested. That helped me out a lot" (S3R2K2I25-2012).

Teachers talked about underclassmen in different ways than they talked about seniors at this time of year. Underclassmen were moving toward more positive behavior or finding ways to pass their classes if they were behind. "The student who always asked for help before does her work with little or no help at all. She even helps other students in class" (S3R1T1WP4-2012). "Does a student look at you [teacher] and say, 'Now I get it,' or 'So that is why we learned this.' That means you have found success" (S3R1T3WP4-2012). "Using past activities to learn how to make choices and decisions about the individual student and his or her future" (S3R1T8WP4-2012). Some goals were simply about passing courses to find success: "Keeping the majority of students on task and allow them to gain ground toward passing, and convincing stragglers that they can and should turn in back work" (S3R1T7WP4-2012).

Teachers described seniors as taking the next steps in their lives. "I find success in the homestretch is mostly related to watching seniors as they approach their goals. So many of our students when they arrived were on a road to nowhere…that to see them now transitioning into adulthood is a rewarding and special feeling" (S3R1T2WP4-2012). "Graduation marks the victory of their endeavors. They will forget all the struggles and difficulties, but will savor the victory and the joy that graduation has to bring. It prepares them for the greater challenges that await them in the future. Students' successes are teachers' and parents' too. I'm excited!" (S3R1T4WP4-2012).

The Surprise in the Third Spiral. As the student group interview was wrapping up, the researcher decided to ask one more question of the three seniors present. Tina had been an Aspire Academy student for three semesters; Susan and Chris had been at Aspire Academy for two years or more. The question that sprang to the researcher's mind came from the rich data that the teachers had provided in the second spiral. The question was this, "What do you think is unique about Aspire Academy that really allowed you to find the success that you've found?" Their responses were astonishing, corroborating much of the teacher data, yet sometimes going beyond it in depth of perspective on what Aspire Academy provided to students. What follows is a summary of what those students shared, some parts of which are very moving because of their frankness.

In addition to emphasizing more access to their teachers through small class size, these students talked extensively about their relationships with teachers. Tina said,

> The teacher is really able to communicate with you better, so you understand it [class work]. I think that has changed me a lot and made me come a lot further than I would have come because I transferred from the huge high school to this. I mean, Aspire Academy is not small, but with the class ratio, I know that I can get the help that I need, that I couldn't get at my other high school, so I've learned a lot and I've gained a lot of confidence here. (S3R2K1GI5-2012 p. 2)

Teachers' ability to be responsive to students was another message from the students. Susan shared, "I realize that the environment is much better to work in with smaller classes so you can focus on your work better. The assignments that they give out are more interactive than just 'You need to do this. There's a deadline. You need to do this, or you know, you get a zero.'"

(S3R2K2GI5-2012 p. 3). Chris elaborated on this message with the factors that he perceived, contrasting both teachers and schools, and making causal connections between his experiences:

> When it comes to academics, I think that there's a huge difference between teachers that
> go through their lives just doing the same thing every year after year. Here every year is
> different. It's not repetition. It doesn't matter if you take the same classes; teachers try
> their best to keep things different to keep things going. Knowing that you are coming
> back for the next semester, for the next year, that things are not gonna be the same. I
> think it's really good because you don't get that worn down feeling that you're just
> coming here every school day over and over. I think that school should be fun, especially
> because most of us are still kids, that just putting the iron fist down and telling you,
> 'Learn this. Learn that, and learn that.' It doesn't teach you much of a real world
> experience. It doesn't teach you that thing that you need to know when you're out there.
> That's what most high schools don't really give you. I think that at Aspire Academy
> things are really different. The teachers are so much more open and connected to you that
> they're not just your teachers, well, I mean they can't really be your friends, but they're
> willing to be there for you, someone that you can actually relate to…Not everyone's the
> same. Not everyone has the same mindset and for teachers to understand that, I think that
> means a lot. (S3R2K3GI5-2012 p. 3)

The students valued the fact that their struggles were understood by their teachers. Tina said,

> We can stand on our own because we see our teachers knowing what we're going
> through because it's easier to confide in them. I can keep going and wake up every day
> and keep coming to school because you're interacting with me…I believe that a lot of the

student body here at Aspire Academy have a lot of strength and courage to come to

school and strive because I know a lot of us have been down to the point that we haven't

wanted to come to school or we quit coming to school. Aspire Academy is like a second

chance that I think a lot of the students appreciate. (S3R2K1GI5-2012 p. 4)

Chris corroborated the perception that Mary, one of the teachers, has of high school students'

disliking adults simply because they are adults:

No longer is the teacher your enemy. Most teenagers look at adults as people who just

hate them, but most teachers do care about their students. I think that here, a teacher will

come up and make a joke, and you can make a joke back, and we don't take things too far

in our conversations. We're still student and teacher, and that relationship has to stay like

that, but, always more open minded than other…than other places. I really love that fact

that teachers are open minded. They're not just a lesson plan. They're more than that.

They're actual people with actual problems, so they cannot lie to us. They don't teach us

about schoolwork as much as they teach us about life. And that I like. I think that they

understand that. (S3R2K3WP5-2012 p. 4)

Susan added her endorsement of the description of Aspire Academy teachers thus far,

You guys did a good summary of them. They're not just teachers who make us think

outside the box; they're people we can relate to, as well. I remember when I was really

down one day, Mr. F. asked how I was doing. I said I was just okay. He said, 'You're just

okay? What aren't you good?' I said, 'Well, I'm good.' He said, 'Well, you know what?

That's not good enough.' He said, 'You're fantastic!' And you know, it's like the

teachers know you. The teachers know what you're normally like, and they know when

you're down. And when you're down, they know how to make you smile and make you

feel like a special person inside. (S3R2K2GI5-2012 p. 5)

Chris decided to return to the connection to the size of the school at this point in the

conversation. "That kind of relationship with teacher and student, you can't only have it. Not

only because we have a small school is that why it's possible, because it's not. You can have a

really good school and have a connection because I've had that kind of teacher before. The

teacher that goes out of her way to know that her student is doing right. But after the many years,

I guess, people just lose interest, and I don't blame them for that. It's possible in other schools.

It's not just Aspire Academy that can do this" (S3R2K3GI5-2012 p. 5).

School attendance was another topic for these seniors. The persistence of teachers as well

as an attendance secretary was emphasized. Tina told the story of Chris missing several days of

school:

They [the teachers] know Chris has been missin' and Chris walks in, and it's like,

'Where've you been? Is everything okay?' They don't just care that you're not here at

school. They want you here, so when you're not here, it's not like you're just one of those

faces in the crowd that doesn't matter because that's not true. They'll go and ask other

teachers, 'Have you seen Chris?' You know if one can't find out, then we all know that

we have a secretary that'll find out. (They all laugh here.) Walking in and seeing her face

every day, it's like…it's good. (S3R2K1GI5-2012 p. 5)

Chris took over the dialogue at this point, wanting to clarify what Tina said.

Overall, even if you're small [a small school], you have some kids that really don't want

to be here, who would rather be somewhere else. Just because teachers care doesn't mean

success, because people, if they really tried giving up, the teacher looks at it as a smarter

student is really one who tried hard. The teachers know when we have a long ways to go,

and to know that there's someone out there that is willing to stick out their neck to help

you out…It's just like you were saying, Tina. I haven't been in school, and every single

teacher has been asking me, 'Why haven't you been here?' and I feel bad because I feel

like I let them down, and I'm trying hard. I know that they believe in me; they care about

me. It's why I want to work even harder than I was in the first place. They're willing to

support me…and I want to graduate from this school knowing that they'll remember

THAT guy. I want to know that when I come back in a few years and the teachers are still

here that they'll still be the same as they are right now. That's the main idea. Teachers

care. Students want to be cared for. And that's what makes this school such a great

school. (S3R2K3GI5-2012 p. 5-6)

Chapter Six: Making Meaning of the Data

While a summary of the data from participants tells a story of what happens at Aspire Academy that helps teachers and students find success, making meaning of that summary required that I make connections among elements of the participants' story and the literature that informs this study. Lester (1999) advocates for the use of a discussion section to making these connections between the findings, previous research, personal experience, and even common-sense opinions, provided that it is clear which findings are being discussed and what assertions are being made. To begin to make meaning of the story of the participants' experiences, I sought to identify through analysis across the data from the spirals, the *structures* (Giorgi, 2012) that were the essence of the phenomenon of the students' and teachers' experiences.

Discussion

According to Thomas (2006), "Phenomenology seeks to understand the lived experiences among people who have had a common experience and to write a coherent account of the meaning of those experiences" (p. 241). Therefore, the product of a phenomenology is "a coherent story or narrative about the experience" (p. 241). To enhance the trustworthiness of a phenomenological study, participant checks, or as Thomas (2006) calls them, stakeholder or member checks, allow participants to comment on the findings as they relate to their personal experiences (Thomas, 2006, p. 244). In addition to a participant check, a review by two critical friends at this point allowed the researcher to gain perspective from these sources as to the appropriateness of her description of the lived experience of the participants. Giorgi (1997) outlined this step in the process of sharing findings from a phenomenological study as re-describing them in the language of the discipline, and interpretation of the results as structures.

"Structures can be understood as essences and their relationships. What are important about structures are not so much the parts, but the interrelationship among the parts. Moreover, structures are not ends in themselves. Rather, to use statistics as an analogy, they represent 'measures of central tendency'. They express how the phenomenon being investigated coheres or converges" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 244). This element of phenomenology is what makes it the best methodology for this study. Instead of taking apart the relationships, engagement, and motivation, which are the structures of these findings, examining their interrelatedness is the place in which the essences of the phenomenon appear. What occurred during this process of meaning making was that I realized that this research was less about the setting, Aspire Academy, and more about the people within this setting, in particular, their relationships, which lead teachers and students to find success together.

Relationships Lead to Academic Success

The relationship between teacher and student, for Dewey, was one in which the teacher imparted wisdom having taken into account the learning needs of the student. The other aspect of this relationship was the enforcement of rules of conduct by the teacher over the student (Dewey, 1938). This relationship has changed over time to one in which teacher and student are more collaborative in their work of teaching and learning. Teachers now use the term *guide on the side* in contrast to the imparter of wisdom to define their role with students. A shift in the student-teacher relationship is significant if it means that students who are at risk of academic failure can find success. The descriptions of teachers and students at Aspire Academy reflect this shift in the student-teacher relationship.

The relationships that teachers and students develop that help them find academic success at Aspire Academy have several characteristics that provide insight into their teaching and learning work. First, teachers and students agree that they care for one another, that this caring is explicitly expressed, and that this caring helps them find success. For teachers, having a caring student-teacher relationship means that teachers take opportunities to respond to students' needs appropriately, immediately, and intentionally. For students, having a caring relationship means that students feel known, supported, and accommodated by their teachers in finding academic success. Students were able to contrast their relationships with teachers at Aspire Academy with their relationships with their previous schools. Secondly, teachers and students saw their relationships as the basis for their engaging in academic work. Students felt that teachers responded to them with flexibility with their curriculum and instruction. Teachers talked about their persistence in reaching all students although they had to admit that they felt concern that they felt unsuccessful with some students. Finally, students and teachers expressed their ability to overcome challenges and celebrate success together because of the reciprocity of their relationships. Students wanted to return to school even after they had faced challenges like long absences because they wanted to interact with their teachers, who they characterize real people with real problems who cannot lie to them. The teachers talked about their understanding of the challenges that their students faced outside of school as a reason for students' struggles to find academic success. Most importantly, both students and teachers talked about the ultimate celebration of academic success: graduation. Teachers shared their sincere belief that without their school, that their students would most likely not have graduated. Students acknowledged that they might not have been prepared for life after high school without their teachers' interest in and support of their learning about what opportunities life after high school might hold.

Relationships Mean that We Care for One Another

The most frequently mentioned element of the relationships described by the participants was caring for one another. Both teachers and students expressed their care for one another. In addition, students expressed that they knew that their teachers cared for them.

Student-Teacher Relationships. Teachers expressed explicitly how they showed and told students that they cared. In spiral one, students said, "The teachers actually know who you are" (S1R1K4WP11-2011). "Teachers do their best to help you with anything that you need" (S1R1K5WP11-2011). "You feel more backed up by your teachers" (S1R1K7WP11-2011). "You care about me. You show me that you care about me [sic] learning" (S1R1K8WP11-2011). In spiral three, students said, "They [teachers] know how to make you smile and make you feel like a special person inside" (S3R2K2GI5-2012 p.5). "I know that they believe in me; they care about me" (S3R2K3GI5-2012 p. 6). Teachers also shared their observations of the nature of caring in their work, and related that caring to their feelings of helping students find success. "Aspire Academy is unique in the ratio of caring adults to at-risk students" (S2R2T5WP3-2012). "If a kid knows that we sincerely, genuinely care about them, it makes it hard for them to fail" (S2R1T2GI3-2012). "I tell them explicitly that I care about them and want them to be successful" (S2R2T7WP3-2012).

The literature on relationships echoes the caring connection between teachers and students. As Aspire Academy students mentioned, feeling known by teachers is important to urban high school students. "Feeling *known* by school adults was discovered to be a significant characteristic of their relationships with adults" according to Rodriguez (2008, p. 444). "The data suggested that when adults *recognize the existence of the other* [student], both personally and

academically, students tend to respond favorably" (Rodriguez, 2008, p. 449). Klem and Connell

(2004), also emphasize teacher support as affecting students' engagement. "Students who

perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment in which

expectations are high, clear, and fair are more likely to report engagement in school" (Klem &

Connell, 2004, p. 270).

Students seemed to talk about how their relationships with teachers in terms of how their

school feels about them, in particular those situations in which they do not feel cared for.

Contrasting their relationships with Aspire Academy teachers to their relationships with teachers

in other high schools was one way that students showed the depth of their value of relationships

with Aspire Academy teachers. Students talked about their previous schools hating them. "I

hated school and school hated me" (S1R1K1WP11-2011). The principal shared this experience

with a senior when he asked the young man about his last school: "His response was, 'Man, [my

previous school] doesn't care about me'. If a student believes that a school and its staff doesn't

care about him, he will not be motivated to do his best" (S2R2T1WP3-2012). Here, the principal

underscored his value of relationships with students. It seemed likely that this principal models

his caring for Aspire Academy students to his teachers, which would certainly influence the

perception of the value of caring for students to the entire staff of the school. Having a principal

who values relationships with students would explain why several teachers spoke about caring

for their students in the data.

The relationships between students and teachers also allowed students to care for their

teachers. Evidence of this reciprocal relationship appeared in the student data about the NCLB

assessment results. "It [assessment] shows what we have learned as a student body and what our

teachers are capable of teaching us" (S3R2K1GI5-2012 p. 1) One junior who had taken all of the

NCLB assessments during the spring semester before she was interviewed shared her desire to

show caring for her teachers if they told her that the assessment was important: "I don't really

care about the tests because they're not part of my grade [in class]. If you guys [teachers] tell me

to get good grades [scores] on the tests, I'll try the hardest that I can, but really it's not affecting

me, it's affecting you guys [teachers]" (S3R2K2I25-2012). This student believed that if her

teachers told her to get a good score, the test was important because her score would reflect on

her teachers. Her level of care demonstrated a desire to reciprocate care that had been shown her

by her teachers by doing her best on the assessments.

  Teacher-Teacher and Teacher-Administrator Relationships. Teachers' building

relationships with one another and with administrators was an element of caring for each other as

they did their work with students. The function of this caring according to the data from

participants was one of supporting each other in their work. This support for teachers came from

both administrators and other teachers.

  Support from the principal was important to teachers' perceptions of their success.

Chrisman (2006) and Hampton and Gruenert (2008) noted that principal's support of teacher

collaboration was an important factor in teachers' relationships with one another as well as

students' success. Mary, in spiral one, round two, said, "We're able to work with other staff

members to collaborate and team teach, which allow us to meet goals in a way that we wouldn't

be able to in other places" (S1R2T2I2 p. 1). Chrisman (2006) also identified the teacher's

autonomy in decision making as a factor in schools' academic success, an element that Mary

identified as an important type of support from her administration. "I think the main thing that

administrators do in our school is they give us leeway and flexibility to work with students in the

way that we feel is best for them, and rarely are we told not to do something, so we have the

ability to be creative and use our judgment" (S1R2T2I2 p. 1). Tim, the other teacher interviewee

in spiral one round two, called support "a connection with administration" (S1R2T1I1 p. 1) that

resulted in "encouragement and positive support" (S1R2T1I1 p. 1). "You can get feedback and

access to the administration that not only helps you professionally improve your work, but also

keeps you intrinsically motivated to continue for yourself and your students" (S1R2T1I1 p. 1).

Hampton and Gruenert (2008) called this a focus on teamwork that is designed to help students'

learning.

Relationships between teachers began with caring from one another. "For three years of

being here, I have experienced that the staff, the teachers, and of course the administrators are

very friendly, very supportive, and each and fun to work with" (S2R1T1GI2-2012 p. 1). A unity

of purpose reflected Mary's perception of teamwork in the effort to guide students to success as

she shared her fishing metaphor in spiral two, round one: "Overall, we're decent fishermen at

Aspire Academy, but we have to experiment with our tools and equipment and bait and

techniques" (S2R1T6GI2-2012 p. 5). Mary saw the task of reaching students as one that

warranted the use of the plural pronoun *we*, acknowledging that teachers must all work to

reaching any given student. As a few teachers talked about their struggles to find success with

students in spiral two, round two, one teacher expressed the importance of being able to rely on

his colleagues for support. This teacher explained that he was able to overcome his doubt that he

was reaching every student by getting reassurance from his peers that he was not alone

(S2R2T6WP3-2012 p. 3). He characterized his teaching colleagues as professional, experienced

and eager to help in any way, which demonstrated his confidence in their expertise as a form of

support for his teaching efforts. Only through reflective conversation with those teaching peers

could this teacher feel this kind of support.

Relationships Mean We Engage in Academics. The relationships between teachers and students were the foundation upon which academic engagement was based. Relationships allowed teachers to be responsive to their students in their curricular decision making and instructional decision making. A student expressed this most clearly. "When it comes to academics, I think that there's a huge difference between teachers that go through their lives doing the same thing every year after year. Here every year is different. It's not repetition. It doesn't matter if you take the same classes; teachers try their best to keep things different to keep things going" (S3R2K3GI5-2012). Feeling as if the teacher was responding to the individual learner's needs made learning opportunities equal for this student: "With the assignments here [Aspire Academy], it's just hands-on; it's equal assignments for everybody. It challenges you and prepares you for your future, but it's also easy to get done" (S3R2K2GI5-2012). Knowing what each student needed to learn was another way in which teachers responded to students' uniqueness as learners: "The teachers can monitor everyone without losing track of who is doing what. The method of hands-on and interactive teaching makes it more suitable for a range of students so that way everyone understands what the lesson is teaching" (S1R1K10WP11-2011).

Teachers, too, addressed their ability to be responsive to students, "I'm able to communicate with each of my students every day. I have room to challenge my students individually" (S2R1T3WP11-2011). A veteran teacher translated autonomy from her administrators into being enabled to be responsive to students, so relationships between administrators, teachers, and students reflected the ability to personalize learning. "I think the main thing that administrators do in our school is they give us leeway and flexibility to work with students in the way that we feel is best for them" (S1R2T2I2 p.1). "You can get feedback and access to the administration that not only helps you professionally improve your work, but

also keeps you intrinsically motivated to continue for yourself and your students" (S1R2T1I1 p. 1).

Even the questioning that two teachers did about their ability to reach all students showed that they cared about reaching *all, not some or most,* of their students. "I doubt that I can reach every kid. Sometimes I don't reach a high percentage of a certain class. It's pretty disturbing to me" (S2R1T3GI2-2012 p. 1). Yet, this teacher countered his doubt and concern with his persistence, quite explicitly, to his students, "You guys [students] can act as foolish or as silly as you want here. We're not quitting…The teachers here aren't like the teachers where you came from. We're not quitting" (S2R1T3GI2-2012 p. 2). This teacher's determination to persist in helping his students prevailed, even through his doubt that he could reach every student. Another teacher expressed the same doubt about her teaching methods, "There's not a day that goes by that I don't think, 'What did I do wrong? What could I do differently? Did I really teach that the best way? Did they get it?'" (S2R1T5GI2-2012 p. 3). Eventually, after telling the story of one of her successes with a disengaged math student, the teacher had to concede that she found success, like her colleagues: "We go that extra mile to make sure that they're getting it, and we kind of get them the opportunity to learn it a new way" (S2R1T5GI2-2012 p. 3). Her willingness to agree that she searched for new ways of helping students learn her content was spurred by her doubt that she was reaching every student. This level of responsiveness to students' needs was echoed by the students' expressions of their experience of learning as being different, even when students took the same class. The difference may have come from the teachers' pursuit of unique ways of helping students understand their content. Perhaps teachers persisted in their pursuit of teaching methods that reached all students because they perceived that need for persistence from their students. As these two teachers shared their feelings of doubt, another teacher emphasized

the value of persistence in response to their concerns when she said that one of her students told

her, "I want my teacher not to give up on me" (S2R1T1GI2-2012 p. 3). A student also expressed

her impression of her teachers' persistence: "At Aspire Academy you have more opportunity to

accomplish academic success because the teachers help you until you understand the lesson"

(S1R1K9WP11-2011). Perceiving the teachers' ability to continue to help *until* she reached

understanding of the lesson showed that this student knew that her teachers would not give up on

her.

From this data, the school environment appeared to reflect the positive relationships that

created engagement in learning. Relationships with administrators as well as relationships with

students promoted the responsiveness that teachers provided to students academically.

Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) called the relationships, relatedness, in their meta-

analysis of engagement. "It is assumed that students will be more engaged when classroom

contexts meet their needs for relatedness, which is likely to occur in classrooms where teachers

and peers create a caring and supportive environment" (p. 80). "A positive school environment is

favorable to learning by being normed for respect, fairness, safety, and positive communication.

Such an environment enhances the engagement of students at all grade levels" (Marks, 2000, p.

174). School and classroom environment reflected the relationships that caring adults had

between them that allowed responsiveness to students' academic needs. One Aspire Academy

teacher summed up the environment through her perception of how students should feel about

their school, "Aspire Academy creates a secure, helpful, aware environment for learning and

growing for the young people who come here. They should feel welcome each day and free to

ask for help without judgment. They should know that the building is safe and hurtful behaviors

will not be tolerated" (S2R2T4WP3-2012). A student also characterized the classroom

environment as positive, "Having a relaxed and fun environment in the classroom makes it less tense for me, which helps me get my work done faster and more efficiently" (S1R1K3WP11-2011).

Relationships Mean We Overcome Significant Issues. Even though none of the questions to students asked about overcoming challenges, many students' responses to questions about success lead to the sharing of perceptions about overcoming something to find success. Missing school was one such challenge. "I haven't been in school, and every single teacher has been asking me 'Why haven't you been here?' and I feel bad because I feel like I let them down, and I'm trying hard. I know that they believe in me; they care about me. It's why I want to work even harder than I was in the first place" (S3R2K3GI5-2012 p. 6). Other seniors agreed that missing school was difficult because they felt that their absence was noticed by teachers. "They don't just care that you're not here at school. They want you here, so when you're not here, it's not like you're just one of those faces in the crowd that don't matter because that's not true" (S3R2K1GI5-2012 p. 5). For these students, being absent was akin to letting their teachers down, a reflection on their relationships with their teachers. Attending school was an important element maintaining their relationships with teachers. "I can keep going and wake up every day and keeping coming to school because you're [teachers are] interacting with me…a lot of us [the student body] have been down to the point that we haven't wanted to come to school or we quit coming to school" (S3R2K1GI5-2012 p. 5). Students, having been to the point of non-attendance, saw their relationships with teachers as a reason to attend school and to overcome a previous lack of attendance.

For students, lack of attendance was the visible manifestation of their lack of engagement. For teachers, the understanding of students' challenges was deeper than students

may have admitted. Even though only questions in the individual interviews to two teachers asked about obstacles, several teachers enumerated the some of the challenges that students face and how teachers feel about failing to overcome those challenges. "The kids that come here [have] different issues…different obstacles: family, drugs, apathy" (S2R1T2GI2-2012 p.1). "They have broken families; they have poverty; those are just a few" (S1R2T2I2 p.2). The principal understands how this system of challenges intertwined for students: "How are they going to complete their school work then the students are asked by their own parents to stay home for days at a time and watch their younger siblings so the parent can go to work? I believe the students understand the importance of their education, but 'survival' takes precedence over school. This is one of the biggest obstacles we face" (S2R2T1WP3-2012). A teacher summed up the same sentiment: "They [students] fail at school because they have to put all of their energy and resources into surviving and living" (S1R2T2I2 p. 2).

The teachers admitted that not always did they find success with all students, "We do see shutdown and sabotage…which is frustrating. I don't think anyone has come up with a really good solution" (S1R2T2I2 p. 3). Another teacher expressed her concerns about failure in terms of motivation: "I am sometimes disappointed that I am unable to motivate these young people to care about education" (S1R1T2WP11-2011). In the end, teachers admitted what this teacher finds to be true: "Aspire Academy allows great opportunity to achieve the academic success necessary to complete high school, but cannot force any child to buy into that" (S1R1T2WP11-2011). Allowing themselves to acknowledge these failures seemed to play a part of the teachers' ability to talk about their success. Much like the teachers who expressed doubt about reaching every student academically, the teachers needed to express their knowledge of their inability to help every student find success in order to honestly define their experiences of success. The

sheer number of expressions of success by teachers in the data summary had to be countered with these few admissions of failure. When addressing these failures, teachers always returned to talking about how they defined success or how they helped students find success.

The literature bore out some of the same themes for students who were at risk academically. Finn and Rock (1997) studied 1800 students who were at-risk because of low socio-economic status or minority racial or ethnic status. The students who earned good grades and reasonable standardized test scores and graduated on time were classified as resilient. In addition to the most significant factors in their success, which were home factors such as family structure and parents' income, and personal factors such as self-esteem, their school-related characteristics involved engagement in academic behaviors. Overcoming at-risk factors like low socio-economic status was dependent on how students engaged in their work at school. "Engagement behaviors may be manipulable; that is, school personnel may be able to reinforce these behaviors when they occur and promote them when they do not" (p. 231). Aspire Academy teachers demonstrated how they provided support that may have been encouraging students' engagement. "They [students] just need support and encouragement from teachers," said one Aspire Academy science teacher (S1R1T13WP11-2011). "A student who is struggling on learning a skill acquires that skill after being helped," was the mark of success for another teacher (S1R1T1WP11-2011). One student also acknowledged this encouragement to engage in learning at Aspire Academy as opposed to her previous experience. "You have more instruction and guidance, and it makes you feel like you're more backed up by your teachers" (S1R1K7WP11-2011). Teachers also gave explicit encouragement when challenges occurred. "I try to help them see that everybody has challenges, and sometimes we fail…Each step is a learning experience whether you get there all the way, or you get there a little bit, or you step

back and try to learn from whatever the experience was and try to use that to take the next step

toward meeting the goal or the challenge or overcoming the obstacle" (S1R2T2I2 p. 2). If

students received encouragement even at the moment when a challenge seemed the greatest, their

ability to internalize that resilient behavior is like to be maximized, increasing their engagement

in subsequent learning experiences.

Relationships Mean We Celebrate Together. The most dominant message beyond the

importance of relationships is the importance of the ultimate high school success: high school

graduation. Half of the participants mentioned graduation as part of their definition of academic

success. For one teacher, graduation was the penultimate success because of the challenges that

students had faced in attempting to accomplish graduation as a goal. "Every time I sit at

graduation, I feel success. I look at the group of kids who are graduating, and can't help but

think, 'If Aspire Academy didn't exist, they might not have ever graduated.'" (S1R1T11WP11-

2011). Students, too, could enjoy the success they felt as graduation neared. "As graduation

approaches, it makes me realize how much success I have, how many accomplishments I have

completed, and it makes me realize how much I have actually learned," said one senior

(S3R2K2GI5-2012 p.1). The distance that students had come was also measured in success by

teachers. "So many of our students when they arrived were on a road to nowhere…that to see

them now transitioning into adulthood is a rewarding and special feeling" (S3R1T2WP4-2012).

Ultimately, graduation marked an end to students' high school challenges and the beginning of

their ability to use their resilience in new endeavors: "They [students] will forget all the struggles

and difficulties, but will savor the victory and the joy that graduation has to bring. It prepares

them for the greater challenges that await them in the future," said one Aspire Academy teacher

(S3R1T4WP4-2012).

The most significant phenomenological structure of this study was the importance of

relationships in high school success in this setting. Relationships were the basis of most of what

helped administrators, teachers, and students find success at Aspire Academy. Building

relationships allowed these teachers and students to care about one another, which was an

important component in their success. These relationships were the foundation of learning for

both students and teachers. Their relationships with one another promoted engagement in

learning and the motivation to learn and grow by influencing students to attend as well as

teachers to persevere in their examination of their teaching practice. These students perceived

even their success on the NCLB tests as a way of recognizing their accomplishments and

protecting their teachers from harsh judgment by the public via poor assessment scores.

In what seemed like an ironic twist, caring relationships between themselves and students

seemed to include an examination of failure for teachers. That failure ranged from a daily

reflection on teaching in an effort to help every student learn to a more general reflection on

students that did not engage, despite receiving guidance about positive engagement behaviors.

The sentiment that a student didn't succeed was accepted by teachers as a choice that the student

made despite their desire to build a relationship with that student. "I feel very successful. If a

student doesn't try or doesn't come to class, I try to visit with him/her, but if they choose not to, I

still feel successful, as I cannot control their choices," said one business teacher in her

description of her teaching experience at Aspire Academy (S1R1T9WP11-2011).

Issues and Implications

Phenomenological research seeks to describe the lived experiences of participants. In the

case of this research, the lived experience of participants is one that they have in common

because they have taught and learned in the same setting: Aspire Academy, a charter high

school. Furthermore, the experience of these participants is also limited by the school year in

which this experience occurred. However, since the turnover rate of teachers at this school is

low, it may be safe to assume that students who have attended this school in recent years and will

attend this school for some undetermined amount of time may have similar experiences, as this

senior hoped: "I want to know that when I come back in a few years and the teachers are still

here that they'll be the same as they are right now" (S3R2K3GI5-2012 p. 6).

Phenomenological research theorists are clear about the limitations of their findings.

"While universalization is the highest form of generalization, it is not demanded of all inquiry.

This is especially true of the human sciences, where contexts are important and tend to relativize

findings" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 245). Generalizing phenomenological findings to other settings or

situations would not be appropriate. Because this research seeks to describe the experience

during this school year for these participants, generalizing the findings herein to other settings is

not appropriate. That said, it seems possible that some may read these findings and learn that

promoting productive relationships between teachers and students may help lead to academic

success, or that students who have good relationships with their teachers might have higher

engagement if those teachers both emphasize positive engagement behaviors or point those

behaviors out to students who are not exhibiting them. It may also be possible to imagine that at-

risk students who have good relationships with their teachers may overcome some of the

challenges that they face to academic success. Of course, all of these ideas are embedded within

this research. However, these elements are at work in conjunction with one another, creating an

environment that produces success for these students with these teachers, which is based on the

perceived experience of these participants, making it the only thing that this research can truly

claim.

Creating a high school environment that lead to this success is dependent on these

elements and most likely, many others that did not become evident despite this research being

conducted at this school. Some of the elements that are part of this school are important to its

success: smaller student to teacher ratios, which enable relationships to be built with more ease

than might be possible in larger schools, a process of enrollment that allows screening of

applicants because the school is a charter school, the personal traits of the teachers that make

building relationships with students that have been identified as at risk possible, the personal

traits of the principal including his modeling of the value of teacher/student relationships as a

priority, the factors at work in the comprehensive high schools served by this charter high school

that may allow students who are most open to a new opportunity to succeed to find Aspire

Academy as an option, and the district within which this charter school operates perceiving its

success as an anomaly that is not worthy of exploration for whatever reason. Regardless of what

is at work in this charter high school or what may be enabling the results that occur there, the

lived experience of these teachers and students provides others with a collection of vocabulary

with which they could discuss their own success or failure. Whether similar elements come

together in a similar place is hard to tell, but principals, teachers, and students could use the

combined ideas of caring relationships, student growth and motivation, and engagement as terms

that describe their own experience or lack of experience in order to examine how they might

make their high school more effective. Perhaps some teachers and principals may at least find

that they feel affirmed by this description of this school because they can see similarities

between this school and their own. At the very least, these findings could get a conversation

started among those stakeholders that have so much to gain from better relationships, increased

growth and motivation, and higher engagement. Whether the assessment results improve or not,

or the graduation rate increases or not, looking for ideas is a beginning for those who are

pursuing academic success, but may not be looking for more test preparation to accomplish it.

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Appendix A Consent Letters

ADULT INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

What's the Deal with Aspire Academy?

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Curriculum and Teaching at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with any of these educational institutions, or the services they may provide to you.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand what it means to have academic success by earning credits toward graduation at Aspire Academy. The study will examine the experiences of both students and certified staff to gain information about how students find success after having previously struggled academically, and how teachers promote success with their students at the school.

PROCEDURES

Participants will be asked to both write and talk about their experiences at Aspire Academy. Speaking experiences may include either focus group conversations or individual interviews. The time required for participation in these activities will range from 20 to 30 minutes per conversation. Time spent in writing will be decided by the participant as he or she formulates and drafts responses to prompts/questions. Focus group conversations or interviews will be audio taped and transcribed; all audio files will be used by the researchers only and will be securely stored. Participants will be asked to verify transcripts of audio files to address issues of bias in the research.

RISKS

Participants will be asked to take no risks during this study. All data collection efforts will occur outside the student's required instructional time.

BENEFITS /PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS

Participants will receive no benefits for participating in this study. Participants will receive no compensation for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

Your name will not be associated in any publication or presentation with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study. Instead, the researcher(s) will use a study number or a pseudonym rather than your name. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless required by law or you give written permission.

Permission granted on this date to use and disclose your information remains in effect indefinitely. By signing this form you give permission for the use and disclosure of your information for purposes of this study at any time in the future.

REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from Aspire Academy, The District Public Schools, or the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose further information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: Laura Smith.

If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the research team may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher(s) listed at the end of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email mdenning@ku.edu.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

_____   _____

    Type/Print Participant's Name   Date

   _____

    Participant's Signature

PARENT-GUARDIAN INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

What's the Deal with Aspire Academy?

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Curriculum and Teaching at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish your child to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not allow your child to participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to allow your child to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw your child from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand what it means to have academic success by earning credits toward graduation at Aspire Academy. The study will examine the experiences of both students and certified staff to gain information about how students find success after having previously struggled academically, and how teachers promote success with their students at the school.

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RISKS

Participants will be asked to take no risks during this study. All data collection efforts will occur outside the student's required instructional time.

BENEFITS/PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS

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PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

Your child's name will not be associated in any publication or presentation with the information collected about your child or with the research findings from this study. Instead, the researcher(s) will use a study number or a pseudonym rather than your child's name. Your child's identifiable information will not be shared unless required by law or unless you give written permission.

Permission granted on this date to use and disclose your information remains in effect indefinitely. By signing this form you give permission for the use and disclosure of your child's information, excluding your child's name, for purposes of this study at any time in the future.

REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, your child cannot participate in this study.

CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You may withdraw your consent to allow participation of your child in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose further information collected about your child, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: *Laura Smith.*

If you cancel permission to use your child's information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about your child. The research team will not use nor disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher(s) listed at the end of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my child's rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429, write to the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas   66045-7568, or email mdenning@ku.edu.

I agree to allow my child to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

_____   _____

       Type/Print Participant's Name   Date

    _____

          Parent/Guardian Signature

Appendix B Data Collection Protocols

Spiral One Questions
Student questions
   1. Describe your classroom experience at Aspire Academy.
   2. How do you define academic (school) success?
   3. How does your classroom experience at Aspire Academy relate to your feeling of success in school?
Teacher questions
   1. Describe your teaching experience at Aspire Academy.
   2. How does your teaching experience at Aspire Academy relate to your feeling of success as a teacher?
   3. How do you define academic success?
Principal questions
   1. Describe your administrative experience at Aspire Academy.
   2. How does your administrative experience at Aspire Academy relate to your feeling of success as a principal?
   3. How do you define academic success?

Spiral One Round Two Individual Interview Protocol (Teachers)
How do your administrators push teachers and students to do their best?
How do your administrators support you in meeting your goals?
How do you help students overcome challenges?
What connections do you see between students' emotional development (and growth) and their academic success?
How do you get students to trust you?

Spiral Two Group Interview Protocol
Think of your experience at Aspire Academy. What is the best word that characterizes it? Why does that word best describe your experience at Aspire Academy?
Alternate question:
Provide a metaphor for your experience at Aspire Academy. Explain how that metaphor could help someone who has never worked at/attended Aspire Academy understand the experience that you have had.

Spiral Two Follow-up Questions (Teachers)
Teacher 1
What makes you feel valued as a teacher at Aspire Academy?
Principal
What do you find challenging about helping students find success?
In the group, you mentioned that we (the teachers/staff at Aspire Academy) "milk every ounce of motivation out of these kids." How do you think that you and your teachers do that?
Teacher 2
How do you deal with the doubt that you feel after an unsuccessful interaction with a student?
In the group you mentioned the idea of "not quitting" on students. What keeps you from "quitting" on a student?

How do you get students to accept compliments?

Teacher 3
What do you do with students one-on-one that helps them find success?
Teacher 4
In the group, you mentioned that your students know that you care about them. How do you let students know that you care about them?
Teacher 5
Can you explain your metaphor for "making progress when the ocean is steady" in terms of what that looks like every day in your teaching practice?
Teacher 6
Why is patience so important in helping your students find success?
Teacher 7
How does learning about your students' backgrounds contribute to your helping students find success?
Teacher 8
How do you help students feel that Aspire Academy is a "safe port" for them?

Spiral Three Writing Prompt Questions (teachers, principal, students)
Assessment and Graduation Questions
How do you feel that assessments (state, district, building) measure academic success?
How do you find success in the "home stretch" of the school year, as graduation approaches?

all writing

teacher interviews

teacher groups interviews

teacher writing

all writing

student group interview and individual interviews

reflection

data collection

SPIRAL ONE ROUND ONE Academic Success Definitions

SPIRAL ONE ROUND TWO Support/ Response to Students

SPIRAL TWO ROUND ONE Metaphor for Aspire

SPIRAL TWO ROUND TWO Following up to Group Interview

SPIRAL THREE ROUND ONE Tests and Graduation

SPIRAL THREE ROUND TWO Aspire Unique Success