

THE MIDDLE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE: A LATINA PERSPECTIVE

BY

Laurie Bottiger

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Chairperson

Committee members* _____*

_____*

_____*

_____*

Date defended: _____

The Dissertation Committee for Laurie Bottiger certifies
that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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Committee:

Chairperson*

Date approved: _____

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Abstract

Middle School best practice recommendations are represented in the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades *Schools to Watch* criteria. Middle School best practice appears to be informed by research including samples of policy makers, administrators, teachers and parents. It appears that the student voice may be missing. Extant research suggests that responding to students' perception is critical for learning to take place. This study will focus on gathering students' descriptions of their school experiences in an inner city middle school for low income girls. After collecting and analyzing the students' perceptions, the study will address whether a student sample adds to data gathered from education professionals. Student data will be gathered through phenomenological interviews. The sample was selected because its students appear to be overcoming negative outcomes associated with at-risk Latina students.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Current middle school best practice guidelines are represented in the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades *Schools to Watch* criteria for determining effective schools, which were developed in order to help middle schools prepare children to assume productive roles in a democratic society. Middle schools may use the criteria—which make recommendations regarding quality of staff, instructional strategies, curriculum and classroom ecology—to evaluate their progress towards developing an effective school, according to the National Forum. These criteria were established in 1997 based on research that explored the perspectives of teachers, administrators, policy makers, and parents. But more recent research acknowledges that "ultimately, it is the perceptions of the students [...that determine] the effect that an instructional act has on the students' learning" (Shuell, 1996, p. 734). The current study builds on this research by gathering student descriptions of school experiences in an inner city middle school for low-income girls. Analysis of the students' perceptions explores and evaluates the contributions of the perspectives of middle school students.

Research on the influence of classroom characteristics argues strongly for the inclusion of students' perceptions of classroom experience as an important mediator of actual classroom experience (Affleck, Madge, Adams, & Lowenbraun, 1988; Jenkins & Heinen, 1989; Pintrick, Roeser, & DeGroot, 1994; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986; Schunk & Meece, 1992; Weinstein, 1989; Weinstein, Marshall, Sharp & Botkin, 1987; Whinnery, King, Evans, & Gabe, 1995; Winne & Marx, 1982). Including measures that tap student perceptions can allow researchers to explore questions regarding overall classroom influences, thereby shedding light on the relative

importance of classroom and individual difference effects (Keogh, 1994; Pintrich, Anderman, & Klobucar, 1994; Schulte, 1996).

In their study of middle school students, Doda and Knowles (2008) explored precisely these effects. By collecting 2700 letters from middle school students across North America (including urban, rural and suburban populations), Doda and Knowles were able to capture young adolescent voices, which shared “critical insights about the nature of schooling they wish they had, and glimpses of their struggles, hopes, fears and even dreams” (p. 26). The student letters consistently express a desire for high quality relationships as well as a desire for high quality learning, qualities which appear to be congruent with *Schools to Watch* Criteria published by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades. Doda and Knowles (2008) ultimately suggest to middle level educators that legitimate voice be given to the young adolescent learners: “It makes sense to ask students to tell us about themselves and their school experiences if we are to create learning experiences that work better for the young people we serve” (p. 26). However, to date, no study has yet analyzed student perspectives on the effects of their middle school experiences.

Listening to an “at risk” sample that has met educational success by completing middle school, high school, and college may add important perspectives about qualities identified with successful middle level education. Although the extant research on the developmental characteristics of young adolescents and what these students need in school in order to thrive in educational settings regardless of race, socio-economic status or gender is substantial, the research tends to be collected from analyses of school documents, student accomplishments and achievement test scores, and the perceptions of key groups such as teachers, parents and administrators. It does not appear to include student samples (Nesin & Brazee, 2005).

This study responds by collecting the perceptions of current and former students of a successful middle school serving low income, inner-city girls. The Middle School for Girls (a pseudonym) operates in a large metropolitan city in the North East. Now in its 17th year, the school has continued to serve low income, inner city girls who were not finding success in public schools and could not afford private school education. Students at the Middle School for Girls were predicted to fail in the public educational system not only from high school but also from college. Ninety-six percent of the graduates currently complete high school and 90% of the high school graduates attend college, which is far above the rate for students in comparable local schools (CCC, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to analyze and evaluate the perceptions of a sample of graduates as well as current students as they relate to the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades *Schools to Watch* criteria. I explore in detail the student perceptions of the operations of the Middle School for Girls using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with students and the principal in order to fully gather the perceptions of the students, alumnae, and professional educators responsible for the establishing academic program and school culture. Ultimately, I explore the relationship between the *Schools to Watch* criteria and the qualities students name as making their school successful for young adolescents.

More specifically, this study will respond to the following research questions:

1. To what degree are the student perceptions of their middle school experiences congruent with the *Schools to Watch* criteria?
2. What can we learn about the quality of relationships from the student perceptions of the practices?

3. What can we learn about the quality of learning from the student perceptions of the practices?

Disclosure Statement

As a lifelong middle school teacher, I have been fascinated with the motivations and teaching and learning cycles that best meet the needs of young adolescent learners. I am currently a founding Head of School at a similar middle school for girls, which is a member of the same network of schools as the Middle School for Girls. I was interested in learning from the Middle School for Girls about both the successes and the failures of their 17-year journey. The unique qualities of a school that serves only females who are mostly first or second generation immigrants to the United States hosts a microcosm of young adolescents who may have important perspectives for middle school best practice. The Middle School for Girls appears to be providing a pathway to success for their girls that place them on a trajectory for successful high school completion and post high school education. Learning from a school with similar demographics will make our young school stronger. Through the interview processes, I remained unbiased by using a phenomenological interview process, which honors the direction that the interviewees take. There was a clear protocol during the interviews that emphasized no right and wrong answers but rather the opportunity to really describe the way the school works from a student perspective. It was clear to me as the researcher prior to the interviews that the school was a place where at-risk; inner city Latinas had pride in their school. Records showed that the school was successful at helping the girls to graduate from middle school and high school.

Summary

Chapter One presents the problem and purpose of the study on the Middle School for Girls. Chapter Two represents middle school best practice frameworks, an in-depth look at the importance of student perception and an overview of the alternative middle schools attempts to meet unique needs of underserved populations. Chapter Three explains the qualitative methodology describing both the setting and participants. Chapter Four examines the interviews. Chapter Five presents the final analysis and discussion of the interviews.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

The review of related literature is organized as follows: (1) Theoretical foundation of middle school best practices including Turning Points and Schools to Watch Criteria; (2) Asking the Students; (3) Alternative Middle Schools in America; (4) Nativity Miguel Network Schools ; (5) Current research on Latino immigrant populations and education in America; and (6) Cultural Competence of the Faculty and Staff Summary.

Theoretical Foundation

With the support of the Carnegie Corporation and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades developed in 1997 “out of a sense of urgency that middle-grades school improvement had stalled, amid a flurry of descending test scores, increasing reports of school violence, and heated debates about the nature and purpose of middle-grades education” (NFAMG, 2009). The National Forum has since become a unique alliance of more than 50 associations and organizations committed to improving education for middle-grades students. The present work of the Forum includes two initiatives: (1) the study of

reform models committed to promoting academic performance and healthy development of young adolescents, and (2) the *Schools to Watch* criteria, which identifies middle schools that have achieved gains in student performance beyond what might be expected in light of student demographics.

The National Forum has studied seven comprehensive school reform models aimed at improving middle schools. The most researched is the Turning Points model (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Turning Points middle schools commit to a multiyear, systemic reform process based on the following seven principles (Jackson & Davis, Turning Points, 2000):

- Teaching a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards, based on what students should know and be able to do, the concerns of adolescents, and how they learn best.
- Using instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve high standards and become lifelong learners.
- Staffing middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, and engaging teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities.
- Organizing relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.
- Governing democratically through direct or representative participation by all school staff members, the adults who know students best.
- Providing a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance, and developing caring and ethical citizens.

- Involving parents and communities in support of student learning and healthy development (Jackson, 2000).

Studies of Turning Points Schools have shown that in order to improve and sustain student learning, Turning Points schools need to (1) use the seven Turning Points principles to create a strong vision of a middle school learning community, (2) focus deeply on improving learning, teaching, and assessment, and (3) create the school culture, structures, and supports that enable all students to learn at high levels and all faculty to engage in continuous professional development and purposeful collaboration (Jackson, 2000). In doing so, schools must embrace the twin goals of high student achievement (excellence) and ensure opportunity and success for each student (equity) (Jackson, 2000).

Several studies indicate that by implementing the Turning Points reform model, student achievement increases, student behavior problems decrease and there is evidence of improved student learning (DePascale, 1997, Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997). Specifically, in 2003, the Turning Points school in the Bronx, New York showed a 23% score increase from the previous year in the English Language Arts segment of the standardized test. Approximately 7.4% more students met the standard in this particular school than those from the rest of the city. The teachers in this school had focused on good curriculum and instruction—a major component of the Turning Points model—rather than teaching to the test (CPRD, 1999).

In another study on five Turning Points middle schools in Peoria, Illinois; state standardized tests reflected a significant gain in mathematics, which corresponded to an increase in effective classroom practices. Over a two-year period, the mathematics teachers increased enhancement practices from several times a month to weekly. The number of students who met the standard nearly doubled (CPRD, 1999). The schools were noted to have fewer academic

warnings and higher numbers of students meeting or exceeding the Illinois state standards. These schools also showed positive results in student adjustment and self-esteem scores and decreases in reports of depression. All in all, the 8th graders in the Peoria schools had significantly higher levels of academic efficacy and lower than average behavior problems. These gains were attributed to the implementation of the Turning Points reform model (CPRD, 1999).

In a comparison study of nine Boston middle schools that were implementing the Turning Points model and seven Boston middle school that were not implementing the model, results showed a 10% gain in the percentage of regular education students at the Advanced or Proficient levels in English Language Arts in contrast to the 0.6% gain in the schools not implementing Turning Points. The Turning Points schools also had 50% more Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students at the Advanced or Proficient level of the state test. Turning Points middle schools had a high percentage of LEP students meeting the standards in math, too (CPRD, 2003). The Boston Turning Points schools generally outperformed the non-Turning Points schools in all three subjects: English, math, and science. The schools that were fully implementing the Turning Points model had one and one-half to two times greater academic gains (CPRD, 2003).

In larger, more comprehensive studies, including 31 Illinois middle schools and 26 Massachusetts middle schools, standardized test score improvement among the Turning Points schools were evident in the mathematics, language and reading portions of the state tests. The increases were well above the state means. In addition to test score improvements, the schools reported that student behavior problems declined significantly. The 8th graders in the Massachusetts Turning Points schools were reportedly taking algebra at a significantly higher rate than the state average. Teachers in these schools had increases well above the state norm in the use of effective instructional approaches, including the use of math manipulative and

extended writing assignments (De Pascale, 1997). The Illinois study concluded that meaningful improvement in student learning will occur in schools serving high percentages of low-income students and students of color only if reform is comprehensive and integrative (Felner, 1997).

Each of these studies consistently shows academic and personal growth at a rate above the state and national norms when the Turning Points model is fully implemented. The model has proven to be appropriate for meeting the needs of young adolescents. Through the various studies, educators can verify their own teaching practices against the suggestions and make improvements. Turning Points helps middle schools undergo dramatic change by recognizing the need to both strengthen the academic core of middle schools and establish caring, supportive environments that value all young adolescents. The studies show that full implementation of the model brings ultimate gain. The faculty in the Turning Points schools is trained to both understand the developmental stages of the young adolescent and implement programming that honors those unique needs.

Schools to Watch Initiative

Another initiative that the National Forum embraced was to identify middle schools whose students showed high academic performance. This process focused particularly on the schools that were already meeting success with young adolescent students. By identifying the schools with high academic performance, the Forum was able to then learn about the practices those schools had in common. The Forum studied the student outcomes and cultural characteristics, rather than a particular model, which then evolved into the identification of the *Schools to Watch* criteria. These criteria are divided into three categories including academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity. According to the Forum, “academic

excellence” describes middle schools that challenge all students to use their minds well (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades, 2008). According to the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades (2008), “developmental responsiveness” requires sensitivity to the unique developmental challenge of young adolescents (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades, 2008). “Social equity” demonstrates democratic and fair practices, and provides every student with high-quality resources and supports. These criteria work together to describe how schools create an academic and social environment that supports young adolescents to feel safe and stimulated enough to achieve at optimal levels. The model balances the needs of the young adolescent with best teaching practices to establish a strong learning culture and a strong interdependent community.

The first “Schools to Watch” were identified in 1999 and 2000. Of the 64 schools that were nominated, 28 schools applied. The Forum requested additional quantitative and qualitative data from the schools, concentrating particularly on the categories of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity. Nine of the schools were selected for one-day site visits in the spring and fall of 1999. Four of the schools were selected for three-day visits in the fall of 1999 and spring of 2000. During the extended visit, extensive data was collected, and dozens of interviews were conducted with students, teachers, parents, administrators, business partners, and the principal of each of the four schools. Classroom observations were conducted, and Forum site visitors sat in on team meetings and socialized with students in the lunchroom (NFAMG, 2009).

The Forum selected Barren County Middle School in Glasgow, Kentucky and Jefferson Middle School in Champaign, Illinois in May 1999 as the first “Schools to Watch”. During the second and final selection round in December 1999, the Forum also selected Freeport

Intermediate School in Freeport, Texas and Thurgood Marshall Middle School in Chicago, Illinois. Each of the four schools had a demographic make up that included minority student populations and/or low socio-economic status populations. In their academic service to these at-risk populations, the schools were proven academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable. Based on the interviews with the various stakeholders and classroom observations the *Schools to Watch* criteria were made evident and documented.

As part of its continuing effort to identify and learn from high-performing middle schools, the National Forum, in collaboration with NMSA, NAESP, NASSP, and NSDC, launched its *Schools to Watch* State Program in 2002. Through this program, the Forum has trained teams of education leaders to implement *Schools to Watch* programs in their states. Through this initiative, schools are identified across the United States that are well on their way to meeting the criteria for high performance. Eighteen states have affiliates who are involved in the *Schools to Watch* program with a total number of 200 middle schools designated as *Schools to Watch* nationwide. Those schools appear to be meeting the unique needs of the young adolescent by being socially equitable, developmentally responsive, and academically excellent places of learning. Schools that initially appeared to meet the criteria were then visited by state teams who observed classrooms, interviewed administrators, teachers, and parents, and looked at achievement data, suspension rates, quality of lessons, and student work. The schools vary in size from several hundred to several thousand students and represent urban, suburban, and rural communities. The schools with *Schools to Watch* designation share the following characteristics:

- The schools know and articulate the academic outcomes they seek. In some cases, the outcomes are prescribed by the state or district; in others, the faculty has adopted the outcomes recommended by their various disciplines.

- The schools are taking deliberate steps to help students achieve those outcomes by making strategic changes in curriculum, teaching, and school services.
- The schools have set benchmarks for implementing their strategies, and hold themselves accountable for specific results.
- Each school strategically concentrates its energies on important focus areas. As a result, the changes in each school are burrowing deeply into its culture.
- The schools have strong, visionary leaders who can articulate challenging goals, and motivate faculty and staff to reach those goals (NFAMG, 2009).

The *Schools to Watch* schools are de facto models of best practice. By establishing an educational environment that supports the culture of learning and the culture of meeting unique needs; the schools are meeting success. The approach is consistent in philosophy but specific to the population of students in their individual communities. The *Schools to Watch* criteria were developed in order to help middle schools prepare children to assume productive roles in a democratic society. The criteria are meant for school professionals to use in a formative evaluation context. Middle schools may use the criteria to evaluate their progress towards developing an effective school, according to the National Forum. Each of the three criteria domains— academic excellence, developmental responsiveness and social equity—is equally important for establishing educational programming that meets the needs of the young adolescent regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, race and gender.

Academic excellence, according to the Forum, represents evidence of a thoughtful and meaningful academic learning environment that is individualized for each student and which holds all students accountable to specific benchmarks. The lesson-planning processes, including curriculum, instruction, and assessment are key components of this domain. In addition, real

world connectedness and application of academic work, teacher collaboration, and high expectations for each learner are important facets of this domain.

Developmental responsiveness represents those characteristics that keep in mind the uniqueness of young adolescents and the need to connect learning to the real lives of students. These criteria respect the various learning styles of different students, the continuum of cognitive development within the 10-15 year old population, and the importance of student voice in academic and social contexts related to school. By implementing strategies that allow students to evidence their thinking and learning in a variety of ways, the teachers create an environment for deeper, more engaged and sustainable learning. Developmental responsiveness represents the opportunity for every child to become individually important and a valued community member. By recognizing the value of student voice, the classroom and school culture become places where the exchange of ideas, thoughts, and interdependent relationships deepens the learning and experiences of the community.

Social equity represents respect for the differences that a student population embodies within a community. Those differences are embraced to enrich the entire community, which allows for a synergy of collective energy to attain excellence throughout the population. Social equity provides a framework for a community to acknowledge the strengths of each community member while simultaneously creating a community of mutual respect and interdependence. No voice is unheard and no one person is underestimated. Valuing the individual voice of each student in this way creates an environment that engages all learners.

According to the *Schools to Watch* criteria, the balance between developing a strong middle-school community and recognizing each individual student is critical. Two of the

domains explicitly call for listening to the student voice, and the third domain emphasizes the importance of involving the individual in his or her own instruction and assessment. Although these criteria make clear that the student perspective is important in successful middle school reform, few studies have subsequently collected data from student samples. This perspective may add valuable insight about student success in middle schools. The student perception of a learning experience often mitigates the learning outcomes; it only seems appropriate to invite the student perspective about the entire educational program and its processes within the middle school.

Asking the Students

In the Doda and Knowles (2008) study of 2700 middle school students across North America—representing 30 different middle schools from diverse communities including 6th, 7th and 8th graders in rural, urban and suburban schools—adolescent students shared their perspectives about their own education. All respondents expressed desires for high quality learning and high quality relationships.

Responses were collected via letters written by students expressing what they would like from their middle school experiences and teachers. In these letters, the students described “high quality relationships” as the kind of long and rewarding relationships they desired to have with their peers and teachers. They wanted those relationships to be characterized by compassion, respect, personalization, fellowship, and friendship. They expressed desire for relationships with their teachers that showed the teachers really knew the students, genuinely enjoyed them and were committed to working with them. They also wanted teachers to attend to the uncomfortable tensions that competitive peer relationships produced, including both bullying and harassment.

The young adolescents desired to have peer relationships that were respectful, collaborative, and relationally equitable.

The middle school students described high quality learning as occurring in schools that have teachers who believe in their students and their capacity to learn and who understand their learning styles. They indicated that they wanted teachers who acknowledge their development and who do not overestimate or underestimate their abilities. The students expressed a strong desire to be actively engaged in their learning, doing what real learners do—for example, researching, writing, analyzing, presenting, and collaborating. They wanted school to be fun, but not in lieu of learning. They wanted teachers to know that they were concerned about their peers and that all students are capable of success (Doda & Knowles, 2008).

Doda and Knowles ultimately suggest to middle level educators that legitimate voice be given to young adolescents. In their study, they discovered that the majority of the letters contained profound insights about educational practices, reflecting the remarkable capacity of young adolescents to describe themselves and their school worlds (Doda & Knowles, 2008). After reading and reflecting on the letters the middle school students wrote, their conclusions led them to wonder how middle level schooling might be improved if middle school educators regularly went directly to the young people and took what they had to say seriously. However, at this time, there seems to be little evidence of the student voice in the extant research on the middle school experience. Asking the students directly seems to be the next logical step in learning how middle schools can better work for young adolescents.

Among the studies that argue for the inclusion of student voice, Beane (2005) asserts that students learn best when they are honored as contributing members of their school. By grounding

middle school work—including both academic and cultural tenets—in democratic schooling and curriculum integration, our young adolescents can become more engaged and more successful (Beane, 2005). Students must therefore not only be engaged in their learning, but they must also know that their voices are being heard and recognized in order to thrive as young adolescent learners.

Caine and Caine (1997) similarly claim that students must choose to participate in the learning process if learning is meant to occur and endure. When educators and communities create middle schools, it appears that the input of the young adolescents themselves could be valuable in designing, implementing, and reflecting on best practices. This points to the importance of involving the young adolescent as much as possible in his or her own education, and of reducing the amount of time in class and throughout the school day when students simply follow the directions of the adults in the school.

The contributions of Doda and Knowles (2008), Beane (2005), and Caine and Caine (1997) make clear that educators should engage adolescents in each learning experience, encouraging them to share their ideas and voice their beliefs about their own education whenever possible and that educators should value those contributions. Indeed, research on the influence of classroom characteristics argues strongly for the inclusion of students' perceptions of classroom experience as an important mediator of actual classroom experience (Affleck, Madge, Adams, & Lowenbraun, 1988; Jenkins & Heinen, 1989; Pintrick, Roeser, & DeGroot, 1994; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986; Schunk & Meece, 1992; Weinstein, 1989; Weinstein, Marshall, Sharp & Botkin, 1987; Whinnery et al, 1995; Winne & Marx, 1982). Researchers have most often relied on adult informants, such as parents, teachers, and administrators, as data sources. Less often, has student voice been solicited and honored as a valuable perspective on schooling.

Young adolescents are thoughtful enough to provide valuable insight into existing school conditions for both practitioners and policymakers (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Asking the students to reflect on their experiences and to share their perspectives may be an important component as educators try to understand how to meet the needs of all young adolescents, regardless of their diverse backgrounds and economic status. As Linda Darling-Hammond asserted, “If deep understanding of what's needed and what works for adolescents were shared by every policy maker and educator, we would indeed see a major transformation in the education of our young” (as cited in Jackson & Davis, p. 268).

Alternative Middle Schools Evolve

Alternative middle schools and middle school approaches have evolved over time for two reasons. In some cases, policy makers and middle school experts have identified the unique needs of young adolescents who are underachieving. This model, more typically associated with public schools across the country, identifies the goals of the educational process and the characteristics of the population intended to be served. Through a logic model a plan is made that would include the appropriate characteristics necessary to help the underachieving populations achieve at or above their expected level. An example of this model is Turning Points.

In other cases, individual teachers who have developed close relationships with students have changed their practices in order to provide an experience that is meaningful and more engaging which in turn provides a better landscape for learning. One example is the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program), founded by Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin in 1994 (both alumni of the Teach for America program), where the philosophy is that demography does not

define destiny. Another example is the Nativity Miguel Network schools, founded by Father Jack Posadillo, a Jesuit Priest, in 1971, which aim to break the cycle of poverty through education.

KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Schools

KIPP schools are free, open-enrollment, college-preparatory public schools where underserved students develop the knowledge, skills, and character traits needed to succeed in top quality high schools, colleges, and the competitive world beyond. By providing a safe and structured learning environment, more time in school, and high-quality teachers, KIPP schools have helped students make significant academic gains. Of the 82 KIPP schools, 55 are middle schools. The traditional KIPP middle school begins with a fifth grade and adds a grade each year until it serves fifth through eighth grades. KIPP schools share a core set of operating principles known as the “Five Pillars”: High Expectations, Choice & Commitment, More Time, Power to Lead, and Focus on Results. Rigorous college-preparatory instruction is balanced with extracurricular activities, experiential field lessons, and character development. In spite of the long hours, average daily attendance at KIPP schools is 96%. The breakdown of the student population across the network is as follows:

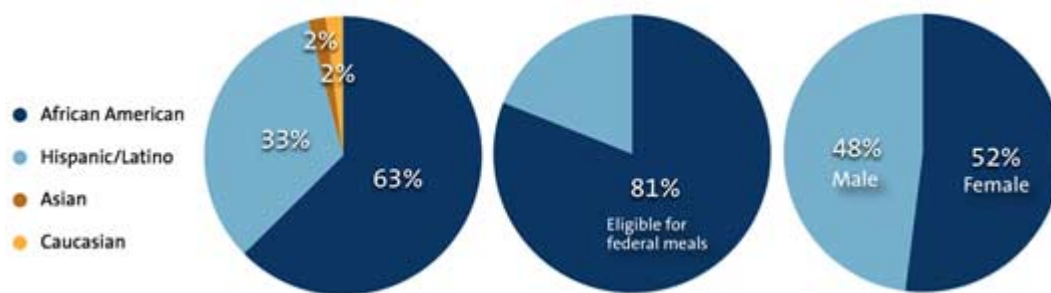


Figure 1. 2008 Student Demographics of KIPP School Population

Educational Outcomes of KIPP Program

The educational outcomes of the KIPP Program show significant academic progress for typically underserved populations. After four years at KIPP, 100 % of the eighth grade classes outperformed their district averages in both mathematics and reading/English language arts, based on state tests. The same students were performing at the 80th percentile in math and 58th percentile in reading whereas their district counterparts were at the 41st percentile and 31st percentile respectively. More than 85% of KIPP students from the original two KIPP Academies are matriculating to college. Additionally, nearly 95% of KIPP students matriculated to college-preparatory high schools in 2008—and have earned millions of dollars in scholarships and need-based financial aid since 2000. Compared to the national average of 20 % of low-income students attending college, there is significant difference. As an alternative middle school model, it appears that the needs of the underserved adolescents are being met.

Nativity Miguel Network of Schools

Nativity Miguel Network Schools, a group of tuition free, private schools, are designed specifically to provide an alternative to low-income, underserved families with middle school students. Ultimately, the goal of the network schools is to break the cycle of poverty through education. There are 64 network schools, all of which are committed to the following nine principles: (1) providing a faith-based education, (2) serving the economically poor and marginalized, (3) offering a holistic education, (4) partnering with the families of students, (5) providing extended day and year programs; (6) committing to each student beyond graduation, (7) establishing and maintaining an effective administrative structure, (8) conducting on-going assessment and inquiry, and (9) actively participating in the network. The network schools aim to create a culture that values each individual and his or her potential to find success in school, evidenced by graduation from high school and enrollment in post-secondary schools. The

Nativity Miguel network has established 64 schools that serve over 4300 male and female students in the middle school grades. These schools are located in 27 states throughout the nation and 90% of their student populations qualify for free or reduced price lunch. The Nativity Miguel schools serve a student population comprising 51% African American, 37% Latino. Elsewhere considered “at risk” and deemed less likely to succeed in life due to physical, emotional, socioeconomic, or cultural factors, 90% of Nativity Miguel Network students graduate from high school, compared to the national rate of 55% for African American and Latino students. Nativity Miguel schools boast a four-year dropout rate of 6%, as well as 75% enrollment in two- or four-year institutions upon graduation (Nativity Miguel Network of Schools, 2006).

Student Demographics of the Nativity Miguel Network

Four thousand nine hundred twenty-one students are enrolled in the 2008-2009 school year. This is an 11.8% increase from the number of students enrolled in network schools in the year prior. Charts showing demographic breakdowns are below.

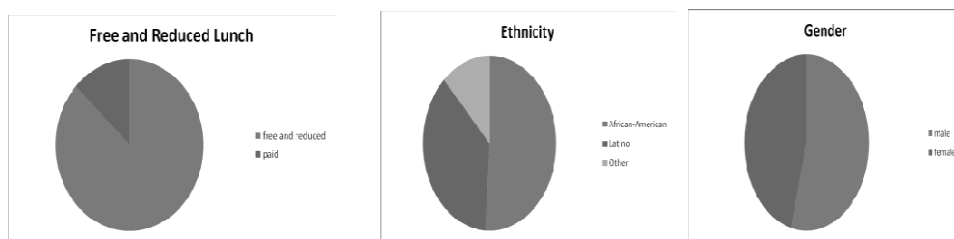


Figure 2. Student Demographic Distributions, Nativity Miguel Network

The network schools have 54% males and 46% females in their student population. Student ethnicity percentages are 51% African-American and 37% Latino. The income levels of the family indicate that 87% of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Educational Outcomes of Nativity Miguel Network Schools

Nativity Miguel Schools have an average daily attendance of 97%. Ninety-one percent of the member schools provide summer programming for all students. Eighty-three percent of the 2004, 8th grade graduating class completed high school in 4 years compared to the national average of 60% for low-income students. Forty-nine percent of the 8th grade graduates of the Class of 2004 are currently enrolled in or have completed post-secondary education in a two-year college, four-year college or university or a trade or vocational school by 2008. These numbers are very different from national percentages.

Both the KIPP schools and the Nativity Miguel Network schools appear to be responding to the unique needs of young adolescents, particularly at-risk students. Statistically, these populations, and those identified as first or second generation immigrants, girls of color and members of families in the lower socio-economic range, have shown to be most vulnerable in their education, often dropping out of school or experiencing early pregnancy. However, Nativity Miguel Network of schools has established a culturally competent program that supports the success of these students in particular.

Cultural Competence of Educators

Educators can best serve all students' needs when they have knowledge and understanding of culturally sensitive practices that honor the ethnicity and culture of their students (Garcia-Preto, 2005). Although it is crucial to acknowledge unique ethnic identity among different groups of Latino families, there are certain commonalities that can inform teachers. Spanish is the common language among Latinos, except among Brazilians (Portuguese speakers), and most belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Although religion is valued and has greatly influenced gender roles, family values, and rules of behavior, most Latinos tend to

emphasize spirituality and to express a willingness to sacrifice material satisfactions for spiritual goals.

Another value Latinos seem to display in common is personalism, a form of individualism that values those inner qualities in people that make them unique and give them a sense of self-worth. In contrast, American individualism values achievement. Dignity of the individual and respect for authority are closely linked to personalism. Most Latinos also agree that machismo and marianismo are constructs that tend to organize gender roles in their culture (Garcia-Preto, 2005).

Often their respect for authority, a value that many of these Latino groups profess in common, keeps them from speaking up and asserting their rights. Especially for those who are living in the United States illegally, this becomes more problematic because they live in constant fear of being caught and sent back to situations that may be extremely dangerous and oppressive, both socially and politically. With the passing of laws such as Proposition 187 in California, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, and the recent Patriot Act (Chapter 13), this fear has escalated, causing increased stress for families already feeling displaced (Garcia-Preto, 2005).

Assuming that the number of Latinos continues to grow as has been predicted, by the year 2010 they will compose about half the population of the United States (Gonzalez, 2000; Roberts, 2004). It is also estimated that as their numbers increase, so will their influence on the social and political structure of this society. This country's welfare will greatly depend on their contributions, and for those contributions to be positive, a shift in the present social position of marginalization and oppression that the majority of Latinos experience is necessary. Engaging

Latinos in a process of change that will help them use their spiritual power to access internal and external resources can be beneficial and may lead to their feeling more connected to their history, family, and community. For Latinos to embrace this nation and work toward its betterment, they must feel embraced (Garcia-Preto, 2005). The growth of the Latino population calls for our educational systems to respond.

Latina Students in Middle School

The Middle School for Girls consists of a majority of Latinas in its student population. The school has hosted these demographics since inception. Working cultural competence into the fabric of the school has been a goal from the very beginning. The school attempts to create an educational environment that serves the invisibility of the young adolescent Latinas in the United States. Henderson (1999) suggests that the majority of research located in psychology journals does not include girls of color when presenting research on adolescent development: “As a consequence, most ‘general’ discussions about adolescent girls are really about White girls and are experienced as irrelevant by girls of color. Adolescent girls of color are invisible” (Henderson, 1999, p. 111). Theorists in the field of cultural and media studies have spoken of this tendency to ignore certain groups in cultural representations and discourse or to represent them only in ways that are congruent with socially rooted conceptions of them. Their psychological diversity and the culture-linked sources of resilience, strength, and self-definition remain unrecognized and unarticulated. Ohye and Henderson (1999) also believe young adolescent girls of color are muted and made invisible by media, current psychological and educational research, and the general population. However, the inclusion of adolescent girls of color in all aspects of science, practice, instruction, and public policy is not just a political issue (Henderson, 1999). In this era, Latina middle school students are mostly from first- and second-

generation immigrant families. The academic achievement of students from immigrant families in general has been found to be related to family obligation and the emphasis put on education, which appears stronger for immigrant families than for native families (Fuligni, 1997; Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002). However, even with a strong desire for their children to do well and initiative to help them succeed, language and cultural barriers between home and school can still hamper the amount of family support available to foster children's learning (Goldenberg, Gallimore, & Reese, 2005). Among immigrant groups in the United States, the Latino population is the fastest growing, at a rate of 3% annually or about 400,000 new immigrants a year. Although they form the fastest growing segment of the middle-school population (Fry, 2003), immigrant Latinos are the most likely to drop out of school (Fry, 2003). Young Latinas have a higher pregnancy rate than white or African-American girls, and a higher percentage of Latina dropouts have had babies as compared to white girls (Fry, 2003). Attending an effective middle school appears to decrease the at-risk behaviors for this population, including drop out rate and early pregnancy.

However, if an adolescent girl, whether White, Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Native American, Alaska, or Aleut is living with her single wage-earning mother, there is an overwhelming likelihood that she is dealing with her adolescence in the context of severely limited economic resources. This is a factor of critical significance, given the strong tendency to misattribute problems in academic, social, and emotional functioning to racial and cultural factors rather than to the often-profound limitations associated with poverty (Ohye & Henderson, 1999). Research shows that both depression and self-esteem worsen when adolescents have no one at home or elsewhere to help with schoolwork, or when they feel embarrassed by their parents (De Las Fuentes & Melba, 1999.) Low-income families are often challenged by the fact that no one is home when the students arrive home from school. The constant struggle to meet

basic needs, including providing housing and feeding the family, competes for time and attention to the family. The ways in which these characteristics manifest themselves in young adolescent females at school can lead to concern about their behavior and academic performance. Behaviors that may seem to be attributed to their ethnicity and race may very well be attributed to the limited financial resources of the family unit. By asking the young adolescent Latinas attending a successful alternative middle school about the ways in which their school is helpful, we may be able to draw lessons directly from the students about our own best practices in order to respond most appropriately to this population in our schools.

Summary

There is clear agreement emphasizing the importance of the middle school years. The extant research provides a history that shows how middle schools have continued to evolve in ways meant to serve the unique developmental period of the young adolescent. There is a paucity of research that includes student perceptions of their educational experiences. As the global world evolves and continues to diversify the population in the United States of America, it seems an opportune time to listen to a uniquely successful population of middle school girls.

Comparing the notable de facto best practices for middle level educators known as the *Schools to Watch* criteria and the qualities that the Latinas share about their middle school makes it possible to recognize congruence and contrast between the experiences the girls perceive to have had in the middle school and the suggested best practices.

Chapter Three: Methodology

To gain an understanding about the ways that at-risk Latinas experienced middle school years while attending an alternative middle school for girls, interviews were held with 13 eighth-

grade students and 15 alumnae. They were asked to describe their middle school experience. Transcending themes throughout the interviews were identified to see if there were similarities in the experiences of the students of the middle school for girls and the “*Schools to Watch*” criteria. Phenomenological interview techniques were chosen because this method allows participants to assign meaning to their common experiences. While using this method, I developed a composite description of the experience for students at the Middle School for Girls. This description consists of not only “what” they experienced, but also “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews were analyzed in order to gain an understanding of the perceptions about the Middle School for Girls directly from its students.

Research Objectives

The research objectives of the proposed study were: (1) to describe in rich detail the perspectives of the at-risk Latina middle school students; and (2) to report how the same students experience the *Schools to Watch* criteria.

Research Questions

To what degree are the student perceptions of their middle school experiences congruent with the *Schools to Watch* criteria?

What can we learn about the quality of relationships from the student perceptions of educational practices?

What can we learn about the quality of learning from the student perceptions of educational practices?

Qualitative Design

A qualitative design was chosen for this study. By collecting the individual perspectives of the at-risk Latinas through interviews, we can learn about the possible congruency between the operations of the school and the *Schools to Watch* criteria while exploring potential high quality learning and high quality relationships. As described in Chapter 2, although the extant research on the developmental characteristics of young adolescents and what those students need in school in order to thrive in educational settings regardless of race, socio-economic status, or gender is substantial, the research seldom includes the young adolescent voice (Nesin & Brazee, 2005). Criterion sampling methods were used in this study. Criterion sampling was selected in order to ensure that all participants had experienced the phenomenon being studied. All of the participants in this study attended the Middle School for Girls from fifth grade through graduation in eighth grade. By speaking directly to students of the Middle School for Girls about their experience as middle school students, the study collected their direct perspectives and perceptions about how their school works in relation to the three domains of the *Schools to Watch* criteria.

Rationale for Samples

The extant literature provides de facto best practice frameworks for middle school teachers to use in order to meet the needs of young adolescents. There is empirical evidence that specific populations of students in the United States underachieve in school, one of those populations is Latinas. Extant research also indicates that young adolescents have not been asked themselves about their experiences. This study intends to begin the data collection with a unique population of students that are females, students of color, members of low-income families and Latina.

All students at the middle school for girls attend the school for four years. They participate in the admissions process in their fourth grade year. They begin their middle level education in the summer prior to the fifth grade. Their first middle-school experience begins in a two-week long camping trip with the entire student body, which consists of 60-70 girls, and which is led by graduates of the school and the faculty. The students attend the middle school through the eighth grade. The school then helps the students to identify appropriate high schools and acts as an advocate through the high school years.

For this study, there were four samples. The first sample included 13 girls who were in their last year at the middle school. Students spend four years at the Middle School for Girls. They begin in 5th grade and complete middle school in 8th grade. The 8th grade class typically has between 12-16 students. This class hosted 13 students, as two had left the school in an earlier year. The second sample included fifteen student graduates of the middle school. Of those fifteen, five were attending high school, five were attending college, and five had entered the professional work force at the time of the study. The third sample consisted of the principal of the school. The principal had been at the middle school for seven years. The fourth sample included teachers, counselors, and consultants at various middle schools. The members of this sample acted as content validity judges for interview questions and to verify the coding process. With these samples, the perceptions of an alternative middle school experiences could be compared to the *Schools to Watch* criteria to identify those characteristics that are congruent with the suggested best practices.

Samples

Sample 1. The eighth grade sample (n= 13) consisted of girls that were in their last year of middle school, which is the same year the girls begin the high school admissions process. The interviews were held in the late spring of 2009. All students agreed to participate and permission was obtained for inclusion in this study.

Sample 2. The alumnae sample (n=15) consisted of graduates of the middle school for girls. Five of the women were attending high school, five were attending college, and five were in the work force at the time of the study. The participants were identified through the Graduate Support Director and President of the school. Each graduate agreed to participate in the study and permission was obtained for inclusion in the study.

Sample 3. The principal agreed to be interviewed as part of the study. She had been in her position for seven years. Her role was both manager and instructional leader.

Sample 4. Four content validity judges were solicited for the study. Each participant agreed to participate in the study. Each judge worked in another Nativity Miguel Network school with similar demographics as the Middle School for Girls. Each judge was asked to rate and review interview questions and coding selections.

Setting

This study focused on collecting current and former student perceptions about a successful alternative middle school serving low income, inner-city girls. The Middle School for Girls (a pseudonym) operates in a large metropolitan city in the Northeast. Now in its 17th year, the school has continued to serve low income, inner city girls who were not finding success in public

schools and could not afford private school education. Students at the Middle School for Girls were predicted to fail in the public educational system not only from high school but also from college. As of 2008, all eighth grade student passed the state examination in both math and language arts. Ninety-six percent of the graduates complete high school and 90% of the high school graduates attend college, which is far above the rate for students in comparable local schools.

Data Collection

This study used qualitative techniques to learn about the students' experiences in order to uncover student perceptions of the qualities that are evident in the school. To elicit these perceptions I used a phenomenological interviewing technique (Seidman, 1991).

Phenomenological approaches give context to the educational experience.

I explored the operations of the school by beginning with grand tour questions and narrowing them to obtain specific information. Grand tour, open-ended questions that lead to narrower questions are key to the phenomenological interview. Beginning with broad questions allowed the respondent to talk about what she felt was important and allowed me to follow the lead of the interviewee, a key characteristic of the inductive-hypothesis model. An outline was developed with specific starter questions that allowed for flexibility in order to embrace follow-up probes and prompts (Arskey & Knight, 1999; O'Brien, 2007). This outline helped to identify the underlying beliefs and experiences of the students that explained their perceptions of the school. All interviews were recorded.

The pairing of the interview questions and *Schools to Watch* criteria was accomplished in various stages. Initially, I matched questions with the criteria from the three domains (including

social equity, academic excellence, and developmental responsiveness). I then contacted teachers, consultants, and counselors serving demographically similar samples in the same network of schools. Four educators from other network schools agreed to participate in a content validity process. Each educator was asked to rate the fit of each question or questions to the criteria that was to be elicited. The raters scored the compatibility using a scale of 1 to 5 and had the opportunity to make rewording suggestions and/or add further questions. Notes and records from each evaluator were kept. Revisions were made to the interview questions and the evaluators reviewed the final questions prior to holding the interviews. Most of the suggestions and comments suggested by the reviewers made the questions conversational.

Intending to explore the student perceptions of the *Schools to Watch* criteria, the interviewer established conversational partnerships with each group or individual participant during the interview. The goal of the interview questions was to explore the perceptions of the interviewees about the operations of the school from a student perspective. As suggested by Rubin (2005), thoroughness was ensured with follow up questions when evidence was missing or seemed thin in addition to when something sounded puzzling. All participants were asked the same questions using a grand-tour format, which allowed the interviewer to follow the lead of the interviewee. Grand tour questions begin with broad questions and then allow the interviewer to ask clarifying questions in order to fully understand the phenomenon from the interviewee perspective. The 90-minute interviews were held in person or by telephone. Each interview group was composed of three or four students or alums. The principal was interviewed alone.

The interview questions were evaluated by content validity judges who reviewed the questions and made suggestions. The judges were given a draft of the interview questions. They independently rated the relationship between the questions and the *Schools to Watch* criteria.

The rating scale was 1-5, 1 meaning no match and 5 meaning perfect match between the question and the *Schools to Watch* criteria. Upon the return of the ratings, the researcher made changes to the questions. Most suggestions helped to make the interview more conversational. The questions were given to the judges a second time for review to ensure the matches were appropriate for eliciting information relative to the criteria. All judges were asked to participate by email or through a phone conversation. Seven judges were solicited. Four judges agreed to participate in the study as content validity judges. At the time of the study, each judge worked with a school demographically similar to the Middle School for Girls. The types of work the judges did in their respective middle schools included teaching, counseling and consulting.

Transcriptions of the interviews were reviewed by interviewees to ensure an accurate representation. All samples participated in the member check process.

Embedded in the interview process was the opportunity to assess the cultural sensitivity of the *Schools to Watch* criteria. By using the *Third Edition Ethnicity and Family Therapy* text authored by McGoldrick, Giordano, and Garcia-Pedro (2005), I became familiar with the clinical knowledge on cultural sensitivity practices for the Latino families whose daughters attend the Middle School for Girls.

Following the interviews, I performed an inductive data analysis by building patterns, categories, and themes from the “bottom-up” (Creswell, 2007). Through this process, the research works back and forth between the themes and database until a comprehensive set of themes is established. This process starts with the raw data, which are then formed into larger and larger categories and increasingly abstract units of information. The data is represented partly based on the participants’ perspectives and partly based on my own interpretation. The

interpretation involves making sense of the data, the “lessons learned,” as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). In the end, the process identified themes that transcended the interviews.

Validity. Several means of providing validity and reliability were built into the research plan. Prolonged engagement by visiting the school several times and interacting with students and faculty to begin to build trust and learn the culture of the school created a comfortable setting for the interviews. I visited the school three times over the course of two years. Each visit consisted of unstructured classroom observations, casual conversation during lunchtimes and recess times with students and collaborative discussions about adolescent development with the principal and school counselor. All of the community members were aware that I am the Head of a similar school in another northeastern city.

Procedures establishing inter-rater reliability were included by engaging the same judges from other Nativity Miguel Schools to review, in order to confirm or dispute, the assignments made to respondents’ comments to different *Schools to Watch* categories. All disagreements were discussed in order to re-categorize when appropriate. One-on-one member checks were conducted with all interviewees. This process solicited the participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations. This technique is considered the most critical technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The interpretation of the data were presented through thick description. These detailed descriptions allow readers to make decisions regarding transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By providing detailed descriptions, the researcher enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred “because of shared characteristics.”

In order to enhance validity, I kept detailed notes and used a digital recording device and had all interviews fully transcribed. Transcriptions were made by an unbiased party. The transcriptions were used for interpretation of the raw data.

Analysis procedure. By interviewing a criterion sample of students who have shared experiences at the Middle School for Girls, it was possible to analyze data for significant statements, meaning units, textural and structural description and description of the essence (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Inductive data analysis was facilitated by using NVIVO 8 (2009), a qualitative data analysis software package. Qualitative research software helps to manage, shape, and make sense of unstructured information. It provides a sophisticated workspace that enables the researcher to work through the information. NVIVO 8 allows the researcher to make in-depth analyses of interview transcripts with efficiency. It provides convenience for data management, enabling the researcher to structure the work allowing for more time for thinking and analyzing. With built in tools for classifying, sorting and arranging information, qualitative research software provides the forum to analyze materials and discover patterns, identify themes, glean insight and develop meaningful conclusions. The researcher can see how the data have been categorized, and easily identify where there are overlaps and intersections. They can also query the data in many ways, including searching for a word or combination of words, finding content that supports a topic or idea, or examining word counts. Importantly, the researcher can return to the original material to find the content that supports the software findings.

The transcriptions were analyzed for significant phrases. The analyses process involved developing meanings and clustering them into themes which led to the presentation of an exhaustive description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The coding process involved

several steps. First, the interviews were read as a complete set. Second, using key words and phrases, the researcher matched comments to *Schools to Watch* domains. The domains are academic excellence, developmental responsiveness and social equity. Thirdly, the key words and comments were coded to the specific criteria within each domain. Ultimately, the responses were coded with the intent to identify transcending themes across the participants and samples.

Themes common to each sample and transcending themes across the sample groups were identified through the use of NVIVO8. Those themes were identified by using matrix coding queries. A matrix coding query allowed the researcher to compare results across the three samples. In other words, the number of references related to each specific criterion was placed in groups and the software provides a count of responses for each sample and across samples. Those results were represented in a table format. Furthermore, the software allows the researcher to review all related phrases based on the coding which creates the opportunity to view the related comments at one time. The content validity judges reviewed the matches between phrases and *Schools to Watch* criteria in order to confirm the assignment of responses to particular criteria.. Suggestions were made to re-categorize a few responses. Some phrases were matched to more than one criterion due to the similarity between the criteria in two domains.

The researcher ensured reliability by establishing saturation through the use of a word frequency query. By identifying the top 500 words, the researcher was able to ensure that all transcending concepts were identified in the findings. Therefore, no related ideas were overlooked.

Ethics

There was no anticipated physical or emotional harm that came out of the participation of the study. The participants were informed that there were no risks associated with participating in this study. To preserve the privacy of the subject, pseudonyms were applied to the students who were individually interviewed. Full disclosure was used in all aspects of the study. Participants were free to ask questions related to the purpose and publication of the final data. Participants could refuse to answer an interview question, and they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Summary

The research in this study is based on qualitative interviews collected entirely through face-to-face or telephonic conference calls that were digitally recorded. Interview questions were geared toward uncovering students' perceptions of their experiences at the Middle School for Girls. In total, 29 participant interviews were obtained over 14 hours of digital recordings and were analyzed for common themes. Recordings were analyzed and the resulting data for each sample are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter Four

Chapter Four contains (1) descriptions of the participants, (2) analysis of the interviews and research findings, (3) transcending themes congruent with the *Schools to Watch* criteria, (4) summaries representing each sample, (5) themes related to high quality relationships, and (6)

themes related to high quality learning gathered from the 14 hours of interviews recorded with the 29 participants. Nine transcending themes were identified as a result of the interviews.

The participants. This qualitative study includes phenomenological interviews with females who attended the same middle school. The participants were selected using a criterion method. Twenty-nine participants were interviewed using a phenomenological interview technique. Three samples were interviewed.

Sample 1

The participants in this sample (N=13, Female=N) were all eighth grade students who attend the Middle School for Girls. The principal initially informed the students about the study. These students were provided including written information about the study and asked if they would like to volunteer for the study. All of the students in eighth grade were willing to participate. Parents and students were given a written description of the study process including information expressing that their children could stop at any time. Parental permission to participate in the study was kept on file for all participants. All interviews were conducted in groups of three or four. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Students had an opportunity to review the interview transcriptions to verify accuracy.

Sample 2

The participants in this sample (N=15, Female=N) are all graduates of the Middle School for Girls. Five were attending high school, five were attending college, and five had entered the workforce at the time of the interviews. The Graduate Support Director, Principal and Executive Director, along with the School Secretary, contacted the students to let them know about the study and to ask them if they would like to volunteer. Some of the students asked other graduates to participate, which fully formed the graduate sample. All participants were given written

information about the study. Each volunteer agreed to participate and those who were still in high school received parental permission. All permission to participate forms have been kept on file. Participants were interviewed by telephone individually, in pairs, or in a group of three or four. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Students had an opportunity to review the interview transcriptions to verify accuracy. Information related to the graduate participants' education level and middle school graduation dates are presented in Table #1.

Table 1

Sample 2

Information Table for Sample 2: Graduates of the Middle School for Girls

<u># of Participants</u>	<u>Current Education Level</u>	<u>Middle School Graduation Year</u>
5	High School	2006-2008
5	College	2002-2003
5	College Graduate	1995-1997

Sample 3

The principal agreed to participate in the study by answering the same questions as the student participants. The researcher and principal had visited several times prior to the study because they serve similar populations in their respective schools. The interview was conducted by telephone and was digitally recorded.

To What Degree are the Student Perceptions of their Middle School Experience Congruent with the *Schools to Watch* criteria?

The purpose of this study was to learn about the student perceptions of the *Schools to Watch* criteria at their middle school. Predominant themes across the samples are presented to identify those perceptions that are congruent with *School to Watch* criteria. The interpretations of

these themes were a result of inductive data analysis. This involves immersion in the specifics of the data and coding procedures that take into account external homogeneity, the degree to which the data do not belong together; and internal homogeneity, the degree to which the data do belong together (Creswell, 2005). Discussion of the results of the interviews held with the 29 participants represented in the three samples is presented.

The *Schools to Watch* criteria were developed in order to help middle schools prepare children to assume productive roles in a democratic society. Middle schools may use the 38 criteria to evaluate their progress toward developing an effective school, according to the National Forum. Each of the three criteria domains— academic excellence, developmental responsiveness and social equity—is equally important for establishing educational programming that meets the needs of the young adolescent regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, race and gender. Six hundred twenty-six comments congruent with the 38 *Schools to Watch* criteria were made throughout the 14 hours of interviews with the 29 participants. Of those 626 comments, 152 were related to Academic Excellence, (24% of the total responses); 319 were related to Developmentally Responsiveness, (51% of the total responses); and 155 were related to Social Equity, (25% of the total responses).

Academic Excellence

Academic excellence, according to the Forum, describes high-performing schools that challenge all students to use their minds well. The criteria are explored through responses of the participant samples.

Academic Excellence is defined by 8 criteria. Throughout the interviews, 152 relevant responses were made; there were 101 relevant responses (66%) made by Sample 1 (N=13), 41 responses (27%) by Sample 2 (N=15) and 10 responses by Sample 3 (N=1) that were directly

related to the Academic Excellence criteria. Table # shows the number of responses for each of the Academic Excellence criterion. Three of the eight criteria were referenced more often than the others; those include criteria 7, 5 and 1. They are described as expecting high academic standards and exemplars of quality work, using a variety of assessment strategies, and providing supports to students in order to allow them to meet rigorous standards.

Table 2

Schools to Watch: Academic Excellence Criteria

The table represents the number of references related to Academic Excellence criteria.

<u>Key Words for each Criterion</u>	<u>Sample 1</u>	<u>Sample 2</u>	<u>Sample 3</u>	<u>Total</u>
AE1 High Standards with feedback	18 (18%)	8 (20%)	2	28 (18%)
AE2 Curriculum Alignment	8 (8%)	6 (15%)	0	14 (9%)
AE3 Important Concepts	5 (5%)	1 (24%)	0	6 (4%)
AE4 Instructional Strategies	12 (12%)	4 (10%)	1	17 (11%)
AE5 Variety of Assessment	16 (16%)	5 (12%)	3	24 (17%)
AE6 Time to meet standards	8 (8%)	4 (10%)	1	13 (9%)
AE7 Supports	23 (23%)	7 (17%)	1	31 (20%)
AE8 Adults together	11 (11%)	6 (15%)	2	19 (13%)
Total Responses	101 (100%)	41 (100%)	10	152 (100%)

Note. Sample 1 (n=15) 8th Grade; Sample 2 (n=15) graduates; Sample 3 (n=1) Principal

The percentage represents the percent of responses for coded within each sample

Developmental Responsiveness

Developmental responsiveness represents criteria related to the uniqueness of young adolescents and the need to connect learning to the real lives of the students. According to the forum, developmental responsiveness is attributed to schools that are sensitive to the unique

developmental challenges of early adolescence. Each criterion is explored through the responses of the participant samples.

Developmental Responsiveness is defined by 10 criteria. Throughout the interviews, 319 relevant responses were made related to these criteria; there were 176 relevant responses (55%) made by Sample 1, 122 responses (38%) by Sample 2 and 21 responses by Sample 3 that were directly related to the Developmentally Responsive criteria. Table # shows the number of responses for each of the Developmentally Responsive criteria. Three criteria were referenced more often than the others; those include criteria 1, 8 and 10. Those criteria represent the following features: creating a personalized environment, developing alliances with families and providing co-curricular activities.

Table 3

Schools to Watch: Developmentally Responsive Criteria

The table represents the number of references related to the Developmentally Responsive criteria.

<u>Key Words for each Criterion</u>	<u>Sample 1</u>	<u>Sample 2</u>	<u>Sample 3</u>	<u>Total</u>
DR1 Personalized environment	41 (23%)	37 (30%)	5	83 (25%)
DR2 Comprehensive services	11 (6%)	3 (2%)	2	16 (5%)
DR3 Instructional strategies	7 (4%)	6 (5%)	1	14 (4%)
DR4 Relevant curriculum	11 (6%)	6 (5%)	1	18 (6%)
DR5 Curriculum connections	14 (8%)	2 (2%)	3	19 (6%)
DR6 Lots of chances	10 (6%)	10 (8%)	0	20 (6%)
DR7 Voice	7 (4%)	6 (5%)	3	16 (5%)
DR8 Family alliance	27 (15%)	22 (18%)	5	54 (17%)
DR9 Citizenship community	22 (12%)	8 (7%)	0	30 (9%)

DR10 Co-Curricular	26 (15%)	22 (18%)	1	49 (15%)
<u>Total Responses</u>	<u>176 (100%)</u>	<u>122 (100%)</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>319 (100%)</u>

Note. Sample 1 (n=15) 8th Grade; Sample 2 (n=15) graduates; Sample 3 (n=1) Principal

The percentage represents the percent of responses for coded within each sample.

Social Equity

Social equity represents respect for the differences that a student population embodies within a community. Those differences are embraced to enrich the entire community. Ultimately, the forum would attribute “social equity” to schools that are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students. Each criterion is explored through the responses of the participant samples.

Social Equity is defined by 10 criteria. Throughout the interviews, 155 relevant responses were made related to these criteria; there were 98 relevant responses (63%) made by Sample 1, 46 responses (30%) by Sample 2 and 11 responses by Sample 3 that were directly related to the socially equitable criteria. Table # shows the number of responses for each of the socially equitable criteria. Three criteria were referenced more often than were the others; those include criteria 1, 5 and 7. Those criteria represent the following features: expecting quality work from all students, providing on-going opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others’ cultures and assuring that each child’s voice is heard, acknowledged, and respected.

Table 4

Schools to Watch: Socially Equitable Criteria

The table represents the number of references related to each of the Socially Equitable criteria

<u>Key Words for each Criterion</u>	<u>Sample 1</u>	<u>Sample 2</u>	<u>Sample 3</u>	<u>Total</u>
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SE1 Quality work	33 (34%)	11 (24%)	3	47 (30%)
SE2 Varied approaches	4 (4%)	0 (0%)	1	5 (3%)
SE3 Adapts curriculum	3 (3%)	3 (7%)	1	7 (5%)
SE4 Equal access	0 (0%)	4 (9%)	1	5 (3%)
SE5 Value culture	18 (18%)	8 (20%)	2	28 (18%)
SE6 Voice is heard	10 (10%)	12 (26%)	1	23 (15%)
SE7 Family participation	14 (14%)	3 (7%)	0	17 (11%)
SE8 Reward citizenship	4 (4%)	0 (0%)	1	5 (3%)
SE9 Faculty diversity	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	0	1 (.06%)
SE10 Low suspension	12(12%)	4 (9%)	1	17 (11%)
Total	98 (100%)	46 (100%)	11	155 (100%)

Note. Sample 1 (n=15) 8th Grade; Sample 2 (n=15) graduates; Sample 3 (n-1) Principal

The percentage represents the percent of responses for coded within each sample

Sample 1: Schools to watch congruency summary. Through their descriptions, Sample 1 (N=13), the eighth graders, referred to the academic requirements of the Middle School for Girls. Of their combined 375 responses congruent with the *Schools to Watch* criteria, 101 of the responses (27%) were related to Academic Excellence criteria. Of the 101 responses, 23% of their responses were directly related to high academic standards. Additionally, 18% of their responses referred to the support they received to help them achieve those standards and 16% of the responses were related to the variety of assessments provided at the Middle School for Girls. The 8th grade students consistently mentioned that the teachers help them to achieve the objectives of the lessons. The students' responses indicate that they understood what they are meant to do and are able to receive help if there is confusion or lack of understanding. In addition to the multiple responses made regarding high academic standards and the variety of assessments and supports to ensure meeting high academic standards, the sample referred to each

of the other Academic Excellence criterion. From the perspective of the 8th graders, it appears that the Middle School for Girls challenges all students to use their minds well.

The 8th grade sample made 176 comments related to the Developmental Responsiveness criteria, representing 47% of their total responses congruent with the *Schools to Watch* criteria. The total number of comments related to Developmentally Responsive criteria were almost double that of the Academic Excellence and Social Equity criteria. Sample 1, the 8th grade students, expressed that their school is sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescents. Twenty-three percent of the total responses described the school's personalized environment, 15% described the development of alliances with families, and 15% described the co-curricular activities. Additionally, the students mentioned other roles of the teachers that were related to developmentally appropriate criteria. Examples included sending emails if home printers do not work or are not available, solving problems related to issues outside of school, communicating with parents about hard topics and spending time with them even when they are not required to do so.

Sample 1 made 98 comments congruent with the *Schools to Watch* criteria related to the Socially Equitable criteria. This constitutes 24% of the pertinent responses. The 8th grade sample emphasized the quality of work that was expected from all girls attending the school. They referred to the quality of work in 34% of their responses. Parallel to each mention of quality work, the sample stated the many ways that the students were provided support to meet the school's high expectations. They consistently pointed out that the culture and voice, 18% and 10% of the responses respectively, of each student mattered to the faculty and fellow students. Although these characteristics were mentioned more frequently, the students referred to all of the Socially equitable criteria in the *Schools to Watch* criteria.

Sample 2: Schools to watch congruency summary. Sample 2 (N=15), the graduate sample identified the same criteria that the 8th grade sample described. Their descriptions were more reflective, as would be expected from females who were developmentally more mature. The memories that were shared were similar to the responses of the 8th grade sample. They made 209 responses that were congruent with *Schools to Watch* criteria. Twenty percent were related to the Academic Excellence criteria, 58% were related to the Developmentally Responsive criteria and 22% were related to the Socially Equitable criteria. Although the same nine criteria crossing the three domains were consistently emphasized, this sample referred to the 37 of the 38 *Schools to Watch* criteria.

In sample 2, the graduate sample, the same three Academically Excellent criteria were most transcending as in sample 1, the 8th grade sample. They remembered high standards, a variety of assessments and supports for learning to be well established in the Middle School for Girls. 20% of their responses referred to high academic standards, 12% of the responses referred to the variety of assessments and 17% referred to access to the necessary support to meet high standards. The graduates remembered their middle school to be a place where all students were meant to do well.

Similar to Sample 2, the greatest number of responses were congruent with Developmental Responsiveness criteria. One hundred twenty-two of their 209 responses were related to this set of criteria. The feature that received the most comments was the creation of a personalized environment. Thirty percent of their comments were congruent with this feature. Eighteen percent of the responses were congruent with creating alliances with the family and 18% were congruent with providing opportunities for co-curricular activities. The graduates mentioned that the personalization of the school made it very much like a family.

Sample 2, the graduates, indicated qualities of the Middle School for girls that were congruent with the Socially Equitable criteria 46 times. Of those 46 comments, 11 or 23% were related to high quality work, 8 or 23% were related to valuing the culture of the students and 12 or 26% were related to valuing the voice of each student. The graduates were able to recall specific examples from their middle school experiences that referred to 37 of the 38 *School to Watch* criteria.

Sample 3: *Schools to Watch* Congruency Summary. Sample 3 (N=1), the principal, described the structure of the operations of the school. In addition to the nine criteria that were most predominant across the other two samples, the principal emphasized the work of teaching the teachers about the students they would serve. The principal's perspective represented the daily actions that were meant to serve young adolescent girls well, but also addressed how the teachers were ultimately responsible for meeting the needs of the students, which led to the importance of teaching the faculty how to enact those roles responsibly. She described the importance of addressing the teachers' mental models in order for them to best serve the students. The principal described it in this way:

To be an educator of girls of color, especially those living in poverty, comes with it a unique skill set. I think it's difficult not to have it become charity work when you hire teachers who have never interacted with this unique population before. I think schools like ours always underestimate their own fears and the middle class values that teachers bring to situations along with the fear of the children they bring to situations unknowingly. As a leader, the more explicit you can be and the more education you can provide to your staff about their standards of being a teacher in your school, the better.

The principal reiterated the same features that the student samples emphasized about the operations of their school and added that those features were developed and implemented purposefully in order to serve the unique population of low-income, recent immigrant girls of color. The three samples consistently recalled similar qualities that were predominant in the Middle School for Girls.

What can we learn about the quality of relationships from the student perceptions of the practices at the Middle School for Girls?

Four of the nine congruent *Schools to Watch* criteria place emphasis on high quality relationships. The Doda and Knowles (2007) study emphasized that young adolescents wanted their schools to have “high quality relationships.” Those were described as long and rewarding relationships with peers and teachers that were characterized by compassion, respect, personalization, fellowship, and friendship. The four transcending criteria indicate that the Middle School for Girls appears to have established those qualities within their daily operation. The concurrence of the graduate perspective suggests that the school culture values these characteristics and they have become part of the fabric of the school over time.

Those four criteria include:

- Developmental Responsiveness Criteria 1, which states, “The school creates a personalized environment that supports each student’s intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development. The school groups adults and students in small learning communities characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships.”
- Developmental Responsiveness Criteria 8, which states, “The school develops alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of their children. It involves families

as partners in their children's education, keeping them informed, involving them in their children's learning, and assuring participation in decision-making."

- Socially Equitable Criteria 5, which states, "Students have on-going opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures. The school values knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the school and our nation."
- Socially Equitable Criteria 6, which states, "Each child's voice is heard, acknowledged, and respected."

Each of these criteria is discussed through the perspectives of each sample.

Transcending Theme 1

Developmental Responsiveness criterion 1 states, "*The school creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development. The school groups adults and students in small learning communities characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships.*" Sample 1 (N=13) made 83 relevant comments. The 8th grade sample spoke about this criterion in three ways. They mentioned that the school community felt like family, and acknowledged the well-roundedness of the school program and their relationships with other girls attending the Middle School for Girls and with their teachers.

The respondents indicated that the teachers wanted their students to be well rounded, not just academic. The girls described the school as a place where leaders were created. They reported that the teachers helped the students with their self esteem. Ultimately, the students reported that the teachers did not focus only on grades but also focused on how the students were feeling and doing. One 8th grader stated, "I just feel that I could just be me, I could talk and I could do everything here." They reported that their middle school was like a second home. It

was described as a place where the girls were comfortable. They described the relationships as mutually respectful and mutually supportive.

The 8th graders reported that the priorities of their schoolmates were different from when they were in public school. They mentioned that the clothes girls wore and their hairstyles were not important to the population attending the Middle School for Girls. The girls reported that they were relieved to know that people cared about the whole person rather than just how they looked. They expressed that they appreciated the way their peers treated them by judging their personality, not just their clothes and hair.

The students reported that the work they were required to do was hard but the experience made it worth it. They mentioned that the relationships with the teachers were strong and if something was hard or they weren't good in a subject, there was tutoring and an opportunity to become good at it. They indicated that teachers wanted to help them. An 8th grader said, "They actually take the time to sit down and they're like, "Okay, you're not good at this, but we can help you." The girls indicated that they were glad to be in their school. They reported that they believed their teachers cared about them.

The 8th graders attributed much of their connectedness to each other to the size of their school. They reported that the school has a small setting and every teacher and student knows the other teachers and students. They indicated that this closeness made it so that they also knew when other community members were having trouble. The girls reported that often times a teacher could just tell by a facial expression what one of the girls was thinking. The students mentioned that at times the teachers knew there was a problem or concern before the student alerted anyone. The girls attributed this quality to the small number of students and small size of the school. One 8th grade student said, "This middle school is a way for girls to interact with a

smaller environment and community and they get to be themselves and they don't have to worry about what other people think.”

The students reported about the opportunities that are part of the school that are meant to help the girls develop relationships. They recalled frequent opportunities to get to know one another. They indicated that the beginning of each school year and the summer camp experience were very helpful in the process of bonding between classmates and girls of other grade levels. The girls reported that they do fun activities and are with each other every day which leads to them becoming close in relationships. They mentioned that they hang out together even when they are not in school and enjoy walking to school together.

All of the participants appeared to express themselves authentically. The friendships between the students and teachers appeared to be an attribute of the community in the perspectives of the 8th graders. When describing the relationships between the students attending the Middle School for Girls, they commented on social times including meal time, snack time, recess time, which are opportunities for the girls to simply visit with each other. They noted that early in their tenure at the Middle School for Girls, the teachers actively separated cliques, which made all students bond together. Participants reported that they could make friends easily at the school. One 8th grade student expressed surprise about the idea that she could attend a good school and create close friends at the same time. She expressed this idea when describing the school to potential students: “This is a good school because you get to know people [...] you wouldn't expect to know. I did not really expect to be so close to my classmates. I never expected them to be my close friends, but now they are my closest friends. It's funny because it's ironic that somebody [who] isn't anything like me can become one of my dearest friends.”

Another group of interviewees described the relationships at school as fun because they get to be

themselves. One student mentioned that her classmates are like her sisters. She said that in 5th grade she came in shy and could embarrass easily, “but now they’re like my family and now it really doesn’t matter. I feel comfortable to be me.”

The teacher relationships were identified as very important to this population. The girls expressed their appreciation by the way that they could connect and talk with their teachers openly. They thought it differentiated their school from others. The girls reported that at the Middle School for Girls they get the attention that they needed in order to reach their goals. They indicated that the teachers are willing to help. One 8th grade student stated, “And here you have the teachers [who] are willing to help you and [who] don’t just push you aside and say, ‘Oh, I don’t like you.’ They help you—whatever you are, your nationality, or color doesn’t matter.”

Participants reported that the teachers were both fun and strict when it came to schoolwork. The 8th graders perceived that the teachers care about them, they listen to them, and they hear their opinions and what they have to say. They indicated that they knew their teachers not only as teachers but also as friends. The students reported that the teachers made them feel comfortable and always had an open ear if the students needed to talk about something. The homeroom teacher relationship was identified by several students as being especially important. They stated that the homeroom teachers really knew them personally and as students. They described the check-ins with their homeroom teachers, which were explained as personal meetings with their teachers that were held on Mondays and Thursdays. The girls indicated that they have regular opportunities to meet with trusted adults.

The students referred to actions that the teachers would take that made them feel like the teachers knew them. One student reported, “[The teacher] knows when to get you. If you’re falling behind, she’ll pull you to the side and say, ‘What’s wrong, what’s happening? What are

you doing?’ And she’ll tell you, ‘You need to get back on track’ or ‘when you go to high school it’s going to be a hard road.’ She’ll give you the talk; she’s like another mother.” Another student described the teacher-student relationship as follows: “I don’t even have to explain myself because, since I’ve been in the school for so long, when I have a facial expression, you could really tell how I’m feeling just by my expression. The teachers will say, ‘Is everything O.K.?’ They can tell what was wrong. I didn’t even have to say anything.” These instances appeared to be important to the participants. A fellow student reported how much she valued that the teachers could provide useful advice. She referred to a situation where the teacher was watching her behavior with friends and suggested she not push them away during a hard time but rather let them help her. The student said, “This is like everyone at the school. We just give each other the extra push. The class helps each other a lot.” The 8th grade sample expressed 41 times that the relationships between all of the stakeholders were mutually respectful and allowed each student to become all she could be.

Sample 2

Sample 2, the graduate population including high school, college, and career women (N=13). made 37 references to this criterion and reiterated much of what the 8th graders mentioned as important about the holistic program and relationships within the culture of the school. Their perspectives expressed a view of longitude that appeared to add to the credibility of the school culture. They expressed the belief that the feeling of the school is like a family. The graduates recalled their experiences of the past and appeared to take pride in the continued relationships they have with the school. A few of the career women recall the experiences as being like a family away from their biological families at home. They recalled the teachers being

involved in their lives—not just with academics, but also involved in their personal lives. One 1995 graduate stated,

I would say about the school in general, basically it's a family. It is a place where I know that my parents always felt comfortable going to the school and, you know, just being involved. It's a family atmosphere where all the girls get to know each other and you kind of built a special bond that carries on throughout your life. To me, that's what's most important. The school has such a small environment, you are able to feel like you are in a family and to have that grow with you as you grow into a young lady. I think that's what's very special about the school.

Another career woman mentioned, "It's a lifetime relationship. Here I am at 27, 12 years later, and I am still involved in the school." This memory was reiterated by a fellow classmate: "It just doesn't matter how long you've been away from the place. It's still your family. It's like always going home and feels like you have someone to turn to, you have people who will support you in absolutely any decisions you make in life and will help you through anything." The stories the graduates told were all similar. They consistently recalled the close relationships between students, teacher and families. The career ladies indicated that the teachers would regularly visit their home and often have dinner with their families. They reported that their mothers were especially happy to have found a middle school that really cared about their children.

The graduates indicated that the size of the school created a family-like environment. They attributed the closeness of the students to the small student population. Each group in the graduate sample mentioned that attending the Middle School for Girls was like going to school with sisters. One college student described it as follows: "It was like every day I got to hang out

with my sisters. I got to learn from my sisters. If I felt sad about something, I knew I could talk to anyone and even with teachers.”

They indicated that the culture of the school was warm. Each day they were greeted with smiles and described the experience as going from one home to another. They recalled knowing what the rules were and feeling comfortable. The graduates spoke of their connection even after they graduated from the Middle School for Girls. They indicated that after graduating from the Middle School for Girls they continued to be welcomed and celebrated any time they returned to the school. They indicated that at times they would still return to the Middle School for Girls when they had a hard decision to make or needed advice. They reported that after one year, five years and for some fifteen years, they were still given the same welcome. One graduate described the feeling as follows: “You will never be forgotten. You will always be a legacy. No matter how old we are. And that’s why we love this school. I don’t think any other schools do that.” They appeared to be surprised by the idea that after graduation they are still very important to the staff. The graduates indicated that the current staff knows each student regardless of whether they ever taught the student. The samples expressed gratitude for being able to come back after graduation and still benefit from the school. They expressed that their friends are lifelong and whenever they are in the school community, they feel comfortable.

In addition to describing their comfort and strong connections, the graduates expressed how the teachers would help them to work out their problems with other girls and use the problems to strengthen their relationships. One college student said, “We spoke our minds, we told each other what we thought about this or each other and instead of us being against each other because of our differences, we became closer. We always were close, which is amazing.” They described the process used when students had issues with each other. They explained that

the process was relationship building. Girls were not yelled at or reprimanded but were made to sit together to work out a plan that would effectively solve the problem and move on.

They indicated that the teachers tried to create a nice environment for strong communication and collaborative work. The sample appeared to value these qualities and spoke of them fondly. The relationships the graduates had with the teachers were similar to those the current 8th graders described. They mentioned that the teachers would sit with them. They recalled that it was good that there were very small classes because of the opportunity for one-on-one interactions. They indicated that the teachers would let students know exactly how the classes worked and what their expectations were and what they wanted the students to actually achieve. Over and over again, the graduates repeated the following statement, “We would always talk to the teachers.” Each interviewee mentioned how they could always talk to a teacher and explain to them what was going on. They expressed appreciation knowing that they could get help with academics and other life issues that middle school students face. One graduate explained: “You need those teachers who are extra engaged with the students and who are willing to have the extra, that side relationship, not a relationship to just respect each other or as a friendship but as a role model.” Another graduate expressed wonder about whether the administration told the teachers to act this way because they all seemed to have the same mindset.

Although they described themselves as mutually respectful and close in relationships, the graduate sample also expressed how much they were able to be themselves and show their individuality. The school had a philosophy of “Be yourself and make yourself all that God wants you to be.” This mantra was taken from a well-respected Catholic saint. The graduate women appeared to value this philosophy and referred to it throughout the interviews. One high school

student added, “They encouraged us [to] be ourselves and not worry about being the same or different from someone else. I think our school lives by that quote because it’s very inspirational and that’s basically what they teach us here is to be yourself.” As the young women recalled building relationships, they described how much they value them. They recalled the experiences with ease and appeared to speak about them with joy. The college group reported that the school was fun because it was all girls:

You got to know each other quickly and by at least the end of the year you knew everyone. You knew student’s families beyond the classroom because it was so small that everybody knew each other. We still know each other’s last names even though we weren’t in each other’s class and each other’s grades. We just feel that it was like a sisterhood. Because we know each other even though we are 10 years apart, this seems almost impossible. We know many of girls from the first class and current classes. We still keep connected even though we’re not in the same grade.

When talking about each girl being herself, the interviewees recognized that everybody had their own personalities: “In our school they all got to show it. If they are quiet, you know they are quiet. We were just really close. In reality, everyone knows how everyone is.” They appeared to appreciate that there was not peer pressure to be anything other than what you were meant to be when it came to popularity and acceptance. Participants suggested that there was a clear objective set out for academic achievement but a great deal of flexibility in personality and hobbies. They indicated that they were not judged by other students but tried to make each other feel valued. They reported that the 8th graders would help 5th graders and the community appeared to act like a family. A high school graduate mentioned, “Yeah, everyone just gets along

because it's such a small school and we're like a little family. People helped each other with anything, even if they didn't know how to help right away, they'll find a way to help each other.”

The graduate sample consistently expressed that the school established a culture that fostered mutually respectful relationships and valued each individual in order to help her be her best.

The principal, Sample 3, made 5 references to this criterion. She spoke directly about the intended operations of the Middle School for Girls:

I say that this is not for everyone. I say that this is a place for girls who want to be in this kind of environment, which is single sex, where you wear uniforms, where you have challenging work. It's smaller so teachers know who you are. There is more attention paid to what you are doing and what you are not doing. And we expect you to behave a certain way as a Middle School for Girls student. That may be different from how you have been at your other school. I lay it out as, “it's okay if this doesn't work.” Not everyone will do well in this environment but if you feel that you would be better off – if you would appreciate or prefer an all girls environment, you don't mind wearing a uniform and you are ready to do more work and work harder or have things be more challenging for you, that this could be the place for you.

The principal spoke about how the girls build their relationships through sharing. She mentioned the sharing of school supplies and most regularly, the sharing of food. Ultimately, she mentioned that the sharing of their advocacy and voice for each other is what brings them together. All three samples spoke about the community and its respect for relationship building that led to each girl reaching her potential. This criterion is pervasive throughout the community, across the samples, throughout the years.

Transcending Theme 2

Developmentally Responsive criterion 8 states, “*The school develops alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of their children. It involves families as partners in their children’s education, keeping them informed, involving families as partners in their children’s learning, and assuring participation in decision-making.*” Sample 1 (N=13) made 27 comments relevant to this criterion. The 8th grade sample spoke about this criterion in three ways: they mentioned parental involvement for community gathering, the parent association, and oral and written communication between parents and teachers. There was unanimous concurrence that parents are encouraged to make contact with the school should they need information, want to check up on their daughters and if they wanted to share ideas. The 8th graders expressed that communication between school and home is regular and includes both positive and negative messages about the student.

The 8th grade sample expressed that there are several ways that parents receive communication from the school in writing. The school sends home letters that explained upcoming events, calendar items, and important announcements from the Executive Director or the Principal. They also mentioned that parents are often required to sign classroom assignments, which may include tests, quizzes, and major assignments. Sometimes, if a student does not do well on an assignment, she will have to take it home to get a parent signature. One student confessed: “And your parents have to sign it so that she knows that you’re committed to class and you’re not going to mess up.” Other written communication is shared at progress report time, which includes a parent conference, when student portfolios are shared with parents. They indicated that the portfolio included a report card and comment sheet for each subject. The comment sheet was used to indicate whether a student was doing well or poorly. It was reported that parents saw all comments and signed all documents. The students indicated that they often

would do what they were supposed to because inevitably parents would learn about everything. The 8th grade sample indicated that teachers gave grades for participation and effort and if parents weren't happy with the grades they could ask the teachers about them. At that point, the teachers provide strategies for improvement. The students indicated that parents could ask about progress at any time. They didn't need to wait for report cards.

The girls consistently expressed that their parents were comfortable at the school and communicating with the teachers. They described how their parents would ask the school for help resolving personal or family situations so that their daughters could continue to achieve at the school. The students indicated that at times the staff would contact parents because they noticed a behavior change or a sign that there might be a problem. Although the participants appeared surprised that these communications took place, they expressed relief to know that the faculty would help with family situations. Four participants made reference to other older female relatives who attended the school, which made the relationships between the family members and faculty members stronger and longer. The participants indicated that these relationships encouraged communication and mutual trust. This sample expressed that they were surprised by the trust their parents had in the school. They described their parents to be protective in general, but if there was a school event the parents were happy to let the girls participate even if it was before or after school hours. A few participants indicated that they thought the relationship between the faculty and their parents might be too close. One participant described several situations when her parent came to the school to talk to the faculty about family situations and was surprised to learn that the counselor was aware of these events. In the end, the student expressed belief that this must be a good thing. Other students mentioned that the faculty would go to their home in if a circumstance required it. The circumstance might

include younger siblings at home or something that prevented the guardian from coming to the school. The students appeared somewhat surprised but mostly appreciative that the teachers would take the time to do this.

The 8th grade sample consistently mentioned that the parents are comfortable coming to the school and do so on a regular basis. They mentioned that the parents stop in to talk to the Principal, Counselor, or a teacher. They mentioned that parents call the school to leave messages for the teacher to call them back with specific information. One student mentioned that some parents write letters and put them in the teacher's mailbox while other parents might email the teachers for updates about their daughters. In one group of interviewees, the girls mentioned that their moms have the school number on speed dial. They often check in about students' progress, but also for details about schedules and school logistics. The participants mentioned that parents are invited to come into the school at any time of day. One student mentioned that her mother is in the school all the time. She helps regularly "and that means she knows everything." They stated that the parents tell each other "everything." It was mentioned several times that if there is misbehavior, the school calls the home right away and makes plans to work with the parents to change the behavior. The same process is used for expressing that a student needs to improve in their work. The girls mentioned that the teachers also call the homes to say what a good job their daughters are doing.

There are many community events that bring the school personnel, students, and families together at the Middle School for Girls. Some of those events include pot-lucks, back-to-school night, books fairs, speakers and graduation. The 8th grade sample mentioned that most families attend the events and they enjoy being together socially.

The Middle School for Girls has a Parent Teacher Association. The participants reported that the activities include planning events for the school community, having fundraisers and raffles, and facilitating communication between school and home. The girls mentioned that the school sends home letters to remind parents about the meetings. Not every parent is involved but the school wants to inform every parent about it. This sample mentioned that the parents give ideas to the teachers about what they want; they help make food for the bake sales and organize the potluck dinners. A few students mentioned that sometimes parents still attend PTA events even after their daughters graduate. The 8th grade sample made it clear that there is a strong partnership between the school and the families.

Sample 2, the graduate sample (N=15), made 22 references to this criterion and recalled that their parents felt comfortable at the Middle School for Girls. They mentioned several times that their parents were in regular communication with teachers about the progress that their daughters were making in class and that the parents were involved in several ways including cleaning, cooking and PTA meetings.

The comfort level of the parents was compared to the comfort level of a family. One college age participant described it as follows: "I know that my parents always felt comfortable going to the school and, you know, just being involved. It's a family atmosphere where all the girls get to know each other and you kind of built a special bond that carries on throughout your life." Another graduate mentioned that the relationships with the teachers evolved to a very comfortable level: "Well, they felt comfortable. My parents invited each and every one of the teachers for dinner at least once a month." The parent's comfort with the Middle School for Girls was expressed throughout the interviews.

There was a variety of ways that the parents were literally involved at the school. A few

graduates reported that their mothers worked full time, but they prioritized the events at the school and made sure they participated. For example, one high school student reported that “every time we had a performance or something to do, our parents made sure they came and saw us. The school made it seem like it was this great and spectacular event.” Another mentioned, “My mother just really trusted them and, you know, she worked full-time so it was hard for her to really be in that much contact but she’d go for a parent teacher night and they were always having something where you could bring your family. There were always programs going on.” Several parents were reported to be at the school regularly. A college-age participant recalled how the mothers would come in and help serve during lunch:

They helped clean the schools. We had a big event one night and they organized it. Some mothers would cook for graduation. We would have a little party at the end in the school and all the mothers would cook. The mothers are more than welcome. They were part of the school. They actually loved that their girls were going to this school. They tried to get as much hands-on experience with the girls as possible.

Potluck dinners were also recalled repeatedly during the interviews. The graduate sample indicated that families would bring their favorite ethnic foods and spend time visiting with each other. They expressed that their parents valued the opportunity to get to know their daughter’s friends. Another college age participant mentioned that everyone knew each other: “Even the parents and we would have a Thanksgiving dinner all together at school and all the parents were there.” The sense that the school culture felt like family was pervasive throughout the graduate sample interviews.

Other ways that parents were involved at the school included parent meetings.

Participants reported that at the PTA meetings parents, mothers especially came together to think

about ideas, like how to raise money for the school: “All the parents would get involved. Also the school meetings, the parents felt like they could go any of the teachers and it would always be positive interaction. The moms coordinated events.” One career-level respondent recalled, “For our graduation dress, the moms got together and they spoke about colors and designs. When they had the meeting for graduation and all the details about the events, all the moms put in ideas. I think the moms were involved in choices the school made as well.”

The graduate sample also reported that parents were in regular communication with the school about student progress. They recalled report cards and the requirement for parent signatures on them in order to assure that parents knew how their daughters were performing at school. Direct communication between teachers and parents was commonplace. For example, one college age participant mentioned, “Let's say they want to work something out about your grades or something like that. They might say to the teacher, ‘Oh, what can my daughter do to improve this class?’ and the teacher would have suggestions right away.” Or as a classmate reported, “If the student is having problem outside of school, the parent would call and see if they could work it out. They would probably just call just to see how the student is doing.”

Another recalled, “I had a problem with math in 5th grade and my mom, she would not give it up. She was always going to the teacher and going to the school and saying, ‘What are ways my daughter can become a better math student?’ and eventually it worked. I became a better math student.” Parents did their best to support the education of their daughters. A career-level participant added, “My mom was very involved. There were many activities and projects. She always helped me with them. Not doing them for me but I think she just loved doing them with me and I think it made a bond between me and my mother. She definitely was always into my school work. It got annoying sometimes.”

The graduate sample consistently mentioned that their parents were glad they attended the Middle School for Girls and tried to do what they could to support their daughters' education. One student explained,

For me personally, I was born in the Dominican Republic and my mom brought me to the United States when I was six years old. She basically left me with my grandmother when I was two and she came to the United States in search for a better life. She went to high school and finished but she didn't get to go to college. Ever since I started at the Middle school for Girls, she is always telling me do the best you can do and go to college because in the United States there are so many opportunities and now that you're here, you know English. You can have all those opportunities. Take advantage of them while you have them.

The relationships between the parents and the school were described as being consistently strong. The school provided many ways for parents and families to be involved and the graduate sample recalled meaningful examples of that relationship throughout their interviews.

The Principal, the Sample 3 participant, made 5 references to this criterion and mentioned that the school tries to involve and keep in contact with parents through written communication and by making direct phone calls when appropriate:

We communicate with the families at least every quarter about grades and so forth. At different times during the year notices go home about special scheduling or events that are happening and asking the parents to come to the school. The written communication is periodic, it's not every day and it's not every week even, that we're sending home notices. It's just various times during the year when we send home more information about particular things. We definitely communicate with parents. The Parent Association

meets once a month and it's another place where I'll share information or solicit feedback from parents about things.

The principal also reported that parents take the initiative to contact teachers and come to the school as well:

For example, when they have a problem or something, they will contact the school. They will call or email to say that their child will be out or to get permission. I just got an email saying a student will be out for the next three days. Parents will also let us know about that because they know how much we are on top of them when their children are absent. We call and we get into the reasons for a child missing school. They do contact us in advance if they know.

The principal mentioned additional parent involvement through the PTA and school events:

They're involved at varying levels. Some parents are really involved because they have a lot of time and they can do PTA and they can come to every function. They come to every parent conference. I'd say 98 percent of our parents come to conferences and our potluck dinners. If we have a school play, they'll come. They all come out for the big events. We'll have a small group that will come and decorate the school at Christmas time. The parents help out at graduation time. You ask for something and they do it. They all participate at various times during the year.

All three samples concurred that the alliances and relationships between the school personnel and parents is a valued quality of the community.

Transcending Theme 3

Social Equity criterion 5 states, "*Students have on-going opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures. The school values knowledge from the diverse*

cultures represented in the school and our nation.” Sample 1, the 8th grade sample, made 18 references to this criterion throughout the interviews. They described the opportunities to learn about and appreciate various cultures and ethnicities represented at the school. Several girls mentioned that at assemblies when the entire community gathers each day, they have celebrations where everyone gets to declare their ethnicity and state how proud they are of their heritage. They described their student population as mostly Hispanic, but qualified the large categorization by mentioning that there are people from Honduras, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Peru, and elsewhere, which make them similar but different. Their tone during the interview made it clear that these differences are valued by the girls. They mentioned that the student population has African-American and Chinese students, even though there are not very many. The students described their conversations about race and ethnicity as exciting because they learn about each other and clap for each other when they are celebrating their heritage. They expressed appreciation for the pot-luck dinners where every family brings food from their culture: “It is really yummy and you learn a lot about each other.” Additionally, the participants reported that the summer camp experience provided the girls an opportunity to get to know each other and appreciate one another’s heritage.

The 8th graders mentioned that they also learn about cultures and ethnicities during class times, mostly in Social Studies and Art. They described learning about immigration, the Harlem Renaissance, the Spanish American War and about their families and neighbors in the community in Social Studies. They noted that their art assignments are often in support of the social studies content. They make sculptures, drawings, and take neighborhood walks to help understand how art represents various cultures.

The 8th graders mentioned the respect they had for each other with regards to their religions. One student stated, “Just because it’s a Catholic School, we don’t learn about just Catholics. We learn about Protestants, Jewish, Lutherans and Baptists. With every religion we study, we come to understand ourselves.” The girls expressed that they want to learn about all backgrounds and for others to learn about their backgrounds. They mentioned that the school does not exclude anyone. “They even it out,” was how one 8th grade student explained the school culture.

Sample 2 made 8 references to this criterion throughout the interviews. One graduate described the Middle School for Girls as follows: “The Middle School for Girls is a great opportunity for girls because it’s a school where you do not just learn but you learn about yourself. You learn who you are, teachers stand up for you, and you learn to stand up for yourself and become a leader.” She and her fellow participants agreed that at the Middle School for Girls, the faculty appreciated diverse ethnicities. The families wanted the girls to be proud of their cultures.

Some of the ways that they recalled the school embracing their ethnicity was through family meals when everyone would bring ethnic food, students teaching Spanish to Caucasian teachers and having cultural nights and performances that taught the community about the cultures of the girls and their families. They thought the culture of the school made them feel like they were wanted because they were different and that being a minority was a good thing. They remembered the community as a place that liked to celebrate. Any holiday that allowed them to celebrate a culture was embraced and it gave them the opportunity to learn.

Sample 3 made 2 references to this criterion throughout the interviews. The principal appeared enthusiastic when responding to questions about the culture and ethnicity of the

students. She said, “I am West Indian and I am proud. We embrace ethnicity and we embrace difference. We allow girls to express that and that’s not bad. It’s not like ‘no Spanish can be spoken in the school,’ the girls will talk to each other in class in Spanish. When they are talking to each other and explaining things, that is just fine.” She went on to explain that throughout the year, as a community, they talk about different holidays and historical moments for various populations. Rather than celebrate one heritage at a time, the community learns in an on-going way about many cultures and ethnicities. Rather than polarizing populations, this plan allows everyone to celebrate: “We have a large population of Hispanics. Therefore, we always try to include Hispanic perspectives in whatever we talk about in assembly. We allow the girls to express their nationalistic feelings.”

The principal described the importance of recognizing culture and ethnicity with parents too. For conferences, translators are available for the Spanish-speaking parents and guardians. Throughout the school day and year, Spanish music is played in the hallways. Parents decorate the building in traditional ways. Salsa and Meringa are heard year round. “The rich backgrounds of our girls, their families, and our staff make us stronger. Of course, we celebrate them,” the principal said in closing.

Transcending Theme 4

Social Equity criterion 6 states, “*Each child’s voice is heard, acknowledged, and respected.*” Sample 1 made 10 references to this criterion throughout the interviews. The 8th grade sample described many times when they thought they could express themselves. Those times included during class, homeroom, conferences, class meeting time, Girls’ Space and “pretty much anytime you thought you needed to share an idea.” They described the faculty as

encouraging them to express their ideas. They expressed their belief that the faculty feels that if they share their ideas their confidence will increase.

The sample consistently described this quality of the school to be unique because when they were in public school, they were shy and afraid to speak out. One student mentioned that she would hide herself. They expressed feeling very comfortable at the Middle School for Girls because they know everyone so well. The comfort makes them feel safe to share their ideas, thoughts, and concerns.

The girls believed some of the ideas for parts of the school come directly from the students. For example, the school store idea was initiated by a fifth-grade student. Now the store is open. “The teachers encourage us to use our voices” was stated many times. Sample 2 made 12 references to this criterion throughout the interviews. The graduates remembered being very comfortable talking at school. They mentioned several places where they could express their ideas including homeroom, assembly, classrooms and in social times. They described themselves as being very expressive and the school as a place where everybody’s personalities came out. Unlike during their earlier public school experiences, they expressed that they were no longer embarrassed to speak out. They attributed much of this cultural characteristic to the school’s motto: “be yourself.”

They mentioned that they were comfortable in the environment and with the teachers. They recalled sharing ideas and believed that the school was always open to their ideas. The graduates mentioned that the teachers and administrators would solicit their opinions regularly. One graduate in college mentioned that the faculty was always interested in what the girls had to say. Other ways that they could express themselves included through dance, arts and decisions that needed to be made, for example, selecting the matching graduation dresses. The graduates

also agreed that every camp experience gave them the opportunity to get to know their schoolmates more deeply, which gave each girl the confidence to know that she was cared about and that the community valued her.

Sample 3 made 1 reference to this criterion throughout the interview. The principal mentioned that there are many opportunities for students to share their ideas and feelings. Class meetings are held in homerooms. Students can put whatever suggestions they want to discuss in the class or school meeting in a box so that all ideas are regarded important. She expressed confidence that the students of the Middle School for Girls feel comfortable. They stop into the offices of the principal and counselors regularly to share ideas. The girls are vocal and feel comfortable talking to adults about their thoughts. She stated, “I think we have done a good job of making them feel that their opinion matters and that their voice matters. We want to hear what they have to say and what they think—kids who have ideas [and] haven’t been afraid to share them.”

Summary

The three samples told many stories that indicated evidence that the community within the Middle School for girls is a community that values high quality relationships. The participants regardless of age consistently remarked on their mutual support of each other and the loyalty they have to the school along with their perception that the school maintains the same loyalty to them.

What can we learn about the Quality of Learning from the Student Perceptions of the Practices at their Middle School?

When asking what we can learn about the quality of learning from the student perceptions of the practices, there are five of the transcending themes related to the *Schools to Watch* criteria

that express high quality learning as featured in the Middle School for Girls. The five criteria show indication of “high quality learning” as defined by the Doda and Knowles (2008) study. The interview participants from the Middle School for Girls appear to describe their school as having those qualities. The sample described teachers who believe in their students and their capacity to learn and who understand their learning styles. The students appear to have a strong desire to be actively engaged in their learning, doing what real learners do—for example, researching, writing, analyzing, presenting, and collaborating. They describe school as fun, but not in lieu of learning. The criteria that indicate “high quality learning” include:

- Academic Excellence criterion 1, which states, “All Students are expected to meet high academic standards. Teachers supply student with exemplars of high quality work that meets the performance standard. Students revise their work based on feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard.”
- Academic Excellence criterion 5, which states, “Teachers use a variety of methods to assess student performance (e.g., exhibitions, projects, performance tasks) and maintain a collection of student work. Students learn how to assess their own and others’ work against the performance standards.”
- Academic Excellence criterion 7, which states, “Students have the supports they need to meet rigorous academic standards. They have multiple opportunities to succeed and extra help as needed.”
- Social Equity criterion 1, which states, “Faculty and administrators expect high quality work from all students and are committed to helping each student produce it. Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, special adaptations, and other supports.”

- Developmentally Responsive criterion 10, which states, “the school provides age-appropriate co-curricular activities.”

Each of the criteria is presented through the perceptions of each sample. These criteria were predominant within the interviews held with the three samples in order to learn about the perceptions the samples had about their middle school. They appear to be directly related to high quality learning in the middle school.

Transcending Theme 5

Academic Excellence criterion 1 states: “*All students are expected to meet high academic standards. Teachers supply students with exemplars of high quality work that meets the performance standard. Students revise their work based on feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard.*” Each sample made specific references to these characteristics at their school. Sample 1 made 18 references to this criterion.

Students in Sample 1 described high standards as commonplace throughout the school. Rubrics are provided for most large assignments and the opportunity to make revisions is expected. All 8th grade groups reported the same process for the usage of rubrics. They consistently mentioned that the teacher distributes the rubric, the class review and discusses the rubric, the student uses the rubric to guide her work, the students reviews her own work according to the rubric, the teacher reviews the student work according to the rubric and then the student can revise as necessary. The students reported that rubrics have all of the things that are necessary to include in an assignment. The sample consistently expressed that the students are required to do well. They are expected to meet the standards. One participant stated, “Well, it’s kind of hard, but it’s like a challenge. I need a challenge. You get to learn a lot at this school and you do a lot of work. It prepares you for high school.”

Sample 2, the graduate sample, mentioned eight times that their middle school experience taught them to strive for the best and understand that they have to achieve. One college student expressed it as follows: “The school really puts a lot of focus on education, but it helps the students focus on realizing that special talent that each individual has to try to make that person see that they’re capable of doing anything they want and there's nothing that can stop them. Each girl learns to know that she is special and there's something in her that makes her strive for the best.”

The participants talked specifically about classroom procedures, in particular the use of rubrics as a way to ensure that all do well. They described the usage of rubrics similarly to the descriptions the Eighth grade sample included. The graduates especially pointed out that the rubrics made it easy to understand how to earn the maximum points on an assignment. They referred to the gradations of the rubric that showed various levels of accomplishment. They indicated that the intent was to earn the most points on each part of each assignment. One graduate mentioned, “There was a model, a guideline, for us. There was no way to fail.” They spoke about the various times when teachers used rubrics and gave the students examples and feedback. Those times included projects, essays, and tests. The graduate sample indicated that the rubrics helped them out and they appreciated that they didn’t have to guess what should be on an assignment. In conclusion, one career woman mentioned, “The Middle School for Girls teaches us to strive for the best and understand that each of the girls has to achieve the best education and move forward through her education and career.”

Sample 3 made 2 references to this criterion. The participant in Sample 3, the Principal, pointedly stated that the teachers are intentional about their expectations for the girls. She expressed that at the start of every school year the teachers lay out their expectations in terms of

behavior and academics. Teachers create a syllabus right at the start of the year. Every unit comes with a rubric. Teachers will give out the rubric saying, “this is what you need to produce for this unit of study that we’re in right now. Teachers are also required to model whatever it is they’re asking students to do. Whatever their students are required to produce, teachers have to model and teach to.”

There was total agreement amongst the samples that the work of the students is expected to be high quality and the role of the teachers is to help the students meet those standards. The commitment level appears solid by all stakeholders.

Transcending Theme 6

Academic Excellence criterion 5 reads as follows: “*Teachers use a variety of methods to assess student performance and maintain a collection of student work. Students learn how to assess their own and others’ work against the performance standards.*” Sample 1 (N=13) made 16 references to this criterion. The participants consistently suggested that the teachers allow them to use a variety of ways to show what they know. The students are expected to review their own work compared to the rubric or the directions provided. The teacher also reviews the work prior to grading and gives the students feedback for revisions. Students mentioned that they often have pre- and post-tests, which are kept in portfolios. Those documents are used to provide comments for parents and progress reports. The students themselves prepare comments, as do the teachers. Eighth graders reported that comparing their beginning work to the end gave them concrete examples of their academic growth. One student reported the process in this way:

At the end of the unit, we get the same questions, post-assessment. We take the test, and at the end, we see our progress. We're, like, “Oh, I went up five points. That means I did a lot this unit.” And then the teachers put it in our portfolio; it’s part of our report card.

When we get our report card, it's a green folder with tests and assignments we did this quarter. Our parents then say something like, "Oh, she learned something this quarter. She had a 1 out of 7 on this, and 6 out of 7 on this, so she learned. It makes it clear so everybody can see how we are doing including us, the students, the teachers, and our parents.

Several participants referred to the process of getting feedback from the teacher in order to make changes before the final grade was established. Each time, the students reported, they have to evaluate their own work first. One described the practice this way: “[The teacher] gives you the rubrics to self-grade yourself to see if you think you did well and if you think you did what was expected, she checks to see if you are right. Then she grades it for real.” Another student referred to the feedback received in study hall, which meets for one hour each day and is used to support the class work. They indicated that if they had assignments coming up, they could meet with a faculty member during study hall and clear up expectations or have them review the work mid-project. The process was reported to be helpful because it allowed the students to look over the teacher’s understanding of their work and ask questions when necessary. The grading process was described as being interactive between the student and teacher. A classmate added, “She’ll tell you then how you’re doing, and then you can make changes. Sometimes I can have my own draft and I reread my own writing before our RLA teacher reads it. I can grade myself and then she’ll grade it and then she’ll circle what I have and what I don’t have.” Another student expressed the interactive process in the following way: “We grade ourselves first. Then the teachers grade us. My grade for myself might be a 98, but when the teacher reads it, it might be like a 90 according to her understanding of the rubric or assignment sheet. Sometimes, I might think I used something properly, but I didn’t.”

Students described the protocols for honoring quality work through various levels of honor roll. They expressed that having these levels helped them to understand the importance of doing their best and how grades helped them see themselves academically. They reported that there were various levels of honor including First Honors and Principal's Honors. They recalled the honor levels as a way to indicate how well each student was doing. The 8th grade students appeared to have a clear understanding about their academic progress and were able to evaluate themselves against the standards as part of the normal daily process.

Sample 2, the graduates, made 5 references to the variety of assessments that the teachers use in the Middle School for girls. They recalled taking tests and quizzes. A college age graduate mentioned, "Oh, they gave us tests and quizzes. You had a test every week. Quizzes all the time. A lot of homework. I guess they just wanted to prepare us for that. That's what I experienced all the time." Another graduate, a career woman, remembered the teachers comparing each piece of work to her previous performance. If you were doing better before and you just happen to drop, they would compare it then and say that you could do better than that. You always had better grades or something like if you were worse before and you're better now, then they would like encourage for you to keep doing a good job. The high school age graduates mentioned tests, projects, and regular assessment of class work. All three levels of graduates mentioned that the teachers used games to prepare the students for their assessments. They provided the girls a variety of ways to learn the material in order to be sure they did well on their tests.

The principal, the Sample 3 participant, made three specific references to this criterion. She described the rigor of the educational program in the following way: "Our Middle School for Girls has a program of rigor; that means it is really strong in its contents and has high standards and measurable outcomes. We aim to have students who are well spoken and who

seem to have educated responses and who are able to think about things for themselves.” She expressed the strong connection between use of rubrics and teacher feedback as the means to establishing a student population that meets the previous description:

Through use of rubrics, we help the students develop metacognition and self-reliance.

The rubrics have levels of performance and the teacher will go over each component with the students. The teachers will point out how students earn ones, twos or threes in each part of the assignment. Of course, they will emphasize what needs to be done to get a three. All is delineated in the rubric in addition to the teacher’s modeling of what’s expected in the exemplar. Teachers are required to collect drafts of the assignment – they don’t just assign whatever the assignment is and then collect it. They have to have drafts of it so that the student is getting feedback on what they need to tweak, what they need to improve on, what they need to change.

The principal specifically mentioned that the staff of the alternative middle school tends to be young and less experienced. She explained, “Well, most of the teachers – because they’re not so experienced – do a lot of whole class instruction. And then they break class out into pairings of girls to work together and then come back to the larger group. Sometimes they will do small group work, which provides time for mini-lessons on specific topics different students need.” She reported that the differentiation is more obvious in the product than in the instruction. The student samples confirmed the principal’s intent to have teachers provide feedback to students on a regular basis. The principal reported that the teacher’s job is to teach and to do so in such a way that the teacher can have some confidence those students will be able to understand and learn. The teacher has to have a way of checking that the kids are getting it: “It’s not just stand up and teach and not have any way of receiving data back on how well that’s

going. And the student's job is to really pay attention and ask questions and do the practice and try to learn what the teacher is explaining." The three samples show concurrence about the opportunity for uses of a variety of assessment strategies and the interactive roles that both teacher and student play in the assessment process.

Transcending Theme 7

Academic Excellence criterion 7 reads as follows, "*Students have the supports they need to meet rigorous academic standards. They have multiple opportunities to succeed and extra help is provided as needed.*" Sample 1 made 23 separate comments about getting support and help. The school has a study hall, which is an opportunity to get homework finished and get help if needed. The 8th grade sample described study hall as a place to do homework and get help from a teacher, where they can go to that teacher and get help whenever they need it. The students acknowledged that if they had questions during class or were confused about a topic, they could ask questions and get help during class time. One student mentioned that she often asks if the teacher can explain the lesson to her again. She commented on the opportunity to ask for extra credit if a student struggled with a concept and needed to improve her grade. The participants mentioned that they were regularly allowed to make changes to an assignment even after the teacher has graded it the first time. They expressed that the teachers wanted them to know the material and would keep giving them chances after tutoring to demonstrate their mastery of a topic. When referring to the help the teachers provide, one participant explained: "They don't turn you away. It doesn't matter what you are working on; they don't turn you away." A classmate mentioned that the teachers were always paying attention to whether the girls were focused on their work. For example, she states, "Oh, Middle School girl, come on,

you're better than that. Those study minutes you waste on the computer, waste it on your homework.' And she (the teacher) pushes each of us to our best."

Students indicated that there were opportunities to get tutors in all subject areas. There are local colleges and universities that coordinate tutoring for the students free. The participants reported that the college students wanted to give back and were willing to teach and tutor them for the grade or class the students was doing poorly in.

Students reported about both advanced curriculum and students that were on IEP's (Individual Educational Plans) or needed a slower pace. Students referred to how they attend classes that give them the extra support that is needed. One stated, "I go to Mrs. [Teacher] for math because I have a learning disability. We learn the same thing as [the other students], but we learn much slower. Today, we have the same homework as them and the same tests as them, but we just take our time." Another reported her similar experience:

We will learn the same things as our whole class, but in a slower, more paced manner. It just depends on how much help you need or how much help you want. Some help, you don't necessarily need and you may just ask for it. I know for math, two of the girls in our class, they stepped out of the class to work with Ms. [Math Teacher]. That doesn't mean that they don't understand things we do, they just learn it in a different way than we do.

The 8th graders mentioned that even after they graduate from the middle school and attend high school, they can come back to the Middle School for Girls in order to get tutoring. The school wants the girls to succeed academically, not only during Middle School, but also beyond. One student added, "The Middle School for Girls teaches us to strive for the best and understand that you have to achieve the best education and move forward through your education and career."

Sample 2, including graduates attending high school and college as well as women in the workforce (N=15), made 5 references to this criterion. They consistently referred to the variety of ways the teachers assessed their learning and how there was always opportunity to compare present performance with past performance in order to establish growth. They reported having quizzes and tests regularly. They mentioned that pop quizzes were given often. The graduates recalled having a lot of homework. They reported that teachers would play games in class in order to assess how the students had learned the material. The graduates reported the regular implementation of pre- and post-tests. They recalled knowing exactly what they had learned by comparing the results of the two. A college age participant referred to this process: “They, the teachers, would encourage you to keep doing a good job by showing you how much stronger you have gotten academically.”

Sample 3 made 1 reference to this criterion. The principal suggested there is a lot to be expected from the students in terms of their behavior and in terms of their academics: “We have a standard for both of those things. But that most of the time the students feel the teachers are helping them to reach that standard and that even when they falter, if they have a problem with their behavior or with their academics that they know that there is some person, some staff person who they could turn to, to get help in getting better at whatever it is.” The direction that the leadership has for the school appears explicit and intended to help each girl achieve high quality work and meet or exceed the performance standard.

The three samples note that additional help is provided in order to help each student achieve. The school systems appear to provide a structure where the students can get help. It also appears that individual teachers are proactive in attending to the individual needs of the students in order to ensure academic success.

Transcending Theme 8

Developmental Responsiveness criterion 10 states, “*The school provides age-appropriate co-curricular activities.*” This criterion had a total of 26 responses made by Sample 1. The 8th graders mentioned that they have many co-curricular opportunities including tutoring, study hours, school trips, community service opportunities, athletic opportunities and other enrichment opportunities. They specifically recalled the camp experience to be a co-curricular activity that really differentiated their middle school experience from others. The enrichment experiences appear to reinforce the sense of “high quality” learning at the Middle School for Girls.

Sample 1 participants emphasized study hour, community service, enrichment opportunities and camp. They spoke with enthusiasm about each of the programs that would be considered co-curricular. The programs take place between 3:00 PM and 6:00 PM. A few programs meet on Saturdays throughout the year. When describing the study hour, eighth graders consistently expressed how important the study hour was to them. They noted that especially during the early years when they were getting used to the harder academic standards, they really needed the help during study hour. In eighth grade, the girls have a choice about whether they attend study hour two days a week. Study hour ends at 4:30, at which time the girls can participate in various enrichment programs. They noted clubs and athletics as the available programs. The girls mentioned that the clubs include yoga, track, flag football, comedy club, track, martial arts, digital photography, dancing, choral, swimming, and jogging. They expressed appreciation that some of the clubs meet off site from the school. The clubs meet for two quarters. Club participation is self-selected.

Community-service projects were identified as co-curricular activities that the girls participate in and appeared to value. The participants described their participation in the

community service projects as a way for them to feel good about themselves by helping others. They consistently described the community service projects as a way for them to help others in neighboring communities. The projects are varied and include Habit for Humanity, Children for Children, World's Prep, and sponsorship for a sister school in Darfur, Africa. The participants described the ways they participate as helping to build houses, completing math problems to raise money for cancer, reading to kindergartners and selling bracelets to raise money for Africa. The ways that the students participate in community service are diverse and offer various experiences.

The 8th graders mentioned field trips as another way they participate in co-curricular activities. They go on day trips and overnight trips. Some of the trips are in local neighborhoods and within the city. Other trips are further away. Most of the trips are related to something they are studying in class.

The participants described their summer camp experience as a co-curricular experience that is meaningful to every member of the school. The entire student population and many graduates of the school attend a summer camp for 2 ½ weeks every year. The girls are mixed by grade level in cabins and experience an outdoor itinerary for the duration. The participants consistently identified camp as what brings them together and makes them feel more like a family because they actually live with each other for two weeks. They described the experience as community-building; by the end they know each other really, really well.

Sample 2 made 22 references to this criterion. Sample 2, the graduate sample, mentioned similar activities to the eighth-grade sample. They mentioned clubs and sports, community service and field trips as the co-curricular activities they experienced while in middle school.

The clubs and sports included track, basketball, drama, art, Big Sisters, dance, French, planting club, knitting, origami and church activities. The participants reported that there were collaborations with the YMCA and local universities, which gave the girls the opportunity to see other places, meet other people, and enrich their lives. They mentioned participation in academic competitions as a way to meet students from other schools. Several respondents mentioned that the clubs and athletics allowed them to experience activities they did not think they liked or were good at. For example, a student who participated in French club went on to study French throughout high school. Another student who did not think she liked swimming joined a swim team following her middle-school experience. Finally, a student who thought she could not run ended up winning events during the track meets. Community service experience was common among the graduates. They mentioned collecting pennies, hosting food drives and raising money for women's shelters as regular projects for the school.

The graduate sample referred to many fieldtrips. They visited places throughout the city attending plays, music events, museums, athletic events and meeting people. They described the eighth-grade trip, which lasted several days, as a wonderful science-related bonding experience for the class. Camp was especially important to every participant. The 2 ½-week experience, which started as a five-week experience, was the common denominator as the favorite co-curricular event in the school. One graduate recalled,

I went to camp every summer; it was mandatory. All of us were so excited to be going off to camp because it was a fun time being away from home and from our moms or whoever was raising us. But coming back, we were all depressed, all of us. Going to camp was what I remember most about the Middle School for Girls. To do this day, ten years later, we totally enjoy remembering all these stories from camp. The tears and laughter that

come from these great memories are amazing. Camp allows you to have wonderful experiences and develop incredible friendships. It is the first thing I would tell a family that was considering the Middle School for Girls for their child.

The principal, the participant in Sample 3, made 2 references to this criterion while describing the co-curricular activities as follows:

The girls do have an after school program, pretty much four days a week. They have tutoring in after school. They could be in a couple different after school activities. There is community service that they can do and that's usually done through Student Council. There are sports, for example; they run track on the weekends and once during the week. And then every now and then there are arts programs. There was an art program that the 8th graders are in and they're going to a Saturday presentation. Co-curricular activities happen mainly through the after school program.

The samples agreed that the co-curricular components of the Middle School for Girls were an integral part of the school's structure. It appeared that the students, both current and graduate, were appreciative of the enrichment opportunities.

Transcending Theme 9

Social Equity criterion 1 states, *“Faculty and administrators expect high quality work from all students and are committed to helping each student produce it. Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, special adaptations, and other supports.”* Sample 1 made 33 references to this criterion.

The 8th grade sample described the Middle School for Girls as a place that helps girls be responsible and well educated. They concurred that attending the Middle School for Girls prepares students for high school and out-of-school activities. They described the culture as more

focused on the students than in public school. One student said, “They basically push you forward to be a better person academically and personally.” The participants mentioned that all work is to be done neatly, is to be handed in on time and if it is sloppy a do-over is required. They concurred that it is the responsibility of every student to be a good student and if they need help, they must go to the teacher. The students mentioned that at times, they do not always feel like they can do some of the things required but the teachers help them and remind them that they can do it. They can be pushed and accomplish the tasks. An 8th grader reported that the teachers come right out and say, “We expect a lot from you!” Another student said, “They expect us to be on point, not to slack off or anything. It is like a little pressure for us. It becomes an easy challenge but at the beginning of the year you have to get used to it.”

The sample described the ways that they get support from the teacher to include help during study hall, tutoring, remediation classes and advanced placement classes. The students reported that students and teachers initiate extra help for students. There are remedial and advanced placement opportunities for the girls to grow as much as possible academically. Outside agencies, including colleges, counseling centers and community groups, offer additional tutoring and supports, and help the girls to meet high academic standards. The 8th graders described that the classes emphasize pace more than content. The girls stated that the pace allows each girl to learn in her own style, at her own pace, but they all study the same concepts.

Sample 2 made 11 references to this criterion. The graduate sample consistently acknowledged their attendance at the Middle School for Girls as a major part of their success in high school, college and in career life. One career woman stated, “I feel like I could probably not have been in the same place as I am right now if I had not attended the Middle School for Girls.” They recalled that the faculty pushed them to make more of them and to do well. They described

the school as a place that helped them to build confidence and believe that they could become whatever they wanted to become. One graduate attending college expressed that the school wanted every girl to achieve highly, but they were never compared with each other—only with themselves.

The graduates mentioned that, in balance with the high expectations for each girl at the school, there was tutoring and opportunities to get the extra help that was needed in order for each girl to achieve. They reported that even though they have graduated, they still come back for tutoring or to get help about decisions they need to make. They mentioned that when they attended the school, they did not hesitate to ask for help and now that they are graduated, they still feel comfortable asking for help and sometimes can offer it to younger girls. They remembered that at the Middle School for Girls, “the students respected you if you asked for help and wanted to do your best.”

Sample 3 made 3 references to this criterion. The principal stated explicitly that the teachers and administrators expect a lot from the student in terms of behavior and in terms of academics. She made it clear that there were standards for both. That said, she mentioned that even though the expectations are high the girls feel that the teachers are helping them to reach the standards. In order to establish and maintain the culture of high expectations, the school has several levels of Honor Roll and regular progress reports that are intended for the girls to use as benchmarks for their progress and growth. The principal also mentioned that the young adolescent girls show a great deal of emotional development over the course of their tenure at the school. The teachers support the girls in this growth and they tend to outgrow a low tolerance of frustration or the need to be “queen bee.” The principal specifically mentioned that the culture of the school encourages the girls to clarify expectations or to ask for help during class time or

study hall: “Ideally, the questions are addressed during class but the study hall is purposefully provided as a 2nd tier of support. If a student doesn’t seek the help herself, then the staff intervenes. By 8th grade, most students are able to advocate for themselves, which is another measure of growth related to high expectations for the school.” The principal reported that the support that the teachers and staff provide the girls does not end when they graduate from middle school. The staff helps them apply to high schools and most receive several invitations to private schools. This is another measure of success attributed to high expectations. The graduates return to the school regularly for both social and academic support.

Summary

All of the participants that were students at the Middle School for Girls including each member of Samples 1 and 2, reported that they were positively impacted by the relationships that supported their academic progress while attending the Middle School for Girls and appeared appreciative of those relationships even post graduation. It was clear from the interviews that each student perceived it her responsibility to do well and to do what the teachers asked of them. The participants expressed belief that the teachers were always available to help regardless of the circumstance. There was a strong belief that the teachers wanted the students to do well. The relationships extended outside of the students and teachers and were extended to the families. The relational culture appeared to be something all of the participants valued. The principal appeared to understand the culture of the girls and their families and realized the responsibility to help the teachers to do the same.

Chapter Five

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze and evaluate the perceptions of a sample of current and former students as they relate to the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades *Schools to Watch* criteria. I explored in detail the student perceptions of the operations of the Middle School for Girls using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with all samples in order to fully gather the perceptions of the students, alumnae, and professional educators responsible for establishing the academic program and school culture. Ultimately, I explored the congruency between the *Schools to Watch* criteria and the qualities students name as making their school successful for young adolescents. A summary of the research is presented, related to the current literature and the research questions.

Review of research questions. The research questions of this study asked about the experiences of the students at an alternative middle school for low-income Latinas. These experiences were conveyed through interviews with current and former students. The interview questions specifically sought to learn to what degree student perceptions were congruent with the *Schools to Watch* criteria, as well as how students perceived the quality of relationships and quality of learning in their middle school.

Overall, there were nine *Schools to Watch* criteria that all samples repeatedly used to describe their school. Those criteria identify nine features present in the Middle School for Girls. These include high academic standards; providing exemplars of high quality work and feedback; usage of a variety of assessment strategies while having students assess their own work against the performance standards; providing the supports students need to meet rigorous academic standards; establishing a personalized school environment with mutually respectful relationships; creating strong alliances with the families to enhance and support the education of their students; having expectations for all students to create high quality work; creating opportunities to learn to

appreciate students' own and others' cultures; and a school environment that assures each child's voice is heard, acknowledged and respected. These nine criteria were predominant throughout the interviews. The student samples mentioned all 38 criteria within the interviews but due to the scope of this study only predominate transcending themes are discussed. Interestingly, the nine transcending themes can all be classified within the frameworks of high quality relationships and high quality learning as identified by Doda and Knowles (2008) in their exploratory study reflecting the desires of young adolescents for their middle schools.

Review of Research Question 1: To what degree are the student perceptions of their middle school experiences congruent with the schools to watch criteria?

The responses from the three samples were consistent when describing the Middle School for Girls. There appeared to be a connection between best practice research for young adolescents and the implementation of those practices within the daily operations of the school. The three samples in the study including current students, graduates and the principal were comparable in their perceptions of an academic and relational structure intended to serve young adolescents. The perceptions, opinions and beliefs that the participants expressed reflect the structure of the school appeared to be designed in order not only to meet the needs of young adolescent females in general but also to respond to the specific needs of young adolescent females who are also members of recent immigrant families and have lower socio-economic status. As Garcia-Preto (2005) reminds those serving at-risk populations, educators can best serve all students' needs when they have knowledge and understanding of culturally sensitive practices that honor the ethnicity and culture of their students. The beliefs expressed by each of the samples indicate that the Middle School for Girls appears to be responding to this call as evidenced through those practices designed uniquely for the school's population. There were

predominant themes throughout each of the interviews related to the three domains of the *Schools to Watch* criteria including Academic Excellence, Social Equity, and Developmental Responsiveness.

Academic Excellence. Academic excellence refers to high performing schools that challenge all students to use their minds well. The participants in all three samples most frequently referred to the following criteria within the domain of academic excellence:

- All students are expected to meet high academic standards. Teachers supply students with exemplars of high quality work that meets the performance standard. Students revise their work based on feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard.
- Teachers use a variety of methods to assess student performance (e.g. exhibitions, projects, performance tasks) and maintain a collection of student work. Students learn how to assess their own and others' work against the performance standards.
- Students have the supports they need to meet rigorous academic standards. They have multiple opportunities to succeed and extra help is provided as needed.

All three samples mentioned that the Middle School for Girls has high expectations for each student at the school. The participants indicated that teachers are explicit about both behavior and academic standards that are to be met. Teachers provide clear expectations verbally and using rubrics for classroom work. The use of rubrics allows for revisions of work in order to use feedback to enhance the quality of work. They mentioned a variety of structures provide the students with the necessary support to meet high expectations. Those structures include daily study halls where students can get help directly from a teacher, regular tutoring for students who want and need individual help and opportunities for remedial and advanced placement for reading and math. The samples emphasized that each girl got what she needed. For example, the

participants expressed that there was a respect for individual responsiveness. Additionally, they mentioned that the students were not faced with teasing or judgment when receiving additional help and there was consistent evidence that the students are engaged in the learning cycle. Participants reported that they are given opportunities to see evidence of their own academic growth . Some of those opportunities mentioned included pre- and post-tests for each unit of learning, use of rubrics for large assignments and routine progress reporting and portfolio building. Students described having a clear role in determining their own progress and showing evidence of their growth. This role creates a disposition of investment in the student's own personal education. There is interdependency between each teacher and student related to learning that the participants mentioned as important to their academic success and belief in their abilities.

The culture of academic excellence described at the Middle School for Girls reflects gains in student performance beyond what might be expected in light of student demographics. National statistics predict that young adolescent girls with similar demographic characteristics were more likely to drop out and have early pregnancies. Whereas, the statistics at the Middle School for Girls show a likelihood of both high school and college graduation. It appears as though the Middle School for Girls is taking deliberate steps to help students achieve those outcomes by making strategic changes in curriculum, teaching, and the school services identified as a key factor by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades (2008). The school has created a culture that supports the academic success of each student.

Developmental Responsiveness. Developmental responsiveness refers to high performing schools that are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence. The transcending themes throughout the interviews related to the following criteria:

- The school creates a personalized environment that supports each student’s intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development. The school groups adults and students in small learning communities characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships.
- The school develops alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of their children. It involves families as partners in their children’s education, keeps them informed, and assures their participation in decision-making.
- The school provides age-appropriate co-curricular activities.

This domain was given the most attention by all three samples throughout the interviews, especially the eighth grade and graduate samples. When speaking about the mutually respectful relationships between each stakeholder at the school, the students appeared to appreciate the relationships built within the school community. There was regular mention of the commitment to help each student to be well rounded and that the relationships are about the whole person, not just academic performance. Students appreciated that a cultural tenet of the school emphasizes grades and not clothes and other stereotypical distractions typically found in middle schools. They attributed the closeness of the community to the small size of the school and the regular summer camp experience. They consistently stated that their teachers really “know” them. The overarching theme was that each girl is meant to be herself and the community members respect that. The tone in each sample indicated appreciation for the relationships that the school has built with the families.

As a member of the Nativity Miguel Schools, the Middle School for Girls provides a day and year that are extended to allow low-income children to have access to the same enriching experiences that their peers from middle- and upper socio-economic backgrounds are provided.

The extended school hours and extended year provide the students with co-curricular activities that help the students to build cultural and social capital. Those co-curricular activities include study hour for homework assistance; community service events that allow students to learn that they have much to offer others; summer camp which provides an opportunity to fully develop personal relationships across the community; and enrichment activities including the arts, sports and other specialty skills. These activities counter some of the at-risk behaviors, including dropping out of high school and early pregnancy, often associated with low-income students and families. The connectedness of the community that is developed through the co-curricular experiences responds to the desire that Latino populations have for personalism, a form of individualism that values those inner qualities in people that make them unique and gives them a sense of self-worth (Garcia-Preto, 2005).

Social Equity. Social equity refers to schools that are democratic and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities and supports. They keep positive options open for all students. The predominant themes throughout the interviews related to the following criteria:

- Faculty and administrators expect high quality work from all students and are committed to helping each student produce it. Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, special adaptations and other supports.
- Students have on-going opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures. The school values knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the school and our nation.
- Each child's voice is heard, acknowledged and respected.

Throughout the interviews, all three samples emphasized the importance of social equity. The participants consistently spoke about their access to high quality learning experiences and feeling respected as contributing community members who bring unique attributes to the community. The student samples referred to their abilities to create high quality work as a result of individualized attention, the small size of the school, teacher respect for each student's own learning pace and the variety of types of help the students can get in order to be successful. The sources of help come from experts in all areas not limited to academics. The participants repeated that the pervasive tenet that all students can and will achieve sets a tone within the school that appears to constitute a sense of pride and "can-do" spirit.

There were consistent reference to the respect attributed to the various cultural backgrounds of the students and staff and that each girl's voice is important to the community. The student samples expressed beliefs that these cultural tenets are manifested through daily community assemblies, through the tone of the classroom and through the mantra of the school, "Be Thyself." Current and former students recounted the story of previous public school experiences where they would be too shy to speak and were not confident enough to raise their hands. In the Middle School for Girls, the participants felt like they had, early on, become part of a community that encouraged the use of their voices and the sharing of their ideas. The participants consistently mentioned that they were encouraged to share their ideas in large community assemblies each morning, during class and at any time they had an idea. They expressed their comfort with peers, teachers and administrators. It became obvious that from the students' perspectives, current as well as graduates, the administrators and teachers have intentionally set out to create a school culture that honors the individualism of each student while at the same time respecting and developing the collective spirit of the community. The National

Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades (2009) identifies these qualities as essential in order to meet the needs of all young adolescent learners.

Review of Research Question 2: What can we learn about the quality of relationships from the student perceptions of the practices?

The most common theme throughout the interviews was the relationships built between the stakeholders in the community. The school, including faculty and administration, were described as being committed to each individual at the school. This attribute was described by each sample as the most defining quality of the school. The relationships between the teachers and students, between students and other students, and between school and family were emphasized in each interview. Because the population at this school is predominantly Latina, it is no surprise that the community would value this attribute. Latino populations, regardless of original birth country, tend to be relational and this quality at the Middle School for Girls contrasts the national trend, which begins to counter the extant research which implies that girls of color are invisible (Henderson, 1999). Each current and former student of the Middle School for Girls interviewed for the study expressed that she felt recognized and valued by her community. This theme was evident in all three samples.

Latino populations, regardless of birth country, tend to be familial. The school community has developed regular protocols that honor this cultural tenet. Some of the ways the school stays connected with families includes reporting of academics through regular conferencing and progress reports, making home visits for introductory or continued connection based on the unique needs of the family, and having regular community events. The graduate population in particular referred to the relationships between students and between students and

teachers as invaluable. Those relationships were described as the foundation for their belief that they could achieve their goals. There was an emphasis on both the support that the students provided each other and the support that the teachers gave the girls as role models. Several times throughout the interviews, the graduates referenced that they were the first in their families to graduate high school or attend college. Therefore, by default, the responsibility for being role models had to be assumed by the faculty. The graduates attributed much of their academic success to the culture of the school that sent a clear message that each girl would achieve academically. The respondents consistently pointed out that the school was the one factor that differentiated their lives from many of their female relatives. They attributed their high school completion and college admission and graduation to the fact that they attended the Middle School for Girls. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades (2008) emphasizes the importance that each school strategically concentrate its energies on important focus areas. As a result, the changes in each school are burrowing deeply into its culture. It appears as though the Middle School for Girls has established a culture that supports a strong academic commitment through the relationships between its stakeholders.

Review of Research Question 3: What can we learn about the quality of learning from the student perceptions of the practices?

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades (2009) suggests that schools know and articulate the academic outcomes they seek; take deliberate steps to help students achieve those outcomes by making strategic changes in curriculum, teaching, and school services; and set benchmarks for implementing their strategies, and hold themselves accountable for specific results. The interviews held with the students and principal at the Middle School for Girls appear to confirm that those three strategies are in place at their school. The student samples

consistently refer to the philosophy that all students are held accountable for meeting high academic standards and expectations. The principal described the ways that teachers are expected to assure learning for each student. These include the use of strong models, rubrics and teaching practices that individualize the curriculum for each student. The students reiterated that while they were held to high standards, they were provided opportunities to learn at a pace that was individualized. The samples frequently mention the support structures established to provide additional academic help and reinforcement for students who are struggling, as well as the additional opportunities afforded to accelerated learners. The respondents described the Middle School for Girls as a place where there is a balance in structure that allows each student to be recognized as both an individual and as a contributing community member. The expectations for each student and adult were explicit. The graduates of the Middle School for Girls, predicted to fail by national statistical standards, are achieving at a competitive level as measured by both national norms and private school norms.

Limitations

This study of the perceptions of inner city Latinas attending an alternative Middle school for girls evolved from questions about an alternative school that appeared to be successful and was designed specifically for a low-income, inner city, minority population of females. The school's 16-year track record demonstrated that the school placed its students on a trajectory for academic success, including graduation from high school and college. The study was designed to solicit the perceptions of the students related to their experience at the middle school. Including the principal as a sample allowed for a triangulated data collection to confirm or contradict whether student perception was part of the school plan or something that was a bi-product of this unique community of students and teachers.

One limitation of this study is that it includes interviews from one population and one school only. Another limitation is that there appears to be no other study that specifically focuses on the input of young adolescent student perceptions; therefore, it is impossible to compare this data to the data from a similar study. A future study may include gathering perceptions of a similar school in order to compare the result of this study to another middle school population. Another limitation is that the participants in the graduate sample were all volunteers and fewer in number than the participants in the eighth grade sample. An opportunity to study the perceptions of more graduates may enliven the themes with additional information that may have been missed due to the limit of five participants at each post-graduation level.

Another limitation of the study is the categorization of Latinas. By treating all Latinas as though their culture of origin were the same, there may be inappropriate bias because the cultures are naturally diverse and do not necessarily have a great deal in common. The study was comprised primarily of Latinas. The Latinas represented many places of origin including Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico who attended the same middle school reported that relationships with various stakeholders in the school attributed to their success as a students. Although the Latino ethnicity represents people from many places the general population shares the same quality know as personalism. Therefore, by considering the importance of relationships the students attributed to their academic success, other middle school and policy makers may consider trying to better understand the culture of relationships within their school in order to better serve their students from low socio-economic backgrounds, as well as recently immigrated students.

The Latinas representing many places of origin including Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico who attended the same middle school expressed the

importance of holding each student accountable for high quality work and appreciated the built in supports provided. Therefore, regardless of culture or tradition, it appears, students that feel like the teachers believe they can achieve at a high level can influence the academic success of a student. The students expressed that every student must be made to know they can indeed meet high expectations and they can be provided the structures to do so. The relational part of their experience between students and teachers, students and students, and families and staff was identified as crucial to their success.

By using the *Schools to Watch* criteria to code the participants' comments, there are additional comments that were not considered in the analysis. It was intended to identify congruencies between the comments and best practice criteria which explain the limits of the analysis to the *Schools to Watch* criteria.

Finally, the research design did not include triangulation. The study focused on matching the participants' responses to the *Schools to Watch* criteria. There was not an opportunity to triangulate the data.

Implications

Gathering and studying student perceptions about their middle school experience can be beneficial to middle level educators and policy makers. Recognizing the perceptions of students who are from low socio-economic backgrounds or who are recent immigrants can inform best practices within the field and increase academic achievement. O'Brien (2007) and Hammersly (1995) state "To be of value, research findings must not only be valid but also relevant to issues of actual or potential public concern" (p. 206). Long-term trend data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that over the past three decades, academic achievement has risen in the United States. At the same time, the United States continues to be a

place where people from across the world converge to embrace the “American Dream.” Schools are challenged to overcome fundamental problems that are associated with students coming from homes debilitated by poverty and economic or educational inequity. By listening to the students who have achieved academic success while living with these challenges, educators can learn about strategies to begin to overcome these barriers. As middle schools intend to meet the needs of unique populations, this study becomes worthwhile to teachers, administrators, policy makers and families of recent immigrant, low-income students. A population of learners who have defied the prediction to fail is evolving. It makes sense to learn from their experiences and use those experiences to explore practice.

Previous literature has focused mostly on young adolescent development and best practice teaching and learning processes. Policymakers have emphasized the importance of the middle school years and note that progress is being made in middle level education. George (2009) argues that “Middle schools are better than they ever have been” (p. 51). Rothstein (2004) points out that the problems may be less with the schools and more with the economic, social, personal, and spiritual supports that are vital to positive child development and schools success. This study offers practitioners and policy makers the opportunity to see how student perceptions of their middle school experiences at one middle school describe the characteristics of their school that helped them find educational successes even though they were members of family of low income, girls of color and recent immigrants.

Within this study, students both current and graduated reported commitment to the values embodied in the *Schools to Watch* criteria. When using the *Schools to Watch* criteria to analyze students’ responses, it was clear that they internalized the messages embodied in each of the *Schools to Watch* domains. By focusing on providing both *high quality learning* and *high*

quality relationships, it appears that schools can better serve the students of low-income families and those who have recently immigrated to the United States. The students in the Doda and Knowles (2007) study suggested that these two criteria are important to middle school students. The populations in this study consistently described experiences that can be classified as high quality learning and high quality relationships. At the Middle school for Girls, the students reported that their faculty and administration had respect for their cultural background. The participants expressed their belief that faculties need to have enough cultural competence to understand the cultures of the students and families they serve. These skill sets can be developed over and above the basic learning about young adolescent development and teaching and learning best practices. Participants suggested that policy makers in schools and school districts provide the resources and opportunities for their faculties to develop these skill sets. Within this study, it appears from the perceptions of the students that creating mutually respectful relationships were memorable for these high achieving students.

Suggestions for Further Research

As with any qualitative study, the study of more participants in different institutions could determine whether these themes are supported with greater numbers and across other types of middle schools.

Gathering further perceptions directly from the students that attend other middle schools would add further perspective. Particularly studying schools with populations of various ethnic backgrounds may add further perspective to the extant research. It appears as though different ethnic groups may respond to different cultures represented in those schools. Gathering

perspectives students attending middle schools that serve male populations and middle schools that are co-ed may add further perspective.

A study that gathers the perspectives of parents and teachers of underserved populations may add a unique perspective about those qualities that they believe to be necessary for their children to meet academic success.

Additionally, another qualitative study would be to use a constructivist approach to analyze the student perceptions of their middle school experience. In addition, triangulating the data with an analysis of school artifacts including communications with families, observations of parent-teacher conferences and observations of student-teacher interactions could be informative.

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Appendix A

Schools to Watch Criteria

Academic Excellence:

1. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess student performance (e.g., exhibitions, projects, performance tasks) and maintain a collection of student work. Students learn how to assess their own and others' work against performance standards.
2. The adults in the school have opportunities to plan, select, and engage in professional development aligned with nationally recognized standards. They have regular opportunities to work with the colleagues to deepen their knowledge and improve their practice. They collaborate in making decisions about rigorous curriculum and effective instructional methods. They discuss student work as a means of enhancing their own practice.
3. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the concepts and skills being taught.
4. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts, development of essential skills, and the ability to apply what one has learned to real world problems. By making connections across the disciplines, the curriculum helps reinforce important concepts.
5. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned with high standards. They provide a coherent vision for what students should know and be able to do. The curriculum is rigorous and non-repetitive: it moves forward substantially as students progress through the middle grades.
6. All students are expected to meet high academic standards. Teachers supply students with exemplars of high quality work that meet the performance standard. Students revise their work based on feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard.
7. The school provides students time to meet rigorous academic standards. Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry based learning. Most class time is developed to learning and applying knowledge or skills rather than classroom management and discipline.
8. Students have the supports they need to meet rigorous academic standards. They have multiple opportunities to succeed and get extra help as needed.

Developmental Responsiveness

1. Teachers make connections across disciplines to help reinforce important concepts and address real world problems.
2. Teachers use a wide variety of instructional strategies to foster curiosity, exploration, creativity, and the development of social skills. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the concepts and skills being taught.
3. The school provides multiple opportunities for students to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future.
4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal interests of young adolescents.
5. The school provides students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, uses the community as a classroom, and engages the community in providing resources.
6. The school provides age-appropriate co-curricular activities.
7. The school creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social and physical development. The school groups adults and students in small learning communities characterized by stable, close and mutually respectful relationships.
8. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.
9. Students have the opportunities for voice-posing questions, reflecting on experiences, developing rubrics, and participating in decisions.
10. The school develops alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of their children. It involves families as partners in their children's education, keeping them informed, involving them in their children's learning, and assuring participation in decision making.

Social Equity

1. Faculty and administrators expect high-quality work from all students and are committed to helping each student produce it. Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, special adaptations, and other supports.
2. The faculty is culturally and linguistically diverse.

3. Students may use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards.
4. The school continually adapts curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet its students' diverse and changing needs.
5. All students have equal access to valued knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the school and our nation.
6. Each child's voice is heard, acknowledged, and respected. The school welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families.
7. The school's reward system demonstrates that it values diversity, civility, service and democratic citizenship.
8. The school's suspension rate is low and is in proportion to the student population.

Appendix B

Content Validity Rating Sheet

Possible rating scale

5 = outstanding fit

4 = ok fit

3 – not so great fit

2 = belongs in a different category (name)

1 = probably shouldn't ask this question or should reword it (include suggestions)

STW criteria	Interview question	Fit to category?
<p>A.</p> <p>Getting Acquainted/Student perspectives about the school</p>	<p>1. What is the purpose of the Middle School for Girls?</p> <p>2. Describe a typical day at the Middle School for girls.</p> <p>3. Tell me about being a student at the Middle School for girls.</p> <p>4. If your were to recommend the Middle School for girls to a prospective 4th grader, what would you say?</p> <p>5. If you were in charge of the school, what would you change to promote powerful learning?</p> <p>6. Are the girls in your school successful? How do you know? Describe it.</p>	
		1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	

Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	
B. AE1,3,5,6,7,8 SE 1,4 DR 1, 2, 3, 4	1. What do you think academic excellence is? 2. How do the teachers know what you know and what you have learned? Give me an example or two. 3. How do teachers let you know what their expectations are/were? 4. How do you think the teachers decide what you should learn and what you should do in class?	1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	
Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	
C. AE 1,3,5,6,7,8	Describe your classes. How are they organized? What happens throughout the class periods?	1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	
Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	

D. SE 6	What do you do if you have a problem?	1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	
Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	
E. SE 6 DR 9	How do you share your ideas?	1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	
Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	
F. SE 6 DR7	How do the people at the Middle School for Girls get along?	1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	

Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	
G. AE 2	How do teachers work with other teachers?	1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	
Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	
H. SE 8 DR8	Do the girls get in trouble? Why? What happens?	1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	
Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	
I. SE6	How do people in the Middle School for Girls get along?	1 2 3 4 5

DR 7		
	Reworded questions, additional questions	
Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	
J. SE 4,5	How do student work with teachers? How do students work with each other?	1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	
Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	
K. DR 10 SE 6	Is your parent/guardian involved at school? If so, how and when?	1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	
Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	

L. DR 5,6	In addition to classwork, what other types of experiences do you have at the Middle School for Girls? Community service, enrichment, other activities	1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	
Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	
M. SE 3	How do you know how you are doing in your classes? How do the teachers know?	1 2 3 4 5
	Reworded questions, additional questions	
Additional	Is there something else you'd like me to know?	

Appendix C

Interview Questions

SE= Socially Equitable

DR=Developmentally Responsive

AE=Academically Excellent

I. Getting Acquainted/Student perspectives about the school

Questions:

- 1. What do you think the purpose is of the Middle School for Girls?**
- 2. Describe a typical day at the Middle School for girls.**
- 3. Tell me about being a student at the Middle School for girls.**
- 4. If you were to recommend the Middle School for girls to a 4th grader who is interested in coming to this school, what would you say?**
- 5. What could this school change to help girls learn better?**
- 6. Are the girls in your school successful? How do you know? Describe it.**

II. AE

1. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess student performance (e.g., exhibitions, projects, performance tasks) and maintain a collection of student work. Students learn how to assess their own and others' work against performance standards.
3. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the concepts and skills being taught.
5. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned with high standards. They provide a coherent vision for what students should know and be able to do. The curriculum is rigorous and non-repetitive: it moves forward substantially as students progress through the middle grades.

6. All students are expected to meet high academic standards. Teachers supply students with exemplars of high quality work that meet the performance standard. Students revise their work based on feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard.

7. The school provides students time to meet rigorous academic standards. Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry based learning. Most class time is developed to learning and applying knowledge or skills rather than classroom management and discipline.

8. Students have the supports they need to meet rigorous academic standards. They have multiple opportunities to succeed and get extra help as needed.

SE

1. Faculty and administrators expect high-quality work from all students and are committed to helping each student produce it. Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, special adaptations, and other supports.

4. The school continually adapts curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet its students' diverse and changing needs.

DR

1. Teachers make connections across disciplines to help reinforce important concepts and address real world problems.

2. Teachers use a wide variety of instructional strategies to foster curiosity, exploration, creativity, and the development of social skills. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the concepts and skills being taught.

3. The school provides multiple opportunities for students to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future.

4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal interests of young adolescents.

Questions:

- 1. When you hear the words “Academic Excellence” what do you think of?**
- 2. How do your teachers know what you have learned? How do they know what to teach you? Do the teachers teach you and your classmates the same thing? Give me an example where they taught you and your classmates the same thing. Can you think of a time a teacher taught you something different from your classmates?**
- 3. How do teachers let you know what their expectations are/were? in classwork, performance, know and learn, skills and concepts**
- 4. What are the teachers measuring your performance against?**
- 5. Do you know what to do in a class to earn the highest grade?**
- 6. I saw a rubric on the bulletin board, tell me about rubrics.**
- 7. How do you think the teachers decide what you should learn and what you should do in class?**
- 8. Describe the ways the teachers teach. What type of activities do you do in class?**
- 9. What do you do if you don’t understand something in class? What do you do if you need help?**
- 10. How meaningful are the various lessons you have in class to life outside of school? Can you give me an example of a lesson you learned in class that is connected to your life outside of class? Give an example**
- 11. Do the same topics come up in more than one class or subject at the same time?**

III.AE

3. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the concepts and skills being taught.
5. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned with high standards. They provide a coherent vision for what students should know and be able to do. The curriculum is rigorous and non-repetitive: it moves forward substantially as students progress through the middle grades.
7. The school provides students time to meet rigorous academic standards. Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry based learning. Most class time is developed to learning and applying knowledge or skills rather than classroom management and discipline.

Questions

- 1. Describe your classes. How are your classes organized? What happens during the class periods?**
- 2. Do you have grades? What do they mean? How do you earn them?**
- 3. What is the responsibility of the teachers in class? What is the responsibility of the students in class?**

IV. SE

6. Each child's voice is heard, acknowledged, and respected. The school welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families.

Question

What do you do if you have a problem? Does the school communicate with your family? When? Why?

Who really listens to you?

Do your parents ever feel they can't talk to the teachers?

When do your parents contact the school?

V. SE

6. Each child's voice is heard, acknowledged, and respected. The school welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families.

Question

How do you share your ideas with adults at the school? About the future? about the past? Anything?

Do adults listen to you ? Is their advice useful? Why?

How often do you talk at your school? – in class? In other group meetings with students and teachers or other adults? When do you talk? Why do you talk?

VI. AE

2. The adults in the school have opportunities to plan, select, and engage in professional development aligned with nationally recognized standards. They have regular opportunities to work with the colleagues to deepen their knowledge and improve their practice. They collaborate in making decisions about rigorous curriculum and effective instructional methods. They discuss student work as a means of enhancing their own practice.

Question

Can you give an example of how teachers at your school work with other teachers?

What do teachers do at teacher meetings?

VII. SE

8. The school's suspension rate is low and is in proportion to the student population.

DR

8. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

Question

Do the girls get in trouble? Why? What happens? Levels of consequence?

Do you agree with the discipline policy? Why?

VIII. SE

6. Each child's voice is heard, acknowledged, and respected. The school welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families.

DR

7. The school creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social and physical development. The school groups adults and students in small learning communities characterized by stable, close and mutually respectful relationships.

Question

How do you express yourself at your school? Describe your comfort level at school. How do you develop relationships with people at your school?

Do you feel comfortable at this school? Why or why not? How do you make friends, get close to teachers and other adults at your school?

Do you feel safe at school?

Think of a teacher that you are learning a lot from and respect, think of a teacher whose class you are struggling in (academically or socially). Compare the 2 teachers in your mind and then answer the question. Why and what is different in the two classrooms?

IX. SE

5. All students have equal access to valued knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the school and our nation.

Question

How do you know your school values your cultural background? The background of others?

X. DR

10. The school develops alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of their children. It involves families as partners in their children's education, keeping them informed, involving them in their children's learning, and assuring participation in decision making.

Question

Is your parent/guardian involved at school? If so, how and when?

Does your parent/guardian have an active role in your education and school, if so how?

XI. DR.

5. The school provides students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, uses the community as a classroom, and engages the community in providing resources.

6. The school provides age-appropriate co-curricular activities.

Question

In addition to class work, what other types of experiences do you have at the Middle School for Girls? Community service, enrichment, other activities

Are they importance? Why?

What do you participate in and why?

XII. SE

3. Students may use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards.

AE

1. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess student performance (e.g., exhibitions, projects, performance tasks) and maintain a collection of student work. Students learn how to assess their own and others' work against performance standards.

6. All students are expected to meet high academic standards. Teachers supply students with exemplars of high quality work that meet the performance standard. Students revise their work based on feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard.

8. Students have the supports they need to meet rigorous academic standards. They have multiple opportunities to succeed and get extra help as needed.

Question

Do you ever feel that you're working hard and nobody is noticing?

Appendix D
Assent Forms
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS
Minor Assent Document

Project Title: The Middle School Experience, A Latina Perspective

Investigator: Laurie Bottiger

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Reva Friedman-Nimz

I am interested in learning more about ways your school works. I would like to ask some questions about your experiences and feelings at a successful school in the Nativity Miguel Network. If you don't feel like answering these questions, you don't have to, and you can stop speaking with me anytime and that will be all right. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have now or when we are talking together. Do you want to take part in this project?

Procedures:

You will:

- a) Meet with me two times along with two other classmates.
- b) During our time together, I will ask questions about your school and experiences and you will have the opportunity to answer them in any way you wish.

You will not be paid for taking part in this study and there are no risks involved. To maintain confidentiality, your name will not be used anywhere.

Remember, taking part in this study is completely up to both you and your parents. If you

choose to not take part in this study, we will honor that choice. If you agree to take part in it and then you change your mind later, that's okay too. It's always your choice!

PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM

The Middle School Experience: A Latina Perspective

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

Your child is being invited to participate in a research study to learn more about ways your child's middle school works. If you and your child decide that she agrees to participate in the study, your child will be asked to answer questions about her middle school and her experiences.

PROCEDURES

All Eighth graders and 15 graduates of a successful middle school in the Nativity Miguel Network will be asked to:

- Answer several interview questions during two 45 minutes periods.
- Reply to interview questions which will last about 45 minutes.
- Respond to questions which will vary in difficulty. Some questions will be more than difficult than others but there are no right or wrong answers.

- Give their opinions about the way things work at her middle school
- Skip any question that he/she does not want to answer.
- Audiotapes of the interviews will be used by the researcher only and stored in a locked file cabinet.

RISKS

There are no risks associated with this study. Remember your child does not have to answer any question that he/she does not want to and he/she may choose to stop participation in the project at any time. Your child does not have to be in this study, participation is voluntary.

BENEFITS

Choosing not to participate in this study will not affect your student's grades or how she is treated in the classroom. Benefits from this study will help to identify those things that make the school a successful middle school for at-risk Latinas.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS

Participation in this project will be voluntary. Students will not be paid for their involvement in this research.

PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

Your child's name will not be associated in any way with the information collected with the research findings from this study. The researcher will use a study number or a code instead of your child's name. The researchers will not share information about your child 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 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 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 information collected about your child, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: Laurie Bottiger, 112 High Street, Andover, MA 01810 or Laurie.Bottiger@EsperanzaAcademy.org. If you cancel permission to use your child's information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about your child. 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 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 or write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7563, email dhann@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

Researcher Contact Information

Laurie Bottiger

Principal Investigator

Department of Curriculum & Teaching

Dr. Reva Friedman-Nimz

Faculty Advisor

Department of Curriculum & Teaching

School of Education

Joseph R. Pearson Hall

1122 West Campus Rd.

Lawrence, KS 66045-3101

Laurie.Bottiger@EsperanzaAcademy.org

Esperanza Academy

198 Garden Street

Lawrence, MA 01810

School of Education

Joseph R. Pearson Hall

1122 West Campus Rd, Room 349.

Lawrence, KS 66045-3101

785.864.5207

revacf@ku.edu

Appendix E
Human Subjects Approval



3/24/2009
IISCL #17945

Laurie Bottiger
112 High St.
Andover, MA 01810

The Human Subjects Committee Lawrence reviewed your research update application for project
17945 Bottiger/Friedman-Nimz (C & T) A Middle School Experience: A Latina Perspective

and approved this project under the expedited procedure provided in 45 CFR 46.110 (f) (7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

The Office for Human Research Protections requires that your consent form must include the note of HSCL approval and expiration date, which has been entered on the consent form sent back to you with this approval.

1. At designated intervals until the project is completed, a Project Status Report must be returned to the HSCL office.
2. Any significant change in the experimental procedure as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
3. Notify HSCL about any new investigators not named in original application. Note that new investigators must take the online tutorial at http://www.rcr.ku.edu/hsc/hsp_tutorial/000.shtml.
4. Any injury to a subject because of the research procedure must be reported to the Committee immediately.
5. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity. If you use a signed consent form, provide a copy of the consent form to subjects at the time of consent.
6. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.

Please inform HSCL when this project is terminated. You must also provide HSCL with an annual status report to maintain HSCL approval. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date. If your project receives funding which requests an annual update approval, you must request this from HSCL one month prior to the annual update. Thanks for your cooperation. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'David Hearn'.

