SCHOOL FACILITIES AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE URBAN LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND STUDENT MOTIVATION AND PERFORMANCE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the

Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the ways in which middle school and high school students in an urban school district responded to being educated in facilities in some state of disrepair. The purpose of this research study was to arrive at a level of understanding with respect to urban students’ attitudes, perceptions and beliefs regarding the physical environment(s) in which they had been educated. The core questions which guided this research were: 1.) To what extent do students perceive their academic achievement, motivation and/or personal conduct is positively or negatively affected by the condition of the facility in which they are educated? 2.) In what ways does the condition of an educational facility affect students’ perceptions of the overall quality of the teaching and administrative staffing within their building? 3.) In what ways does the condition of an educational facility affect students’ perceptions of the degree to which their school district values their education and personal safety?

Data collection consisted of surveys, interviews and observations which were conducted during the school district’s 2006 traditional Summer School session. Data were collected from fourteen middle school and twenty-five high school students over a period of six weeks. Each student research participant was enrolled in Summer School courses and completed one fourteen item survey and one interview with the researcher. The researcher also conducted participant observations within the various Summer
School settings. Data analysis involved coding responses from surveys and interviews into categories along emergent themes, which was followed by an item analysis concerning the frequency with which each code surfaced in the context of the study.

Analysis revealed that students involved in the study perceived there to be a significant connection between the condition of the school they attended and their own levels of motivation, conduct and achievement. The study also showed this group of urban students regarded the quality of teaching and administrative staffing in their educational environments as being largely contingent upon the condition of the school itself. Students who participated in this study also held the point of view that teachers and principals of higher quality were generally employed elsewhere and were more effective in well-maintained schools. The study also revealed a distinct connection between students’ perceptions of the facilities in which they are educated and the degree to which the school district values their education and safety. The implications of this study are thus useful in that recent accountability standards and legislative mandates have fostered an increased awareness regarding the quality of education which is provided to students across the nation—especially students who are disadvantaged and/or attend schools housed in urban districts.
This work is dedicated to those who not only believed this project would materialize, but who also wanted this to happen for me.

You know who you are and I am eternally grateful you are a part of my life—you inspire me to become something greater than I am.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Excellence in education ultimately must be judged by what happens to the least advantaged students.”
--Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

In the absence of good schools, the future of America begins to look dismal. Recent efforts to reform education have been largely focused upon issues such as improving curriculum and ensuring highly qualified teachers are occupying our nation’s classrooms. While these issues are important, the current condition of many of our nation’s schools is alarming. As many schools have been allowed to “deteriorate to the point of having classrooms with falling ceiling plaster, chained fire doors, and non-functioning bathrooms, students question whether society really places a value on them or on education” (Edwards, 1991, p. 4).

As such, the renovation of our nation’s educational infrastructure is one area where the problem is severe and the solution seems obvious and direct (Edwards, 1991, p.2). If a goal of educational leadership is to affect student achievement in a positive manner, we must determine the extent to which urban students believe they are adversely affected by their physical learning environments. The call for increased student and teacher accountability amidst unsafe, deteriorating facilities—which can negatively impact student motivation and/or conduct—is an irony that must be firmly situated in research.
Context of the Problem

In 1988, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching published a report citing priorities imperative for improving the nation’s urban schools. School reform had been at the top of the nation’s agenda since the 1984 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, yet in spite of national discussions on educational reform, the Carnegie Foundation perceived a significant gap between rhetoric and results. To support this notion, the Foundation argued that in “almost every big city, dropout rates are high, morale is low, facilities often are old and unattractive, and school leadership is crippled by a web of regulations” (p. xi). The Foundation (1988) concluded that although the reform movement was launched to improve the quality of education for all students, urban students had failed to benefit from such efforts.

The report issued by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching offered a myriad of suggestions geared toward improving the education of urban students. The Foundation (1988) argued that implementation of these suggestions would simultaneously “bring hope to children, renewal to our cities, and vitality to the nation” (p. xv). One such suggestion was for a comprehensive program of renewal at every urban school. The program of renewal called for urban students to be educated in school facilities not in a state of disrepair and complete with appropriate equipment and libraries. The Foundation (1988) maintained their position that urban children must learn in an environment that is safe and conducive to maximizing individual motivation and academic potential.
The implications of the Carnegie Foundation’s report are as relevant today as they were in the late eighties. As the nation has recently been concerned with leaving no child behind, the Foundation’s report successfully built upon the tenets of the *Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963*—which established emergency funding for the immediate revitalization of our nation’s colleges and universities—and the recommendations embedded in a host of related studies. Not lost on the Foundation was the fact that successive generations of urban students would need the economic and civic preparation afforded to them via public education.

In 1992 Shirley Hansen argued our nation’s education infrastructure was “crumbling” due to the condition of our nation’s public school facilities. Hansen (1992) estimated nearly five million children were subjected to substandard facilities on a daily basis. A 1992 study conducted by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) found that “74 percent of U.S. school facilities should be ‘replaced or repaired immediately’ and another 12 percent are ‘inadequate places of learning’” (Hansen, 1992). The United States General Accounting Office (GAO) conducted a survey in 1996 that revealed “about 60 percent of the nation’s 80,000 elementary and secondary schools are at some level of disrepair” (Montecel, 1996). As a result, the General Accounting Office (1996) estimated $122 billion would be needed to repair or upgrade these educational facilities to good overall condition.

Foreshadowing this ominous state of American education, perhaps the National Commission on Excellence in Education most accurately summarized the issue in their 1984 report to the Secretary of Education and the nation. The Commission concluded that “if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre
educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, p. 5). Thus, as citizens of this country, we are all stakeholders in the education of our urban youth. In effect, if the education of urban schoolchildren fails, the entire movement fails.

Statement of the Problem

An overwhelming number of poor and minority students in America are being educated in deteriorating school facilities not conducive to increasing student motivation and/or academic achievement. In the absence of appropriate and safe educational facilities in which urban students can access the tools to confidently pursue their education, it is unreasonable to expect tremendous gains in areas of student conduct, motivation and/or achievement. As inadequate physical learning environments may adversely affect students in a variety of ways, burdening poor and minority students and their parents with deteriorating, unsafe, and unsightly schools significantly undermines the recent federal promise to leave no child behind.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how poor and minority students in a large, urban school district respond to being educated in facilities in some state of disrepair. A review of related research revealed no published studies regarding the motivation levels and/or personal conduct of urban students who attend schools in various states of disrepair. Toward this end, the completed study should establish a
connection between the responses of urban students educated in deteriorating facilities and the implications such responses have upon increasing student achievement via increased motivation and improved personal conduct.

Definition of Terms

In an effort to help the reader understand terminology used throughout the study, definitions of referential concepts are proposed below:

1. An *educational infrastructure* is defined as the underlying foundation or basic framework of an educational system or organization.

2. An *urban school*, according to Hines (1996), is defined as “a school in a more populated area” (p. 12). The schools selected for this study are located in Columbus, Ohio. Columbus is a large metropolitan city with a population of at least 700,000, making it the largest city in Ohio and the 15th largest city in the nation (*Columbus Census, 2000*, p. 1).

3. According to the American Association of School Administrators (2004), *deteriorating schools* are defined as, but not limited by, the following statement:

   “Structures [that] are unsafe and fail to meet safety codes; roofs leak; mold and poor indoor air quality are common; wiring is old and inadequate and cannot support contemporary electronic equipment; and lead, asbestos and radon levels still lurk under the surface” (p. 7).

In addition, the deteriorating condition of schools can be attributed to their age and to inadequate maintenance. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) also states that deteriorating schools usually have at least
one unsatisfactory environmental condition which may include, but is not limited to, any of the following: lighting, heating, ventilation, acoustics or noise control, indoor air quality and building security (AASA, 2004, p.18).

4. **Student motivation** is defined as the capacity to use intrinsic factors to improve personal conduct and/or academic achievement.

5. **Student conduct** is defined as attributes of personal behavior which may positively or negatively impact academic achievement.

6. **Student achievement** is defined as a level of academic performance arrived at by the collective efforts of students, parents, teachers and administrators. Student achievement is measured—individually or collectively—via the use of classroom grading systems and/or standardized test scores.

7. **Student performance** refers to the level of achievement attained via the combination of inputs from student motivation and conduct.

**Significance of the Study**

Signed into law on January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind legislation was drafted to improve the quality of education offered by public schools in the United States of America. In his executive summary, Bush outlined and detailed numerous provisions geared toward achieving excellence in education through increased standards and accountability. President Bush’s (2001) reform goals included, but were not limited to, the following: reduce bureaucracy and increase flexibility, increase accountability for student and teacher performance, empower parents through issuing school reports, improve teacher quality, assist charter schools, and issue
consequences for schools that fail to educate disadvantaged students. The goals intended to facilitate President Bush’s framework for educational reform yielded no provisions for improving the substandard educational facilities which poor and minority schoolchildren must attend on a daily basis.

In drafting President Bush’s No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001, the federal government accepted proposals from and for a variety of programs eager to facilitate educational change. The Federal Impact Aid Program administered by the Department of Education was one such program policymakers wanted to alter through increased funding. Created by Congress in 1950, the Federal Impact Aid Program was designed to compensate local school districts for lost tax revenue or increased burdens resulting from military service men and women sending their children to local schools. The Impact Aid program was then expanded to assist the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and help offset hardships endured by rapidly growing school enrollment figures. In 2001, the United States federal government recognized “more children are attending BIA schools, [and] they are doing so in physical environments that are among the worst in the nation” (www.whitehouse.gov/news/reports/no-child-left-behind.html). This statement was followed by the government’s declaration that it had a “special obligation to certain schools that educate the children of families who serve in the United States military and those that educate Native American children” (www.whitehouse.gov/news/reports/no-child-left-behind.html). Although recent research (Buddin, Gill, & Zimmer, 2001) indicates Impact Aid funding for schools located on or near military facilities, as well as BIA schools, amounted to almost one billion dollars in fiscal year 2000, the federal
government (2001) has indicated the “federal obligation to these schools has often not been met, most notably in the area of school construction. These shortfalls can be addressed by increasing funds for construction.”

Paradoxically, recent federal legislation has maintained and enforced rigorous accountability standards without providing a financial means through which urban schoolchildren can access public education in appropriate facilities. For example, provisions in No Child Left Behind allow parents to use Title I funds to enroll their child in a public or private school in the event the child attends a school that fails to make adequate yearly progress. Parents are also given the option to keep their child at the underperforming school and use federal Title I monies to obtain appropriate supplemental educational services. The law also requires states to forfeit a portion of their administrative funds in the event they consistently fail to show adequate yearly progress for various student subgroups. Under the law, schools and school districts which fail to show adequate yearly progress for disadvantaged students must first receive assistance and then come under corrective action for a lack of productivity. As such, federal legislation easily guarantees sanctions and options in the absence of academic achievement, but seems to offer relatively little in cases of unsafe and/or deteriorating public schools which are used to educate the same students the legislation was ultimately designed to protect.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1988) expressed concern regarding the quality of learning environments and the message that was being sent to urban students. The Carnegie Foundation held that “the tacit message of the physical indignities in many urban schools is not lost on students. It bespeaks neglect,
and students’ conduct seems simply an extension of the physical environment that surrounds them” (p. 36). Similarly, a survey conducted by the Washington D.C. Committee on Public Education (1991) cited neglected facility concerns such as leaking roofs, ceilings and walls with significant water damage, crumbling plaster, and inefficient electrical and heating systems as problematic. The committee concluded that the message the buildings sent to students was “what is going on inside is not important, the school system is uncaring, and neglect is tolerated. A building in poor repair contributes to the attitude and discipline problems among students, which in turn contributes to poor performance in schools” (p. 5). Similar studies have extended the research on the relationship between good facilities and student performance. There is, however, limited research regarding the effects deteriorating facilities have upon the motivation levels and/or personal conduct of urban students attending schools in significant states of disrepair.

National attention on issues of school reform has made it increasingly evident that accountability will remain at the forefront of our nation’s educational agenda. States have been required to place heavy emphasis on pupil performance and the competency of classroom teachers. As a result, effective schools are absolutely critical for students and school districts striving for academic excellence. Because school districts must reduce barriers to academic achievement and cultivate climates conducive to increasing student performance, it reasonably follows that the findings of this study will prove viable and relevant for all educational stakeholders.
Limitations of Study

In terms of the limitations of this study, attention must be paid to the size of the student sample used in this research. Participants in this study were selected at random and were enrolled in the 2006 Summer School program within the large urban district each student normally attended traditional school. Ideally, the sample would have consisted of at least fifty students from the combined middle school and high school Summer School programs. The final sample actually consisted of thirty-nine students from the combined middle school and high school Summer School programs. Although the sample size was smaller than originally intended, there is no indication that it will impact attempts to generalize emergent ideas, theories and/or final results.

Another limitation of this study concerns the overall time frame of the data collection period. As the methodological goal of this study was to survey, interview, observe and then code the verbal and written responses of middle school and high school students enrolled in traditional Summer School courses, the data collection time frame had to be tailored to fit within the confines of the school district’s 2006 Summer School program. As such, the middle school program was four weeks long and the high school program was six weeks long. And, as the high school program was designed for students to attend only until they “recovered course credit,” I routinely found that research participants had recovered their credit and been released from the program—unbeknownst to the researcher. While this obstacle became a source of frustration, student participants did provide me with demographic data, including addresses and
phone numbers where they could be reached; however, in the end, I was able to obtain the requisite amount of data and did not need to contact participants outside of the traditional Summer School setting.

Just as the relatively short time frame of each respective Summer School program made it difficult to recruit and retain student research participants, the collective nature of the participants themselves became yet another hurdle. In designing this research project, it was decided early on that perhaps the best and most informative way of learning the degree to which urban students felt they had been affected by attending schools in some state of disrepair was to talk with a wide variety of students. As such, the 2006 Summer School session within Columbus, Ohio’s largest urban school district presented a wonderful opportunity to talk with students in grades six through twelve who had experienced firsthand being educated in the district’s twenty-seven middle schools and twenty-three high schools. To be sure, the participants in this study genuinely seemed as though they wanted to assist me in any way they could, yet some routinely displayed difficulty with tasks which required follow-through on their part. Approximately half of the Summer School students involved in this project had to be reminded day after day to take the permission form home and have their parent review the document and then return the signed form to either their teacher or myself. While a significant portion of student participants seemed unmotivated to comply with the simplest of tasks, the information they ultimately provided proved beneficial. Students were honest and communicative during the interview portion of the study. In the end, the narrow time
frame of the school district’s 2006 Summer School session—and subsequent data collection period—proved challenging for a researcher who needed to keep things moving along at a brisk and productive pace.

Research Questions

Susan Jones (2002) indicates a research question “must anchor the researcher around an intellectual curiosity or phenomenon about which the researcher cares and wants to know more” (p. 463). In this qualitative study, research questions were used to focus inquiry concerning a complex and important issue in public education—the physical nature of the environment in which urban students are educated and the degree to which students felt the built physical learning environment affected their conduct, motivation and/or academic achievement. The research questions were also used to shape methodological decisions, guide the study, and establish boundaries necessary for maintaining the investigative focus. As such, what follows are three questions which were used to guide this research study:

1. To what extent do students perceive their academic achievement, motivation and/or personal conduct is positively or negatively affected by the condition of the facility in which they are educated?

2. In what ways does the condition of an educational facility affect students’ perceptions of the overall quality of the teaching and administrative staffing within their building?

3. In what ways does the condition of an educational facility affect students’ perceptions of the degree to which their school district values their education and personal safety?
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

“We cannot expect our children to raise themselves up in schools that are literally falling down.”
--President Bill Clinton

In consideration of the research questions that guided this study, a review of related literature and selected studies will be presented in this chapter. The literature review will examine theoretical perspectives concerning school facilities and student achievement while incorporating aspects of critical race and social constructivist theories to further support and ground this study. The literature review will also examine student performance and motivation in relationship to the academic achievement of poor and minority students educated in deteriorating school facilities.

Theoretical Perspectives on School Facilities and Student Achievement

Effective schools for poor and minority schoolchildren repudiate the notion that family background and/or socioeconomic status are determinant of a student’s ability to learn and achieve success in school. Studies (Edmonds, 1979; Purkey and Smith, 1983) have shown that effective schools for poor and minority students share the following characteristics: strong and supportive administrative leadership, instructionally effective teachers, professional development opportunities, consistent monitoring of pupil
progress, parent involvement and support, and a climate of high expectations for all students. In addition, urban schools that successfully educate poor and minority children believe in the educability of all children and maintain orderly, safe physical learning environments conducive to teaching and learning.

Paradoxically, Ronald Edmonds (1979) discusses the educational progress that has eluded many urban schools by deconstructing the social order responsible for advancing issues of equity in public education. Edmonds (1979) contends that progression toward equity in education requires public policy that “begins by teaching poor children what their parents want them to know and ends by teaching poor children at least as well as it teaches middle-class children” (p. 15). These educational inequities have been fueled by our nation’s general failure to educate children of the poor. Along these lines, Edmonds (1979) alleges that “schools teach those they think they must and when they think they needn’t, they don’t” (p. 16). In an ideological sense, such complacency distances educators from their professional responsibility to provide a quality education to poor and minority students.

School officials who maintain the environment of urban educational facilities have a significant impact upon teaching and learning. Arguably, an essential component of effective schools is that they “are as eager to avoid things that don’t work as they are committed to implementing things that do” (Edmonds, 1979, p. 21). In effect, because research (Earthman, 1996; Edwards, 1991; and Hines, 1996) has shown certain aspects of school climate (for purposes of this study—orderly, safe, and appropriate educational facilities which are conducive to teaching and learning) to be determinant of academic achievement, it is incumbent upon district and school administrators to make
improvements in the physical climate of urban schools so as to establish gains in academic achievement on behalf of poor and minority students. Substandard pupil performance in deteriorating urban schools is often connected to policies and/or decisions which negatively affect the physical learning environment. Research (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1988; Edwards, 1991; Poplin and Weeres, 1992) suggests that the depressed physical environment of many urban schools is believed to reflect society’s lack of policy and priority for urban students and their education; deferred maintenance, building age, and dramatically reduced operating budgets have each contributed to the substandard physical nature of urban schools. Along these lines, Poplin and Weeres (1992) contend that the depressed nature of urban schools is most problematic in middle schools and high schools. Citing facilities where “temperatures inside classrooms can and do reach 110 degrees . . . ceiling tiles are missing, lighting is poor, new paint is spare, and landscaping minimal,” Poplin and Weeres (1992) maintain urban students are also “crowded into rooms where, unless students are absent, there are not enough desks” (p. 35).

It therefore reasonably follows that learning amidst substandard conditions fosters decreased student motivation and sense of responsibility for maintaining the physical learning environment. In such situations, it is also thought that student conduct actually mirrors the condition of the facility (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1988). When asked to draw or write about the perfect school, student illustrations have depicted beautiful schools complete with landscaping, spacious classrooms, and swimming pools—albeit flanked by police helicopters and security personnel (Poplin and Weeres, 1992). Research indicates poor and minority students
have a desire to learn in aesthetically pleasing and physically comfortable schools. Teachers often support these sentiments. Poplin and Weeres (1992) offer the following remarks of a middle school teacher: “How many executives in businesses sit in rooms like that. Show me one, I haven’t met any . . . no professional who day after day tries to maintain some kind of integrity. What really upsets me is that I do go home to air conditioning. I’ll cool off eventually. But I’ll bet nine-tenths of my kids don’t. And they don’t deserve this all day long. They don’t.” (p. 35).

Researchers and institutions closely aligned with the plight of urban children educated in deteriorating school facilities have long perceived the situation as a social crisis. The Carnegie Foundation (1988) describes the situation as a “major failure of social policy, a piecemeal approach to a problem that requires a unified response” (p. xv). Edmonds (1979) similarly holds that inequity in American education belies the need for effective schools capable of providing “children of the poor those minimal masteries of basic skills that now describe minimally successful pupil performance for the children of the middle class” (p. 16). Such thinking implies that schools and districts hoping to progress toward increased student achievement should begin with safe and secure physical learning environments. The alternative, as advanced by the Carnegie Foundation (1988), is a future “imperiled if disadvantaged young people are not economically and civically prepared. So long as failure is accepted, the lives of millions of children clustered in our big city school systems will be blighted . . . . and the nation’s future will be threatened” (p. 55). Toward this end, luxurious, grand environments are not prerequisites for quality education, but neither can quality education be accomplished
in an atmosphere of neglect. Successfully rebuilding the nation’s educational infrastructure need only require a response as urgent and dire as the problem.

Social Constructivism

In consideration of theoretical perspectives on school facilities and student achievement, social constructivism has emerged as an alternate theory of constructivism and has legitimized the significance of social contexts in education. For social constructivists, knowledge acquisition is a complex process involving language, community, social interaction and other cognitive functions that attend to an individual’s intellectual development. In this study, the mutual existence of social constructivist and critical race (discussed in following section) epistemologies are presented as social processes which significantly impact the intellectual and social development of poor and minority students. Accordingly, elements of social constructivism will be used to guide data analysis and interpretation in this study.

Social constructivism is an influential theory in education which has appeared in a variety of forms and contexts since the 1930s, and is often cited as an alternative to the Piagetian theory of radical constructivism. Widely regarded as a theory which acknowledges that social processes and individual sense-making both have central and essential roles in learning (Ernest, 1994), social constructivism furthers our understanding of how individuals actually construct knowledge. Although theorists (Ernest, 1994; Haslanger, 1996) have advanced concerns regarding the ambiguous nature of social constructivism, Lomas (1999) contends the model retains a common thread which “runs through social constructivist theories [and] is a rejection of the epistemologies of both
rationalism and empiricism.” Thus, the pivotal function of social constructivism is to investigate the social negotiation of classrooms against a backdrop of inquiry focused upon knowledge acquisition and the role of the teacher.

Considering the diverse routes of entry social constructivism has employed since early in the twentieth century, it reasonably follows that the discipline has taken shape and evolved significantly over a period of years. Early theorists such as Mead, Blumer and Garfinkel were concerned with the social construction of individuals and their ability to negotiate daily roles and interpersonal relationships. Building upon such ideas, Berger and Luckmann (1966) advanced the notion that knowledge and perceptions of reality were socially constructed in that the socialization of an individual is “an ongoing dialectical process” (p. 149). The importance of these ideas was manifested in the ensuing work of sociologists who first applied the term social constructivism in the 1970s and used it to account for the social construction of scientific knowledge (Restivo, 1988). With roots in both sociology and philosophy, Ernest (1994) argues social constructivism is used to refer to widely divergent positions but maintains the core premise that our social domain impacts developing individuals in “some formative way, with the individual constructing meanings in response to experiences in social contexts” (p. 4).

Social constructivism, then, is often viewed as an alternative perspective to radical constructivism and is similar to radical constructivism in that both theories are embedded with ambiguity. Ernest (1994) indicates that radical constructivism strongly prioritizes the individual aspects of learning and thus regards social aspects such as linguistic factors, interpersonal interactions, and the role of the teacher as merely reducible to the individual and therefore not part of the theoretical base. The
development of this model is attributable to Piaget, whose theory employs strategies
designed to reduce the value of social interaction upon classroom learning. By way of
contrast, Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes interaction, dialogue, activity and social contexts
as forming an “interrelated whole, and indicates a broad range of classroom and research
implications and applications” (Ernest, 1994, p. 7).

The implications of constructivist epistemologies upon the field of education are
profound where the nature of knowledge construction is concerned. Shared experiences
and interpersonal interaction combine to create truth and knowledge and guide students
toward shared sense-making. Theories of social constructivism embrace the influence of
language and social factors in purposeful meaning-making while acknowledging student
experiences are constantly manipulated by socialized learning situations. Given this
information, it becomes incumbent upon educational researchers to arrive at an
understanding of circumstances which positively and/or negatively manipulate student
experiences.

In terms of this research study, tenets of social constructivism will be utilized
during data analysis and data interpretation. Whereas the education of urban students
has long been adversely affected by social contexts ill-suited to increasing academic
achievement, social constructivism will provide a deeper understanding of how cognitive
functions are impacted by manipulated social interaction. Fosnot-Tworney (1989)
describes knowledge construction as an exchange where learners “need to be a part of a
community that actively works with them . . . allowing the experience to be dissected,
evaluated, and reflected upon” (p.21). This study, then, will use social constructivism to
investigate the manner in which manipulated social contexts positively or negatively affect knowledge construction and ultimately impact individual student achievement.

**Critical Race Theory**

In consideration of the basic tenets of social constructivism, critical race theory builds upon and extends this framework with respect to issues of race. For critical race theorists, social reality is constructed by the formulation and exchange of stories and individual experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1999) that frequently serve as interpretive structures which may impose order on our experiences and allow experience to impose order on us (Delgado, 1989). This perspective regarding the construction of social reality aligns with those tenets of social constructivism which strive to situate the importance of language, community and social interaction amid cognitive functions and intellectual development. Relatedly, critical race theory will be used in this study as a guide for both data analysis and data interpretation.

Critical race theory emerged in the mid-1970s with a movement advanced by legal scholars Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman. Bell and Freeman, both distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States, argued that appealing to the moral sensibilities of American citizens via the traditional civil rights strategies of filing amicus briefs, protesting, and marching actually produced few gains. Given such, critical race theory soon emerged as “both an outgrowth of and a separate entity from” (Ladson-Billings, 1999) an earlier legal movement called critical legal studies. Critical legal studies challenged traditional legal scholarship which focused on doctrinal and policy analysis (Gordon, 1990) in favor of a form of law that “spoke to the specificity of
individuals and groups in social and cultural contexts” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 11). Despite the positive merits of the movement, critical legal studies was widely regarded as having failed to provide strategies for substantive and sustainable social transformation. Critical race theory thus became the product of minority legal scholars concerned with issues of race and the advancement of social issues.

Ideologically, critical race theory assumes the position that racism is deeply woven into the fabric of our American social order and necessitates an idealistic response capable of “unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p.12). Critical race theorists use experiential knowledge to advance experiences of racial oppression through storytelling. For critical race theorists, the development of a shared cultural history fundamentally sculpts an analytical platform capable of mobilizing and transforming the “painstakingly slow process of arguing legal precedence to gain citizen rights for people of color” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 13). Critical race theory also assumes the controversial position that European descendants have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation and cites displaced affirmative action policies as empirical evidence to support this claim. Conversely, theorists suggest the notion of interest convergence (Bell, 1980) as an alternative angle that emphasizes locating the point where the interests of whites and minorities intersect. To be sure, critical race theorists are largely concerned with understanding what they perceive to be America’s continued subordination of people of color and how to change and impact the existing relationship between law and racial power (Ladson-Billings, 1999).
Chronicling the black legal struggle for equal rights and protection of the law via the narrative style unique to critical race theory, civil rights attorney and former Harvard legal professor Derrick Bell makes compelling arguments regarding the evolution of related social crises by utilizing experiential knowledge and storytelling. In articulating his claims regarding the degree to which civil rights litigation has actually benefited those for which it was intended to serve, Bell (1992) indicates “we are impelled both to live each day more fully and to examine critically the actual effectiveness of traditional civil rights remedies” (p. 199). In another writing, Bell (1987) recounts an experience in which he was able offer assistance simply by the nature of his involvement, and affect change simply through his own articulation of a shared culture. Bell’s (1987) narration offers the following anecdotal account of lived experience:

I had graduated from college with a B.A. degree and a commission in the air force. Driving to my duty station in Louisiana, my new uniform in the back seat, I missed a turn and found myself on a dark country road where my worst fear became fact in the presence of a state policeman, huge and hostile, who stopped my car, refused to accept “lost” as the reason I was so far off the main highway, and threatened to hold me responsible for various thefts in the area . . . It was only by showing him my uniform with its gold lieutenant’s bars and my military orders that I managed to calm him. Finally, after a long look at the orders, comparing the name with that on my driver’s license, he handed them back to me and, scowling still, told me how to get on the right road. Then he stamped back to his cruiser and roared away.

The lesson was not lost on me. Even now, a respected lawyer and law professor, I was fearful of being stopped and hassled because of my race—even now, with the many civil rights statutes protecting me against police violation of my right to due process of law. On that dark country road, any legal rights I had seemed remote and irrelevant.

Suddenly, topping a rise in the road, I could see far ahead the flashing blue light of a patrol car. Coming closer, I saw it was parked behind another car like the one that had flashed by me so fast. Two figures were standing
in the light of the police cruiser’s headlights. Thank God, it’s not me! I thought, and prepared to drive past.

By then, I was close enough to make out the two figures. While one was, of course, a police officer, the other was not the “good ole Southern boy” I had imagined, but a black woman wearing what appeared to be a choir robe of some shade of gold. As my headlights picked up the scene, I saw the woman was crying, obviously in distress and, from the way the policeman was brandishing his flashlight at her, in some little danger as well. I had to stop, however little I wanted to. I eased the car to the side of the road, turned on the emergency flashers, fished the rental-car contract out of the glove compartment, and, getting slowly out, walked back to the two vehicles.

The policeman challenged me at once. “Mister, I ain’t got time to give no directions. You want to go to town, you headed in the wrong direction.”

Before I could say anything, the woman broke in, “Sir, he forced me off the road, claims I was speeding, and look what he made me do to my tire!” I had by this time noticed that her car, a vintage Pontiac, had a flat tire. “Now he’s trying to turn me into a criminal, which he knows full well I am not” . . . .

“And,” the officer interrupted, turning to me, “unless you move on right this minute, I’ll charge you with interfering with a policeman in the performance of his duty. Now move!”

“But, officer, I’d like to help if I can. This lady is mighty upset.”

Slowly and ominously he removed his service revolver from its holster and pointed it directly at me . . . .

I was scared. Not for a long time—not since the early civil rights struggles—had anyone pointed a gun at me, and that empty feeling in my stomach didn’t feel any better now that it did then. But the woman offered me an opening. Putting her hand on my arm, she said quietly, “I needs a lawyer, sir. Could you go and call someone for me?”

“Officer,” I said, making an effort to keep my voice from shaking, “I am a lawyer, though not admitted to practice in Virginia. I want to represent the lady until she obtains local counsel.”

“I don’t care who you are mister. This woman is my suspect. You’re interfering with my questioning, and I’m warning you one last time to clear the area.”
“Officer, however easy it may be to put me down, I don’t think you’ll find it quite so easy to dismiss my friends in this area.” I dropped the names of a prominent politician, the federal judge in the area, and the president of the local university. “I’ve known each of them for years, and I am sure they would state, on the witness stand if necessary, that I would never have threatened you so as to justify you in using your gun.”

I reached in my pocket for my wallet and handed him a card. “That shows I am a law professor, and I’m sure my faculty colleagues would support the president and the dean here in Virginia.”

In that moment of silence, some of the tension went out of the scene. The officer said to no one in particular, “How the hell this country ever get in such a fix?” I was thinking the same thing, though I had come at it by a very different route.

“This lady got a heavy foot and a big mouth,” he said, taking out his book and writing a ticket for speeding. After handing it to the woman, he stalked back to his patrol cruiser without another word and sped off.

“Thank you,” the woman said. “He was real ugly, knowin’ I belong to the church up the road, where we been petitionin’ to stop police harassments around here, and he takin’ his anger out on me.”

After my scare, I was disgusted with myself, and the woman’s thanks made me feel no less embarrassed. She had assumed me to be powerless—an assumption she’d seen verified when I hesitated and almost started back for my car until I thought to invoke the names of important white men.

“Don’t thank me,” I said. “You owe your thanks to my friends in high places.” (p. 181-185).

As previously stated, and as evidenced by the narrative offered by Derrick Bell, the development of a shared cultural history fundamentally sculpts an analytical platform capable of mobilizing and transforming individuals as they embark upon the journey toward change. In effect, the transformational and guiding principles of critical race theory have placed the responsibility of affecting social change squarely upon the
shoulders of individuals who, through a collective, experiential voice, are inherently poised and positioned to tell their own story for the betterment of their own culture.

While contemporary currents in critical race theory continue to reflect the legal scholarship of Derrick Bell, the use of storytelling is still encouraged to provide a context for understanding the interests of individuals and groups in both social and cultural contexts. Ladson-Billings (1999) similarly contends much of the scholarship of critical race theory centers upon using “voice” to bring additional relevance to the legal discourse concerning racial justice. And, through recounting an instance of her own experience with racism, Ladson-Billings (1999) offers the following anecdote:

> My talk as a part of the “Distinguished Lecture” Series at a major research university had gone well. The audience was receptive, the questions were challenging, yet respectful . . . . But it also had been a tiring day—all that smiling, listening with rapt interest to everyone’s research, recalling minute details of my own, trying to be witty and simultaneously serious had taken its toll. I could not wait to get back to the hotel to relax for a few hours before dinner . . . . As I stepped off the elevator I decided to go into the VIP lounge, read the paper, and have a drink. I arrived early, just before happy hour, and no one else was in the lounge. Shortly after I sat down with my newspaper, a White man peeked his head into the lounge, looked at me sitting there in my best (and conservative) “dress for success” outfit—high heels and all—and with a pronounced Southern accent asked, “What time are y’all gonna be servin’?” (p. 8).

For critical race theorists, presenting a voice different from that of the dominant culture is essential in constructing a social reality through the formulation and exchange of stories. In this context, voice is ultimately utilized to facilitate a deeper understanding of instances of social injustice.

Undoubtedly, critical race theory provides a lens through which issues related to equity, social justice and racism can be explored and analyzed. Increasingly, the cultural
competence of the society in which we live is characterized by assertions of fairness, proclamations that every child has the opportunity to succeed in school, and the notion that the effectiveness of educational policy has to be based on variables that school administrators and teachers can control (Bennett, 1993) in order to ensure success for students regardless of race. Critical race theorists aggressively contend that despite these efforts, non-minorities continue to place “material and social value” on their “possession of whiteness” (Ladson-Billings, 1999) to the detriment of advancing productive social policy for those individuals marginalized by society.

Andrew Hacker (1992) illustrates the value white individuals place on their whiteness in an exercise conducted with his college students. Hacker’s exercise ultimately revealed that none of his white students were remotely interested in changing places with African Americans. When asked what sum of money would adequately compensate them in the event they were forced to “become Black,” white students routinely and unflinchingly indicated amounts approaching $50 million dollars. Hacker (1992) concluded his students perceived they would need large sums of money to purchase protection from the discrimination they assumed they would face “once they were perceived to be black” (p. 32).

In a similar vein, critical race theory, traditionally consumed with social issues and issues of race, has recently turned an investigative focus on the struggle for equal opportunity and equity in education—a parallel focus of this study. As such, critical race theory can be used as an important tool in deconstructing “prevailing notions of educational fairness and neutrality in educational policy, practice and research” (Villenas, Deyhle, & Parker, 1999, p. 33). Toward this end, research (Villenas, Deyhle, & Parker,
1999) has demonstrated an important link between ideological and/or empirical positions in education that appear to be fair and nondiscriminatory, but contain countertruths of racism and discrimination (Villenas, Deyhle, & Parker, 1999) faced by minorities and other marginalized individuals. Critical race theorists have thus come to assume the role of challenging notions of race neutrality in administrative policy decisions in our current educational system. Along these lines, theorists (Bell, 1992; Oakes, 1985, 1992, 1995; Oakes, Wells, Jones, and Datnow, 1997) cite an increasing reliance on special education programs and ability tracking in public education as being largely determinate of the type of education African American students receive. Critical race theoretical approaches to education therefore establish the relevance of examining connections between law and power where minority schoolchildren are concerned.

Using “equal opportunity” to examine the relationships that can exist between critical race theory and education, Ladson-Billings (1999) associates the concept with “the idea that students of color should have access to the same school opportunities as White students” (p. 21). Paradoxically, critical race theorists posit school curricula as an attempt to silence the voice and experiences of African Americans. Swartz (1992) has identified this notion as “master scripting” and contends that “all other accounts and perspectives are omitted from the master script unless they can be disempowered through misrepresentation” (p. 341). In these situations, school curricula that “does not reflect the dominant voice must be brought under control . . . and then reshaped before it can become a part of the master script” (Swartz, 1992, p. 341). Critical race theory also suggests instructional strategies have been reshaped to include approaches firmly rooted in some form of remediation for African American students. The perceived deficiencies
of African American students are then often legitimized “under the guise of scientific rationalism” (Gould, 1981) and thus include intelligence testing and other forms of assessment which support the continued subordination of minority students.

In terms of school funding, critical race theorists believe the models currently employed epitomize inequity and racism in a systemic and structural form. Jonathan Kozol’s (1991) analysis of school funding and the inherent differences between “white schools” and “African American schools” further substantiates widespread claims of inequitable conditions within our nation’s educational infrastructure. As most states fund schools with revenue generated from property taxes, disparities in per pupil expenditures have moved critical race theorists to advance the notion that property is a determinant of academic achievement. Ladson-Billings (1991) aptly concludes it is difficult to “mount an ethical case for allowing poor children to languish in unheated, overcrowded schools with bathrooms that spew raw sewage, whereas middle-income White students attend spacious, technology-rich inviting school buildings” (p. 25). The absence of redesigned school funding formulas further perpetuates and promotes the savage inequalities (Kozol, 1991) currently found in American education.

In sum, the implications of employing basic tenets of critical race theory along a continuum of educational reform are profound in that critical race theory can be employed as an explanatory tool (Ladson-Billings, 1999) for social and cultural issues. Critical race theory may also assist in the ideological deconstruction of an educational structure in which minority students are poorly served by a system that devalues their culture and experience while simultaneously mandating increased academic achievement upheld by federal law. Along these lines, Ladson-Billings (1999) cautions educational
researchers against unknowingly facilitating a “transmutation of theory” capable of recasting a particular theory as a shadow of its original form. In other words, educational researchers and school personnel interested in critical race theory must operationalize its theoretical underpinnings without reducing the movement to a superficial notion incapable of improving the experiences of minority students. Ladson-Billings (1999) suggests “adopting and adapting critical race theory as a framework for educational equity . . . will [necessitate] exposing racism in education and proposing radical solutions for addressing it” (p. 27). Whereas critical race theory may advance social justice as both process and product (Pizarro, 1999), it also provides narratives and perspectives capable of developing transformative knowledge which may ultimately provide minority students with an equitable education.

Theory Into Practice: Issues of Equity in Urban Education

The failures of urban education have long been engaged in parallel play with efforts centered upon national school reform. Reform strategies offering the latest road map for successfully moving all children to proficiency consistently fail to address the education of poor and minority children. Howard (2003) contends that the inferior education of poor and minority children has historically been of “little interest outside the communities in which they grew up because the social problems that resulted could be largely contained within the boundaries of those communities” (p. 90). In effect, theorists (Edmonds, 1979; Howard, 2003) have long held the position that the failure to educate minority children is firmly situated in American beliefs about the “distribution
of intelligence and attitudes about race” (Howard, 2003, p. 90). For this purpose, educational reform efforts have remained ineffectual and sustained the inequity that has besieged urban education for decades. With this in mind, issues of equity in urban education will be addressed here along a continuum of social constructivist and critical race theoretical perspectives and in consideration of the original research questions of this study.

In terms of addressing equity in education, the Brown v. Board of Education decision, which rendered segregated schools unequal and subsequently incapable of receiving equal protection of the laws, is a significant milestone. Notably, at fifty-two minutes past noon on May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled the “separate but equal” doctrine concerning the segregation of public facilities was unconstitutional and in direct violation of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. Presumably, the landmark ruling would eradicate social injustices against African Americans and subvert the daily indignities forced upon a marginalized people. Yet from a perspective of critical race theory, Brown v. Board of Education was largely derivative of America’s need to reinstate credibility badly damaged by the “widely broadcast inequitable social conditions that existed in the United States in the 1950s” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 19).

Alluding to the win-win nature of the Brown decision, Ladson-Billings (1999) contends the decision helped the United States in its struggle to minimize the spread of communism and provided reassurance to African Americans that the “freedom and equality fought for during World War II might become a reality at home” (p. 19).
Although this freedom was largely concentrated upon achieving equal rights for African-Americans in a variety of situations at home, at the time, the tenor of the plight seemed to resonate distinctly within the discord surrounding the education of minority children. Along these lines, Bell (1972) argued that “throughout the nineteenth century, black people repeatedly sought judicial help in their efforts to enter white schools or to upgrade the usually inferior facilities provided for them. Thus, controversies [are] . . . important because a quality education is essential to personal success . . .” (p. 431). To be sure, Brown v. Board of Education exposed the dual societies and educational infrastructures that existed in the United States and systemically countered points of opposition regarding the equitable treatment of people of color within education.

Despite the educational changes initiated and implemented as a result of the Brown decision, theorists (Edmonds, 1979; Howard, 2003; Kozol, 1991; Villenas, Deyhle, & Parker, 1999) have suggested vast improvement is still needed. Along these lines, the 1983 publication of A Nation at Risk by the National Commission on Excellence in Education formally addressed the need for improvement in American education and established education as a national priority. Labeled a “ringing indictment of the failures of American education,” (Howard, 2003) the commission held the following:

We do not believe that a public commitment to excellence and educational reform must be made at the expense of a strong public commitment to the equitable treatment of our diverse population. The twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other either in principle or in practice. To do so would deny young people their chance to learn and live according to their aspirations and abilities. It also would lead to a generalized
accommodation to mediocrity in our society on the one hand or the creation of an undemocratic elitism on the other. Our goal must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest. (p. 16).

In spite of the recommendations contained in the report, Howard (2003) contends a significant portion of African Americans are still not “equipped to take full advantage of opportunities afforded by the fifty years of successful social activism that culminated in the *Brown* decision . . . and civil rights legislation” (p. 81). Whereas many poor and minority schoolchildren remain at risk and continue to learn in environments not conducive to increasing academic achievement, the crisis of public education remains concentrated in urban schools which may provide the only available sources of hope to students. We are thus drawn to the conclusion that twenty years after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, “we had a right to expect something better” (Howard, 2003, p. 82).

Thirty-seven years after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and eight years after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, Jonathan Kozol (1991) offered a sobering account of the inequalities inherent in American education. Using the Boston education system as an example, Kozol (1991) wrote, “Looking around some of these inner-city schools, where filth and disrepair were worse than anything I’d seen in 1964, I often wondered why we would agree to let our children go to school in places where no politician, school board president, or business CEO would dream of working” (p. 5). The harsh reality of many urban schools is that the environment is “by and large, extraordinarily unhappy” (Kozol, 1999) and therefore incapable of inspiring the creativity and motivation students (and teachers) need to achieve academic success. Given this complex set of circumstances, critical race theorists argue for a transformation of the social structure that would “advance the political commitment of racial emancipation”
(Roithmayr, 1999, p. 1). Said differently, adherents of critical race ideology advocate expanding the scope of reform to promote and implement equity in all areas of urban education. From a post-

Brown social constructivist position, one significant benefit of achieving equitable learning conditions is the overall improvement of the shared learning environment. This also reinforces the social constructivist position that learning is ultimately a social, lived experience.

Given the complexities inherent in a modern education system replete with disadvantaged youth attending disadvantaged schools in disadvantaged areas, identifying the implications of such practices is a sobering task. The implications which accompany our nation’s persistent and collective failure to provide equitable educational opportunities for poor and minority children far outweigh the good intentions of most reform efforts. The lack of educational equity has thus amounted to a systemic failure where the education of poor and minority children is concerned. Howard (2003) contends this consistent failure perpetuates the “widespread culture of disbelief in the learning capacities of many of our children, especially children of color and the economically disadvantaged” (p. 83). Howard’s (2003) finished position is that most educators believe intelligence to be innate, fixed and therefore predictive of future performance. Such beliefs foster low expectations of otherwise capable children and propagate a core of teachers who fundamentally lack the dedication and motivation needed to increase student achievement. Howard (2003) ultimately concludes it is “logical for people who don’t believe their students can achieve high standards to resist being held accountable for such achievement” (p. 84).
Edmonds (1979) assessed and addressed parallel issues in the late seventies and early eighties and aggressively rejected the notion that “a school is relieved of its instructional obligations when teaching the children of the poor” (p. 21). While the current state of public education seems to support an absence of educational equity in urban schools, Edmonds (1979) contends there has never been a time when educators have been ill-equipped to teach poor and minority children. On the contrary, our American education system has experienced no shortage of unmotivated individuals who unconscionably exert minimal effort when teaching poor and minority youth. Toward this end, Edmonds (1979) concludes by offering the following three declarative statements regarding the education of poor and minority children:

a.) We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; b.) We already know more than we need to do that; and c.) Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far. (p. 23).

The struggle for excellence in public education must ultimately be spearheaded by instructionally effective classroom teachers deeply committed to increasing the academic achievement of poor and minority students while simultaneously demanding equitable learning conditions for the children they serve.

On the contrary, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1988) has argued that reform movements launched to improve the education of all students have proven “irrelevant to many children—largely black and Hispanic—in our urban schools” (p. xi). The report (1988) concludes that high drop-out rates, low morale, deteriorating facilities, and highly centralized school leadership has supported the “gap between rhetoric and results” (p. xi). In particular, the rhetoric surrounding issues in
urban education has consistently failed to address the education of poor and minority children. According to the Rand Corporation (2004), more than half of our nation’s eighth graders fail to achieve proficient status on national Math, Reading and Science tests while American eighth graders have collectively only managed to achieve twelfth place status in international rankings of Math achievement. The federal push to improve the quality of public education and leave no child behind is a start, but will ultimately require the accompaniment of equitable resources and facilities. The Carnegie Foundation (1988) thus correctly holds that the “quality of our education will determine the strength of our democracy, the vitality of our economy, and the promise of our ideals. It is through schools that this nation has chosen to pursue enlightened ends for all its people. And it is here that the battle for the future of America will be won or lost” (p. xi).

Studies of Urban School Facilities and Student Achievement

The educational infrastructure in the United States of America has primarily been a function of state and local responsibility. While the goal of many states has been to create learning environments where children can be properly educated and prepared for the future, numerous reports and studies have indicated our nation’s school facilities are in poor condition. The studies included in this section disrepute the common worldview that the United States is a formidable powerhouse in education. Many studies have shown the opposite to be true and have thus drawn attention to the sharp contrast between the ideals of equality set forth by our founding fathers and the lived realities of individuals who reside in this country. The aim of this section, then, is to consider the
condition of America’s educational infrastructure via studies which indicate deteriorating, inequitable facilities lead to reduced learning and poor academic achievement for poor and minority children.

In her quantitative study which examined the impact of parental involvement on the condition of Washington D.C. public schools, Maureen Edwards (1991) found the condition of public school buildings to be statistically related to the academic achievement of students. Using a regression model to test her hypothesis that the condition of school buildings affected academic achievement, Edwards (1991) also measured the overall condition of the schools in her study by assigning a scale score (1= excellent, 2= fair, and 3= poor) to each building. In the end, Edwards (1991) found an “improvement in the condition of the school by one category . . . is associated with an improvement in average academic achievement scores of 5.5 percentage points” (p. 1). Of great significance is the fact that Edwards (1991) has statistically proven that students learning in “buildings in poor condition will have lower achievement scores than those in better maintained buildings” (p. 19). Embedded in these results are policy implications which suggest funding for public school building maintenance and capital improvements must be adequate and not subject to budget reductions. Edwards (1991) thus surmises that “good infrastructure is truly at the base of a quality education” and for a “society searching for ways to address the educational needs of the future, the building itself is a good place to start” (p. 47).

In a similar study, Cash (1993) investigated the relationship between building conditions and academic achievement in rural Virginia high schools. Using subtests
of a standardized achievement test as a form of measurement, Cash (1993) quickly determined academic performance was positively related to the overall condition of school buildings. The condition of each school facility was determined by building personnel who evaluated the facility using an instrument developed by the researcher. Interestingly, student achievement was found to be as much as five percent higher in buildings with higher quality ratings. Such results indicate a positive relationship between overall school building condition and student achievement.

In 1995, the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) provided a report to congressional requesters which documented the condition of America’s school facilities. The Department of Education had not assessed the condition of the nation’s schools since 1965, and, as a result, the findings of the 1995 study were alarming and contained serious implications for America’s educational infrastructure. United States senators Carol Moseley-Braun, Edward M. Kennedy, Claiborne Pell, Paul Simon and Paul Wellstone surveyed a national sample of schools and augmented the survey with visits to selected school districts (GAO, 1995). Site visits revealed many school buildings were unsafe and/or harmful to the overall health of children. Specifically, the General Accounting Office (1995) determined the nation’s schools “need about $112 billion to repair or upgrade America’s . . . facilities to good overall condition” (p.2). In 1995, approximately 14 million students attended schools in districts that reported needing “extensive repair or replacement of one or more buildings” (GAO, 1995, p.2). School deterioration was attributed to district decisions to defer maintenance due to reductions in funding. In one high school in Chicago, deferred maintenance exacerbated the following conditions:
The classroom floors are in terrible condition. Not only are the floors buckling, so much tile is loose that students cannot walk in all parts of the schools. The stairs are in poor condition and have been cited for safety violations. An outside door has been chained for 3 years to prevent students from falling on broken outside steps. Peeling paint has been cited as a fire hazard. Heating problems result in some rooms having no heat while other rooms are too warm. Leaks in the science lab caused by plumbing problems prevent the classes from doing experiments. Guards patrol the outside doors, and all students and visitors must walk through metal detectors before entering the school. (p. 12).

The finished position of the General Accounting Office (1995) was that decent school buildings are essential to providing a good education for children and preparing them for the future.

Glen Earthman (1996), however, studied the relationship between the built learning environment and the performance and behavior of the user, or student, and formed a hypothesis that the users are “influenced both positively and negatively by how the built environment either permits them to function or inhibits the process of teaching and learning” (p. 1). Earthman (1996) contends that although the “variance the built environment can account for” may be slight, of greater significance is the fact that “there is a portion of the variance that can be controlled” via the collective efforts of design professionals, teachers and administrators. Accordingly, Earthman (1996) indicates two student variables, achievement and behavior, are either positively or negatively influenced by building conditions such as: school building age and size, thermal factors, visual factors, color and interior painting, hearing factors, spatial design, location and utility of windows, and proper illumination. As a result, the conclusions drawn from the Earthman study support the earlier findings of Edwards (1991) and Cash (1993).
Whereas the Cash study (1993) investigated the relationship between building condition and student achievement in small, rural Virginia high schools, Eric Hines (1996) replicated that study using the same data gathering instrument and research methodology in large, urban high schools in Virginia. Yielding results similar to that of the Cash study, Hines (1996) discovered his “range of differences between below standard and above standard buildings” (Earthman, 1996, p. 10) were as much as 11 percentile ranks higher than those cited by Cash. Hines (1996) noted “scale scores improved on every subtest of the Test of Academic Proficiency when substandard buildings were compared to above standard buildings” (p. 76). Given these facts, the Hines study supports the notion that there is a relationship between the built learning environment and student performance.

In June of 2000, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) division of the United States Department of Education published a statistical analysis report designed to address high priority data needs in the field of education. This report, entitled *Condition of America’s Public School Facilities: 1999*, produced important findings and information related to the staggering financial support needed to bring some buildings to good condition, as well as the hazardous, physical and deteriorating environmental condition of other school buildings, and plans for repairs, renovation, or replacement of such buildings (NCES, 2000). While data suggest the oldest schools are most in need of maintenance, the National Center for Education Statistics (2000) found that those in charge of such buildings have no plans for improvement. Interestingly, close to 10 percent of public schools have “enrollments that are more than 25 percent greater than the
capacity of their permanent buildings” (NCES, 2000, p. vii). To be sure, the complexities surrounding deteriorating and overcrowded school buildings are extensive and will require costly solutions.

In sum, all students should be provided an opportunity to learn in a quality environment conducive to maximizing both teaching and learning. The General Accounting Office within the U.S. Department of Education has stated that, at a minimum, children should be able to attend decent school facilities. Decent facilities were defined as those which are “structurally safe, contain fire safety measures, sufficient exits, an adequate and safe water supply, an adequate sewage disposal system, sufficient and sanitary toilet facilities and plumbing fixtures, adequate storage, adequate light, [are] in good repair and attractively painted as well as contain acoustics for noise control . . .” (GAO, 1995, p. 3). The Education Infrastructure Act of 1994, passed by Congress, was intended to upgrade many public school buildings to “decent” condition and assist the United States in meeting its National Education Goals. In consideration of related goals, Earthman (1996) concludes “spending funds to improve the built environment will produce greater results than funds spent on materials, textbooks, and even teachers” (p. 12). Toward this end, it is incumbent upon educators and school board members to improve the educational opportunities and achievement of students by improving the overall condition of their physical learning environment.

Student Performance and Motivation

As previously discussed, the research on student performance (achievement and conduct) reveals a strong correlation between student learning and behavior and the
nature of the physical environment in which poor and minority children are educated. Research also suggests the built learning environment can have a positive or negative impact upon student motivation. The goal of this section, then, is to consider the degree to which the physical learning environment can impact student performance and motivation. Another aim of this section is to investigate the built learning environment and the extent to which its associated nuances might influence and/or impact the technical core of education—teaching and learning.

In its 1988 report on saving urban schools, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching came to the conclusion that “America must confront, with urgency, the crisis in urban schools” (p. xiv). The Carnegie Foundation (1988) held the opinion that “bold, aggressive action is needed now to avoid leaving a huge and growing segment of the nation’s youth civically unprepared and economically unempowered” (p. xv). As it stands, contemporary currents in public education are focused upon and drawn toward issues of standards, accountability and achievement. Lost in this pandemic interplay of mandates and responsibilities is the notion that educators must communicate to urban students their education is important and their future is valued. Dr. Lillian Parks, interim superintendent of the East St. Louis public schools states, “Gifted children are everywhere . . . but their gifts are lost to poverty and turmoil and the damage done by knowing they are written off by their society. Many of these children have no sense of something they belong to. They have no feeling of belonging to America” (Kozol, 1991, p. 33). As a result, the crisis of urban education must progress toward a systemic elimination of conditions which bespeak neglect in public schools.
As recent research (Cash, 1993; Earthman, 1996; Edwards, 1992; Hines, 1996) has proven a relationship exists between school buildings and student performance, removing and/or reducing environmental barriers to academic achievement should be a requirement of urban education. And because student motivation and performance are undoubtedly affected by environments which adversely affect morale, poor and minority students must have “access to quality facilities that are conducive to learning and optimize opportunities for student success” (Johnson, p.1, 1997). Further, Johnson (1997) contends that “students’ perceptions of their physical environment provide a gauge to measure what the students perceive about the quality of the education provided to them” (p. 2). As such, the long-range improvement of our nation’s public schools would facilitate equitable educational opportunities capable of increasing and maintaining higher levels of student engagement, performance and motivation.

In exploring the degree to which the physical learning environment can impact student performance and motivation, consideration must be given to teachers who staff urban schools. An important part of achieving equity in public education is attracting and retaining instructionally effective teachers. The Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) insists that “physical conditions [in urban schools] have direct positive and negative effects on teacher morale, sense of personal safety, feelings of effectiveness in the classroom, and on the general learning environment” (IASB, 2002, p. 3). In support of this position, the IASB cites a study which found that “where the problems with working conditions are serious enough to impinge on the work of teachers, they result in higher absenteeism, reduced levels of effort, lower effectiveness in the classroom, low morale, and reduced job satisfaction” and “where working conditions are good, they
result in enthusiasm, high morale, cooperation, and acceptance of responsibility” (IASB, 2002, p. 3). Attention must therefore be paid to the physical condition of the buildings in which teachers are asked to work. After all, a teacher from East St. Louis has sagely concluded that for “new, incoming teachers, [money] is a great deterrent. When you consider that many teachers are afraid to come here in the first place, or, if they are not afraid, are nonetheless offended by the setting or intimidated by the challenge of the job, there should be a premium and not a punishment for teaching” (Kozol, 1991, p. 30). Thus, it is ultimately poor and minority children who suffer when teacher morale and feelings of effectiveness are sabotaged by deteriorating working conditions.

In sum, student performance and motivation can be adversely affected by the condition of the built learning environment. Whereas a primary goal of public education should be to ensure that students know their safety, education and future are of value, a parallel goal should be to attract and retain instructionally effective teachers for such students. Given the facts detailed throughout this study, we can reasonably conclude that improving the condition of public school buildings will significantly impact student performance. Poor and minority children are entitled to receive an education that is equitable and ripe with quality learning experiences.

School Facilities and Student Achievement: Toward Equity in Urban Education

Theorists (Purkey and Smith, 1983) suggest there are a significant number of factors which can have a dramatic influence on student learning. While some factors are not easy to manipulate, other variables “can be measured, and, in theory, changed relatively easily, usually by spending money” (Purkey and Smith, 1983, p. 1). In this
context, we focus upon public school facilities as determinants of achievement and consider the implications associated with allowing poor and minority children to learn amidst unacceptable conditions. As research (Cash, 1993; Earthman, 1996; Edwards, 1992; Hines, 1996) has shown an inextricable link between the condition of the built learning environment and student achievement, we must also consider issues of inequity in public schooling and the inevitable consequences associated with failing to rectify such circumstances.

In their discussion on educational aims in contemporary society Tozer, Violas and Senese (2002) contend that “from its very origins American society has struggled with questions of equity and equality” (p. 366). The authors make the argument that democratic ideals of freedom often have a positive association and parallel existence to those ideals associated with economic freedom; however, the authors also contend one fallacy of a free market economy is that it assumes the “starting conditions for everyone allow for fair competition or, at the very least, that social institutions treat everyone fairly” (Tozer, Violas, and Senese, 2002, p. 366). Along these lines, British economic historian R. H. Tawney (Tozer, Violas, and Senese, 2002) comments:

To criticize inequality and to desire equality is not, as is sometimes suggested, to cherish the romantic illusion that men are equal in character and intelligence. It is to hold that, while their natural endowments differ profoundly, it is the mark of a civilized society to aim at eliminating such inequalities . . . and . . . individual differences, which are the source of social energy, and which are more likely to ripen and find expression if social inequalities are . . . diminished. (p. 366).
The significance of this discussion is that it offers an alternative route of entry into the conversation concerning equitable public schooling—a notably elusive standard in our contemporary and pluralistic American society.

By way of comparison, Kozol (1991) maintains our nation’s marked and sustained indifference toward the legal ramifications imposed by the landmark *Brown* decision have, in effect, legitimized *Plessy v. Ferguson* via the reemergence of dual school systems, or systems which separately serve Caucasian and African American children. Consequently, our nation’s most disadvantaged youth have consistently been the benefactors of substandard educational opportunities compounded and characterized by haphazard reform efforts. This existence of dual and inequitable societies in public education (Kozol, 1999) represents a significant gap in productive social policy. As a result, successive education reform efforts will continually fail to reach the staggering numbers of poor and minority children who attend inner-city schools.

In the wake of federal demands for increased educational accountability and stringent academic standards, school districts are now faced with competing local interests—in the form of charter schools—which also offer educational services. Increased accountability and competition have thus provided school and district administrators with the challenge of “implementing increasingly complex educational missions and fulfilling rising community expectations as well as serving growing student populations—all with shrinking budgets” (American Association of School Administrators, 2004, p.4). Although financial resources are diminishing at a time when the current estimate to repair inadequate and deficient facilities is as high as $226 billion (AASA, 2004), our nation must not fail to educate the children of the poor. As public
education is the “key to bringing hope to children, renewal to our cities, and vitality to the nation” (The Carnegie Foundation, 1988), our collective goal must be to provide children attending urban schools with a good education in decent facilities accompanied by good teachers and good equipment. Deteriorating school facilities must therefore improve to levels which “help increase productivity, attendance and learning by removing barriers that adversely affect students, teachers and other staff” (AASA, 2004, p. 5). Failure to implement such changes will be the unfortunate equivalent of a larger, national failure where the equitable education of urban schoolchildren is concerned.

As has been noted, the inextricable link between school facilities and student achievement commences with discussions of providing equity in the education of poor and minority children. Considered “at risk” in 1983, our nation’s current set of circumstances regarding public education is alarmingly familiar. For this reason, the desire for equitable goods and/or services in urban education has forced critical race theorists to insist that social justice and empowerment are built upon foundations of new and emerging “narratives and perspectives and their contributions to developing transformative knowledge” (Pizzaro, 1999, p. 58). Relatedly, the included narratives of noted scholars Bell (1987) and Ladson-Billings (1999) were offered to serve as an example of the power contained in articulate renderings of lived experience and shared culture. Among other valuable life lessons, embedded in each narrative is the notion that an individual’s capacity to affect change shall not be underestimated, and, when given the opportunity, can unite with the voices of others—for the betterment of many.

We must therefore continue to be responsive to the educational plight of poor and minority schoolchildren and their parents. Ladson-Billings (1999) duly notes that if “we
are serious about solving these problems in schools and classrooms, we have to be serious about intense study and careful rethinking of race and education” (p. 27). Adopting and adapting critical race theory as a framework for achieving educational equity must include “penetrating the classrooms and daily experiences of students of color” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 26) so as to improve the teaching, learning and physical environment of urban students. It is here that the methodological goals of this study commence.

Summary

Family background and/or socioeconomic status are widely regarded in the field of education to be non-determinant of an individual’s innate capacity learn and achieve success in school. Paradoxically, researchers (Cash, 1993; Earthman, 1996; Edmonds, 1979; Edwards, 1992; Hines, 1996) have discovered that effective schools maintain safe and orderly physical learning environments which boost the morale and motivation of both teachers and students. In such contexts, the mutual existence of social constructivist and critical race theories actually enhance our understanding of the intellectual and social development of disadvantaged students. Yet, many poor and minority schoolchildren remain at risk and continue to learn in substandard facilities not conducive to increasing academic achievement. As a result, the crisis of equitable public education remains concentrated in deteriorating urban schools which may, in fact, provide the only available source of hope to poor families. Given these facts, the primary goal of urban education must be to ensure that poor and minority students know their personal safety, education
and future are valued as much as any child’s. It would seem, then, that providing poor
and minority students with a decent, safe learning environment is a great place to start.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

“It occurred to me that we had not been listening much to children in these recent years. The voices of children, frankly, had been missing from the whole discussion. This seems especially unfortunate because the children often are more interesting and perceptive than the grown-ups are about the day-to-day realities of life in school. For this reason, I decided, early in my journey to attempt to listen very carefully to children and, whenever possible, to let their voices and their judgments and their longings find a place . . . within the nation’s dialogue about their destinies. I hope that, in this effort, I have done them justice.”

--Jonathan Kozol

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how poor and minority children in a large, urban school district respond to being educated in deteriorating facilities which may be in significant states of disrepair. The primary focus of this study, then, is to elicit student responses via surveys and interviews and to determine the degree to which students perceive the built physical learning environment affects their overall levels of achievement, conduct and motivation. The goal is to recognize and assess emergent themes and patterns so as to provide a rich and contextualized understanding of issues of equity, achievement and accountability in urban education.
Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods were used to conduct this research study and accomplish the aforementioned goals. As a process, qualitative research is fundamentally rooted in a concern for “developing depth of understanding of a particular phenomenon and the construction of meaning that individuals attribute to their experiences” (Jones, 2002, p. 461). In developing viable research questions and methodological strategies, qualitative researchers make important decisions which reflect epistemological and theoretical considerations and are evident in the core characteristics of all qualitative research. The characteristics of qualitative research include the following statements: truths and understanding emerge from an insider’s perspective; the researcher is the instrument; research is field-based or occurs in the natural setting; research is inductive in nature; and findings depend upon rich description and writing to describe the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 1998). Along this continuum, qualitative research holds that the “gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework that specifies a set of questions that he or she then examines in specific ways” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 18). Given the need to generate “thick descriptions” of lived experiences in qualitative research, issues of researcher proximity and influence abound. Susan Jones (2002) summarily contends we must therefore recognize the “importance of researcher discernment about one’s own positionality and the influence of this positionality on who and what can be known, as well as the complex dynamics attached to entering communities both similar to and different from one’s own” (p. 466). As discussed below, issues of qualitative researcher positionality are inextricably linked to detailed explications of all research phenomena.
Navigating the terrain of qualitative research requires a successful negotiation (Jones, 2002) of research questions, methodological strategies and issues which emerge as the research design unfolds and the study begins to take shape. Inherent complexities in rigorous qualitative research are thus easier to negotiate in situations where the researcher has an identifiable “place to stand.” This type of paradigmatic association provides researchers with classification categories designed to establish loose boundaries and provisional representations regarding arrangement of thought. Four contemporary modes of inquiry (positivist, interpretivist, critical theory and deconstructivist) commonly used in qualitative research are less “unified sets of propositions” (Sipe and Constable, 1996) than they are paradigms which refuse classification and can be employed for different purposes. As such, the research methodologies incorporated into this study reflect the interpretivist paradigm and subsequent mode of inquiry.

Ontological assumptions within the interpretivist paradigm suggest qualitative researchers believe reality is subjective and therefore constructed around a core belief that there are many truths. Adherents of the interpretivist paradigm believe discourse is “dialogic and creates reality” (Sipe and Constable, 1996) while communication is transactive and facilitates our attempts to understand the world. Understanding what it means to engage in interpretive inquiry is important in areas of qualitative research. My goal in this study was to develop an understanding of a particular phenomenon and understand lived experience from the point of view of children educated in a specific setting. In achieving these ends, tenets of phenomenology were employed in areas of
methodological decision-making within this study. Phenomenology is defined as the “study of structures of experience or consciousness” (Smith, 2003) and is largely concerned with the appearance of “things” or how “things” appear in our experience. As a discipline, phenomenology is anchored by its interest in first person accounts of how conscious experience is experienced. Max van Manen (1997) further explicates the boundaries of phenomenology:

We adopt a phenomenological perspective in order to help us to bring to light that which presents itself as pedagogy in our lives with children. It is that kind of thinking which guides us back from theoretical abstractions to the reality of lived experiences—the lived experience of the child’s world, the lived experiences of schools, curricula, etc. Phenomenology asks the simple question, what is it like to have a certain experience . . . (p. 44).

In this context, conducting a study of lived experience from a phenomenological platform ultimately informs methodological decisions and clarifies certain issues of researcher positionality.

Qualitative researchers must also be cognizant of how personal assumptions and biases influence research design. Jones (2002) encourages researchers to thus engage in “continuous reflection and discernment about the motivations that influence these decisions and the influence of their own identities and positionalities in the context of the study” (Jones, 2002, p. 472). As a discipline, phenomenology is closely aligned with such processes as researchers illuminate and write about recurrent themes in an individual’s lived experience. Phenomenology is also concerned with the presence of universal themes which emerge from shared experiences and the subsequent analysis and representation of co-constructed data.
In the end, phenomenology is able to move qualitative researchers toward the formulation of precise and accurate interpretive descriptions made possible by an awareness of one’s own positionality.

The implications phenomenology and positionality have upon this research project are significant. Richardson (1992) captures this significance by stating “No matter how we stage the text, we—the authors—are doing the staging. As we speak about the people we study, we also speak for them. As we inscribe their lives, we bestow meaning and promulgate values” (p.131). In light of these facts, I have attempted to create an image which draws upon the lived experience of students and I have therefore assumed a constructive role in fostering a phenomenological understanding of the “essences” in question. Such processes were facilitated via a focused, interview-based inquiry predicated upon respondent answers to a series of carefully designed survey questions.

Consideration of researcher responsibility in qualitative studies requires a reflexive approach regarding positionality. Pizzarro (1999) contends educational research is “still a process that for the most part silences those studied, ignores their personal knowledge, and strengthens the assumption that researchers are the producers of knowledge” (p. 53). In a departure from this ideology, my intent was to allow themes to emerge from the data—the voices of student research participants needed to create a picture reflective of their shared experience as students educated in deteriorating urban school facilities. As such, the manner in which I presented myself and my study were conflated with the development of trust and rapport. As the job of the writer is to
“imitate reality for the consumption of others,” (Rhodes, 2000, p. 515) conducting interpretive inquiry against a phenomenological foreground assisted in this process.

**Administrator-Researcher Roles and Representation**

One of the seven historical moments which dissects qualitative research, the crisis of representation emerged in the late eighties and thrived until it was upstaged by postmodernism in 1990. The crisis of representation makes referential claim as to how researchers struggled to “locate themselves and their subjects in reflexive texts” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) during the aforementioned time period. Humanists and social scientists migrated toward the social sciences and humanities respectively and thus sought alternative evaluative criteria (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) to elicit more sound understandings. As a historical moment, the crisis of representation therefore establishes social inquiry as a practice characterized not only by epistemological issues and concerns, but by issues of gender, class and race.

Critics, however, claim there is “no epistemological crisis of representation, only a practical and moral problem of representation” (Smith and Deemer, 2000, p. 877). The authors suggest we learn to accept the fact that as “finite human beings,” our written text will contain silences and words spoken for “someone else” (Smith and Deemer, 2000). In fact, critics contend textual judgments stated or implied by the researcher actually trouble positionality and provide false solutions to the human condition. Consequently, critics maintain there is “no doubt that there is a problem of representation [emphasis added] . . . but these are not epistemological issues; to the contrary, they are practical
and moral issues” (Smith and Deemer, 2000, p. 891). As individual judgments must eventually be moved “into a public space where they are placed in concert with the judgments of others,” (Smith and Deemer, 2000) the crisis of representation gives pause to the flow of methodological decision-making.

At issue in the representation and role of an administrator-researcher, also referred to as research-practitioner, is how to study lived experience and, more importantly, how to interact with research participants. While researchers may find answers in various methodological approaches, any variation thereof must be anchored in concern for developing depth of understanding. Jones (2002) states the “blessing and burden of qualitative research is that the depth of understanding this approach is intended to unearth also carries with it a significant responsibility to tell the stories of those with whom researchers come into contact in the most respectful way possible” (p. 461). Jones (2002) therefore suggests our ability to interpret and represent stories of lived experience is largely dependent upon the degree to which we are both attentive to, and mindful of, the research process.

In consideration of these thoughts, interpretive inquiry requires a certain level of consciousness regarding decisions made during each phase of the research process. Fine (1994) suggests we “probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study . . . [and] create occasions for researchers and informants to discuss what is, and is not, ‘happening between,’ [and] within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretation . . .” (p.72). Because common characteristics of qualitative research include flexibility and the ability to maintain responsiveness in various situations as they arise, I presented myself and my study in a manner which
reduced my “position” as an assistant principal at a middle school within the school district. In an effort to reduce participant anxiety and/or trepidation unnecessarily set into motion by my title and/or position at one middle school among the district’s twenty-plus middle schools, I chose to emphasize my role as a student—someone learning about the field of education. In this vein, middle school and high school student participants were neither mislead or misinformed. And, in an attempt to further establish myself as an adult learner, I chose to present my study as a shared experience embarked upon by the students and myself; this presentation is consistent with the co-constructed nature of phenomenological research (van Manen, 1997).

Because the “researcher is the instrument” in all variations of qualitative research, the dynamics of my role as an administrator-researcher, or research-practitioner, was an important component in the overall success of this study. It thus became important to present both myself and the study in a manner conducive to the solicitous return of descriptive data brimming with the rich voices of student participants. Jones (2002) argues that in order to create an accurate picture through the written word, we must “engage in research that holds the potential for getting closer to what is true about a particular phenomenon . . . and for contributing to the elimination of structures of inequality, those most fully engaged in qualitative research must recognize the complexities in the effort” (p. 472). Such complexities have grown to encompass and address broader social issues which require awareness on behalf of qualitative researchers concerned with issues of representation and positionality. This awareness requires that “reflections on our responsibilities as social researchers must punctuate all texts we produce. Without such reflection, in the name of neutrality or researcher dispassion, we
collude in a retreat from social responsibility, and the academy remains yet another institution without a soul in a world increasingly bankrupt of moral authority” (Fine, 2000, p. 128). So, in this study, various issues concerning researcher role and representation were met with a degree of reflexivity which ultimately guided me toward the careful discernment of multiple truths which were distinctly representative of life experience.

Site and Participants

The large, urban school district where I conducted this qualitative study is spread across Columbus, Ohio, one of the nation’s fastest growing metropolitan areas (Ohio Department of Development, 2003), and home to at least 1.4 million people in the year 2000. The capital city is home to 16 area colleges and universities and is a center for technology and the arts. The 142 schools that make up the Columbus City School District—home to approximately 60,000 students, 4,500 teachers and 300 district-level administrators—are situated within the confines of 540 square miles of land area which constitute Franklin County, named for Benjamin Franklin and established April 30, 1803. The county’s statistical profile boasts a 2003 personal income per capita of $34,471, which was higher than Ohio’s $30,129 average that same year (Extension Data Center, 2003). While Franklin County’s poverty rate in 2002 was 10.2%, it remained lower than the state average of 11% (Extension Data Center, 2003). Finally, in the year 2000, Franklin County’s racial composition was described as slightly more than 80% Caucasian (Extension Data Center, 2003).
This research study was conducted during the school district’s traditional 2006 Summer School session. During this time, Summer School courses were offered to students at both the middle school and high school levels. Students at the middle school level (sixth and seventh grades) were able to register for classes at one of four available sites appropriately and conveniently located on the city’s north, south, east and west sides of town. The school district’s Summer Bridge program, mostly for eighth grade students needing to pass a minimum of two courses to be appropriately assigned to high school in the Fall, but also for students who desire to take advanced coursework, was also appropriately and conveniently located in four sites—albeit different from that of the middle school sites—one the city’s north, south, east and west sides of town. The remainder of the district’s 2006 Summer School program consisted of high school students enrolled in either remedial coursework or students taking advanced coursework with the intent of graduating early. The high school program operated out of five conveniently located high schools in the district—including one location at a school downtown. The school district’s 2006 traditional Summer School program operated out of eleven different schools, with two high schools simultaneously serving two populations—Summer Bridge and traditional high school Summer School—for a total of 13 different programs serving grades six through twelve.

The summer this study was conducted, I had just finished my second year as an assistant principal at a middle school within the district, located on the city’s south side. I had also just finished my eighth consecutive year under the employment of the school district. As the assistant principal of the middle school, the job was complex and required simultaneous involvement in a variety of projects. On average, daily
responsible for included the following: ensuring that teachers were providing quality instruction, visiting classrooms to provide coaching, support, and encouragement to teachers, engaging teachers in reflective dialogue about their teaching practices, participating in the ongoing development of substantive grants, conferencing with parents, processing student discipline referrals, and ensuring that the school’s daily operations were both effective and efficient. Given the nature of the job, interaction with students and parents occurred in a variety of ways, and for a variety of reasons. For this reason, I was completely comfortable conducting the study within the district and knew the student participants would be wonderful to work with and would surely provide me with a wealth of information.

To this end, students who agreed to participate in this research study were in grades sixth through twelve and had not previously participated in a study of this size and/or nature during their tenure in school. Through discussion with the students, I quickly learned that they were generally enrolled in Summer School for two specific reasons: they either needed to take courses they had previously failed to successfully move to the next grade level, or they were taking advanced coursework in hopes of graduating early. As such, the final sample consisted of 39 students who responded to the researcher’s invitation to participate via a self-identification process which required them to notify their teacher of their interest and/or willingness to participate. At both the middle school and high school levels, the names of interested participants were submitted to me by teachers or the principal of the school. Potential research participants were subsequently informed of the nature of the study and those who were interested took home a four page letter of communication which explained in detail the nature of the
study and also included a place for parents/guardians to give their signed permission for their child to participate. The final sample consisted of an ethnically diverse group of both males and females, grades sixth through twelve, identified as either regular education, special education or academically “gifted” students. While self-selecting students to participate in this study was an option, the random sample I used contained a variety of students at various grade levels.

<table>
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<tr>
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The names of each research participant have been changed to protect their identity.

Table 3.1: Middle School Research Participant Demographics
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The names of each research participant have been changed to protect their identity.

**Table 3.2: Summer Bridge Research Participant Demographics**
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The names of each research participant have been changed to protect their identity.

Table 3.3: High School Research Participant Demographics

Research Procedures

As a process, qualitative research involves the study of human life in social and behavioral disciplines. As a part of this process, empirical materials related to the phenomenon being studied are collected, analyzed and then written up. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) contend much of what is written is influenced by a “gendered, multiculturally situated” researcher who “speaks from within a distinct interpretive community that configures, in its special way, the multicultural, gendered components of the research act” (p. 18). As such, the dialogic nature of qualitative research piqued my
curiosity and inspired me to use surveys, interviews and observations as my complete methodological approach. Kvale (1996) has identified five core topics which need to be addressed when describing the interview process in qualitative research:

- the process by which the researcher obtained access to, and solicited participation from, respondents;
- the manner in which interview data were recorded and saved;
- the manner in which the researcher presented his/herself and the study to research participants;
- the nature of the researcher/participant relationship and how it was maintained during data collection;
- the manner in which data were analyzed.

The aforementioned criteria will be used to outline research procedures which were employed while conducting and completing this research study.

Access to and Recruitment of Participants

As an assistant principal at one of the middle schools situated within the Columbus City Schools, this study presented an opportunity for me to conduct research in a convenient and familiar setting. However, at least one researcher has insisted that “several important features of qualitative research may be compromised in studies conducted in one’s own backyard” (Jones, 2002, p. 464). For the record, I argue the contrary. Conducting this study within the school district in which I work did little to dull my own interpretive lens—reportedly compromised when conducting research in familiar settings—and, on the contrary, actually seemed to facilitate perhaps a clearer and more focused experience which was not burdened by “personal experiences and assumptions brought to the research process” (Jones, 2002, p. 464). The goal, then, was to learn as much new information as possible; therefore, this research study was absent instances of role conflict and/or “ethical considerations of either learning information that
affect[ed] the work setting or not eliciting important data because of the dual role the researcher-practitioner carries” (Jones, 2002, p. 464). It must, however, be noted that the preceding issues are not necessarily unique to conducting research in a familiar setting (Jones, 2002), and, to be sure, the integrity of this project was fervently protected at each stage of inquiry.

Before I could begin the process of recruiting student research participants, it must be noted that I had to apply to the school district for permission to conduct a study within the confines of their schools. I was required to submit a twenty-page proposal which detailed the means through which I would “conduct meaningful research aimed at the advancement of education as a science or the advancement of behavioral sciences commonly associated with the science of education” (Guidelines for the Conduct of Research Studies in Columbus Public Schools, 2006). A detailed proposal was submitted to the committee mid-Spring 2006 and I was notified a few weeks later that I had been granted permission to conduct my study in the district (see Appendices A-B). The only other requirement that I had to fulfill in order to start collecting data was to obtain the signed permission of the building principal of each Summer School and Summer Bridge location. Although the district had granted me permission to conduct my study within the district, the district did not require individual building principals to participate; therefore, securing the permission of each building principal was of paramount concern. Finally, and among a few other minor expectations advanced by the school district, the district required that, post-study, I share and explicate “immediate and/or potential implications of findings for educational practices in the Columbus Public Schools” (Guidelines for the Conduct of Research Studies in Columbus Public Schools, 2006).
The student sample, which consisted of 39 middle school and high school students who were enrolled in the school district’s 2006 Summer School program, was chosen via randomization and without decisions being made based upon prior information and/or knowledge. (Of the 39 students who eventually became full-fledged research participants, I only knew one student—a seventh grade female who had attended the middle school in which I worked the previous year. While she was a student at my school, our direct involvement was limited; I was familiar enough with her, yet we had not had extensive personal interaction and/or discussions.) The entire recruitment process of student research participants was designed to be totally random and was ultimately executed in such a manner. The goal of the recruitment process was to have a core sample that was as diverse as it was large. In the final analysis, it was important to me that students were included from all over the district and had attended school in most of the district’s elementary, middle and high schools. I felt strongly that a vast array of educational experiences represented by a significant number of students would strengthen the credibility of student responses and broaden the scope of the perspective contained therein.

Finally, in designing the manner via which I would recruit participants for this study, I considered carefully the respondent sample and the types of responses I had hoped to elicit from research participants. At the outset of the participant recruitment phase of this research study, it became clear that I had to talk with students who had a keen perspective on what it means to be a student who attends school in a facility that is perhaps not the most motivating of environments. Opposed to taking a door-to-door approach and targeting specific schools based upon personal beliefs and/or biases, it
became clear that I would need to survey and interview students on the periphery—those who have, in some form, exhibited a disconnect with the traditional school setting and who would be candid in their attempts to explain the degree to which the built physical learning environment affected their motivation, conduct and/or levels of academic achievement while in school.

Along these lines, Arthur Viddich (1960) similarly argues the “solution to the dilemma of genuine versus spurious experiences is to make use of individuals who are socially marginal in the society being studied” (p. 357). Central to his argument is the notion that in any society, the participant observer is certain to find individuals who can “see themselves objectively in relation to their society” (Viddich, 1960) and who, if not sought out by the observer, will undoubtedly identify themselves. Finally, Arthur Viddich (1960) claims these individuals serve as a bridge to the meanings of the society being studied by providing the observer with the “first insights into the workings of the society” (p. 357).

In the end, and as conceptualized, the research study did come to encompass students on the margin of their own educational society. In making the decision to survey and interview Columbus Public Schools students who were enrolled in a traditional Summer School program, only two parameters remained under researcher control. The two parameters which I retained control over were: a.) the decision to limit the total number of research participants to under 50, and, b.) the decision to ensure that the final sample consisted of students from each grade level. Participation in this research study required students to identify themselves as potential and willing subjects by responding to a formal “call for research participants.” The call for participants amounted to a request
made by the researcher for voluntary participants via a concise and informative researcher-generated recruitment document (see Appendix C) which was read verbatim to various classes at various grade levels by classroom teachers.

Once students at each school were identified as being potential participants, I briefly spoke with them regarding the nature of my research study. Students who were still interested in participating at the end of the conversation were given an informed-consent document (see Appendix D) to review with their parent/guardian and have signed by their parent/guardian. Once the informed-consent document was signed and returned to me, students were asked to review a similar assent document (see Appendix E) and sign their name, indicating they knew that participation was voluntary and that they could stop being in the study at any point in time. Most of the students in this study were eager to participate and sincerely wanted to help me learn as much as I could about my research topic. In all, the 39 student research participants included in my sample came to represent regular enrollment at nineteen different middle schools and eight different high schools (this figure does not include participants’ brief enrollment at various Summer School locations). Together, these students represented 27 different schools within the school district which ultimately affirmed my methodological decision to broaden the scope of the study by striving to include students from all over the district.

Timeline of Research Cycle

Due to the fact that the middle school Summer School program was only scheduled to last four weeks, the Summer Bridge program six weeks, and the high school Summer School program six weeks, the timeline of this research study was drastically condensed. During the first week of said programs, I concentrated on obtaining the
signed permission of the principal of each school. In addition, I also focused on the identification of research participants and provided them with the requisite forms to have signed and to sign themselves. Getting the students to return the signed consent forms to me proved a difficult task; students were either absent, routinely forgot to take them home, left them in their folders, or lost them altogether. As such, valuable data collection time was spent trying to complete paperwork. Once the paperwork was complete, I began surveying the research participants at each school. Students completed the survey in a matter of minutes and generally needed very little assistance and/or clarification. As surveys were completed, I immediately began data analysis and attempted to generate preliminary findings contained therein. Based upon the survey results, individual students were identified as possible candidates for a semi-structured targeted interview. Because each participant was required to write his/her name on the reverse side of the survey, the process of identifying individuals I would need to interview was easily facilitated. The process of interviewing research participants, then, was the last phase of data collection before final coding and data analysis.

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**Figure 3.1: Timeline of Research Cycle**
Survey Data

The sample of research respondents, which consisted of both middle school and high school students from the same urban school district, was asked to complete a short, Likert scale survey (see below and Appendix F) designed to elicit student perceptions, beliefs and points of view regarding the nature of their physical learning environment. The aim of the survey, then, was to elicit a complete sense of the degree to which students perceived their motivation, conduct and/or academic achievement were either positively or negatively affected by the condition of the built physical learning environment in which they were educated. In addition, the survey was designed to gain a sense of the degree to which students believed the school district valued their personal education and safety, as well as their beliefs regarding the overall quality of both teaching and administrative staffing at their respective schools.

Once research participants were identified and the sample was complete, I first met with participants at the middle school level and again stated the nature of my inquiry and the methods by which I would execute this inquiry. I indicated the study would begin with a survey that asked a variety of questions. Following the collection of survey data, I would conduct an individual, semi-structured interview with certain students, using the survey as a point of reference to either begin dialogue or clarify responses. Students were allotted a significant amount of time in which to complete the survey, yet most students completed the survey within minutes. Respondents were allowed to complete the survey in a setting of their choosing (i.e. library, computer lab, etc.) and, at the conclusion, were thanked for their time and reminded that I might be approaching them in the coming days/weeks to conduct an interview. Respondents at the middle
school level were receptive and enthusiastic. Surveys at the middle school level were conducted and completed within a timely fashion. At the conclusion of these events, I repeated the exact same process with the Summer Bridge students, followed by the same process with students at the high school level.

**STUDENT SURVEY**

**School Facilities and Student Achievement**

**Directions:** Read each statement and then circle the response which most closely matches your current attitudes and/or beliefs about the statement. If you are unsure about a statement or the statement does not directly apply to you, you may want to circle U for undecided.

- **SA** = Strongly Agree
- **A** = Agree
- **U** = Undecided
- **D** = Disagree
- **SD** = Strongly Disagree

1. It is important for schools to be neat, clean and in good physical condition.

2. The overall condition of a school building affects my motivation level.

3. Schools which are neat, clean and in good physical condition have better teachers and principals.

4. My personal safety could be better guaranteed in a school which is in good physical condition.

5. A teacher could teach better in a school in good physical condition.

6. My personal behavior and conduct while I am in school is influenced by the condition of my physical surroundings.

7. My home school is in good physical condition.

8. I could learn better in a school which is neat, clean and in good physical condition.

9. Most students would behave properly in a school which is in good physical condition and is visually appealing.
10. Most students would learn more and achieve at higher levels if the schools they attended were in good physical condition.

11. The condition of my school building is related to the school district’s overall concern for my education.

12. Most students would feel safer if they attended a school in good physical condition.

13. Most students would be more motivated to succeed academically if they attended schools in good physical condition.

14. I consider it important for the school I attend to be in good physical condition.

**Figure 3.2: Survey Instrument**

**Interview Data**

As previously indicated, the participant survey was designed to provide a brief synopsis of respondent viewpoints regarding the research topic. Surveys were used for purposes of quickly identifying student attitudes, beliefs and perceptions and for making general comparisons amongst students at the middle school and high school levels. Accordingly, and by way of contrast, the purpose of the interview was to approach the research topic from an alternative theoretical positioning—that being the thoughts and ideas expressed by students—while expanding upon, clarifying and/or verifying survey responses. The ultimate goal was to allow conceptually important ideas and issues to emerge and become situated within the confines of a rich and meaningful discussion of lived experience which would, in turn, generate “thicker” descriptions of lived experience.
The semi-structured interviews, then, were conducted in various informal settings within the school building (library, student center, vacant classrooms, etc.) and were aimed at constituting the substantive frame of the study. In other words, the goal was to ask research participants questions which would explore a concrete set of ideas, with the end goal being to learn more about the area of study and to illuminate thoughts which were previously unknown and/or uncertain. Whereas survey results were used for purposes of preliminary coding and drawing comparisons, interviews were used to generate “thicker” descriptions of various experiences and phenomena. Along these lines, Weiss (1994) indicates that because “fuller responses obtained by the qualitative study cannot be easily categorized, their analysis will rely less on counting and correlating and more on interpretation, summary and integration” (p. 3). To this end, the findings of the interview portion of this study were supported more by quotations and descriptions than numerical representations. And, as the focus of the interviews conducted for this study was to “tailor [the] interview to each respondent, [so as to] gain in the coherence, depth, and density of the material each respondent provides,” (Weiss, 1994, p. 3) the final analysis should provide readers with a deeper and more thorough understanding of the personal accounts that only these respondents could provide.

The technical means by which interview data were recorded involved a digital audio recorder [Olympus Pearlcorder J300] designed to record conversations at length. Participant interviews were audio-recorded, with parent permission, but were not videotaped. Interview data were retained in multiple formats throughout the study, both for archival and security purposes. At the conclusion of each student interview,
data were stored and categorized via name, date, and time of recording on a portable flash drive. This process was followed by the creation of an alternate copy which was stored in a file on the hard-drive of the researcher’s computer. The interviews were also saved on multi-media discs, effectively creating three copies of each interview. The goal was to protect new data from being compromised or lost due to theft or technical malfunction. The conversations were obviously important to the students, myself, and the study—in this context, extensive and appropriate measures were taken to ensure both the privacy and safety of accumulated data.

Student Observation Data

In addition to utilizing both survey and interview methodologies to arrive at a solid understanding of the phenomena under investigation, it became clear that I would need to incorporate a third, yet distinctly different, method via which I could study the students and their perceptions regarding the aforementioned research topic. I decided early on that I would thus engage in the business of observing students in their educational environment. While I knew that this environment was merely an extension of their regular school setting, observing students in their Summer School buildings and classrooms was the only available option.

To the extent that qualitative research is “inherently multimethod in focus . . . the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 5). The decision, then, to employ a third method of collecting data in this research study was implemented so as to “add rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth” to the
research study and to also enable the reader to become familiar with the phenomena “through its representations” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.5). Student observations also provide the reader with a more contextualized understanding of that which was articulated by respondents via the survey and interview processes.

Most student observations commenced during the second of five successive research cycle phases. As I began speaking with students who had been identified as willing research participants, and as I entrusted to their care the parent consent forms, I began to notice and record student behaviors. During and after any interaction with the research participants, I wrote in a journal designated for recording related activity. I was interested in the manner in which students interacted with their educational environment as well as their peers, teachers and administrator. Various commentary and seemingly aberrant actions were thus recorded and reviewed rather consistently to arrive at a sense of meaning and clarity and to provide readers with an accurate depiction of all observable data.

Researcher Presentation of Self and Study

As previously stated, and because common characteristics of qualitative research include flexibility and the ability to maintain responsiveness in various situations as they arise, I chose to present myself and my study in a manner that reduced my “position” as an assistant principal within the Columbus City Schools. Instead, I emphasized my role as a student—someone learning about the field of education. As a researcher, I felt strongly that essential to the overall success of my research was the manner in which I presented both myself and the study. To this end, and to further establish myself as an adult learner, I chose to present the study as a shared experience embarked upon by the
students and myself. As it were, high levels of student engagement and the return of “fat data” (Lather, 2005, in conversation) were each largely dependent upon how the study was presented to research participants.

Rapport and Research Participants

Fontana and Frey (1994) suggest that as the “goal of . . . interviewing is understanding, it becomes paramount for the researcher to establish rapport. He or she must be able to put him- or herself in the role of the respondents and attempt to see the situation from their perspective, rather than impose the world of academia and preconceptions upon them. Close rapport with respondents opens doors to more informed research . . .” (p. 367). In this respect, my time in the aforementioned field sites was both comfortable and productive in that I came to feel relatively at ease with the dialogic nature of the research and wanted to encourage the emergence of student voice and narrative. Before students were surveyed and/or interviewed, I spent some time conversing with them about a host of non-academic topics intended to “break the ice” and develop a sense of mutual trust and respect. The rapport I worked to develop between myself and the student research participants seemed to facilitate the research methodology in that students were willing to discuss various topics and expand upon relevant ideas.

Along these lines, Gergen and Gergen (2000) conclude that as researchers’ methodologies become increasingly sensitive to the “. . . negotiation of meaning within any relationship as potentially ramifying outward into the society, individual agency ceases to be our major concern” (p. 1042). Implicit in this statement is the notion that
the creation of a shared reality may often become less associable with the individualist tradition and, instead, develop into a more relational and transactive process. Through subverting methodological individualism (Gergen and Gergen, 2000), a new form of consciousness develops which celebrates connectivity and dialogue and the potential impact findings may have upon society. Establishing and developing a rapport with research participants, then, seems paradigmatically aligned with the relational and transactive processes which acknowledge that this method of research is less about individualistic endeavors than it is about an actual result of the combined efforts of the researcher and the researched.

Data Coding and Analysis

In using narrative data to make theoretical claims about the phenomena being researched for this study, it became necessary to regard the texts as “social facts . . . produced, shared, and used in socially organized ways” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 640). Analysis and interpretation of the texts collected for this research study required a system which could be utilized to make judgments about the meanings contained therein. For purposes of this study, that system of analysis was coding. Yet deciding which of the collected texts to use for data coding, interpretation and analysis ultimately became laborious in that there seemed to be value in much of the texts. While Ryan and Bernard (2000) contend that “a single case may be sufficient to display something of substantive importance,” they cite Morse (1994) who advances the argument that researchers need only use at least six participants in studies where one is trying to understand the essence of experience. As such, the process of coding for purposes of
data reduction ultimately amounted to discovering abstract constructs—themes and subthemes—within the texts while using discourse analysis and grounded theory for additional interpretive analysis.

Discourse analysis, a recent poststructural development in interpretive theory (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), uses linguistic data and narratives to make theoretical claims regarding lived experience. Parker (2005) claims discourse analysis “provides an ideal opportunity for studying ideology in psychology, if we read it right” (p. 88). Along these lines, Parker (2005) has identified the following four ideas which are, in effect, seemingly essential to the development and implementation of systemic discourse analysis:

- develop an awareness of the multivoicedness of language instead of searching for underlying psychological processes or themes;
- recognize semiotics and the way we put language together in discussions and other kinds of text;
- understand power and resistance in discourse is a way of illuminating how language keeps certain power relations in place or challenges them;
- discourse links the study of multivoicedness, semiotic construction, and resistance to power through a chain of words and images.

Not to be confused with thematic analysis, discourse analysis aims to link terms and concepts in text and utilizes concepts and theory to review the function of language in a particular passage. In any event, interview data collected during this particular study will be analyzed using tenets of discourse analysis and will facilitate ideological consideration of interviews, surveys and any other communication which ultimately proves relevant to the study.
Grounded theory, then, is an “iterative process by which the analyst becomes more and more ‘grounded’ in the data and develops increasingly richer concepts and models of how the phenomenon being studied really works” (Ryan and Bernard, 2000, p. 783). In an attempt to develop “richer concepts,” researchers code and categorize data and then link coded categories together to form theoretical models. As a model begins to develop and take form, the researcher may then use negative case analysis (Ryan and Bernard, 2000) to identify issues and either disconfirm portions of a model or suggest new connections and/or needed revisions. From this point, grounded theorists may finally display “theoretical results in maps of the major categories and the relationships among them” (Ryan and Bernard, 2000, p. 783).

Data Collection

The naturalistic setting of qualitative research often employs surveys, interviews and observations to achieve a body of data substantive enough to warrant theoretical assertions made by the researcher. The selection of methods is largely dependent upon the phenomenon under investigation (Jones, 2002) and the positionality of the ethnographer. Combining qualitative research with phenomenology is a natural process which recognizes that “phenomenology is concerned with lived experience and with uncovering the essence of a particular phenomenon. In-depth, unstructured interviews are well suited for phenomenological research” (Jones, 2002, p. 467).

In this particular study, semi-structured interviews were one method used to accumulate data. This relatively open-ended, ethnographic interview style provided me the opportunity to interact with respondents and allow various topics to enter the data.
gathering arena. Fontana and Frey (2000) maintain this method of questioning is permissible in unstructured and/or semi-structured interviews, but would constitute a “capital offense” in the world of structured interviews. With regards to this research study, conducting semi-structured interviews was ideal in that only a few questions were asked of each participant. The remainder of the time allotted for each interview was spent asking probing questions and/or exploring topics ideas advanced by each interviewee. In terms of facilitating the entire interview process, my approach was “moderately nondirective” (Fontana and Frey, 2000) in that questions were asked in a manner which provided plenty of “wait-time” and follow-up questions were designed and utilized to enhance clarity within answers and verify the accuracy of my original interpretations.

As previously mentioned, another portion of the data collected for this study included participant surveys. Surveys were used to supplement interview data and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in question. While interviews were focused upon gaining a sense of the degree to which students perceived their performance and/or motivation were influenced or affected by the physical learning environment, surveys were used to ascertain a quick, snapshot response to such phenomenon and compare such data across various demographic groups of research participants. From a methodological standpoint, I felt as though an accurate interpretation of the total picture was dependent upon both interview and survey responses. Moreover, Fontana and Frey (2000) cite Lofland (1971) when describing how qualitative researchers should embark upon collecting empirical materials: a.) researchers should take notes regularly and promptly; b.) researchers should write everything down, no matter how unimportant it
may seem at the time; c.) researchers should try to be as inconspicuous as possible in note-taking; and d.) researchers should try to analyze their field notes more frequently.

Finally, the mutual existence of multiple data collection methodologies utilized in this study provided a unique and embedded opportunity to verify the accuracy of my work as a researcher. Commonly called a “member check,” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) the coexistence of respondent surveys, interviews and observations helped to establish descriptive validity and ensure that my final interpretations were accurate depictions of collected data. And, to the extent that qualitative research participants are usually provided with an opportunity to review a researcher’s field notes and/or transcripts to check for accuracy, the mutual existence of respondent surveys and interviews in this study actually helped facilitate the member check process.

Trustworthiness

The criteria used to judge the credibility of quantitative research are distinctly different from those used to judge the credibility of qualitative research. Inherent in issues of objectivity, credibility, and validity are notions concerning the “degree to which the account reflects or depicts what the researcher is looking at” (Olesen, 2000, p. 230). For qualitative researchers, the issue of validity has reemerged as a concept called trustworthiness. In replacing validity with a more qualitative referent, Janesick (2000) offers the following discussion:

Validity in the quantitative arena has a set of technical micro-definitions… Validity in qualitative research has to do with description and explanation and whether or not the explanation fits the description. In other words, is the explanation credible? In addition, qualitative researchers do not claim that there is only one way of interpreting an event. There is no one ‘correct’ interpretation. (p. 393).
Along these lines, Lincoln and Guba (1995) have established four criteria which result in trustworthiness of research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility describes the degree to which respondents can confirm accuracy in the researcher’s portrayal of their lived experience. Transferability deals with the degree to which a researcher provides his/her readers with information able to be transferred to new situation. Dependability refers to degree to which inquiry is rational and follows logical reasoning. Confirmability demands authenticity of all relevant data and interpretative conclusions. Trustworthiness, then, is achievable via the production of social science research which can be generalized and compliments various theoretical positions.

Also contributing to the trustworthiness of data and interpretations set forth in this study was the inclusion of methods which served in a re-verification capacity. In fact, the inclusion of multiple research methods, or triangulation, in this study ensured my accuracy as a researcher via alternate methodological approaches. Facilitating the completion of the student survey and interview methodologies, in addition to ensuring that relevant observable behaviors were recorded, constituted a research triangulation or “the display of multiple, refracted realities simultaneously . . . [so that] each of the metaphors ‘works’ to create simultaneity rather than the sequential or linear” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 6). The goal was to provide readers with a multi-faceted view of related data which would, in turn, invite them to “explore competing visions of the context [and] become immersed in and merge with new realities to comprehend” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 6).

Finally, the manner in which data were “member checked” helped to ensure the inclusion of language which most accurately captured the essence of that which was
studied. Janesick (2000) has indicated that implicit in the member check process is the “psychometric assumption that the trinity of validity, generalizability, and reliability . . . are to be adhered to in research” (p. 393). Although researchers have formally rejected notions of validity in qualitative studies by advancing arguments which indicate there is “no single correct interpretation” (Wolcott, 1995) and that the “traditional view of generalizability limits the ability to reconceptualize the role of social science in education and human services,” (Janesick, 2000, p. 394) the goal in this research study was to arrive at an informed—and accurate—understanding of the degree to which urban students felt their achievement had either been compromised or facilitated by the environment in which they were educated.

**Ethical Considerations**

Regarding issues of ethical research practices (and because the goal of this research study was to arrive at an approach which would yield results capable of combining to form a synthesis of lived experience and theory), I approached this study from a particular theoretical platform and was naively sure that participant interviews, surveys and data analysis would validate my theories. In stark contrast to this reality, however, collected data actually revealed a number of otherwise credible interpretations and analyses. Along these lines, Hodder (2000) has suggested that the following components are essential in the evaluation of material data: a.) identifying the contexts within which things have similar meaning, b.) recognizing similarities and differences, and c.) the simultaneous evaluation of the relevance of general or specific historical theories to the data at hand. Hodder (2000) also contends that the interpreter is often
faced with material data which are “patterned along a number of different dimensions simultaneously” (Denzin and Lincoln, p. 710) and the researcher is responsible for evaluating these contextual variations and theory regardless of the “rules of representation” which are built from “patterns of association and exclusion.” Triangulation and member checks—both employed in this study—may thus help keep researchers grounded in practice, theory, and ethical considerations.

**Data Analysis**

The process of sifting and sorting through various data proved detailed and laborious. Exhaustive field notes and documents provided an extraordinarily rich accumulation of material which needed to be reviewed. Reviewing the accumulated data required categorizing data into multiple categories to facilitate a clear, precise development of emergent themes and reporting of relevant findings. Relatedly, Erickson (1986) contends there are nine essential elements of reporting fieldwork research, primarily centered and focused upon the role of the reader as a research coanalyst. The inadequacy or absence of any one of these elements shall limit the reader’s ability to “understand the case and to judge the validity of the author’s interpretive analysis” (Erickson, p. 146). The essential elements of reporting fieldwork research are as follows: empirical assertions, analytic narrative vignettes, quotes from field notes, quotes from interviews, synoptic data reports (maps, frequency tables, figures), interpretive commentary which frames particular descriptions, interpretive commentary which frames general descriptions, theoretical discussion, and reporting the natural history of inquiry in the study.
In adhering to Erickson’s nine essential elements of reporting fieldwork research, I decided to approach data from a reductionist perspective which was instrumental in maintaining the integrity of the entire project. This perspective afforded me the opportunity to consider data reduction processes as an opportunity to eliminate irrelevant and/or frivolous data. This process also allowed me to narrow my investigative focus and retain only information of particular relevance to the study. Interestingly, I decided a conservative approach where the reduction of data was concerned could possibly endanger the credibility and transferability of my entire study. As I was not interested in reducing data to the point of compromising the integrity of my study, I readily became engaged in the process of “coding” data.

Upon careful review of my data corpus, I noticed several recurrent themes in the surveys and interviews and thus was able to develop categories, or codes, which housed and organized emergent themes and/or sub-themes. Preliminary data coding revealed there was a need to further reduce relevant themes; this reduction ultimately increased data manageability. Conversely, a failure to sufficiently reduce research data could have affected the overall methodological reliability of this—or any—research project. As the data analysis portion of this study is of significant importance, relevant procedures and processes will be explicated in sufficient detail in the following chapter. The data analysis chapter will also include ontological and epistemological connections to social constructivist and critical race theories.

Summary

As previously stated, the purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how poor and minority middle school and high school students in an urban district responded
to being educated in facilities in some state of deterioration. As such, the methodological core of this study involved investigating lived experience through oral narratives, written responses and participant observations—for purposes of determining the degree to which the physical learning environment affected levels of achievement, conduct and motivation in students who attended school in a particular urban district. Although it was important to create a contextualized platform where emergent themes and patterns could take root and flourish, as co-author of the students’ lived history, I was acutely aware of the manner in which I had presented both myself and my study. Upholding and maintaining this image was important, however, of greater importance was the fact that, in the end, I wanted to achieve a level of generalizability with the findings of my study. Understanding and assessing issues of achievement, accountability and equity in urban education must be of significant concern if stakeholders are to remain committed to the increased educational achievement of children who learn within the confines of our nation’s educational infrastructure. To be sure, the voices of poor and minority children who are educated in deteriorating facilities must be heard. These voices must fill the gap between what we think and what we know about this phenomenon and what we ultimately will do to change its course.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

“Our feelings and honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most daring ideas.”
--Audre Lorde

In this study, data coding and analysis simultaneously emerged and occurred along a continuum of grounded theory methods which were employed to explain a set of phenomena under investigation—the central focus and/or goal being to develop rich concepts which would then be used to explain how phenomena work. Along these lines, Kathy Charmaz (2000) contends that grounded theory methods “consist of systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build middle range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data” (p. 509). As grounded theorists periodically develop “analytic interpretations of their data” to guide future data collection which can then be utilized to “inform and refine their developing theoretical analyses” (Charmaz, 2000), the findings explicated in this chapter will build an explanatory framework where the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of urban students educated deteriorating schools is concerned. The findings will also specify and articulate relationships amongst concepts and across the aforementioned social constructivism and critical race theories.
Survey Data

As previously indicated, middle school and high school student participants who elected to participate in this study were asked to complete a short survey designed to gain a sense of perceptions, attitudes and beliefs regarding their learning environment. The goal of the survey was to gain a sense of the degree to which urban students perceived their motivation, conduct and/or academic achievement were either positively or negatively influenced by the overall condition of the environment in which they were educated. Students were identified and chosen at random to voluntarily participate in this study. The students in this study represented almost thirty of the actual forty-four combined traditional middle schools and high schools within the Columbus Public Schools.

The following survey results were disaggregated to reflect respondents’ answers at both the middle school and high school levels. Data from eighth grade student research participants enrolled in the district’s Summer Bridge program were calculated with the high school data. The results were also combined to provide a final percentage of how students responded to each survey question. As previously indicated, the final sample consisted of thirty-nine students—fourteen at the middle school level and twenty-five at the high school level.

| 1. It is important for schools to be neat, clean and in good physical condition. |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                       | SA    | A     | U     | D     | SD    |
| Middle School Students| 78.5% | 14.2% | 7.1%  | 0%    | 0%    |
| High School Students  | 72.0% | 20.0% | 8.0%  | 0%    | 0%    |
| Combined Results      | 74.3% | 17.9% | 7.6%  | 0%    | 0%    |

Table 4.1: Results of Question #1 from the fourteen question survey
2. The overall condition of a school building affects my motivation level.

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<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Students</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Students</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Results</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 4.2: Results of Question #2 from the fourteen question survey

3. Schools which are neat, clean and in good physical condition have better teachers and principals.

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Students</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>High School Students</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
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<td>Combined Results</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
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Table 4.3: Results of Question #3 from the fourteen question survey

4. My personal safety could be better guaranteed in a school which is in good physical condition.

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<tbody>
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<td>Middle School Students</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
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<td>High School Students</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
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<td>Combined Results</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
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Table 4.4: Results of Question #4 from the fourteen question survey

5. A teacher could teach better in a school in good physical condition.

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<tr>
<td>Middle School Students</td>
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<td>14.2%</td>
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<td>High School Students</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
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<td>16.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Combined Results</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
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Table 4.5: Results of Question #5 from the fourteen question survey
6. My personal behavior and conduct while I am in school is influenced by the condition of my physical surroundings.

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<td>Middle School Students</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
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<td>Combined Results</td>
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<td>23.0%</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
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Table 4.6: Results of Question #6 from the fourteen question survey

7. My home school is in good physical condition.

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<td>33.3%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
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Table 4.7: Results of Question #7 from the fourteen question survey

8. I could learn better in a school which is neat, clean and in good physical condition.

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<tr>
<td>High School Students</td>
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<td>17.9%</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
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Table 4.8: Results of Question #8 from the fourteen question survey

9. Most students would behave properly in a school which is in good physical condition and is visually appealing.

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<td>30.7%</td>
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Table 4.9: Results of Question #9 from the fourteen question survey
10. Most students would learn more and achieve at higher levels if the schools they attended were in good physical condition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Students</td>
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<tr>
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<td>16.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
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<td>15.3%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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</table>

Table 4.10: Results of Question #10 from the fourteen question survey

11. The condition of my school building is related to the school district’s overall concern for my education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>U</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Students</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Results</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.11: Results of Question #11 from the fourteen question survey

12. Most students would feel safer if they attended a school in good physical condition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>SD</th>
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<td>50.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>High School Students</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
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<td>12.0%</td>
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<td>51.2%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
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Table 4.12: Results of Question #12 from the fourteen question survey

13. Most students would be more motivated to succeed academically if they attended schools in good physical condition.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>U</th>
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<tr>
<td>High School Students</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Results</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.13: Results of Question #13 from the fourteen question survey
14. I consider it important for the school I attend to be in good physical condition.

<table>
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<th>U</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>7.1%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Students</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Results</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.14: Results of Question #14 from the fourteen question survey

The survey data collected from student research participants was designed to give a composite image of the entire sample’s responses. The goal was to quickly learn where the majority of students fell along the continuum of possible responses, thereby allowing me to identify the outliers—students whose responses fell outside the majority—and begin the process of preliminary data analysis. Students were asked to provide demographic information, which included their names, on the back of the survey to seamlessly facilitate the identification process in the event there was a question about a particular survey response, or if the totality of responses warranted an interview.

The entire survey consisted of fourteen questions which were designed to elicit a sense of the degree to which students believed their motivation, conduct, academic achievement, and personal safety could be guaranteed, influenced and/or affected by the nature of their built physical learning environment. Students were also asked about the degree to which they believed their peers’ felt as though their motivation, conduct, academic achievement, and personal safety could be guaranteed, influenced and/or affected by the nature of their built physical learning environment. Of the remaining six questions, three asked about the quality, effectiveness and/or values of certificated faculty
at the building and district levels, while the last three asked about the relative condition of the students’ schools, as well as the general importance of ensuring that schools are “neat, clean and in good physical condition.”

Discussion of Survey Data

What follows is a single item response analysis which discusses the responses to each survey question as well as possible attendant and/or related explanations for those responses:

**Q-1. It is important for schools to be neat, clean and in good physical condition.**

In answering this particular survey question, students routinely answered in the affirmative. In fact, at the middle school level, 92.7% of all students surveyed responded that they either strongly agreed or agreed with this supposition. At the high school level, 92.0% of all students surveyed either strongly agreed or agreed with this supposition. It can thus be said that virtually all of the students surveyed value the importance of schools being presentable, in good condition and capable of facilitating the technical core of education—teaching and learning.

**Q-2. The overall condition of a school building affects my motivation level.**

Survey respondents answering this question appeared to be consistently split between the following two categorical responses: agree and undecided. At the middle school level, 64.2% of respondents agreed with the statement while another 21.4% were undecided. However, at the high school level, 40.0% of respondents agreed with the statement while 24.0% were undecided. Although 85% of middle school students and 64% of high school students fell into either of these two categories, the majority of students surveyed at each respective level agreed with the statement. Whereas gains in
student achievement are believed to be strongly correlated to student motivation, responses to this survey question indicate there is at least one other indicator of student motivation—the overall condition of a student’s physical learning environment.

Q-3. **Schools which are neat, clean and in good physical condition have better teachers and principals.**

Middle school students responding to this question overwhelmingly answered in the negative. That is, 57.1% of middle school students disagreed with the survey statement while another 21.4% were undecided. Interestingly, at the high school level, 68.0% of students either disagreed or strongly agreed with the posed statement. Whereas middle school students appeared to uniformly disagree with the statement, high school students were almost evenly split and either disagreed or strongly agreed. As the majority of student respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with question number one which assumed it was “important for schools to be neat, clean and in good physical condition,” it is possible to make the assumption that because students feel schools should be in good physical condition, they also believe only educators of lesser quality would work in schools in poorer condition.

Q-4. **My personal safety could be better guaranteed in a school which is in good physical condition.**

Regarding this survey question, 50.0% of all middle school respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement while another 42.8% of students were undecided. At the high school level, 80.0% of all students either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. It can thus be said that half of the middle school students
surveyed believed their personal safety could be “better guaranteed in a school which is in good physical condition” while virtually all of the high school students surveyed were also in agreement with this statement.

Q-5. A teacher could teach better in a school in good physical condition.

In answering this particular survey question, students again answered in the affirmative. At the middle school level, 71.3% of students surveyed responded that they either strongly agreed or agreed with this supposition. At the high school level, 56.0% of all students surveyed either strongly agreed or agreed with this supposition. Interestingly, in question number three students either disagreed or were split evenly between disagreeing or strongly agreeing as to whether or not schools in “good physical condition have better teachers and principals.” By way of contrast, answers to survey question number five seem to indicate most students believe once teachers are in schools in good condition, they are more effective in their positions.

Q-6. My personal behavior and conduct while I am in school is influenced by the condition of my physical surroundings.

At the middle school level, there was an even distribution of student responses which seemed to indicate students were varied in their opinions. Interestingly, 21.4% of students strongly agreed, agreed and disagreed with the posed statement while another 28.5% of students were undecided. High school respondents were somewhat less evenly distributed over three possible responses in that 36.0% disagreed, 24.0% agreed, and 20.0% were undecided.
Q-7. My home school is in good physical condition.

With respect to this question, students were verbally told that their “home school” was the school they attended for the majority of the preceding school year. Students were aware of the fact that the question was not referring to their Summer School site. At the middle school level, exactly 28.5% of students surveyed agreed and disagreed with the statement (for a combined total of 57%). And at the high school level, 36.0% of students disagreed while 24.0% agreed with the statement. As a result, over half of the students surveyed at each level neatly fell into two categories when answering this question.

Of particular mention is the fact that students who either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement also verbalized this sentiment. It was not uncommon to hear an “Oh, no” or “Yeah, right” as students answered this question. In fact, when students who would eventually disagree or strongly disagree with the statement actually read number seven, they would generally look up at me and laugh or smile as if to communicate embarrassment of the school they attended and/or to say, “Are you kidding me?”

Q-8. I could learn better in a school which is neat, clean and in good physical condition.

A significant number of middle school (42.8%) and high school (44.0%) student respondents answered that they agreed with this statement. In addition, another 24.0% of high school students indicated that they strongly agreed with the statement. Not a single respondent claimed they strongly disagreed with the statement. While the combined results indicated that 17.9% of middle and high school students were undecided and inclined to disagree with the statement (for combined total of 35.8%), the
combined majority of students (43.5%) \textit{agreed} and in so doing revealed another variable implicit in increasing student achievement for themselves, as well as for other students.

Q-9. \textbf{Most students would behave properly in a school which is in good physical condition and is visually appealing.}

In responding to this question, students at both the middle school and high school levels were evenly distributed along the following three response categories: \textit{agree}, \textit{undecided} and \textit{disagree}. The data suggest roughly one-third of the student responses at each level (middle school and high school) fell into each of the three aforementioned response categories, thereby indicating that students either \textit{agreed} with the statement, \textit{disagreed} with the statement or were \textit{undecided}. The number of students who either \textit{agreed} (25.6%) or \textit{disagreed} (30.7%) were similar at each level.

Q-10. \textbf{Most students would learn more and achieve at higher levels if the schools they attended were in good physical condition.}

The majority (64.0%) of high school student respondents indicated they either \textit{strongly agreed} or \textit{agreed} with this statement, while 50.0% of middle school students surveyed indicated they also either \textit{strongly agreed} or \textit{agreed} with the statement. Not one student \textit{strongly disagreed} and only a small amount of those surveyed indicated they were \textit{undecided}. Responses to this statement were consistent with responses to an earlier statement which read, “I could learn better in a school which is neat, clean and in good physical condition.” Students thus not only believed they could increase their own academic achievement in appropriate educational facilities, but they also indicated they believe their peers would perform at higher levels if they, too, were educated in schools which were in good physical condition.
Q-11. The condition of my school building is related to the school district’s overall concern for my education.

While 71.4% of middle school students responded that they either agreed with (35.7%) or were undecided (35.7%) where this statement was concerned, the majority of high school students (52.0%) indicated they agreed with the same statement. The numbers, however, were significant enough to suggest that students believe there is a positive correlation between the condition of their physical learning environment and the degree to which school district administrators and/or officials are concerned with the educational and personal achievement of students.

Q-12. Most students would feel safer if they attended a school in good physical condition.

In answering this particular survey question, students routinely answered in the affirmative. In fact, at the middle school level, 85.7% of all students surveyed responded that they either strongly agreed or agreed with this supposition. At the high school level, 76.0% of all students surveyed either strongly agreed or agreed with this supposition. It can thus be said that a significant number of the students surveyed believe their peers would feel safer if they attended school in a facility which was in good condition.

Q-13. Most students would be more motivated to succeed academically if they attended schools in good physical condition.

Regarding this survey question, most middle school students (85.6%) either strongly agreed or agreed that their peers would be “more motivated to succeed academically” if the educational facilities in which they were educated were not in some state of deterioration and/or disrepair. Conversely, there was a marked degree of variance in the responses of high school students. The responses indicated that 20.0%
strongly agreed, 36.0% agreed, 24.0% were undecided and 20.0% disagreed with the statement. The variance could account for the analytical maturity of high school students, who are capable of considering multiple variables to explain human behavior.

Q-14. I consider it important for the school I attend to be in good physical condition.

Perhaps not surprisingly, students at both the middle school and high school level responded in the affirmative to this question. The data revealed that 85.6% of middle school students either strongly agreed (57.1%) or agreed (28.5%) with this statement. At the high school level, the data revealed that 72.0% of students stated they either strongly agreed (36.0%) or agreed (36.0%) with the statement. The relatively strong affirmative response to this survey statement seems to indicate that students, irrespective of grade level, routinely place value upon the physical condition of the schools in which they are educated.

Summary of Survey Data

As previously mentioned, survey data collected for this research study was intended to provide a simple composite of the degree to which students felt they had been impacted, either positively or negatively, by the physical condition of their learning environment. The survey data contained useful information and was able to provide me with a logical point of entry into the discussions and analyses which were to follow. Post-survey interviews were “targeted” in that I decided to interview only those with whom I knew I needed to have a discussion. The targeted interviews also provided me with an opportunity to ensure research validity in that the interview process was largely
based upon survey responses. In a sense, the interviews served a dual role and purpose—to acquire more data and simultaneously member check the previously acquired survey data.

**Interview Data**

As previously indicated, participant surveys were designed and administered to provide a brief synopsis of respondent viewpoints regarding the said research topic. Surveys were used for purposes of quickly identifying student attitudes, beliefs and perceptions and for making general comparisons amongst students at the middle school and high school levels. The surveys also provided me with an opportunity to approach the research topic from an informed platform—supported and strengthened by student perspective—whereby I could expand upon, clarify and/or verify the kids’ own survey responses. The more prominent goal was to allow important ideas and issues to emerge and become situated within the confines of a rich and meaningful discussion of lived experience which was initiated by survey responses.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in various informal settings within the Summer School buildings (library, student center, vacant classrooms, etc.) and were intended to explore a concrete set of ideas about the students’ own learning environment and possible connections to motivation, conduct and achievement. The interviews were targeted in that after reviewing the surveys administered to all grade levels, I made decisions regarding who exactly I would need to interview. In the interest of time, and because of the condensed timeframe under which the Columbus Public Summer School program operates, I decided to not interview every student who
completed a survey. It seemed more prudent to generate “thicker” descriptions of various experiences and phenomena by engaging in more in-depth conversations with fewer students, as opposed to talking briefly with every single student research participant—which was, in effect, accomplished via the survey process.

Coding Categories

As the central aim of coding in qualitative research is to associate that which is articulated by the respondent to the “concepts and categories that will appear in the report,” (Weiss, 1994) the manner in which data were coded in this research study was largely dependent upon the theoretical assumptions and general context of the study. Working within the substantive frame of the study, I often discovered myself creating contextual codes during the interview process. As student research participants talked of their feelings, attitudes and beliefs regarding the topics of discussion, I noticed that I was mentally and silently generating codes as students spoke. In this respect, data analysis was continuous—especially to the extent that coding “disaggregates the data, breaks it down into manageable segments and identifies or names those segments . . . although it is impossible to identify or name without at least an implicit conceptual structure, coding is often classified as relatively descriptive . . . depending on the degree of interpretation” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 16).

Each of the codes used for this research study were either content-specific or context-sensitive—meaning the codes were either derivative of the research area or of the dialogue between the researcher and the researched. The content-specific method of coding is derived “directly by the social inquirer from the language of the problem area or theoretical field” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 16). By way of contrast, however, the context-
sensitive method of coding considers the "actual language of respondents to generate the codes (Schwandt, 1997, p. 16). To these ends, the qualitative research codes which were used for this research study were embedded in either content or context and were thus appropriately categorized into each of those domains. The five codes which were content-specific were the following: safety, teacher effectiveness, educational resources, academic focus, and student expectations. In addition, the five codes which were context-sensitive were as follows: intrinsic motivation, learning space, comfort, peer behavior, and facility standards.

Descriptions of Codes

The following is a description of each code and the auspices under which that particular code was assigned to either the research study content or context:

1. Safety ~ This code was attributed to interview dialogue in which participants made reference to either their own personal safety, the safety of others, or the general safety of their built physical learning environment.

2. Teacher Effectiveness ~ On several occasions, student participants mentioned their teachers and what they perceived to be their role in educating students in substandard educational facilities and regardless of the actual environment. To this end, such talk was coded under teacher effectiveness.

3. Educational Resources ~ To the extent that students frequently communicated a need to have appropriate educational resources—commonly referred to as textbooks, laboratory equipment and technology—this code reflects student mention of either the need for such resources or the perceived presence or absence of such educational items.
4. Academic Focus ~ Student research participants frequently discussed the need for personal accountability of their own education. Students verbally communicated a need to maintain a sharp focus not influenced by the condition of their immediate educational surroundings. To this end, such dialogue was coded as academic focus.

5. Student Expectations ~ This research code was attributed to interview dialogue which centered upon students’ own expectations for their learning environment(s).

6. Intrinsc Motivation ~ This research code reflects student mention of the need to self-motivate and achieve despite factors which are beyond student control.

7. Learning Space ~ Student research participants routinely made mention of the need for significant personal learning space and specifically indicated a desire and need for larger classrooms. All related commentary, then, was effectively coded as learning space.

8. Comfort ~ In instances where students mentioned they would “feel better if . . . ” certain accommodations and/or improvements were made for the betterment of their physical learning environment, responses were coded as comfort.

9. Peer Behavior ~ In interview dialogue with student research participants, frequent mention was made about the conduct of other students and the degree to which their behavior amounted to a distraction from individual student learning. Student commentary which referenced these concerns was thus coded as peer behavior.

10. Facility Standards ~ As students in this research study often communicated and/or discussed what they perceived to be minimum levels of acceptable facility standards, related comments were subsequently coded as facility standards.
Frequency of Codes

In coding interview data provided by student research participants, each code was accompanied by a specific number of instances in which the topic was broached. As detailed below, some codes surfaced regularly while others were hardly mentioned at all. To be sure, each code needed to appear in student dialogue a minimum of three times to warrant consideration in data analysis. The table which follows thus lists each code and its attendant frequency within the confines of this research study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th># of Occurrences</th>
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<td>Safety</td>
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<td>Educational Resources</td>
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<td>Academic Focus</td>
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<td>Intrinsic Motivation</td>
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<td>Student Expectations</td>
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<td>Learning Space</td>
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Table 4.15: Frequency of Codes

Discussion of Interview Data

The data which were collected during the interview portion of this research study will be discussed relative to the descriptive codes which precede this section. Interview data will also be discussed relative to the frequency of such codes. As previously mentioned, semi-structured interviews were included in the methodology of this research study to explore a concrete set of ideas about learning environments and possible connections to student motivation, conduct and achievement. The interviews were targeted in that not every student who was surveyed was interviewed. Working under a condensed timeframe rendered it necessary to engage in more in-depth conversations
with fewer students, as opposed to talking briefly with every single research participant. As such, a total of thirty-nine students were surveyed and a total of fifteen students were interviewed at length. The following discussion will be descriptive in nature and will detail interview responses—at both the middle school and high school levels—relative to extensive data analysis and the emergent frequency of descriptive coding. The following table depicts a representation of pupils who participated in the interview process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.16: Interview Participants
Safety

Middle School: Although interviewed separately, each of the middle school students collectively responded to the issue of safety within their urban schools. Students took particular issue with the fact that roofs leaked, ceilings appeared buckled and warped from water damage, floor tiles were routinely missing and restroom facilities were not in appropriate working order. One student, Kenny, indicated that he felt as though his personal safety could be better guaranteed in a school which was in good condition. He stated, “If the school is in good condition, nothing would be falling on your head.” Kenny also indicated, “If the building was in good condition, then I wouldn’t be looking at its flaws. I would be listening to the teacher instead of looking at things.”

Offering another perspective, one male student indicated that while he felt as though the interior of his school was relatively safe, he was particularly concerned with the neighborhood in which it was located. He stated that his mother became anxious and unnerved when she transported him to and from school. He offered the following sobering account: “Earlier in the school year, there were gang-bangers and they were shooting outside of our school. You could hear it, too. We had to lock down and everything. And one time this guy walked into the school and we had to lock down then, too. The school even had to send a letter home.”

High School: Students at the Summer Bridge and High School levels offered similar sentiments and connected building safety to financial issues. A seventeen-year-old male student who attended a high school on the city’s north side stated, “I understand it’s money. You know, you have to put everything into it. So no matter how much they want you to, you know, get a good education, if they don’t have the money, they can’t really
take care of the building for you.” While most respondents talked about the overall safety of their educational facility and how it impacted them on a daily basis, the few who expanded the topic to include the district’s financial obligations and limited resources also indicated they felt the school district was doing all it could to provide decent learning environments for students.

**Educational Resources**

**Middle School:** Offering a positive and mature account of her inner-city education, Ashanti, a middle school Summer School student, indicated that as long as “You have enough books and enough things to support every student, then that’s good. At least you’re doing something that can help everybody. If you can get us through that grade and pass us on, it is fine.” Interestingly, students who spoke of educational resources seem to link the availability of such resources to an improved learning environment.

As students broached the topic of safety within their own educational learning environments, they often made comments which seemed to suggest that the mutual existence of potentially hazardous safety issues within the school setting and the presence of quality educational resources actually cancelled each other out. In other words, a significant number of students who expressed concern regarding the physical condition of their built learning environment also indicated that the presence of quality educational resources (students frequently referenced books, chalkboards, lab equipment, computers and teachers) made substandard learning conditions tolerable in that the school was equipped with items essential for student learning.

**High School:** At the high school level, a student by the name of Michael summarily indicated that, “It shouldn’t really matter what the school looks like. As long as you are
learning and getting your education so you can pass on to different grades, it really shouldn’t matter. It’s just a school. As long as you got your books and a board, you’re good and fine; you don’t need nothing else. Well, maybe some chairs.”

**Academic Focus**

**Middle School:** Students with whom I spoke during the interview portion of data collection seemed acutely aware of their personal responsibility to acquire a quality education and increase their own academic achievement. In one such interview, a middle school female attempted to explain how she maintains a steadfast approach to success in most of her academic classes. Ashanti indicated, “I do things on my own. No one can make me do anything. If I want to skip class, I’ll skip class. If I want to make the grades, I can. I can do the work and I choose to do the work.”

**High School:** Paradoxically, a female Summer Bridge student with whom I spoke indicated during her interview that her ability to concentrate while in school is largely affected by conditions over which she has no control. Asia stated, “The condition of my school is very important because if you can’t concentrate on your work and your tests and studying . . . then you are focusing on how hot it is. When it was winter, they would turn the air conditioner on [because it was too hot], but when it was summer they would turn the air conditioner off. That heat kind of wears you down.”

**Intrinsic Motivation**

**Middle School:** This code reflects discussion which centered upon students’ own ability and capacity to internally motivate and accomplish educational goals. In our individual interviews, several students mentioned their ability to self-motivate and find success in spite of adverse situations and/or circumstances, both in school and out of school. At the
outset, I considered this a bit ironic in that most (but certainly not all) of the students enrolled in Summer School were there because of previously demonstrating a marked inability to accomplish prescribed academic goals.

Along these lines, I interviewed one twelve-year-old female student, Ashanti, who attended Summer School on the city’s east side. Regarding personal motivation, she held the opinion that “It doesn’t matter how the school is. It depends on how you act and which way you interact with your schoolwork and how you do things.” My continued discussions with Ashanti and several of her peers seemed to slowly unearth pupil solidarity where intrinsic motivation was concerned. In fact, students seemed to feel very strongly about their ability to self-motivate and even indicated the condition of their learning environment was not and/or had not been a deterrent in attempting to increase their own individual academic achievement.

**High School:** High school students with whom I spoke also alluded to a perceived, innate ability to self-motivate despite adverse situations and/or conditions. Moreover, one female student with whom I spoke at the high school level indicated that personal motivation was often just as important as the condition of the school building in which she was educated. Shavonne succinctly echoed similar sentiments which had been previously articulated by a significant number of her peers; she concluded by offering the following, “It really depends on how much determination and drive you have to get your work done . . . [the condition of the learning environment] doesn’t mean you don’t have to succeed.”
Student Expectations

Middle School: Another idea which surfaced in my interviews with respondents was the notion of what schools “should have.” According to students, items which were deemed key elements in the daily operations of schools included quality teachers and administrators, as well as appropriate educational resources. Although each received its own code within the parameters of this study, there were slightly divergent—and more conceptually “loose”—variations of the same theme. Most of these variations received their own code, if the occurrence level was three or higher.

Comments, then, which seemed to advance a generic notion of what schools “should have” were coded as student expectations. One example of such is from that of a middle school student, Jalisa, who indicated that, “Every place is going to have their niches and all that other stuff. You can’t expect everything to be perfect. Some stuff, you have to just—if it’s not that important, then it should be alright.”

High School: Thomas, a nineteen-year-old student taking summer school courses in order to earn the diploma he should have earned a year ago, indicated that when his mother and grandmother “Come up to the school to see me and drop stuff off to me, they’re like, ‘Why’s this out there? Why is this like that? Why is this trashed?’” Referring to the unkempt tendencies of the front of the school, Thomas says, “Like right now, there’s a La-Z-Boy chair sitting out front and a board—nobody knows why it’s there. The chair’s got trash all over it, making it look all bad. You clean that out and it’s gone. It’s a nice little . . . it looks like it’s just got landscaping to it.”
Teacher Effectiveness

Middle School: Students at the middle school level did not voice any particular concerns about the overall effectiveness of their teachers. Only a small portion of interviewees advanced a response when/if the conversation turned to building level faculty. Most of the students’ responses were merely one or two word answers and the number of positive responses equaled the negative ones.

High School: In the course of my discussions with Thomas, he indicated that he felt as though districts with better facilities were able to attract higher quality teachers. He argued, “You want to represent something that’s great—like you can be proud of. You don’t want to say, ‘Oh I teach at that trashy school right there.’ You don’t want to say, ‘Yeah, I have five graduating seniors every year.’ You want to say, ‘Yeah, I’ve got the largest graduating class of all the schools.’” Another student, Shavonne, indicated that “Some teachers, they’ll look at it from a different way. If they see they have a school where students want to learn, and it’s in a bad neighborhood or it’s all run down, they might want to help.”

Comfort

Middle School: In a revelatory exchange between myself and one middle school respondent named Ethan, a simple question was posed which asked the student how attending a school in poor condition made him feel. In answering this question, Ethan promptly responded, “It makes me feel like I don’t want to be there.”

High School: In a similar vein, Vincent, a fifteen-year-old Summer Bridge student, indicated that his desires for his own learning environment are that it “should be clean and kept neat.” That same student said that “when the building is neat and clean and I
feel good in it, then it makes me also feel safer.” In a follow-up question, I asked if there was anything else Vincent desired for his ideal learning environment. I also asked if there was anything else he was aware of that would make his own education more equitable. He laughed and said, “Yeah. Air conditioning.”

In reviewing the data, it seemed as though the comments from these two boys adequately summarized the comments of other students. Respondents unilaterally indicated they desired to feel comfortable in their educational environment. Students seemed eager to find a degree of mental and physical comfort in their surroundings.

**Facility Standards**

**Middle School:** In articulating their conceptualization of how school facilities are supposed to look and function, students routinely discussed concerns which were connected to aesthetics. To a lesser degree, students would also discuss mechanical operations and functions. It seemed as though these children were easily able to arrive at an informed understanding of the manner in which the school should look, function and serve.

Relatedly, Ethan indicated that, “Kids don’t want to learn stuff and they won’t, you know, they don’t want to learn in some crappy environment. They want to have nice, clean swept floors. If you have, like, paper wads all over the floor and, you know, you don’t have good cleaning in school—that’s even a temptation to pick it up and throw it at somebody.” When asked on a scale of 1-10, if he could rate the school he attended last year in terms of the acceptableness of the facility, Ethan answered, “On a scale of one to ten, probably around a six. I mean it still looked like a prison . . . the floors could have been done ‘cause some of the classrooms had no tiles on the floor. For the most part, I
think that schools should do group things, like paint the walls or something once in a while. Do something nice for the school. People don’t want to go in there and look at it like, ‘What kind of school is this?’”

This particular student also addressed concerns regarding what he perceived to be baseline standards for school facilities. Ethan stated, “I don’t like to look at the walls and see how rusty and nasty the pipes are. But, I mean, for other kids it may be different. Some kids are allergic to stuff and there might be fumes in there from pipes leaking.”

**High School:** A fourteen-year-old freshman with whom I spoke at the high school location downtown indicated that the upkeep of the school she attends is important to her. Shavonne indicated that, “The condition is very important because you don’t want to come to school and look at some pitiful, sad place you’ve got to be in all day. It affects your mood.” Another student, Jalen indicated that, “When you look at your school, you see how it represents you and your classmates. You know, you’re going to want to do the same exact job that the school is doing. You’re going to look at the school and be like ‘Well, look what they’re giving us. What do we want to give back to them?’ We’re not going to want to give them 100%.”

**Peer Behavior**

**Middle School:** Some students whom I interviewed for this research study alluded to peer behavior and conduct as being both a catalyst in determining their own behavior as well a distraction from accomplishing educational tasks and goals. When respondents mentioned either of the above, I coded their responses as peer behavior and noted related
concerns. While the frequency of this particular code was not high (8 for middle school and high school respondents combined), it did warrant inclusion into the discussion of interview data.

**High School:** At least one student, Thomas, indicated he wished the school district would spend more money for security guards to control peer behavior and conduct. He stated, “I would have it where there’s more security people that would be able to look in the bathrooms. ‘Cause like there is a safety hazard with the kids that smoke in school. They go in the bathrooms and smoke and kids like me, I have asthma, we can’t go in the bathroom. We gotta go find another bathroom to go to because of the smoke.” The student also indicated a need to correct peer behavior in the classroom and offered the following account, “When you’ve got the clowns sitting in the back of the classroom, cutting up . . . you’ve got kids coming to class twenty, thirty minutes late, fighting with the teacher, distracting the teacher . . . you’ve got people in class fighting, bickering back and forth, messing around . . . you’re not going to learn anything because the teacher’s distracted.”

**Learning Space**

**Middle School:** When speaking with Tasha about the environment in which she was educated last year, she articulated a strong desire to have a larger school. Her story was unique in that she had attended the same school for nine years; the school she attended was a K-8 language immersion school. I asked her if there had ever been a break in her enrollment and she answered no. From my perspective as a researcher, a nine year tenure at one school more than qualified Tasha to speak on issues of building and/or classroom
size. In fact, my conversation with Tasha revealed she felt as though her academic opportunities were actually hindered by the overall size of the school she attended.

Tasha indicated that the school “had classrooms and then a bathroom and then there was a little hall—then there was all the elementary kids. So it was just like we were all packed together. I would make it a little bit bigger—which they are doing now that I am leaving [to go to high school] . . . . The size might have affected the little kids, the elementary school kids, more than it affected the middle school students. They wanted to run up and hug and play around with the middle school students, so the size probably affected them more . . . If the school would have been a little bit bigger we might have had more classes like music and stuff like that. I would have had more opportunities.”

**High School:** Regarding her physical learning space, Shavonne indicated she would like to change the sizes of her classrooms. She said, “They say we have, like, 180 ninth graders, which isn’t a lot, but then we have so many classrooms and stuff. They try to pack a lot in each one to save space for I don’t know what. So, then you feel like you are cramped up in a box, sometimes, when they have all these other rooms— they could be spaced out or connected.” She then added, “It makes me feel irritated. Some stuff you have to ignore but then you have different personalities in the rooms . . . and the teacher may not be that good . . . but you still have to listen to what they say. And it can be all hot and everything.”

**Summary of Interview Data**

Data which were collected during the student interview process provided keen insight into the beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of urban middle school and high school students enrolled in various educational facilities across the expanse of Ohio’s capital.
city. In reviewing the frequency of codes, which provided a detailed analysis regarding the core concepts embedded in interview data, I was able to distinguish the more prevalent codes from their less prevalent counterparts. Thus, the emergence of a hierarchical, numerically-assigned order of emergent codes facilitated a concurrent explanation and/or narrative concerning the data. In the student interviews, research participants seemed to overwhelmingly communicate that their personal safety while in school was of paramount importance and/or significant concern. Students then stated that the availability of educational resources, accompanied by a personal commitment and motivation to succeed, were among the next three concerns regarding their public education. Students’ attention then returned to the educational facility and seemed to communicate a previously unspoken set of student expectations in terms of abstract needs and desires during the school day. These expectations were followed by a seemingly unified articulation of the need for effective classroom teachers capable of facilitating the educational process and increasing student achievement. Students also communicated a need to be comfortable while in school and even articulated a set of baseline facility standards amid which they felt they could function, be academically productive and socially responsible. Finally, students participating in this research study articulated a concern regarding the behavior and conduct of their peers as well as a need for adequate personal learning space.

Observation Data

As previously mentioned, the observation data collected during my daily interactions with students commenced during our initial meeting and occurred on
a regular basis throughout each phase of the research cycle. During all phases of
the research cycle, I visited approximately four to five Summer School sites per day.
During each site visit, I engaged in lengthy discussions with students about a variety of
topics related to their enrollment in the district’s Summer School program and their
simultaneous involvement and participation in my research study. The goal was to
establish and build positive relationships with student research participants so as to
facilitate topical discussions which would provide valuable insight into data collected via
the combined methodologies of participant surveys, interview and observations. Any
observable data which provided insight into the phenomena under investigation were
recorded in my researcher’s notebook, or journal, and were reviewed alongside survey
and interview data during the analysis phase of this project. Observable data were then
organized along five thematic categories which described the behavior of student
research participants at both the middle school and high school levels.

The first thematic category which seemed to aptly describe and capture the
essence of student behavior was *celebratory*. At the outset of my journey into the world
of Summer School and the requisite second-order rendering of state learning outcomes
and approved curricula, I noticed that a significant number of students in my research
study appeared somewhat elated to be in such an environment. I noted in my journal that
Ashanti, one of the middle school participants, seemed “jovial and happy every time we
speak and genuinely seems as though she is enjoying her time in Summer School.” I
noted that such behavior seemed odd in that the temperature inside the buildings
consistently and easily climbed above ninety degrees while the only possibility of relief
came via several ill-positioned fans and drinking fountains which seemed only to
dispense warm water which unfortunately tasted of various chemicals and pollutants.

In addition to Ashanti, I noted several other students, mostly female, who
communicated through body language they were having the time of their lives. When I asked a female student, Shavonne, the reason for her celebratory disposition she said she was, “Kind of glad to be here. It’s kind of like I get a second chance to get the credits I need in order to pass to the next grade. Without Summer School I would be right back in the ninth grade looking silly.” I noted her comments seemed to capture the essence of all those whom appeared to be floating on educational clouds as they passed through the halls of their respective summer institutions. It also occurred to me that some students may appear celebratory due to the fact that they were taking advanced coursework in hopes of graduating early.

The second thematic category which seemed to aptly describe and capture the essence of student behavior was respectful. Noted in my researcher’s journal was the fact that a significant portion of my student research participants appeared as though they were not quite disenchanted with their academic situation, yet they did not quite appear elated with the circumstances in which they found themselves. To me, they seemed respectful of the situation, respectful of the process and respectful of the goals established for them. In fact, they seemed adequately prepared travel the path of least resistance and willing to submit the work needed to earn passing grades. The students who most adequately fit this description were Tasha and Jalisa. When I mentioned my admiration of their mature approach to Summer School, they smiled and shrugged their shoulders. I noted in my journal that Jalisa then indicated, “We have to do the work so we can pass.
Can’t nobody do it for us. We have to do the work ourselves.” I noted that her comments spoke to two of the codes which were used to analyze interview data: academic focus and intrinsic motivation.

The third thematic category which seemed to aptly describe and capture the essence of observable student behavior was neutral. Of my thirty-nine research participants, there were approximately eight who appeared completely and utterly unaffected by their circumstances and also appeared oblivious to the urgent nature of their academic situation. Student behaviors I observed which support this claim were: failure to participate in class yet appearing to follow along with the lesson, a noticeable detachment from all social aspects of the program, wandering aimlessly through the hallways as if not expected to be at any particular location, arriving late to Summer School, submitting some assignments but not others, and maintaining a passing grade but not a good grade.

One high school student with whom I casually spoke completely personified these behaviors and, perhaps not unexpectedly, offered very little when I spoke with him about these matters. I asked Michael about his disposition and his response was that “It’s just Summer School. Credit recovery. I do the work at my own pace and when the work is done, then I’m done.” Michael seemed in no real rush to conclude the program despite the fact that several of his classmates were within a day or two of leaving the program and moving on to more exciting summertime activities. I asked him if seeing the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel increased his desire to complete the program. Michael indicated that “I guess I’ll be done when I am done. It’s not like I have anything else to do . . . get a summer job maybe? I guess I would rather do this.” I noted in my
researcher’s journal that Michael appeared to have chosen the lesser of two evils but did not really appear deeply committed to his decision. His attitude and disposition were thus recorded as neutral—as were similar behaviors which were exhibited by Michaels’ peers.

The fourth thematic category which seemed to aptly describe and capture the essence of student behavior was **apathetic**. Observable behaviors which contributed to the development of this category were generally distributed along a continuum of indicators which identified the unmotivated, the easily distracted, the uncaring, and the uncommitted. Students who appeared apathetic in their educational setting also gave a repeat performance during the interview process of this research study. To be fair, each of the students with whom I worked were all very nice and accommodating; yet, I generally found that academic tendencies and behaviors were not necessarily checked at the door when it came time to engage in data collection processes for this research study. Such observable behaviors in this category were also recorded in my researcher’s journal.

The fifth, and final, thematic category which seemed to aptly describe and capture the essence of student behavior was **disconnected**. The students I came to regard as disconnected were significantly more detached than the apathetic students. As I noted in my journal, the apathetic students were at least able to complete some menial level of school work. The students who were completely disconnected failed to complete most, if not all, of their assignments and were in danger of failing the entire Summer School program. However, within my sample of thirty-nine students, there appeared to be only a couple of students who fit this categorization.
At the middle school level, Shanice was an example of a student I labeled as being disconnected from her learning environment. She was helpful to me (perhaps because she used to attend a school in which I worked) but was significantly removed from any and all concern regarding her schoolwork. After she completed her survey one day, I took a few moments to speak with her about her academic performance and grades. Shanice smiled, laughed and then said, “I’ve already missed two days. You can only miss three in Summer School. If I miss one more, I’m done.” I immediately suggested that she collect her thoughts and regain a sense of focus. I told her there were four more weeks left in the program and that, in theory, she had to be in school every single day from that point forward. Shanice laughed and said, “I know.” She then got up and headed toward the door. I glanced down, noticed that she had left her pencil, and hurriedly exclaimed, “Shanice! You left your pencil.” As I grabbed the pencil and walked over to hand it to her, Shanice laughed again and said, “You can keep it. I won’t need it.” Completely stunned, I stood there and watched her as she walked out of the room.

I returned to that school the next day and, when I didn’t see Shanice, inquired about her attendance. Her classroom teacher indicated that she had not returned to school and that she was unaware of the reason why. I then spoke with the principal, who indicated that Shanice had exhausted her allowance of three absences and that by failing to attend school on that day, she had knowingly forfeited her right to be in the program. He indicated he had already called home and informed her grandmother of this fact. By the end of the first two weeks of Summer School, Shanice had managed to fail out of the program and earn herself a seat back in the seventh grade. I recorded these facts in my
researcher’s journal and simultaneously wondered what role, if any, the educational environment played in Shanice’s hasty decision to completely abandon her studies.

**Summary**

Data which were collected for this research study were primarily collected in three formats: survey data, interview data and observation data. Regarding the survey data collected for this research study, the fourteen question survey instrument asked a wide variety of questions and covered six different domains with respect to educational stakeholders as well as those ultimately affected by the decisions made concerning educational facilities. The six domains covered by this survey instrument were as follows: the student perspective, the peer perspective, teacher and administrator consideration, consideration for the school, district involvement, and overall facility condition. Respondent answers to questions asked within each domain appeared to either be of one accord (in their total agreement or disagreement) or evenly distributed across all categories.

Along these lines, the respondent interviews appeared relatively consistent with the survey data in that each research participant with whom an interview was conducted appeared to echo the sentiments articulated via the survey process. As previously mentioned, students who were approached for an interview were targeted for researcher purposes of ascertaining more descriptive data and engaging in deeper discussion with those whom responded to survey questions in either a consistent or wildly divergent fashion. As a researcher, I felt as though the interviews facilitated a clearer, more precise understanding of survey responses—especially the responses which reflected a
distribution across all categories—in that students were able to articulate the thought processes and patterns of reasoning which framed their survey responses. The student interview process also helped to clear attendant ambiguities embedded in the collected data.

The student observations which were recorded in my researcher’s journal also proved to be valuable data in that the actions of students within their Summer School sites added another layer of insight into the degree to which they might be affected by being educated in less than ideal educational facilities. The observation of students in an extension of their regular school setting proved difficult given the amount of data which had to be collected during the district’s 2006 Summer School session. Yet the addition of this extra layer facilitated a decisively more textured understanding of that which I was attempting to understand. In the end, the process of observing research participants proved rewarding to me as a student, as a researcher, and as an educator.

In the final analysis, the methodologies employed in this research study were designed and intended to ascertain a clear sense of the degree to which the nature of the built physical learning environment impacts student motivation, conduct and/or achievement, as well as the extent to which the condition of the learning environment impacts student perceptions or beliefs regarding those who staff and operate our public schools. Interestingly, when I compared the results of the survey I administered with the results of the school district’s 2005-2006 Eighth Grade Student Survey, I noted a marked similarity in the responses. When asked to respond to the statements (in this study) “My home school is in good physical condition,” and (in the district’s survey), “This school building is clean and well maintained,” student responses were actually very similar. In
both surveys students agreed at a rate of 28%. In my study, middle school respondents disagreed at a rate of 28% yet disagreed at a rate of 21% when responding to the district’s survey. Also, in my study, middle school respondents strongly disagreed at a rate of 14% but strongly disagreed at a rate of 22% when responding to the district’s survey. The results (a combined 42% either disagreed or strongly disagreed to the question posed in my study and a combined 43% either disagreed or strongly disagreed to a similar question posed in the district’s survey) would seem to indicate a marked consistency regarding students’ perception of the condition of their physical learning environment within the Columbus Public Schools.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“It took a lot of blood, sweat and tears to get to where we are today, but we have just begun. Today we begin in earnest the work of making sure that the world we leave our children is just a little bit better than the one we inhabit today.”

--Senator Barack Obama

This research study was conducted to understand and analyze the degree to which poor and minority middle school and high school students in an urban district responded to being educated in facilities in some state of deterioration. As such, the methodological core of this study involved investigating lived experience through oral narratives, written responses and participant observations—for purposes of determining the degree to which the physical learning environment affected levels of achievement, conduct and motivation in students who attended these particular public schools. Because understanding and assessing issues of accountability and equity in urban education must be of significant concern if we are to remain committed to the increased academic achievement of children who learn within the confines of our nation’s educational infrastructure, three essential questions were developed to guide this research study. The questions which ultimately framed and guided this research study are as follows:
1. To what extent do students perceive their academic achievement, motivation and/or personal conduct is positively or negatively affected by the condition of the facility in which they are educated?

2. In what ways does the condition of an educational facility affect students’ perceptions of the overall quality of the teaching and administrative staffing within their building?

3. In what ways does the condition of an educational facility affect students’ perceptions of the degree to which their school district values their education and personal safety?

As will be explicated in the following pages, this research study was designed to analyze relevant and applicable data acquired from student research participants who were enrolled in Columbus Public Schools’s 2006 Summer School program. Data were retrieved via a host of qualitative methodologies which came to include several administrations of student surveys, semi-structured interviews with targeted research participants, and participant observations conducted by me within the natural research setting. As data were coded and analyzed along emergent themes, connections were made to tenets of Social Constructivism and Critical Race Theory. The inclusion of these theories facilitated an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and also helped me frame answers to the research questions. The findings of this research study have revealed an interesting story unique to, and illuminated by, the student research participants themselves. Whereas this story will ultimately suggest concrete provisions for increasing student achievement via the improvement of our nation’s educational facilities, the attainment of true equity in education remains a possibility.
Participant Responses and Observations

The ensuing discussion regarding participant responses and observations will operate ontologically within the interpretivist paradigm. The discussion will center upon the core belief that there are many truths and that discourse is “dialogic and [therefore] creates reality” (Sipe and Constable, 1996). To facilitate this discussion, tenets of phenomenology, or the “study of structures of experience or consciousness” (Smith, 2003), will be employed in an attempt to explain the appearance of “things” and/or how “things” appear in our experience. Because phenomenology is concerned with the presence of universal themes which emerge from shared experiences and the subsequent analysis and representation of co-constructed data, my overriding goal as a researcher in this study was to move toward the formulation of precise and accurate interpretive descriptions via an awareness of my own positionality within the study.

In achieving these ends, the creation of a complete image which captured the lived experiences of research participants allowed me to assume a constructive role in fostering a phenomenological understanding of the “essences” in question. Creating this image thus began with having students answer fourteen carefully-designed survey questions. The survey process was followed by conducting semi-structured, targeted interviews with approximately half of the survey respondents. These processes were accompanied by the simultaneous collection of participant observation data which were recorded in a journal. The utilization of several data collection strategies within the confines of this study allowed various themes to emerge and result in a composite image of student experience which reflected even the most subtle nuances associated with being educated in deteriorating educational facilities.
The composite image I was able to generate as a result of analyzing data which included surveys, interviews and observations told the story of thirty-nine urban students who had some experience with being educated in deteriorating or substandard educational facilities within the largest school district in central Ohio. The story began with thirty-nine students who were regularly enrolled in schools geographically situated within each of the district’s five attendance quadrants: west, east, north, south and central. Within the group of thirty-nine were fifteen females and twenty-four males. The racial identity of the group was decidedly African-American with ten Caucasian students, one Latino student and one Asian student. And, as previously indicated, the story they told was derivative of their combined experience and representation of almost thirty different middle schools and high schools throughout the school district.

Before, during, and after I administered the student surveys and conducted interviews with research participants, I engaged in conducting covert observations of both middle school and high school research subjects. Pertinent information was recorded in a small journal and was reviewed often. In an attempt to categorize the observable behaviors of the students, I generated five categories which I felt aptly described the recorded demeanor of each student. The five categories are as follows: celebratory, respectful, neutral, apathetic, and disconnected. Pursuant to each of the five categories, student behavior routinely fit these descriptions and did not appear to fall outside these categorizations.

In my observation of these students, and in my attempt to become increasingly familiar with each student and his/her attendant behavioral categorization, I surmised that it would, perhaps, become possible to hypothesize where along the Likert scale each
student would land when it was their turn to respond to the survey instrument. I also surmised that the tone of each student’s interview would echo and/or mirror the behavioral category which had been assigned to them via observation processes. In the end, my hypotheses appeared to support a moderately strong correlation between students’ assigned behavioral categorization and the responses they submitted during both the survey and interview process. To a certain extent, then, the responses of the thirty-nine research participants were mildly predictable and generated few surprises.

However, the story the students told through their survey responses was one in which safety and the condition of their schools was of paramount concern. Student participants were in almost complete agreement that schools should be “neat, clean and in good physical condition.” They were also in agreement that the school they attended should be “in good physical condition” and that their own “personal safety could be better guaranteed in a school which is in good physical condition.” Students also acknowledged that their peers might feel safer in a well-maintained school. The students who were surveyed also agreed that the condition of their school building had an impact on their motivation. They also agreed that “most students would learn more and achieve at higher levels if the schools they attended were in good physical condition.” Finally, a significant number (24 out of 39) of students believed that a teacher would be more effective in a better environment.

Regarding the remaining six survey questions, student responses were either evenly distributed across three or more possible response categories or they were split solely amongst two categories and depicted an even divide. Whereas students were
evenly divided or split in their responses to certain survey questions, the targeted and
semi-structured interviews provided needed insight and/or clarification. For example,
the third statement on the survey read, “Schools which are neat, clean and in good
physical condition have better teachers and principals.” Student responses to this
question represented a double-digit distribution across four response categories. The
students who strongly agreed represented 23% of total respondents, while those who
agreed represented 15%. A total of 15% were undecided when it came time to give an
answer to this question, while 43% disagreed with the statement. As such, when data
analysis revealed this type of scattered responses, I ensured that my interview sample
consisted of a student(s) who could resolve ambiguities by the providing the reasoning
behind their divergent answers. The goal was to reconcile all inconclusive survey
responses via the interview process.

The interview process was, in fact, able to reconcile inconclusive survey item
responses and was also able to provide a wealth of additional information. Interview
data were analyzed and coded in concert with the verbalizations of students. During
each interview I made a note of interesting and/or recurrent themes and then these notes
were recorded in my researcher’s notebook. The notes were used during future attempts
at data analysis. Inasmuch as interview data were coded relatively soon after being
committed to audiotape, I had established a rather substantive list of codes prior to
conducting my final interview. Once the last interview was complete, I finalized my list
of codes and then counted the frequency, or number of related occurrences, within the
interview texts. The codes were then ordered by number of occurrences—high to low—and were thus able to substantiate a portion of the composite image which was soon to be advanced by the combined research methodologies.

The portion of the composite image which was attributable to the interview responses told a unique story. The story was told by the celebratory, respectful, neutral, apathetic, and disconnected student research participants who were chosen to clarify and expand upon survey responses for purposes of enhancing understanding. The emergent themes, or codes, seemed to indicate that the students who participated in my study were overwhelmingly concerned with their safety during school hours. Outside of the obvious safety concerns, students were also apprehensive about the availability of educational resources. The availability of such resources was usually mentioned in tandem with issues of academic focus and personal motivation—almost as if these were students’ own educational resources. As the story unfolded, it also became very clear that student expectations and teacher effectiveness were items of significant concern. Such items were followed by a vocalized need to be comfortable within an educational setting which readily met acceptable and predetermined facility standards. Although there was limited concern for the behavior and conduct of other students, as well as the amount of space in which a student is expected to learn, the participants nonetheless acknowledged the significance of these themes in the telling of their collective story.

Connections to Social Constructivism and Critical Race Theory

As previously mentioned, social constructivism has emerged as an alternate theory of constructivism and has legitimized the significance of social contexts in the
field of education. To the extent that social constructivists would argue knowledge acquisition is a complex process involving language, community, social interaction and other cognitive functions, social constructivism is presented in this study as a social process which significantly impacts the intellectual and social development of students. Since social processes and individual sense-making both have central and essential roles in learning (Ernest, 1994), social constructivism actually furthers our understanding of how individuals construct knowledge in response to experiences in social contexts. As shared experiences and interpersonal interaction combine to create truth and knowledge and guide students toward shared sense-making, theories of social constructivism embrace the influence of social factors while acknowledging the fact that student experiences are constantly manipulated by socialized learning situations.

One goal of this research study was to arrive at an informed understanding of which circumstances within the built physical learning environment either positively and/or negatively manipulate student experiences and/or social interaction. Because social constructivism allows us to consider the significance of social contexts within the field of education, we can consider a number of factors previously determined to have an impact upon motivation, conduct and achievement through the analysis of student interview data. However, in determining which of the social contexts lend to positive and/or negative student experiences, it thus becomes important to remember that the theoretical core of social constructivism is supported by the premise that individuals construct knowledge in response to their experiences in social contexts.
In considering the significance of social contexts which may have an impact upon student experiences, a quick review of the information presented in the analysis of student interview data revealed a variety of factors which could trouble the waters of pupil experience. One such factor was teacher effectiveness. Students routinely commented that the effects of a poor teacher far outweighed a personal desire and need to be comfortable in an educational environment. Students also indicated that teachers could be more effective in their positions were they afforded an opportunity to work in an improved environment. Another social context which could manipulate student experience is peer behavior. During the student interview process, it was not uncommon for dialogue to occasionally become fixated upon the behavior of other students. Interviewees demonstrated a peculiar penchant for discussing the behaviors of others and often seemed to amuse themselves by recounting innumerable stories and instances in which a nameless student either disrupted the learning of others or dismantled the peace and sanctity of the school building by engaging in an illicit act or two. Whatever the case, students communicated the effects they believed such circumstances had upon their own educational experiences.

Although social constructivism embraces the influence of social factors and also acknowledges the fact that student experiences are consistently manipulated by socialized learning situations, it is important to consider the degree to which these experiences actually impact knowledge construction and student achievement. The responsibility of maintaining and facilitating each lies with those involved (teachers, administrators, parents, students, etc.) and must be protected so as to ensure the educability and future success of all students. In a sense, those directly involved the educational process always
possess the power to determine the degree to which social contexts either positively or negatively impact knowledge construction and ultimately student achievement.

Along these lines, critical race theory “enacts an ethnic epistemology, arguing that ways of knowing and being are shaped by the individual’s standpoint, or position in the world. This standpoint undoes the cultural, ethical, and epistemological logic of the Eurocentric, Enlightenment paradigm” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 159). In fact, much like social constructivism holds that social contexts found within the field of education are attributed to the construction of knowledge, critical race theorists argue that ethnic ways of knowing are shaped by a person’s social position within the larger context of the world. As previously indicated, the dominant ideologies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) which capture the essence of critical race theory are as follows: a.) racism is “enmeshed into the fabric” of our American social order, b.) critical race theory departs from “traditional legal scholarship” by utilizing stories to integrate “experiential knowledge” with ongoing social struggles, c.) there must be “insistence on a critique of liberalism,” and d.) the notion that the dominant culture has been the “primary beneficiary” of civil rights legislation.

Critical race theory supports and strengthens the findings of this research study in that the premise of this theory is to tell a story of shared culture—often for the improvement of that culture. Said differently, to employ tenets of critical race theory is to also propose radical solutions for addressing the inequities found within various social contexts. To the extent that the large majority of urban students are routinely educated in substandard, deteriorating and poorly-maintained educational facilities, educational stakeholders who are also burdened with increased standards of accountability and
achievement must soon recognize their obligation to impact student learning by ensuring equitable learning conditions for all students. Although performance standards and accountability measurements have evolved and require all students, regardless of ability level and/or circumstance, to achieve at predetermined levels by predetermined dates, educators have retained some control over the type of environment students inhabit as they strive to reach these goals. Toward these ends, critical race theorists would contend that leveling the educational playing field begins and ends with achieving equity within each individual school—for the betterment of student achievement, our nation’s educational infrastructure and the larger society in which we live.

The improvement of urban educational facilities is undeniably linked to the plight of critical race theorists in that substandard pupil performance in deteriorating urban schools can be connected to the negatively affects of the built physical learning environment. Research (Edwards, 1991; Poplin and Weeres, 1992) has suggested that the depressed physical environment of many urban schools reflects society’s lack of policy and priority for urban students and their education. This school of thought also recognizes the fact that the age of urban school buildings, their deferred maintenance and dramatically reduced operating budgets have each contributed to the substandard physical nature of these schools. The students who attend these schools are usually born and raised in geographical prisons which longitudinally resign them to learning amidst deplorable conditions. It is therefore logical to assume that the conditions they are faced with when they arrive to school are often similar to the conditions they left as they prepared to come to school.
Critical race theorists would then suggest that learning amidst substandard conditions actually fosters decreased student motivation and negatively impacts the educational process of urban students. As previously mentioned, to employ tenets of critical race theory is to also bear the burden of responsibility where proposing solutions for inequitable conditions is concerned. This situation can be perceived as a social crisis constituting a “major failure of social policy, a piecemeal approach to a problem that requires a unified response” (Carnegie Foundation, 1988, p. xv). The answer to this perceived social crisis must take root in efforts to restore equity in all educational situations in which kids are involved.

Proposed Answers to Research Questions

The research questions which were developed to facilitate the investigation of certain phenomena surrounding the degree to which a student’s physical learning environment impacts his/her motivation, conduct and achievement also helped to focus inquiry and shape methodological decisions. In addition, the research questions provided a framework for the study and ultimately helped to establish the boundaries needed to maintain a sharp and clear investigative focus. What follows, then, is my attempt to answer the questions posed at the outset of this study. Answering my own research questions and drawing sound conclusions in conjunction with the application of related theoretical concepts in effect, brings both readers and myself to a point where research findings can be summarized and implications for future research study advanced and recommended.
1. To what extent do students perceive their academic achievement, motivation and/or personal conduct is positively or negatively affected by the condition of the facility in which they are educated?

The students who participated in this research study indicated via multiple research methodologies that their personal motivation could possibly be affected and/or impaired by the overall condition of their built physical learning environment. As previously explicated via the inclusion of survey data in the beginning pages of chapter four, almost fifty percent of middle and high school students considered the condition of their school building as having a negative overall impact upon their own motivation to succeed. The same sample of students—this time by a margin of almost sixty-seven percent—indicated that they believed the motivation of their peers was also adversely affected by the condition of their learning environment.

While the results concerning the behavioral conduct of participants and their peers appeared to be somewhat inconclusive in that results were evenly distributed along as many three categorical responses, students were, however, able to articulate via the interview process that poor building conditions may, in fact, incite negative student behaviors. Students explained their comments by articulating a concern for other students who choose to further disrupt, dismantle and/or disrespect building conditions which already exhibit signs of fragility. Respondents frequently conveyed examples of negative personal and peer behavior which were clearly motivated by a complete disrespect for an already depressed shared learning environment. Stories were shared which covered every range of negative behavior which could possibly fall between the splashing water all over the floor to purposefully breaking equipment and materials
simply because they already showed extreme signs of wear. In such scenarios, negative behavior seemed perpetuated and motivated by a lack of school pride and ownership of the learning environment. In essence, most students seemed unable to value something which was given to them in an unacceptable and offensive condition.

Regarding academic achievement, student research participants were able to clearly articulate—via both survey and interview processes—an innate desire and will to increase their levels of achievement. In answering the question, “I could learn better in a school which is neat, clean and in good physical condition,” respondents strongly agreed and agreed at a combined rate of sixty-one percent. In answering the same survey question regarding their peers, students strongly agreed and agreed at a combined rate of over fifty-eight percent. The majority of students in this research sample thus believe there to be a connection between the conditions in which they are forced to learn and the level at which they ultimately achieve.

It is thus clear that urban students perceive academic achievement, motivation and/or personal conduct to be impacted by the condition of the facility in which they are educated. When students are presented with a depressed environment in which they must be successful in order to rise above certain adversities outside the confines of the school building, the goals which are set for them become elusive. The various distractions fostered by deplorable building conditions seem to actually reduce pupil motivation and determination to achieve and find success. The ramifications of such appear greater than the cost and energy needed to provide a solution to the problem.
2. In what ways does the condition of an educational facility affect students’ perceptions of the overall quality of the teaching and administrative staffing within their building?

Within the confines of this research study, survey results were inconclusive when analyzing the degree to which research participants believed the quality of teaching and administrative staffing within their school was impacted by the school’s condition. Thirty-eight percent of middle school and high school students surveyed strongly agreed and agreed with the following survey statement: “Schools which are neat, clean and in good physical condition have better teachers and principals.” Students who disagreed and strongly disagreed with this statement totaled forty-six percent. Likewise, sixty-one percent of students who took the survey indicated they felt as though “A teacher could teach better in a school in good physical condition.”

In sum, while students weren’t in agreement that well-maintained facilities were staffed with higher quality teachers and administrators, students were of one accord when it came to deciding whether or not teachers were more instructionally effective when they worked in decent facilities. Students uniformly indicated that building condition was correlated to job performance. Students who elaborated on such topics during the participant interviews indicated that teachers should want to be proud of their school and should not have to be concerned with low graduation rates, disrespect, student apathy, student disruptions, etc. Negative behaviors such as these are supported by extremely low levels of motivation which, students have indicated, are precipitated by substandard
building conditions. It would reasonably follow, then, that some students perceive their academic performance and conduct to be indicative of the type of educators their school is able to recruit and retain.

3. **In what ways does the condition of an educational facility affect students’ perceptions of the degree to which their school district values their education and personal safety?**

   Students who responded to this survey question were fifty-three percent in agreement that the condition of their educational facility was directly connected to the value the school district placed upon their education and safety. The statement read, “The condition of my school building is related to the school district’s overall concern for my education.” Although thirty percent of survey respondents were undecided, the majority of students agreed with the statement. The implications of these responses are significant in that highly-centralized school districts control the maintenance and improvements of every facility.

**Implications**

The implications associated with maintaining the educational environments in which all students learn are plentiful. There is significant value in ensuring that the condition of public schools is sufficient and inviting for all who attempt to learn and increase their own achievement from within the confines of shared facilities. To the extent that the results of this study have shown students to be adversely affected by the condition of their physical learning environment, it would behoove various educational
stakeholders to work towards ensuring that the learning space of kids is safe and conducive to teaching and learning. Because schools and schools districts must meet various accountability mandates by ensuring the academic success of all students, maintaining the appropriate physical condition and appearance of each educational facility should facilitate these efforts via improved student performance.

One rather important implication associated with properly maintaining and sustaining the educational environment of kids is that through safe and acceptable facility conditions, teachers and administrators are better able to meet the academic needs of students. When educators are able to focus on educating, the performance of students will undoubtedly improve. School buildings must be therefore be ready for students who want to learn and for teachers who want to teach. Interruptions and/or distractions caused by facility maintenance issues are often manageable and can thus be controlled. And, because we have the power to make progress in these types of situations, measured strides must be taken in the overall improvement and care of aging and deteriorating school buildings.

Another implication associated with the findings of this research study is the need to recruit and retain quality teachers for students. Schools must be institutions where teachers want to teach and students want to learn. While there are a variety of factors which may inspire motivation in kids and adults, the condition of our schools is a manageable issue which must not detract from the educational process. Edmonds (1979) indicates that “urban schools that teach poor children successfully have strong leadership and a climate of expectation that students will learn” (p. 1). As such, many federal and state mandates are accompanied by accountability deadlines which serve as a reminder to
educators and central office administrators that all students must demonstrate increased achievement. Interestingly, respondents in this research study indicated teachers would be more effective in well-maintained school buildings. We must therefore proceed in the direction of improved facility conditions so as to lure and retain quality teachers in our buildings and in our classrooms; these measures will facilitate teacher effectiveness and, in turn, increase student achievement.

A third implication associated with the findings of this research study is that of student safety. Cawelti (in American Association of School Administrators, 2004) asserts “We ought not to expect kids to learn in an environment we ourselves would not tolerate” (p. 5). To this end, it is incumbent upon educational stakeholders to see that all students are provided with a safe and well-maintained environment in which to learn. The American Association of School Administrators (2004), in its published report on the condition of America’s educational infrastructure, summarily concluded that “A healthy, safe, and adequate learning environment should be every child’s right. The immense challenge before us is making the American people more aware that the condition of our school facilities has a direct and lasting effect on the quality of education for students. We must convince those in a position to help that the quality of the learning environment is an essential part of education.”

A fourth implication is the notion that we must provide disadvantaged youth with something positive and brighter than their situations at home. The American Association of School Administrators (2004) published in its most recent report the following: “Three-fourths of the school buildings in use today are living on borrowed time; they have outlived their predicted useful life. Twelve percent, or 1 building in 8, are
inadequate places for learning. For five million children, school is ‘no place to learn’” (p. 7). Given this statement, and to the extent that contemporary education is intended to help children realize their full academic, civic and social potential, then we must initiate conversation centered upon improving the quality of the education we provide students. Along these lines, Ambach (in American Association of School Administrators, 2004) indicates “If national goals for student performance are to be met, our students must have learning environments that support high productivity” (p. 7). School facilities must therefore reflect the increased expectations and systems of accountability which face educators today. The American Association of School Administrators (2004) similarly contends that “As we reshape education in America, we must also reshape our school facilities. Schools should be built for productivity. Every school building must be efficient, flexible, and functional enough to serve the changing dynamics of American education” (p. 7).

Finally, the educational learning environments of all American children must be equitable. Whether or not achieving these ends occurs through increased funding measures or other avenues, instituting equal opportunities for all students must be a desired end where student achievement and doing what is best for kids is concerned. In a similar fashion, the American Association of School Administrators (2004) has argued that, as an organization, they should, “prompt a clarion call to every school district, every community in the nation, to look at their school buildings and judge their worthiness to house our young people” (p. 4). To this end, the implications of this research study are
profound. Learning conditions affect student achievement. We therefore must embark upon the journey toward restoring our nation’s educational infrastructure so as to improve and solidify the future of our children and our nation.

Further Research

In reviewing the significance of data collected from research participants during this study, there are several avenues to explore in future research studies. The following is a compilation of related ideas which, upon investigation, could prove successful and beneficial extensions of this study:

1. What do parents think about the overall condition of their child’s educational environment?
2. Is there a correlation between a school building’s overall condition and pupil attendance percentages?
3. Is there a proven correlation between the condition of the physical learning environment and academic achievement, as evidenced by standardized test scores?
4. Do urban students who attend new schools also demonstrate deficiencies in areas of motivation, conduct and achievement?

While there are numerous opportunities for further research and investigation connected to the findings of this study, another important aspect of such inquiry is the instructional effectiveness of classroom teachers who also inhabit substandard educational environments. The numerous variables associated with the academic performance of children suggest future studies aligned with the investigative focus
of this study will facilitate efforts to ensure the academic, social and civic success of all children—especially those educated in deteriorating schools ill-suited for productivity.

**Summary**

The student research participants who were involved in this research study communicated their thoughts, perceptions and beliefs regarding being educated in deteriorating educational environments via the completion of surveys, interviews observations which were conducted over a six week period. Pupils indicated they believed there to be a connection between the condition of the learning environment and their subsequent levels of motivation, conduct and achievement. Data analysis with respect to the surveys, interviews and participant observations revealed a unique account of shared experience. The story students told was this: *We want to learn in an environment that is safe and well-maintained. While it is our responsibility to achieve at high levels and actuate our own self-motivation, our school environments instill in us a sense of pride, community, respect and commitment. We are therefore willing and determined to achieve at higher levels but desire to learn in appropriate educational settings.*

To the extent that the future of our country depends upon the educability of its citizens, every individual ought to be concerned with the academic achievement of urban schoolchildren. Because children of the poor are consistently educated in schools which are ill-suited for productivity and lack the capacity to facilitate quality teaching and learning, restoring equity into the foundation of our American system
of education via the improvement of schools will ensure that disadvantaged students are provided with every opportunity afforded to children born of privilege. Instilling pride and hope in the minds of our children begins with providing equitable learning environments which convey our commitment to their education—and to their future.
APPENDIX A

COLUMBUS PUBLIC SCHOOLS: LETTER OF APPROVAL
June 14, 2006

Don Cramer
The Ohio State University
College of Education
110 Arps Hall
1945 North High Street
Columbus, OH 43210-1172

Dear Mr. Cramer:

The Research Proposal Review Committee of Columbus Public Schools has reviewed and approved the research proposal, *School facilities and student achievement: Student perspectives on the connection between the urban learning environment and student motivation and performance*, by Nicole Edwards.

I am enclosing a letter of introduction. The letter of introduction should be given to the researcher so that she may offer it to administrators when soliciting participation/subjects for the study. The researcher must get the permission of the building principal or designee, get their signed consent (see letter of introduction), and fax it to the Department of Evaluation Services, Columbus Public Schools at 365-5160, before contacting any potential subjects in that building. If the researcher plans to conduct research in more than one building, the letter may be reproduced in order to get signed consent from all building administrators involved.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact my office.

Sincerely,

Saundra G. Brennan, Ed.D.
Director, Evaluation Services
APPENDIX B

COLUMBUS PUBLIC SCHOOLS: LETTER OF RESEARCHER INTRODUCTION
June 14, 2006

Dear Administrator:

This letter serves as an introduction to Ms. Nicole Edwards, doctoral candidate from Ohio State University. Ms. Edwards’ proposed research: *School facilities and student achievement: Student perspectives on the connection between the urban learning environment and student motivation and performance*, has been reviewed and approved by the Research Proposal Review Committee.

**This letter does not obligate you to participate in the study.** Rather, it is an introduction and official notification that Ms. Edwards has followed established procedures and has been granted permission to solicit subjects to participate in the study.

If you agree to allow the researcher to conduct research in your building, please sign below. The researcher must then fax this letter to the Department of Evaluation Services at 365-5160. This must be completed before the researcher contacts any potential subjects in your building. If you have any questions or concerns, please call my office.

Sincerely,

Saundra G. Brennan, Ed.D.
Director, Evaluation Services

Principal’s Name ___________________________ Date ____________

Principal’s Signature _______________________

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APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT DOCUMENT
Memorandum

To: Middle School, High School and Summer Bridge Summer School Teachers
CC: Building Administrator of Respective Summer School/Summer Bridge Site
From: Nicole C. Edwards, M.A.
Date: 19 June 2006
Re: Call for Student Research Participants

Teachers:
Thank you for agreeing to assume a small role in the recruitment of student research participants for this study. The study is entitled School Facilities and Student Achievement: Student Perspectives on the Connections Between the Urban Learning Environment and Student Motivation and Performance. It is my hope that the findings of this study will inform practice and decisions made at all levels of public education.

You may tell interested students the study is relatively short and will only require of them the following: a.) the completion of a short, written survey of no more than 25 questions and b.) the completion a short, informal interview with the researcher regarding their experiences, attitudes and beliefs about the physical environment in which they are presently educated. If students have additional questions, please notify me and I will make arrangements to meet with the student(s) and/or provide a phone number where I can be reached.

Directions:
On June 26, 2006 (tentative date—another memo is forthcoming which will confirm the actual date) you will read the following announcement/bulletin to your homeroom/first period students. This announcement will serve as a recruitment tool and will communicate to students my need for research volunteers. Please read the announcement verbatim. In addition, please read the announcement at the beginning of homeroom/first period every day and for five consecutive school days.

ATTENTION STUDENTS:
A researcher from The Ohio State University is actively recruiting approximately 50 students who are willing to participate in a study about physical learning environments and their relationship to student motivation, achievement and conduct. Volunteers will not be compensated for their time and must be willing to complete the following: a.) one written survey which will take approximately ten minutes to complete, and b.) one informal, audio-taped interview with the researcher which will take approximately fifteen minutes. If you are interested in participating in this study and/or have any questions, please see me today during homeroom/first period.
APPENDIX D

PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM
School Facilities and Student Achievement: Student Perspectives on the Connection Between the Urban Learning Environment and Student Motivation and Performance

Nicole C. Edwards, M.A.

N/A

This is a parental permission form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you permit your child to participate.

Your child’s participation is voluntary.
Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to discuss the study with your friends and family and to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to permit your child to participate. If you permit your child to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:
The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how certain students in an urban school respond to being educated in a facility in some state of disrepair. A review of related research has revealed no published studies regarding the motivation levels and/or personal conduct of students attending schools in significant states of disrepair. Toward this end, the completed study should establish a connection between the responses of urban students educated in facilities in some state of disrepair and/or deterioration and the implications such responses have upon increasing student achievement via increased motivation and improved personal conduct.

Procedures/Tasks:
Student participants who are interested in participating in this study will identify themselves to their homeroom teachers in response to a “call for volunteers” generated by the researcher and announced by homeroom teachers (for maximum exposure and equitable opportunity).

Students willing to participate will complete a written survey about their experiences, beliefs and perceptions regarding their education.
Students willing to participate will also partake in one informal interview with the researcher. This interview will be recorded via audio-tape for purposes of reviewing responses for clarity and understanding.

**Duration:**

The study is designed to last no longer than eight weeks; this is the amount of time that has been set aside to administer a significant number of student surveys and conduct interviews. Your child may leave the study at any time. If you or your child decides to stop participation in the study, there will be no penalty and neither you nor your child will lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

**Risks and Benefits:**

There are less than minimal risks associated with this research study. The parameters of the study are limited to the completion of one written survey and one interview.

The benefits associated with this study will hopefully affect students in similar education situations for years to come. The end goal would be to have the results of this study inform the practice of educational stakeholders and decision-makers for the betterment of all kids.

**Confidentiality:**

Efforts will be made to keep your child’s study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your child’s participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your child’s records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

**Incentives:**

There are no researcher-initiated incentives for participating in this study; however, in an effort to assist the researcher in her efforts to ascertain a minimum number of participants, individual teachers may or may not elect to offer incentives in the form of bonus points, etc.
Participant Rights:

You or your child may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you or your child is a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you and your child choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights your child may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:
For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact Ms. Nicole C. Edwards at (614) 901-0161.

For questions about your child’s rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

If your child is injured as a result of participating in this study or for questions about a study-related injury, you may contact Dr. Philip T.K. Daniel at (614) 292-7991.
Signing the parental permission form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to provide permission for my child to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to permit my child to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

Printed name of subject

Printed name of person authorized to provide permission for subject  Signature of person authorized to provide permission for subject

Relationship to the subject  Date and time

Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

Nicole C. Edwards, M.A.

Printed name of person obtaining consent  Signature of person obtaining consent

Date and time  AM/PM
APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT ASSENT FORM
The Ohio State University Assent
to Participate in Research

Study Title: School Facilities and Student Achievement: Student Perspectives on the Connection Between the Urban Learning Environment and Student Motivation and Performance

Researcher: Nicole C. Edwards, M.A.

Sponsor: N/A

- You are being asked to be in a research study. Studies are done to find better ways to treat people or to understand things better.
- This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to participate.
- You should ask any questions you have before making up your mind. You can think about it and discuss it with your family or friends before you decide.
- It is okay to say “No” if you don’t want to be in the study. If you say “Yes” you can change your mind and quit being in the study at any time without getting in trouble.
- If you decide you want to be in the study, an adult (usually a parent) will also need to give permission for you to be in the study.

1. What is this study about?

This study is about a complex and important issue in public education—the physical nature of the environment in which urban students are educated and the relationship to student conduct and/or motivation levels.

2. What will I need to do if I am in this study?

To participate in this study, you will need to complete one (1) written survey in which you circle the degree to which you agree or disagree with a statement. You will also be asked to participate in one (1) informal interview with the researcher. The interview will be approximately ten (10) minutes in length and will not exceed thirty (30) minutes. The interview will be recorded via audio-tape for purposes of reviewing responses for clarity and understanding.
3. **How long will I be in the study?**

You will be in the study until the survey and interview are complete. There will be approximately fifty (50) participants in this study, yet the total duration of the study is expected to be less than eight weeks.

4. **Can I stop being in the study?**

You may stop being in the study at any time.

5. **What bad things might happen to me if I am in the study?**

There are no anticipated risks associated with this study.

6. **What good things might happen to me if I am in the study?**

An indirect benefit associated with this study is that you may provide information directly related to improving the educational experiences of students younger than you.

7. **Will I be given anything for being in this study?**

While there is no incentive for participating in this study, you may be given a small “token of appreciation” by the researcher at the conclusion of this study.

8. **Who can I talk to about the study?**

For questions about the study you may contact the researcher, Ms. Nicole C. Edwards at (614) 901-0161.

To discuss other study-related questions with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.
**Signing the assent form**

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form. I have had a chance to ask questions before making up my mind. I want to be in this research study.

__________________________  ______________________________  AM/PM  
Signature or printed name of subject  Date and time

**Investigator/Research Staff**

I have explained the research to the participant before requesting the signature above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

__________________________  ______________________________  AM/PM  
Nicole C. Edwards, M.A.  Signature of person obtaining assent  
Printed name of person obtaining assent  Date and time

**This form must be accompanied by an IRB approved parental permission form signed by a parent/guardian.**
APPENDIX F

STUDENT SURVEY INSTRUMENT
STUDENT SURVEY
School Facilities and Student Achievement

Directions: Read each statement and then circle the response which most closely matches your current attitudes and/or beliefs about the statement. If you are unsure about a statement or the statement does not directly apply to you, you may want to circle U for undecided.

SA = Strongly Agree   A = Agree   U = Undecided   D = Disagree   SD = Strongly Disagree

1. It is important for schools to be neat, clean and in good physical condition. SA A U D SD
2. The overall condition of a school building affects my motivation level. SA A U D SD
3. Schools which are neat, clean and in good physical condition have better teachers and principals. SA A U D SD
4. My personal safety could be better guaranteed in a school which is in good physical condition. SA A U D SD
5. A teacher could teach better in a school in good physical condition. SA A U D SD
6. My personal behavior and conduct while I am in school is influenced by the condition of my physical surroundings. SA A U D SD
7. My home school is in good physical condition. SA A U D SD
8. I could learn better in a school which is neat, clean and in good physical condition. SA A U D SD
9. Most students would behave properly in a school which is in good physical condition and is visually appealing. SA A U D SD
10. Most students would learn more and achieve at higher levels if the schools they attended were in good physical condition. SA A U D SD
11. The condition of my school building is related to the school district’s overall concern for my education. SA A U D SD
12. Most students would feel safer if they attended a school in good physical condition. SA A U D SD
13. Most students would be more motivated to succeed academically if they attended schools in good physical condition. SA A U D SD
14. I consider it important for the school I attend to be in good physical condition. SA A U D SD
Student Name ___________________________________________________ _____________

Circle One:   Male     or     Female Age: __________________________

Date of Birth: __________________________________________________________

Home Address: _________________________________________________________

Home Phone Number: ____________________________________________________

School I Attended LAST YEAR: _________________________________________

Grade I was in LAST YEAR:  6   7   8   9   10   11   12

School I Will Attend NEXT YEAR: _________________________________________

Summer School/Bridge Location: _________________________________________

Number of Summer School Courses I Am Taking:    1    2    3    4

Name(s) of Summer School Courses:

1. _________________________________________
2. _________________________________________
3. _________________________________________
4. _________________________________________
LIST OF REFERENCES


Richardson, L. (2000). The consequences of poetic representation: Writing the other, rewriting the self. In C. Rhodes, Ghostwriting research: Positioning the researcher in the interview text. Qualitative Inquiry, 6, 511-525.


