

PRECIPITATES OF POWER WITHIN A MIDDLE  
SCHOOL CULTURE OF SUCCESS

by

DANIEL PHILLIP DICKENS

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how students, teachers, classified personnel, and administrators articulate definitions of success. Data collection occurred at a middle school and included individual and group interviews, student responses, and pictures. Critical Discourse Analysis is the primary framework used to understand how languages of success operate according to the articulations of individuals within the school. This study concluded that three distinct categories exist within the school culture of success: Administrative, Pedagogic, and Student. However, the dominant culture of success is the Administration's ideologies of success which was apparent through the replication of words and phrases by faculty members and students. The three categories of success were documented according to how individuals used various languages of success to create meanings relevant to the areas of academic, social, and personal success. The school displayed its culture through both the languages of success used and the visual spaces that represent success to members of the school and of the community. The implications for this project are for educators to begin to grasp how abstract terms like success play pivotal roles in forming students' identities.

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to all of the people who have helped me along the way. I want to dedicate this specifically to Merinda Simmons who has stretched my own understandings of how one's individuality shapes the way that he or she makes meanings. I want to also dedicate this project to my mom and dad for encouraging me to work hard and continue my education. I also dedicate this project to the students, educators, and administrators at Mallard Middle School who participated in the study. I also dedicate this project to Sarah Graves who exemplified what it means to be successful.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2006 I began to think about what the term “success” means and how it functions within my own school. At the time, my school was in the process of writing our second Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) School Improvement Plan. Over the course of this process, I remember contemplating the meanings of the words that we chose to incorporate into the plan and being forced to leave other phrases, to use the words of Robert Frost, “for another day.” The phrasing that we chose “was not nearly as fair” because it was driven by deadlines and standards and, to some extent reduced the students to objects that can be counted, sorted, and labeled.

Of course there were many positive outcomes of this process such as students improving their test scores and increasing their knowledge (making such progress as to be recognized nationally for their achievements for specific populations of students) and faculty coming together to develop pedagogies that implemented diversity and inclusion. With all of these great academic accomplishments, however, the question of how social and personal aspects of the concept of “success,” in addition to the academic areas, function in the formation of students’ definitions of success kept presenting itself.

During that fall, one assignment for my last qualitative research class was to write a dissertation narrative for a fellowship application. In this process, I began to discuss and frame

several ideas into one complex monstrosity. The fellowship application primarily looked at the ways that students visually and verbally define success. Some aspects of the original idea have mutated into my current focus of how individuals (not just students) define and promote languages of “success” using both words and images. Another aspect that is part of the original idea is for this project to interrogate materialized norms within the school. The original intent of the project centered around an attempt to understand how students define, envision, and then either see the fulfillment of the vision or some other alternate forms of success materializing. I began to think about the complexities of attempting to capture a concept that can only be defined within contextual relationships. For example, a student who was not able to read at his grade level was labeled “successful” as a student by his peers. He did not achieve academic success, but he did have an aspect or quality of success nonetheless. A year and a half of kicking the idea around and trying to tackle the “So, what?” question led me to the summer of 2008 when I wrote my prospectus. I began to conceptualize how to map the process of conducting my study. This territory is marked with intellectual struggles that I have vetted from many possible literatures. Wrestling this topic (and writing the dissertation) is similar to the Biblical story of Jacob who wrestles with an angel and ends the contest by saying, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” My goal in this project is to struggle with the abstract concept of “success” and in the end develop my skills as both a researcher, teacher, and instructional leader.

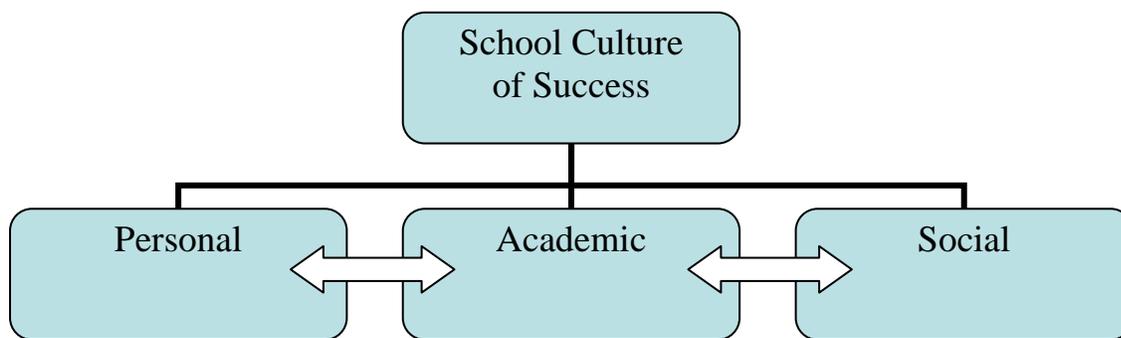
### Overview of the Project

The culture of a school is guided by the wording and the direction of a school’s mission statement as well as the values of the faculty, community, and the school system. All aspects (whether implied or stated) of the school should reflect some portion of the mission and purpose

of a school in both wording and philosophy. Most mission statements, one could argue, are so ambiguous that they are ultimately meaningless. However, some types of common threads seem to be woven into the fabric of schooling in America (Giroux, 2001). These threads are dependent upon school cultures embracing and/or rejecting certain values of what it means to be successful and possible ways to achieve success (Jones, 2004). One could argue that the threads are value laden and are not finite in that they bend or mutate to reflect the values of a larger society. School administrators and teachers are responsible for implementing the school's mission in multiple ways. The most visible example of how teachers, administrators, and other school personnel implement both the implied and stated values of the school is through their influences on students' behaviors. A school's faculty has conceptualized definitions or understandings of "success" that create ways or avenues that students can follow to attain some degree of success whether it is academic, social, or personal. Students choose to either embrace or reject the norms of the school when they create their own definitions and materializations of "success." One of the primary goals of this project is to look at the discourses of success and to see how students and adults within the school interact with the various discourses of success within the school's culture.

The breadths of possible definitions of "success" are often so broad that the way in which they materialize do not allow for singular definitions. I believe that if a researcher attempts to constrain the abstract concept of success to finite terms then some voices are given privilege over others. The multiple dimensionalities of success should incorporate aspects of students' lives both within and out of school and not be solely defined according to academic phrasing. Student behavior (academic, social, and/or personal) is often a result of how constructed circles are mediated by both the teachers, administrators, and the students.

Success in any of the circles does not seem to necessarily predict success in another sphere and may not be included in others' definitions (Jones, 2004). Most definitions of success within any circle are largely dictated by its actors and influenced by outside agencies. Students, as agents responsible for their own behavior, create definitions of what it means to be successful. The administrators and teachers are largely responsible for blending the multiple circles and their definitions of success together to reflect the school's mission and purpose and to create a culture of success. I suggest that the role of an administrator is to foster areas where students are able to create meanings that validate the agency of the students and yet mold students' conceptualizations of success to reflect the purpose of the school. The basic understanding of the different areas of success I envision prior to conducting the research are diagramed in the following graphic. Each aspect of the graphic should show that the personal, academic, and social aspects are interrelated and are not static. The dynamics of the graphic is meant to relate the fluidity of the school's culture; in that the school culture of success is constantly informed by each element of personal, social, and academic success, which may or may not bleed over to the other areas in that each has an overlapping nature.



This study uses data collected from a middle school, because the unique spaces of middle schools allow students structured opportunities to develop their individualities and personas. In this transitional stage students explore who they desire to be and often act on those desires as conscientious members of the student body. This stage of schooling is different from the

elementary schools where behaviors are largely dictated and most extra-curricular activities take place either through the public sphere of recreational leagues or the Parent Teacher Organization rather than being student initiated as members of the school. The roles of students in high schools are largely fulfillments of the experiences that began in middle schools and academic tracks have their roots in middle level education.

This study will be a qualitative case study using both Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and ethnographic methods that seeks to describe the discourses of success within a middle school as articulated by all members of the school, and how the administration and teachers mediate these various Discourses to create a culture of success within the school.<sup>1</sup> Using only one school, I focus on the ways in which the many concepts of success act within the school. My intention is to describe and critique the ways that Discourses of success operate by analyzing both the “forms” and “functions” of languages of “success” within the school (Gee, 2004). Success is not limited to one definition, and its meanings can change from one setting to another depending on the contexts within which they are set.

Culturally, success seems to change or vary from and within ethnic groups, genders, and social classes. Furthermore, subcultures that cross demarcated boundaries exist in schools that position students in socially constructed categories. One example is the way that athletes demonstrate success in extracurricular activities. Socially, success operates to propel students to demonstrate behaviors that others in their peer groups and adults within the school recognize as demonstrated excellence (Habegger, 2008; Jones, 2004; Rodriguez, 2008; Somech and Ron, 2007). This recognition seems to motivate students to exhibit behaviors that are acceptable to other students and adults. Academically, historical definitions of success have been defined as

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<sup>1</sup> Gee (1999) notes the differences between “discourses” and “Discourses.” The latter, he suggests we should read with Foucault’s definition as being “language plus ‘other stuff’” (p. 17). This distinction allows the researcher to look at how language and meanings within language as well as images inform definitions of success.

excelling in content standards when compared to other students at the levels of the local school, the district, the state, and nationally (Jones, 2004; Lagemann, 1992; Lebdina-Manzoni, 2004; Rodriguez, 2008). In all of these Discourses of success, students are influenced to behave in certain ways. The behaviors, it appears, are a result (at least partially) of the decisions that the administration makes within a school. Administrators play a unique role in orchestrating all of the Discourses of success into a synthesis that reflects the school's stated and implied values.

The critical questions for this study are the following: What identifiable languages of "success" are deployed in the school? and How do the Discourses of success align with the school's stated and implied values?

To answer these questions, I interviewed staff members, teachers, administrators, and students; I observed both students and educators' behavior in classrooms and other areas within the school; I attended some in-school and after-school events. All this data contributes to a compilation of the different Discourses of success within the school. I analyzed the data to see how the different individuals interpret these Discourses present in the school. I address *a priori* issues of race, class, and gender present in the school's culture of success. I further analyze the data to see who benefits and who does not benefit from definitions of success. It seems that no matter the case, teachers and administrators influence the spheres of success to create a culture that reflects the stated values of the school's mission. One example is the way that success in academic, cultural, and social circles seems to have a chameleon nature in that they blend into the context of one setting while still retaining meaning and value in others. In all of these Discourses, the label of "successful" or "success" seems to play a pivotal role in defining and promoting the concept and culture of success. The role of the deviants (those who do not

conform to the hegemonic norms of success) seems to be equally important as the roles of the compliant in status positions in the school (Scheff, 1984; 1988).

### Statement of the Problem

Administrators and teachers have the unique positions within a community to be able to define what it means to be successful and to foster a culture of success. All too often the definitions of success seem to vary depending on the context with which they are used (Jones, 2004). The complexity of success seems to be that differing definitions can sometimes compete with each other and at other times have a symbiotic relationship with each other. As guides and leaders for students, school administrators and teachers carry the responsibility for creating and sustaining a learning environment that fosters a culture that promotes student learning. Although the role of the students and the roles of adults within a school are very different, learning seems to be greatest when all of the parties within a school act according to a common set of beliefs or assumptions. The school's stated and implied values ground all of the varying aspects of "success" within a school together. It is the overarching statements and goals that are supposed to dictate decisions of those within the school. Ultimately, the climate and culture of a school reflect both the stated and unstated objectives of a school. Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) delineate the aspects of school culture, or that of any type of organization, into three key areas "assumptions, values, and artifacts" (p.121). I will use these three simplistic areas within the project as guides to interrogate the concept of success in the school and build a more complex understanding of a culture of success. Weick and Sutcliffe's (2001) three areas of culture is tied loosely to Gee's (2004) and Rogers' (2004b) understanding, of how to interrogate Discourses. I

go into the definitions and specifics of how I integrate “assumptions, values, and artifacts” at length in Chapter 2.

Students, administrators, and teachers alike attach the label of success to some students or some behaviors and not others. Attaching a label creates a definition of success that includes some and excludes others. Those who are excluded are often forced to carry the label of “deviant” (Scheff, 1984). Adults often have the ability to circumvent students’ labels by highlighting students whose behavior they deem worthy of the label of success. Administrators’ positions allow them to further guide the actions of teachers by creating and sustaining cultures of success within a school where more students are included in the definitions of success and are permitted to express their individual voices.

The problem of success seems to be that both its vagueness and breadth of possible definitions allow for myriad ways to define and promote the concept of success. Some definitions seem to open the doors of progressive opportunities that allow students to create meanings that are influenced by what they deem as relevant in their views of society. Many American students are able to incorporate progressive ideals into their actions that seem to recognize the troubled past but embrace the possibility of a new future free of fewer prejudices and biases. However, other definitions are susceptible to biases that are continued from previous histories where some students were denied equal access to education (Jones, 2004). These biases may or may not be intentional, but it seems that certain students may suffer as a result of individuals’ feelings towards students’ races, classes, and genders. It seems necessary that the contrary may hold true in that the vagueness of definitions allows opportunities for students who have been historically oppressed to create and sustain definitions of success that represent how they view themselves within a larger context of society. It also allows for opportunities for

students to make their own meanings some of which are counter to the hegemonic or dominant ones.

The research questions for this study come out of the overarching critical questions. The first critical question asks what identifiable languages of “success” are deployed in the school. The research questions that will guide me are the following: 1). How do various members of the school articulate what they mean by success? 2). What are the material precipitates (artifacts and visual displays) of the culture of success? 3). What are the implications for these different discursive articulations of success for students in school? The second critical question asks how the Discourses of success align with the school’s stated and implied values.

### What Does Precipitate Mean?

In chemical reactions, a chemist can combine a metal in a beaker with an acid. When the metal and the acid react, since matter cannot be destroyed, the metal dissolves into the solution. The metallic elements bond with an element or elements in the acid that holds the metals suspended in a liquid form. This chemical reaction changes both the metal and the acid to create a substance that forms from the “swapping” and bonding of molecules. A chemist can then add another chemical to the solution, and if the measurements are precise, the metallic element no longer bonds with the element from the acid that previously held it suspended in liquid form and it precipitates as a solid to the bottom of the beaker. In this over simplistic view of a high school chemistry lab experiment, I have adopted and adapted the term precipitate to a social context.

To understand the social structures of humans, we have to understand the fluidity in which people move in and through spheres of success. This movement is symbolic of the atoms being in constant motion. A researcher can view the material precipitates of success that are no

longer suspended in liquid format. To extend the metaphor, culture symbolizes the solution in which the metallic element has bonded with an element from the acid. The precipitates are symbolic of the material aspects present within the school (languages and icons). One objective of this research process is to see how a concept such as success, which as I previously stated cannot be defined outside of the context in which it related, materializes in a school. Success is defined, promoted, redefined, and stretched to fit the students', teachers', and administrators' individual and group needs. The material precipitates of success symbolize examples of the three areas of a school's culture "assumptions, values, and artifacts" (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001). I intend to examine the ways that the culture of success materializes within a school. Unlike the basic experiment where the metallic element bonds with only one element, the social order of a school is complex and the culture of the school is suspended by many internal contributors (administrators, teachers, staff members, and students) and external contributors (parents, businesses, and media). As a researcher, I look at the ways that the culture of success has material precipitates in a school and how they contribute to the larger Discourses of success.

### Limitations

Although this study only examines one school, I believe that the spherical natures of academic, social, and personal circles speak to the conditions present at other schools. I believe that the impact of this study is for educational leaders not in this school or this school system to be able to generalize concepts from this study to their own schools. However, they may not be able to exactly apply the specifics of this situation to their schools. I suggest that consumers of this information begin with this study as a resource that will allow them to begin investigations as to the ways in which they might manage concentric circles within their schools' cultures.

Conducting research within my community and within my school district presents a challenge. I believe that using the data allows me the opportunity to speak with administrators and teachers at the school to create a more inclusive view of success and a greater culture of success. I made all aspects of the study available for review upon completion of the project I will discuss the findings with district leaders and the principal in hopes of creating a dialogue about the Discourses of success that are present. In this discussion, I intend to focus on ways to increase the number of people who are knowledgeable so that the school can become a “learning culture” (Weick and Sutcliffe, p. 136, 2001). Furthermore, I plan to choose a school with which I have had little experience as a place to conduct research.<sup>2</sup>

One primary limitation of the study was the amount of time that I was available to spend at the school. When I was in the school, I observed how students, teachers, and administrators acted. However, I was limited as to the amount of observations that I made. I attempted to overcome the limited time in the school by utilizing techniques that correlate to the objectives outlined in Alabama Course of Study. I asked students to respond to eight prompts that were similar to the ones found on the Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing. I was able to include as over 200 of the 600 students in the study.

### Significance

A study that looks at the ways in which administrators control and influence definitions of success within schools does not seem to exist. This study fills some of the gaps in the literature on success between educational administration and educational theory. All of these areas have vast amounts of research in the literature; however, this project intends to synthesize

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<sup>2</sup> The target school for this project is another middle school in my district. The extent to which I have worked with teachers and administrators from this school is minimal. I have not taught any students who currently attend the school.

aspects from each body and then blend it together to speak to the nature of Discourses of success within schools. Furthermore, I intend to take the quantitative variable of school culture and examine one aspect qualitatively. I will flesh out the numerical skeleton with examples from actual lived experiences. The literature on school culture and academic success suggests that a directional positive correlation exists between how a culture develops within a school and how students are able learn in the classroom (Habegger, 2008; Jones, 2004; Lagemann, 1992; Rodriguez, 2008; Somech and Ron, 2007). By taking one aspect of middle level education, school culture, I believe I am able to make a statement as to how such a significant variable materializes in schools. Jones (2004) provides a basic guideline for conducting research on success; however, our interpretations of “success” differ as well as the methodology I use. Ultimately, this project focuses on ways to interrogate the Discourses of success present within a school’s culture. Interrogating power structures allows those whose voices are too quiet or too oppressed to have a platform from which to speak. This project also documents the positive aspects of the Discourses of success within the school’s culture that might have gone unnoticed as business as usual.

## Conclusion

To create and sustain a culture of success that is more inclusive will allow more students the opportunities to fully participate in their education. When students feel comfortable and valued, they are more likely to increase their knowledge base according to content standards. A vast body of research exists on school culture and how an increase in culture allows for students to achieve regardless of race, class, or gender (Habegger, 2008; Jones, 2004; Lagemann, 1992; Rodriguez, 2008; Somech and Ron, 2007). One aim of this project is to examine the overall

culture of success within a school and describe how the participants in the school create, sustain, and change definitions of success. Over the course of a semester, I will observe the interactions of students, teachers, and the leadership of the school and interview key players in the school to attempt to capture their lived experiences. These experiences will offer a texture of detail that areas of statistical measurements cannot capture.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A study on school success necessitates that a researcher situate the project within certain parameters to prevent it from becoming too broad. For this project, I look at the concept of success and how terminologies of success have been phrased within research literature. Furthermore, I develop a foundational understanding of how social constructions of Discourse within schools operate. By looking at Discourses, I intend to discuss the ways individuals within schools use both words and images to construct meanings. I chose a middle school because it is arguably one of the most volatile types of schooling in America. At this level of education, individuals begin to explore their identities and create definitions of constructs that are not primarily derived from adults as they were in elementary school.

The many influential factors that assist in determining one's individuality vary from media (TV, music, and the internet) to adults (parents, teachers, administrators, neighbors, clergy, etc.) to peers. I argue that one driving force for this project revolves around how peers impact each other's definitions of success. How peers relate to one another in schools is largely determined by the leadership (administrators and teachers) of schools. Educational leaders are responsible for controlling boundaries and ensuring the

general safety (emotional, psychological, and mental) of students (Brown and Anfara, Jr., 2002). All of these types of safety are defined according to a school's culture. Culture for this project includes both the visible and invisible forms of communication that represent the school and will be documented using the various languages present within the school.

### Social Constructions of Discourse

Individuals act and react according to multiple driving forces. Some of these forces are real while others are situated somewhere on an imaginary spectrum. For example, a person may believe that he or she is successful. This belief is largely dependent upon the definition that the person chooses to use. A real definition would involve a tangible goal which may or may not have some type of imagined existence. The attainable goal would symbolize the real aspect whereas the socially constructed definition that is informed, at least partially, by ideologies would represent the imagined. Althusser (1971) discusses ideologies and the ways that state apparatuses function through both "ideology" and "repression." He states that "what is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations which they live" (p. 57). This speaks to the ways in which students as agents act in ways that are driven by the imagined existence of something outside of the self.

For example, the way that an athlete participates in a sport is driven by the existence of a goal that those who are in charge and society create. The goals that coaches or society create are real because they have a material existence in the form of success. The imagined aspect of the goal for the athlete is how the individual believes that he or

she can make the goal. I argue that the same holds true when examining school sports from the macro level and addresses the hero worship associated with professional athletes. This link of the perceived versus reality is similar to Plato's cave allegory in which the forms are representations of something that is usually hidden from view by those casting shadows. How does one know that what is labeled as success is truly success? As Plato suggests, the viewers have to leave their positions where they accept what is in front of them as truth and challenge the definitions that those behind cast. Because most individuals do not challenge the perceptions, they are "subjects" who submit to those in power who create and control ideologies.

To begin an understanding of Discourses, it seems essential to start with readings from Michel Foucault. His works play a crucial part in beginning to understand the ways in which Discourses impact the behaviors of students. In two separate interviews, Foucault outlines his philosophical shift away from Althusser's notions of power and ideologies (1980). His focus moves from an economic paradigm to one that interrogates the "exercise" of power for both those who control it and whom it controls. He uses Reich and Nietzsche to form two rationales of power; respectively, they are "contract-oppression schema... and the domination-repression or war-repression schema" (p. 92). The first involves a form of a contract negotiation between two entities or individuals that inevitably takes power from one and transfers it to the other in a manner that is similar to a legal contract. The contractual obligations relegate one individual to positions that leave them at the whim of the other. The second schema involves the use of overwhelming force to make one of the parties submissive to the other. The dominant party is powerful through force rather than through a negotiated contract.

Ultimately, the concept of power shows that power relations determine every aspect of one's life. Whether one is powerful or powerless, the effects of power permeate throughout all of existence. Foucault (1980) states, "In the end, we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourse which are the bearers of the specific effects of power" (p. 94). When one begins to take the concept of power to the ends that Foucault describes, one can see that a relationship is present in all of the factors that he lists. Judgment, condemnation, and classification speak to the way that an individual or person views the actions of another. So, even in death, the notion of power is still a factor in determining the worth of an individual's "history." The last two elements of power relations speak to the ways that individuals live their lives. Determination involves an individual's desire to perform actions at a particular level and is reliant upon those who are in power to create a concept of acceptability that defines how one should act. The last element of power shows that how a person lives and dies is largely dependent upon the power dynamic present and one's available access to factors that determine whether or not one can sustain his or her life. For example, a person may have the option of going to the hospital, but does not have the means to pay for life-lengthening procedures, or a person may have access to any educational institution, but he or she is limited in choices by those who control admissions.

Moving from the larger question of what is power to the question of the visibility of power in everyday life is an essential question for this project. Foucault (1980) states that it is necessary to move from the larger "labyrinthine and unanswerable question" of who controls power and what are his or her motives to levels of "subjugation" (p. 97). He

states, “we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc.” (p. 97). When one investigates at the level of the subject of power, the dynamics of the relationships are revealed which speaks to how an individual controls and is controlled by a Discourse.

Foucault (1980) states, “Power must be analyzed as something which circulates or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain” (p. 98). The image of a chain is visible in many aspects of schooling. The “chain” of command is a primary way of representing authority in schools. The structure of authority is one that is purposefully designed to create order within the school. Other “chains” that exist in the school are created by non-administrators (teachers and students) for types of power that speak to relationships. Those who create these chains are essentially controlling the power dynamics of the school. Although they are not changing operational order within the school, these chains influence decisions that students make. Foucault (1980) states, “the individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” (p. 98). Students, teachers, and educational leaders simultaneously both represent informal and formal power structures and are represented by them.

Foucault (1980) states, that when one begins to investigate situations, it is necessary to conceptualize the multiple levels on which action is based (p. 114). His argument highlights the importance of the researcher to “distinguish among events, to differentiate the networks and levels to which they [the research subjects] belong, and to reconstitute the line along which they are connected and engender one another” (p. 114). The multiple levels of Discourses that impact students, teachers, and administrators’

decisions allow for a researcher to explore the manner in which success is defined. He states that the overarching question of discourse studies as being “whom do [these] discourse[s] serve?” (p. 115). This is an essential question for this project because those who are empowered by a discourse are as essential as those who are repressed. Those whom Discourses provide with power have many more resources at their bidding than those who are left powerless or with little power. These resources provide some students with the availability of options to shape both Discourses and success that allow for more dynamic educational experiences that better prepare students for life in the outside world.

When one begins to look at the actors or agents within a school, the power structures reveal themselves through how members of the school act as a unit. It is often thought that a well functioning school is one that has a high degree of cohesion (Scheurich and Skrla, 2003); however, this is problematic because of the elements of the power structures within the school. Thus, Foucault (1980) writes:

One must rather conduct an *ascending* analysis of power, starting, that is from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been—and continue to be—invested, colonized, utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended etc., by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global dominations. (p. 99)

It therefore seems necessary to include those who are at the lowest level of power within the school and progress through higher “chains” of power within the school. The conditions of power present at lower levels, one could assume, are inevitably present at higher levels since power circulates through all members of an organization. For this

project, I attempted to include the voices of all members of the school and described how power relationships mediate definitions within all of the spheres in a school. By creating a space to hear the voices of students, teachers, and administrators within a school, I have a description of how each views the culture of success within the school.

To look at the concept of Discourses of success within a school, I am going to focus on how individuals within the school use language to describe and define what they mean by the term success. This basic outline stems from Foucault's (2004) questions for language analysis: "[A]ccording to what rules has a particular statement been made...and how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?" (p. 92). The rules that govern languages or connotations of success should be seen in relationship with and to others' usage of the term success. By including multiple definitions, the contrasts allow the researcher to create a framework from which to ask the question: What are the Discourses of success within the school and how do the power dynamics present function to influence both wording and visual representation?

Zipin (1998) describes the discursive practices in schools and how meaning is attached to all areas of schooling. Because discourses are largely based on the use of language, it is essential to look at the way in which both students and educators use language to define success. Gee (1999; 2004) agrees with Foucault's distinction between "discourses" and "Discourses" by designating "Discourse" as being "language plus 'other stuff'" and "discourse" as being the "primary grammar of language" (p. 17). This distinction allows the researcher to look at how language and meanings within language drive actors. He further notes that history plays an integral part in Discourses and the present is consistently mediated by the past. History is an important aspect for Foucault

(2004; 1980) as he speaks heavily to the concept of archeology and genealogy. Both of these historical terms necessitate that one understand the history of a situation which allow a researcher to understand the contexts of environments.

This project focuses on how individuals use words to create meanings. To bridge the theoretical gap from Foucault to the project, I use the work of the language theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin provides a framework from which to understand both language and power and their interrelationship. Both Bakhtin (2004) and Foucault (2004; 1980) note the historical aspects of language. As previously mentioned, Foucault includes references to history in many of the titles of his works. Bakhtin (2004) makes a similar claim by stating that languages “cohabit with one another” (p. 676). Cohabitation implies two different types of relationships: first, languages are able to have a symbiosis in which they work in tandem using different words; and second, languages seem to be incommensurate in that they seem to struggle for recognition and status. In a school, languages are used by both adults and students to create meanings. When meanings share a set of common values, they can be in a symbiotic relationship. However, when the values on which language is based are not shared, they become each other’s competition.

The question of how languages are used to create meanings necessitates an understanding of how individuals use words and phrases. Bakhtin (2004) states that “...language for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other” (p. 677). The concept of “other” relates to the philosophical tradition beginning with Hegel and then Sartre, Lacan, and Levinas. Levinas’s concept of “other” implies looking at the face and recognizing and relating to that other person. This recognition speaks to how one’s own humanity is revealed through facial expressions. A person

exists and his or her life has meaning and value because of his or her being. The philosophical area of ethics comes into play when discussing individual worth or meaning. Largely for this project, I examined how the school's culture creates an ethic of success through languages. This involved identifying how individuals relate to one another and how languages used are either in symbiosis or conflict with each other.

When one thinks of the words that individuals use within the school to carry on common conversations or in formal writings, a surface description is often able to capture the intended meanings for the words that they use. However, deeper levels of understanding exist within languages that reveal the inner-workings behind individual usage. Bakhtin (2004) states that "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others" (p. 677). Bakhtin's theories provide a bridge from Foucault's concept of power to an approach where the researcher can interrogate how languages are used within the contexts of others. The power that others have in determining how languages are used or understood is theoretically supported by both Foucault (2004; 1980) and Bakhtin (2004).

The next theoretical movement from Discourses to understanding how individuals relate to each other will focus on how individuals position themselves in relation to others. Paulo Freire (2005) discusses the conditions of social "worlds" that are constructed according to people's needs and desires. He states that, "the ordinary person is crushed, diminished, converted into a spectator, [and] maneuvered by myths which powerful social forces have created" (p. 5). This analysis speaks to the ways in which Discourses prescribe ways of acting for members of groups. Those who are leaders

(adults or students) have control over those who are below them in status or position in the school. He continues to say that these followers “drown in leveling anonymity” (p. 5). The larger issue is that those who control definitions of success are able to dictate what others do and how they act. The difference between those who blindly follow and those who lead is what Freire labels as “object” and “subject” (p. 4-5).<sup>1</sup> When a person is a member of a group and does the bidding of a leader without assessing the risks and rewards of an action, he or she is an object because he or she is merely “adapting” to the situations around him or her which leads to “dehumanization” (p. 4). The difference between humans and animals, he continues, is knowledge. He states, “Knowledge is built up in the relations between human beings and the world, relations of transformation, and perfects itself in the critical problematization of these relations” (p. 99). Students, teachers, and administrators come to develop relationships with each other that foster and sustain dialogues of what it means to be successful in schools. These dialogues are informed by external elements of society such as media, the government, and other cultural influences.

### The Concept of Success

When I began to query research on “success,” I thought that the vast amount of hits on the topic would allow for easy foundation to how I viewed the term. However, what I found was often related to “successful” schools or fundamentals of teaching or administrating. What I quickly learned is that the term success is often used in many contexts that did not speak to how schools actually use the word “success.” I changed

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<sup>1</sup> Freire discusses at great length the ways in which a follower can move from a position of “object” to “subject” by rationalizing and contemplating one’s existence and the consequences of choice. A person can be a subjective follower if he or she examines the rationale of the leader.

how I searched the bodies of educational literature by targeting phrases such as “school success,” “success in schools,” “culture of success,” and “student success.” I found that narrowing the queries to these topics as well as limiting the subject areas to education or educational administration removed many of the extraneous sources that dealt with creating successful schools. However, I had not located a specific source that spoke to how schools actually use the word “success.” I thought that this gap in the literature was quite significant. Only once I had searched electronic dissertations did I find Jones’ (2004) dissertation on a culture of success within a school. Jones employed similar strategies to what I had envisioned. Her work provided a substantial foundation from which to begin to frame my analysis on how a school uses the term “success” and how power structures control language uses and Discourses of success.

Success as a concept can be difficult to imagine without considering the contexts from which it derives meaning (Lagemann, 1992; Rodriguez, 2008; Somech & Ron, 2007). For some students and educators, they have a very strong definition of what it means to be academically successful. However, others tend to focus more on the social element of success that stems from interpersonal relationships between individuals (Jones, 2004; Lebdina-Manzoni, 2004). Whichever avenue one chooses to place the most importance, it is crucial that an educational leader create awareness within the school that is not mutually exclusive and can lead to advancements in academic performances. The literature on success as a qualitative variable is sparse (Jones, 2004; Rodriguez, 2008), and most of the literature deals with the concept of success as a dependent quantifiable variable used as a prediction of other independent variables (Habegger, 2008; Lagemann, 1992; Lebdina-Manzoni 2004). This limit on definitions of success seems to go against

the purpose of schooling, to prepare students for life as responsible adults. In order for students to be successful as adults, they have to learn how to incorporate several key factors of personal development into their personas such as: how to interact with each other, how to act according to their beliefs, and how to act as a citizen of the republic (Lagemann, 1992). When schools are effective in not only teaching contents standards but also aspects of culture, they allow the maximum number of students a viable opportunity to achieve their dreams (Jones, 2004).

Thomas Scheff (1984) provides a framework of what it means to attach a label to a person. Although his original study targeted mentally-ill patients, he states in later works that future studies need to include an “interdisciplinary approach” outside the realms of psychology to increase the breadth of the literature to include how society places labels on individuals (p. 199). Scheff (1998) states in his rethinking of his original theory that, “one must interpret words and actions *in context*” (n.p.). The contexts of relationships seem to dictate that researchers investigate how social, academic, and cultural spheres label their members’ behaviors as successful or deviant. Therefore, the label of success implies that one interrogate the multiple uses of language that define success as a concept. When one interrogates uses of “success” within any school the findings become political in nature. In light of the ways that Discourses drive agents to act, it seems that without a discussion as to the positive and negative attributes of the various Discourses present within the school a study would suffer from an attempt to be apolitical. This would be similar in nature to one who has a vantage point position and does not engage a discussion about the inner-workings of the apparatuses present that create, sustain, or change how languages of success within a school operate.

## Quantitative Associations of Success

As I briefly outlined in earlier paragraphs, I searched for resources to use as a foundation for the literature review on “success.” Initially, the results were quite overwhelming until I began to investigate the nature of articles and books on the topic. These results often dealt with “success” as an attainable goal for schools, students, and educators. Breaking these down, I began to notice that many used the word “success” as an abstract noun that meant to attain a desired result. Many of the articles can be summed into two basic categories: goal attainment and processes necessary to attain said goals. These two categories missed the mark of how I viewed the function of the word “success.” When I conducted further queries, I changed words and phrases that gave results that were closer to how I had envisioned using the word “success” in the study. I divided the results into categories according to the type of research involved in each study. These categories were quantitative studies, qualitative studies, and theoretical/philosophical studies of success.

Lebedina-Manzoni’s (2004) quantitative article deals with differences in perceptions between students’ “success” and “unsuccess.” She states that the aspects students attributed to their success were the following: “inner motivation, persistence, work, and good organization” (p. 704). “Inner motivation” speaks to the ways that a person reacts to situations based on the “inner factors” or personal characteristics. Some students are more capable of responding to educational situations in the way that has been historically accepted. Although, the historical perception mandates that students follow stringent guidelines about individual responsibilities. I argue that the variables of “persistence, work, and good organization” stem from the overarching variable of “inner

motivation” because one’s motivation clarifies how he or she struggles to complete assignments, works, and organizes information. I am not assuming that a large degree of “inner motivation” is always directly correlated to a specific level of demonstrated behaviors, but the students who are motivated do share some characteristics or traits in their performance in school. This article primarily presents the successful student as one who follows the traditional, almost puritanical, aspect of schooling in which teachers have to teach students to have innate desires to perform at acceptable levels. The innate desires to which she refers relates to how students follow rules and structures that mandate that students complete their “work,” struggle with tasks they cannot complete (persistence), and then organize what they have done in a way that is accepted by their teachers.

Unsuccessful students are those who do not meet the stated objectives of education in ways that hegemonic rules outline. Lebedina-Manzoni (2004) lists some of the major factors from her study regarding to what unsuccessful students attribute their lack of success: “[lack of] general knowledge, luck, determination, current mood on exam, interesting contents, responsibility, learning with interest, and parents” (p. 706). She loads all of these factors into the following statement: “These results confirm an opinion that some individuals [successful students] will feel responsible for events happening to them while the others [the unsuccessful ones] tend to feel they are the victims of circumstances” (p. 706).

Lebedina-Manzoni’s (2004) analysis reveals the historical association of students’ success as being dependent upon the circumstances within the school that determine outcomes of education. However, defining the concept of success is an issue that is more

complex than solely focusing on students' performances in the classroom. Lagemann (1992) broadly states his academic definition of students' success as being students graduating by the time that they are twenty-four. Although his definition of success is quite ambiguous (most students who graduate are well under the age of twenty-four and the degree to which they participated even if they graduated is quite varied) he does draw some interesting conclusions as to the necessities needed for students to succeed. Some of the areas that he focuses on are driven by an evaluation of how scarce resources are consumed in schools. He states that money alone does not educate students, but it does provide the availability of resources for teachers to use to educate students. Some of the resources are related to classroom expenditures, and others are related to how teachers with resources are able to expand their knowledge base and increase the types of pedagogic strategies used in the classroom. The interactions of teachers with each other lead to a more "productive" culture in the school.

### Qualitative Associations of Success

The qualitative side of success in the literature primarily deals with success as an outcome for a school as a whole. This view of success seems to collectively associate all of the actions of those within the school with attainments or achievements according to academic standards. Rodriguez (2008) and Jones (2004) specifically state the phrase "cultures of success" and provide a platform from which to replicate similar actions. Habegger (2008) discusses the role of principals in creating a culture that includes success. For this section, I will review the literature that uses success within the contexts of qualitative research designs and will establish a foundation for my study.

The main study that I will use as a model to conduct research is Rodriguez's (2008) article on "cultures of success" within two urban schools. This study provides several key aspects that benefit my work. The study was a case study of two urban high schools. The schools were selected because of their involvement in the "Pathways for Student Success Project" (p. 762). The schools' demographics included at least 90% students of color and the majority of students were from lower socio economic categories that allowed them to receive free or reduced lunch.

Rodriguez provides a vital link between success and culture that allows this research to have a philosophical foundation from which to build. He defines school culture as "a set of processes informed by the intersection of school structures, cultures, and individual agency" (p. 761). The power dynamics within the school are present in all three of the avenues that inform the definition culture. With structures, the adults within the school create a formal structure for how the school operates and students create informal structures. He states, "school culture is also the frame of reference that creates boundaries, categories, and rules in which meaning is negotiated" (p. 761). All of Rodriguez's "frames" relate to Foucault's (2004; 1980) framework for understanding how Discourses operate according to power structures. For this study, I intend to look at how members within a school use languages of success to negotiate meanings.

The strengths of this article are that it establishes a link between culture and success and looks at ways that the structure of the school supports a positive academic and personal culture. Rodriguez (2008) notes that many students feel motivated by the personal relationships established between adults and students. These relationships lead to favorable outcomes in the future as a result of the past experiences. This is only one

aspect of a culture of success. Relationships start at the individual level; meaning that students establish meanings for themselves primarily through how they relate to others (both other students and adults). One deficiency in this article is that Rodriguez's conceptualization of a culture of success only speaks to the academic aspect of schooling. If one broadens the context of success to include how students and adults act with the Discourse of success, then the project has greater applications.

Schools are recognized nationally for many reasons (academic achievement, standardized test score improvements within subcategories such as race or class, the amount of students who are admitted to college, etc.) and Jones (2004) uses the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) school in Houston, Texas for her dissertation research. The KIPP philosophy and mission statement are based on the performance of students who have been historically disadvantaged primarily due to economic factors. Schools in high poverty areas routinely under perform schools that have a majority of students who come from families classified as middle class or higher statuses. For her research, she situates success within the contexts of "effective schooling." Effective schooling relates to the outcomes of students' performances according to a norm referenced criteria. Although I do not delve into the areas that Giroux (2001) labels as the "technique, organization, and administration" of effective schooling as Jones does, her dissertation is beneficial because it provides an avenue into an examination of the culture of success within the school.

Jones (2004) summarizes the mission and purposes that drive all of the proceedings at the KIPP school, and she divides definitions of success into two categories "backstage definitions of success" and "frontstage definitions of success" (p. 72).

“Frontstage Definitions” look at the visible factors that many quantitative research designs would focus as definable outcomes of success: test scores, scholarships, and the prestige associated with college admissions. The school promotes these as norms that students should seek to attain. Students are encouraged to learn in such a manner that they not only complete assignments but also have a depth of understanding to compete nationally for scholarships and entrance into prestigious colleges and universities. One key phrase that she uses to identify the frontstage qualities is “meaning holds across time and place” (p. 73). This speaks to the notion that a high score on the SAT has validity that is not diminished over time and has worth because it allows students to apply at colleges and universities that have higher levels of prestige associated with name recognition and to apply for both privately and publicly funded educational grants. The school, argues Jones (2004), uses the frontstage definitions of success to measure the degree to which the school is successful. The amount of students who score higher than the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile or who are admitted to colleges or universities are both quantifiable amounts that the school can use as bench marks from one year to the next. The school, according to Jones’s depiction of the school, uses these types of statistics to create a culture of success allowing all students the opportunity and desire to succeed. Desirability is an important concept for creating and sustaining definitions of success for students.

The “backstage definitions” of success according Jones (2004) refer to the “inner” qualities that drive people to succeed. She defines them as being “hard work,” “being a good citizen,” and “learning from one’s mistakes” (p. 73). (These are similar to Lebdina-Manzoni’s (2004) definitions of personality traits necessary for success: “inner motivation, persistence, work and good organization” (p. 704).) She states that the

qualities of “backstage definitions” are “marked by process rather than outcome,” “Meaning varies by person, time, and location,” and “linked to student agency” (p. 73). When examining how Jones uses the definitions for the “backstage,” it seems necessary to state that the intrinsic values she associates with these definitions follow historical definitions of success (citizenship, a puritanical work ethic, and learning from failures). These attributes are often attributed to how schools have defined cultures, effectiveness, or achievement. Jones omits the major question of how individuals internalize the formal power structures’ definitions of success in their own actions.

The three “backstage” qualities that Jones (2004) states have significance for this project; they speak to the aspects of life that drive both connotations and denotations in the language of success. The first quality she lists of “backstage success” is “marked by process rather than outcome” (p. 73). This quality is essential to understanding how languages of success are used within a school to both create and sustain a Discourse of success. For example, a student’s definition of success is developed over time according to many external factors. To understand how a student arrives at what he or she deems “success,” a researcher needs to understand the background or history of how the conceptualization occurred. If one only looks at the outcomes of success (achievements, benchmarks, or goal attainment) as the KIPP school does to measure successes or failures, then the researcher has not understood the processes that the school used to create the outcomes. All members of the school are involved in the processes of creating definitions of success; they are interconnected in establishing meanings, varying meanings by small degrees, or changing meanings entirely.

The second quality of “backstage success” is “meaning varies by person, time, and location” (p. 73). When one looks at Foucault’s (2004; 1980) conceptualization of Discourses or Bakhtin’s (2004) language analysis, the philosophical groundwork supports the notion that meanings vary from person to person, from time to time, or from one location to the next. This aspect of Discourse provides the avenue from which I intend to analyze power relationships within the school. Ultimately it seems that Jones (2004) establishes the validity of variation of meaning; however, she does not follow through in her investigation. She merely states the quality without expounding on the subject. For this project, I intend to address the shortcomings of this work and extend the research by describing how a culture of success can exist within a school and the definitions of success can vary according to the three areas that Jones (2004) highlights.

The third quality according to Jones (2004) is that success is “linked to student agency” (p. 73). Her definition of agency states that “students have some control over the quality of education that they participate in” (p. 84). This definition of agency speaks only to the academic aspect of education and not to the social or personal aspects that are prominent in schools. For this project, I intend to look at the educational aspects of success as well as the social and cultural definitions of success established by students, teachers, and administrators. Both the “frontstage” and backstage definitions of success are essential to understanding how agents within the school interact with Discourses of success. Measurable objectives or criteria are prevalent in the age of accountability, but the numbers omit the processes that members of the school follow to create meanings.

In all of the findings within the literature on success, I was unable to find a rich history of sources that used the word “success” in the same way that I intended. When

one views success as an abstract noun that lacks physical properties, the physicality of Discourses and languages are omitted. I believe that by extending the work of Jones to a school that has not received national attention allows a bridge to be built from the literature on success to include a broader application in public schools. The majority of schools were not designed around a framework that has been effective in the KIPP schools. Although most schools hold similar tenets of schooling to the KIPP schools, these schools inevitably use different languages to create cultures of success. One primary difference between KIPP schools and traditional schools is that the KIPP schools serve students in categories of high poverty and/or high nonwhite populations. Traditional school districts often have a range of student diversity with some situations of poverty and have diverse representations of ethnicities.

#### Broader Understandings of Success

In the previous pages, I have developed how the term success as I conceptualize it in this project is used in the literature. This section of the literature review will deal with how other terms that relate to the concept of success are understood in educational literature. Some terms appear more frequently than others such as student achievement, effectiveness, and positive school climate. All of these terms seem to be used interchangeably with the word success. For example an effective or a “successful” school is one that meets the basic educational, psychological, and emotional needs of students. When a school meets students’ needs, then the school is labeled as “successful.” The same holds true for interchanging the words of student achievement or diversity with the word success. However, instead of using the noun success, schools often will add the

adjective successful as a descriptor of whatever element that they intend to highlight. The difference between just student achievement and “successful student achievement” is that the latter necessitates that a school identify a range of achievement. The former on the other hand can indicate performance along a continuum or a mastery of skills. The continuum of student achievement ranges from a level where a student has a score of “does not meet standards” to “exceeds standards.” These may also be divided according to percentile or stanine depending on the standardized assessment.

Harris and Willower (1998) define effective schools as being “those that produce more and higher quality outputs and adapt more effectively to environmental and internal problems than do other similar [schools]” (p. 355). This comparison to other schools means that a school can only be “effective” in relation to other “similar” schools. Uline, Miller, and Tschannen-Moran (1998) extend the relationship between an effective school and others to include more internal variables within the school. These variables address the various aspects of operating a school such as “administrative functioning, leadership behaviors, morale, level of trust, culture and climate, parent involvement, community support, teachers’ efficacy, and the commitment, loyalty, and satisfaction of teachers” (p. 462). In both of the articles mentioned, the authors develop a mathematical model that gauges the effectiveness of a school. Uline, Miller, and Tschannen-Moran (1998) show how the interrelations between variables contribute to the “overall effectiveness” of a school. Although Uline, Miller, and Tschannen-Moran use variables to describe the internal operations of the school, they do not leave the vantage point of the macro level. At this level, respondents answered questions on a survey that utilized a “5-point Likert

scale” (p. 474). The problem with this type of response is that it does not allow respondents to add information that may clarify a choice.

Student achievement is similar to effectiveness in that it needs something else for which it can be compared against to have meaning. In the era of NCLB and accountability, schools are responsible to evaluate how well the school performed against a national standard. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is monitored according to state-issued standardized examinations. These exams often will assess how well the school as a whole performs in relationship to the national standard. The yearly reports also disaggregate the data into subgroups to monitor how well students performed according to demographic data of race, class, and special education. In much of the literature, the concept of student achievement is used as an end result or dependent variable. In this context, other dynamics are used to predict student achievement. DiPaola and Hoy (2005) state that Socio-Economic Status (SES) is the highest predictor of student achievement, but they also found that Organizational Citizenship Behavior was a close second. SES seems to be a logical predictor of student achievement because those of higher SES have the availability of resources to maximize the inputs that influence education. Students who come from families where a parent is able to not only stay at home but also stay at home and teach fundamentals such as reading are able to enter school more prepared than students whose parents depend only on government schools to educate their children. SES is measured in schools according to the amount of students who receive either free or reduced lunches which is based on the parent’s(s’) yearly income and the number of dependents living in the household. With so many predictors of student achievement, it is necessary to break down the components of what student achievement means. For most

students enrolled in a general education curriculum, it means their scores on standardized tests. For students who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), it varies depending on the decisions of the IEP team. “Successful” student achievement, to add the adjective, means that a student has met or exceeded the objectives that are designed according to his or her abilities.

Climate is an overarching term that speaks to the environment of a school. Weller (2002) states that “school climate is made up identified patterns of perceived or actual behavior in the effective school and it is usually measured by quantitative techniques to isolate and confirm critical behavior patterns” (p. 48). Weller differentiates climate from culture which he views as a term best measured using qualitative methodologies. Weller addresses four types of climate: “physical,” “academic,” “organizational,” and “socio-economic” (pp. 49-50). Physical climate is the environment of the school grounds, the hall ways, classrooms, and common areas. Academic climate addresses the ways in which educators create “expectations of success” for students (p. 50). Organizational climate deals with how rules and decisions are made and how administrators incorporate input from students and teachers. Weller (2002) deviates substantially from the traditional understanding of SES with his construct of socio-economic climate. In doing so, he does not speak to the relative wealth of students. He seems to define socio-economic climate according to how the physical environment appears; meaning that the socio-economic climate is based on the wealth of a school system or a school system and how they maintain their facilities. He uses words such as “inviting,” “welcoming,” and “fun” to describe the atmosphere that a school creates.

Effectiveness, student achievement, and climate are all beneficial words that can inform conceptualizations of the word success. However, the primary difference between how these terms are constituted and how I have discussed my particular interpretation of “success” is that the concepts of effectiveness, student achievement, and climate necessitate that a researcher conduct a quantitative study to measure the effects of different dependent and independent variables. This study is a qualitative study that will interrogate how individuals within a school view and conceptualize success. Whereas the unit of analysis in the three alternate meanings of success is the macroscopic school, the unit of analysis for this project will be how individuals within the school understand and negotiate terrains of success. Although I intend to document the administration’s understanding and how it applies the word “success” to the school’s culture, I also will investigate how teachers, staff, and students use the word to contribute to the school’s culture.

### Middle Schools

Middle schools provide a space for students to create social groupings and to expand their overall academic knowledge. For the first time, students begin paths that dictate the diploma tracks that they will choose in high schools. It is because of the uniqueness of the situations where students are more mobile within the school that allows students to establish meanings for different spheres with which they are involved. The role of the administration within the school is to align the definitions of success within these discursive spheres with the values and purposes of the school. I will briefly layout the guidelines for each body of literature in the paragraphs below. In order for the school

to become more inclusive and allow more students the opportunities to succeed socially, culturally, and academically, it is necessary to look at how these discourses of success are defined by students and then redefined and mediated by school officials.

The literature on middle schools is vast and seems to cover a wide array of issues that are unique to middle level education. San Antonio (2004) discusses the way that social class impacts students in middle schools. Class plays an important part in the way that students negotiate spaces and interact with other students both in and out of school. For example, many extra-curricular activities such as cheerleading and football are not free and require a substantial investment on the part of the parents for their children to be part of the team. The cost of necessities which many circles dictate that students purchase name brand apparel for status positions is ever increasing and constantly changing. The ways that fads move in and out of style and students' drive to keep up with them increases the basic cost of education. San Antonio (2004) addresses the values that students of different classes bring with them to school as they move from elementary school to middle school.

How students construct their identities within schools is a crucial aspect of the literature on middle schools. Identity can come in the form of students understanding and acting in ways that represent their individuality. Although it is problematic for schools to recognize students according to their races, classes, genders, and abilities, schools disaggregate students into groups for comparisons under the accountability framework of NCLB. Erik Erikson's (2005) article provides a historical point to begin discussing identity and the role of identity of individual behavior. He highlights many issues that are present in more recent studies such as trust, autonomy, and initiative. Students build

relationships on trust in each other and trust in self. The trust in self leads to autonomy and students acting out of a sense of purpose. Students' initiative drives their actions so that they form their own unique identities. This psychological understanding of student motivators speaks to the need for educators to understand that unseen mental musings compel students to act in certain ways. The actions of a student may not necessarily be conscious and may be a response to something that is completely unrelated to the situation.

Gender in middle schools plays an important role in how students form their identities. Many students often fall into "norms" that stereotype girls and boys into hegemonic categories. Failure seems to distract boys' and girls' ambitions and role performance in school for some while for others it is a catalyst for them to branch into new territories that are more accepting and can sometimes become negative in the ways that students participate in their educations. Bettis and Adams (2005) speak to the unique situations of female adolescence. They note the role of place in forming identity and how place is one issue that is not limited to the school walls. Anita Harris (2004) addresses the ways in which labels are attached to girls, especially in adolescence. These labels from peers drive actions in ways that educators' labels cannot. The label of "bitch" or "slut" seems to be as influential, if not more, in defining behavior as "Captain" or "Honor Student." Labels are often used within a context of culture to define and promote behaviors. The use of a word only has a positive or negative meaning because of its opposite. Students attach labels to other students in a way of asserting power or privilege. In the same way that positive labels are able to carry privileges, negative labels are able to remove privileges.

Middle schools represent a unique field in educational literature because of the circumstances that surround student maturation, both physical and mental, specific to this age range. Students begin to explore individual interests and are capable of acting according to principles that they value. For example, in elementary schools, students have decisions made for them for each portion of the day. A typical elementary school will have a very strong structure in place that dictates what each student is supposed to do for each section of the school day. A typical elementary school day will consist of so many minutes of reading time, mathematics practice, recess, art, spelling and the list goes on so that students in elementary school have very little personal choice as to what they are to do. When students enter middle level education, they have the ability to choose elective classes that they have an interest in. Although the variety of options is not as wide as students will later find in high school, the classes allow students to develop their individual talents and personalities as students. Another significant change from elementary schools comes with core class selection. Core classes often consist of English, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Science. For the first time in students' educational careers, students are divided between regular or academic classes and advanced or honors classes. The division is largely associated with students' scores on standardized tests.

Because of the variety of classes and the different tracks that students are placed in, students must change classes. Changing classes offers a brief time away from the classroom structure in which students are responsible to go to their lockers and put away books and materials for a previous class and collect the materials for the next class. During this brief window in which students must make conscientious choices about what they must do, students often have the ability to socialize with other students.

Socialization is important for students who embrace the opinions of others. Wormeli (2001) discusses at length the roles that emotions play as students develop their personalities. Possible emotions range from fear and despair to happiness and elation and can change instantaneously depending upon the circumstances that surround students.

Before moving into the specifics of middle level education literature that deals with students' attributes, I will briefly discuss the history of middle schools. Prior to the twentieth century, schools were divided into elementary or grammar schools and high schools or secondary schools. Elementary schools taught students basic skills such as penmanship, reading, mathematics, science, and history. Secondary schools were designed during this time to prepare the student for entry into the workplace in society. Anfara Jr. (2001) states, that deviation from the two school model began in the first part of the twentieth century with the development of the junior high school. This movement away from the two school model embraced the unique demands of the early adolescent. George and Alexander (1993) state that "the junior high emerged, originally, as an attempt to satisfy the call for a richer curriculum than the elementary school was able to offer, and a more personal atmosphere than the high school was able to develop" (as cited in Anfara Jr., 2001, p. ix). The literature seems to support and validate the concept that young adolescents are in unique physiological stages in the developmental process. The needs of students who are between the ages of eleven and fifteen have unique needs that cannot be fully met under the structure of the elementary or high school.

Junior high schools became more predominant across America moving from the east coast west (Anfara, Jr., 2001). This expansion into local school agencies was translated differently depending upon the location of the school and the way that states

interpreted research about middle level education. Anfara, Jr. (2001) states that by the 1960s junior highs had become “miniature high schools” and were using similar procedures to determine grades and credits. The apparent problem with junior high schools mimicking high schools is that the junior high schools no longer sought to meet the unique needs of their students. They were preparing them for life in high school, but they were not meeting the demands that are associated with this stage of maturation. To combat the progress of junior high schools toward becoming “miniature high schools,” the National Middle School Association (NMSA) was formed in 1973. The NMSA sought to change the philosophy behind the ways that school systems approached teaching young adolescents. The NMSA set the following five goals:

1. Every student should be well known as a person by at least one adult in the school who accepts responsibility for his/her guidance.
2. Every student should be helped to achieve optimum mastery of the skills of continued learning together with a commitment to their use and improvement.
3. Every student should have ample experiences designed to develop decision-making and problem-solving skills.
4. Every student should acquire a functional body of fundamental knowledge.
5. Every student should have opportunities to explore and develop interests in aesthetics, leisure, career, and other aspects of life. (p. 16)

The five goals of the NMSA point to a historical turning point in middle level education by focusing on the individual needs of the student. They do this by beginning each statement with “every student” rather than every school must do X for the student. I will refer back to these points later when I discuss the different variables that make middle level education unique.

After the development of the NMSA, middle schools began to increase in prominence and gained financial support across the nation (Anfara, Jr., Mertens, and Caskey, 2007). Anfara, Jr. (2001) notes that a critical point in middle level education occurred after the 1989 report by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. This report called educators to reform middle school education and focus on improving the quality of the curriculum and the design of instruction to maximize students' academic performances. The report seems to adopt and closely mirror the five statements of the NMSA report from 1977. Anfara, Jr. (2001) states, "*Turning Points* challenged middle schools to be places for personal growth and intellectual development" (p. xiii).

Middle schools seemed to change throughout the 1990s partially in response to the *Turning Points* report and additionally to the demand from the public for stronger schools compared to international standards. Anfara, Jr. (2001) notes that many critics of middle schools became very vocal at the end of the twentieth century and said that middle schools were "'weak links' in the K-12 education chain" (p. xv). As the concept of middle schools came under attack, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law in 2001. NCLB established a set of standards that judged all schools according to accountability standards. Failing to meet these standards can result in the closure of a school, limits on monetary funding from the federal level, removal of personnel and others. However, NCLB did raise awareness that each step in public education is crucial to the health of an entire school system. School systems could no longer see middle schools as a "muddled middle ground" between early childhood development and secondary education. Middle schools had to become areas of strength that seek to

overcome the obstacles that prevent students from advancing academically. Students who are below grade level in reading and mathematics are targeted so that they may improve their abilities and succeed in higher levels of education. It seems that many school systems across the nation are focusing on ways to improve instruction for middle level grades. This instruction seems to be based on the necessity of schools to meet federal mandates. One major detriment to NCLB standards is that schools seem to focus more on the content areas that are measured under the accountability standards and do not actually seek to foster the five areas set out by the NMSA from 1977. Students are trained to take standardized tests rather than being allowed to explore the fifth principle of “Every student should have opportunities to explore and develop interests in aesthetics, leisure, career, and other aspects of life” (p. 16). This area of education seems to be one that is prevalent in the literature from John Dewey to modern scholars who are adamant about developing well rounded students who can participate in nonacademic spheres of education and can explore their own interests.

The NMSA report from 1977 seems to highlight the unique qualities that students in middle grades seem to have. The qualities or areas of education (social, personal, and academic) reflect the general focus of this study. Social areas of middle school education are a dynamic that reflects the time in which the students are maturing. Although, I do not have first hand knowledge of historical time periods, some people who lived in various times have described what it was like for them during specific years of maturation. My grandfather who was born in 1933 described how during the time period of his adolescence he often listened to radio programs. The author Tony Earley (2001) describes how important TV was during his adolescence in the 1970s. He refers to

monumental social places in his life according to the television programs that he was watching at the time. Today's teenager has moved far beyond the social areas of radio and TV and has the options of internet social networking websites. These websites such as facebook, myspace, or twitter open a new realm of possible social connections especially with the ease of access through most cell phones. Although not typically allowed at schools, cell phones promote social endeavors through text messaging and phone calls that are usually done with limited parent oversight.

Social areas of education are much broader than social networking websites; they are the embodiment of the factors that drive students to post pictures, comment on blogs, and make statements that reveal personal details (Carrington, 2006). Social areas within the school are the ways that students relate with other students and educators. Moving beyond the virtual realms where messages are available around the world, the physical relationships, those that involve face to face contact, influence behaviors in young adolescents. Wormeli (2001) identifies that fostering positive relationships between students and between students and teachers is crucial to have a positive culture within the school. Basic skills of listening and speaking are improved through contacts with others who are good speakers and listeners. Some students will often mimic the protocols for "proper" interpersonal relationships until they have a grasp or the desire to move beyond what society has decided as "proper" and create a format for auditory expression that reflects who they believe that they are. Students build relationships with other students that can range from acquaintance to best friend. Schools foster these relationships by often having students develop bonds, either formal or informal, that bind the students together as a cohort. In the years that I have taught, I have observed how students interact

during times that are not considered “instructional times.” During these times of the school day, students develop their individual personas in relationship to others. For example, being on a sports team seems to have significant influence in bringing individuals unlikely to meet and create a bond outside of the framework of the team. Schools further promote socialization through the class structure. Unlike elementary schools where students primarily associate only with their singular class of 20-25 students, middle school students change classes and come into contact with far greater numbers of students.

The first and the fifth principles of the NMSA report reflect the social areas of education: “every student should be well known... and should...develop interests in aesthetics, leisure, career, and other aspects of life” (p. 16). Expanding the first principle from being known by adults to being known by other students is necessary to understanding the dynamics of the aspect of adolescence. Socially, students attach stigmas to other students that can be positive or negative. These labels, if you will, are vital to how students come to see themselves and others. Labels according to Scheff (1984) speak to the psychological implications of knowing one’s self in relation to others. Labels carry meanings that many students cannot fully grasp until later stages of mental development. The fifth principle of the NMSA report seems to speak to how students often will associate with other students who have similar interests and goals. For example, a club that focuses on a specific interest such as art will often bring together students who have an interest in art. This social aspect seems to drive the creative areas of student development by allowing students to work together through collaboration to engage each other’s work.

Like social areas of education, personal areas are developed in middle schools. Many middle schools focus on areas of character development. Character is only one attribute of the personal arena of schooling. Others can include awareness, self-control, and mindfulness. Carrington (2006) states, “Early adolescence has become identified as a time when young people make choices and take risks that determine what kind of adult they will become” (p. 22). As Carrington points out, middle school is a place of choices and risks, although, one could argue, and I agree, that a risk is a choice. Nevertheless, during the formative years of adolescence, students make decisions that have an impact on whom they become as adults in society. Some choices result in positive outcomes that allow the student to have a sense of pride. Other choices do not have such favorable results and a pessimistic view would state that they are failures. A failure remains a failure only as long as the person does not learn from his or her mistake (Wormeli, 2001). Along the lines of failure, one could position the concept of risk versus reward theory. Some students choose not to act because they consider the risks to outweigh the potential rewards. Others may view risks only in relation to the rewards. Either view seems not to foster a positive impact on personal responsibility. Education or schooling tempers how individuals make informed decisions as to why they are making a choice and not react out of fear of failure or out of a desire only to attain great rewards. Viewing the “big picture” seems to be one of the greatest assets that schools in America can value in their philosophy statements or purpose.

The NMSA report from 1977 addresses two principles toward the personal aspects of schooling. In the first principle, the report focuses on how adults within the school guide students to become independent thinkers. Establishing and maintaining

relationships between students and educators allows students to have an environment in which they are stretched and also an environment in which they are consoled during times of failure. Healthy mentor relationships allow students the opportunity to act within a controlled environment that seeks to protect students' emotional, physical, and mental health or safety. The fifth principle further addresses the concept of exploration. When students are allowed to explore aspects of life that have a relevance to them, they develop their individual personas. The persona of an adult primarily flows from the adolescent stages of development. A musician or an artist often can relate his or her desire to become a professional musician or artists to interests that were established through contacts with a teacher (Wormeli, 2001). It seems that both the first and the fifth principle of the report can work in unison; guidance along with open exploration can lead to greater personal developments for students.

The most substantial work on middle schools involves the academic realms specifically. Although many authors provide a glimpse of the psychology of young adolescents, it seems that the lens that they use is often one that wants teachers to understand the social and personal areas of adolescent life so that better pedagogies can be developed to improve the academic sphere (Anfara, Jr., 2001; Anfara, Jr., Mertens, and Caskey, 2007; Carrington, 2006; Jackson and Davis, 2000; Wormeli, 2001). As I stated in the brief synopsis of the history of middle level education, much attention has been focused on ways to improve core content instruction. This is evidenced by the mandates of NCLB, which focuses primarily on reading and mathematics scores to determine whether or not a school meets the accountability standards. In my experience as a middle school teacher, I have taught a core class that has often come under scrutiny,

as well it should, because as an English teacher, I have the responsibility to teach students not only literary skills, but also reading essentials. From the experiences teaching at a middle school, I have often heard that middle schools are merely places where students continue to hone their skills that will prepare them for high school. These critics of middle level education often will associate the major canons of core content only with high school education. However, with an ever increasing drop-out rate, society can no longer look at middle schools as places to entertain students for three years until they go to high school. Middle school teachers must teach students skills that will prepare them for the future whatever it means: full completion of high school, attaining a GED, or dropping out (Jackson and Davis, 2000).

Middle schools provide unique academic opportunities for students. Rather than being heavily focused on skill building like elementary schools, middle school curricula often seeks to engage the student, to make the student participate with the texts, and to stimulate student-driven learning. Middle schools do this in a variety of ways: Math and Science initiatives that encourage students to interact with principles through activities that one can see in the world around them. Social Studies classes often focus on civics, government, at history that is recent. English classes often use books whose protagonist shares basic traits of adolescence. All of the core classes seem to meet the needs of students who are in the process of moving from childhood into young adults.

The NMSA report addresses three principles toward the academic areas of education. The second, third, and fourth principles can be summarized into the following statement; students should achieve a “mastery of skills” through instruction that develops “decision-making and problem-solving” abilities that will result in an increase in

“fundamental knowledge” (p. 16). To break this statement apart, I will begin with the last aspect of “fundamental knowledge” which is vague in that the word fundamental is often dependent upon the individual’s ambitions. What a student decides to do later in life has a direct correlation to the knowledge base that he or she has. Having substantial knowledge of mechanics might make one interested in finding an occupation that requires one to use mathematics and science knowledge on a routine basis. However, “fundamental knowledge” could also mean students leaving middle school education with the ability to grasp higher order thinking abilities that depend on base levels of understanding. Whatever the case, “fundamental knowledge” implies preparation for the future. The second concept of “decision-making and problem-solving” draws one’s focus on students being able to apply what they have learned to either a similar situation or one that is new. Wormeli (2001) deals with ways that educators can encourage students to develop these academic skills; he suggests that teachers understand that increasing higher order thinking skills has a positive correlation to increasing standardized test scores, and teachers should focus on these skills rather than just those measured by yearly assessments. Preparing students only for a yearly assessment may result in students “looking good on paper,” but it does not meet the first criteria of having students demonstrate true “mastery” later in life. Students become adults who do not have to “bubble in” or write “only inside the box;” they have to depend upon their prior experiences to make informed decisions which will give them validation in future work places.

## Educational Leadership

How educational leaders interpret, create, and enact policies is a crucial element of this study. Heck (2004) contributes a substantial aspect to this project. He states, “The challenge for policy theorists is to develop more comprehensive conceptual frameworks that explain how policy environments and policy actors working within specific arenas impact the policy process, both in its processes and in its results” (p. 24). All actions within a school represent the results of those who implement educational policy. The primary position responsible for implementing policies is the principal, and it is his or her duty to ensure that all policies within the school align with the mission and values on which the school is founded. Some of the questions that I investigated in the educational leadership and policy literature were the following: 1) How principals have sought to implement policies within their schools that mediate how students define what it means to be successful? 2) How principals work with teachers to build cohesive definitions of success within schools? 3) How principals build a set of common values for all members of the school? 4) How educational policy construct the Discourses of “success?”

Sue Thompson (2004) analyzes the role of the middle school principal. She states that an effective principal “help(s) diverse groups of people find common ground” (p. 23). The diversity within a school should not be viewed as a challenge; rather, administrators should consider it strength to prepare students for the world outside of education. She considers a “strong principal” one who is capable of sustaining relationships with teachers and students through open communications. The “common ground” for this project is the areas that are defined through open communication. The

principal is capable of creating an effective culture of success within the school only by including voices of all participants in the school.

Smyth (2005) states that “successful supervision...[p]rovides the opportunity for students to have ownership and voice in their learning” (p. 98). By making students part of the educational process rather than merely products of it, the educational system works to include them in the decision making process. From a critical perspective, it is evident that exclusion of students’ voices on the sole hierarchical argument that teachers know more than students is dangerous. Smyth (2005) continues to state that “students should be treated as co-educators or co-constructors of their learning with teachers and other students” (p. 98). Teachers have an understanding of the basic elements of schooling: pedagogy, learning styles, developmental levels, content areas, etc. and by including students’ voices in the process they are not eliminated or reduced to anything less than a teacher. Students, on the other hand, are not mere jars in which to dump knowledge or “blank slates” because they are learning from their environments that they immerse themselves in both inside and outside of school.

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) give an overview of the term “Instructional Leadership” and its increasing usage throughout the field of educational leadership literature (p. 18-19). They note that the term is not well defined, and that the definitions can vary widely depending on the circle that one locates himself or herself. Smith and Andrews (1989) divide the roles of an instructional leader into four aspects: “resource provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible presence” (as cited in Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 18). A “resource provider” has the materials and the capital available for teachers to use in their classrooms and in preparation of their

lessons. As an “instructional resource,” a principal is a master in supporting his or her teachers in ways to provide learning opportunities to all students to meet their individual learning needs. Principals have to be able to communicate with all members of their faculties and staffs in order to insure that all are contributing and supporting the mission statements and goals of the schools. The fourth aspect of an instructional leader is “visible presence,” which, in my opinion, is the most important aspect of an instructional leader because the leader’s proximity to the students, faculty, and staff increases his or her awareness of what is actually occurring in the school. Administrators need to have an understanding of the motivational forces at work within the school.

Other definitions of “Instructional Leadership” resemble that of Smith and Andrews, but they are stated differently or more specifically. However, these definitions generally fit within Smith and Andrews’ four categories. The most significant addition, transformational leadership, comes from Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999). They state that a transformational leader is an instructional leader who “aspires, more generally to increase members’ efforts on behalf of the organization, as well as develop more skilled practice” (as cited in Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 19). A transformational leader operates with the functions of the organization in mind.

A leader, as I understand the term, implies one who purposefully decides goals and objectives within a school and then plans courses of action to move toward various targets. One crucial factor for a principal is to seek the input of those who are under his or her charge so that through open communication they can build a cohesive plan. The principal has to lead by example and embody the values on which he or she grounds his or her educational philosophies. For example, when a principal begins to contemplate the

culture of success present in the school, he or she should openly communicate with staff members, teachers, and students about the target objectives for the school. Planning is a crucial element of “successful” leadership, and it allows the leader to have an understanding of the short-term and long-term goals. Evaluation coincides with planning because when one creates a plan it is essential to have basic procedures in place prior to implementation that allows the leader to know the effectiveness in the strategies. Evaluation also allows the leader to know when to reflect on ineffective implementation that does not achieve the desired results. When we take up the example of a culture of success, the leader has to plan objectives and means in which to accomplish those objectives. Furthermore, the principal has to establish criteria by which to judge how certain procedures impact the overall culture of success in the school.

At this point in the review, it is necessary to create a philosophy of educational leadership that that guided the interpretation of the data analysis. Leadership is multidimensional and requires that those who are in the position of power in a school be aware of impact of any decision. A basic metaphor for a school leader is a juggler. A juggler has to understand certain characteristics of his or her craft: timing, space, and consequences. Timing is essential for a juggler because if the concept of timing is forgotten, too juggling clubs are in his or her hands rather than in the air. This holds true with the role of the principal; he or she has to be aware of the timing of multiple objectives to ensure that too many do not coincide or conflict with one another which will lead to disruptions in the processes present that the school is attempting to implement to achieve a culture of success. The spaces of a school are symbolic of the objects that are being juggled. Each element within a school occupies its own space, and a leader has to

understand the relationship of one object to others. The consequences of juggling and leadership are essentially the same: if one incorrectly judges either timing or space then the juggling club or clubs fall to the ground. In a school, the principal has to have an awareness of all of the factors involved in carrying out routines and procedures that make the school operate. When he or she fails to understand the relationship between timing and spaces within the school, the school has an ineffective leader. However, ineffectiveness can be remedied by conscious reflection, purposeful planning, and careful implementation which will effectively keep all of the juggling clubs in the air and the school moving toward its stated objectives.

### School Culture

Much of literature on organizational culture deals with the quantifiable numbers and how elements of culture are factors for understanding their relationships to other variables. The outline of this section of the literature review will be to 1. Discuss the historical/philosophical definitions of “culture”. 2. Review the literature on organizational/school culture. 3. Create a framework of culture for the project. and 4. Define how I am going to situate the phrase “Culture of Success” throughout the project.

Culture as a concept seems to have taken on usages and meanings that include everything from music and television programming to fine art and literature. The concept of culture did not begin with such inclusive definitions. Degler (1991) outlines the historical uses of the word “culture” in western philosophical traditions. He begins with Franz Boas’s use of the word culture includes a plurality: meaning that every social structure displays a culture (p. 71). This radical shift from “hierarchical” definitions of

culture began many twentieth century traditions of identifying and debating the concept of pluralized cultures. Degler notes two crucial students of Boas who extended the definitions of culture Alfred L. Kroeber and Robert Lowie. Kroeber's concept of culture broke from the scientific tradition of attempting to use science to position one culture higher than another. Lowie extends Kroeber's point to a logical conclusion that "Culture is a thing *sui generis*, which can be explained only in terms of itself" (Degler, 1991, p. 101). The question stands as to how one goes about discerning different cultures. Using Lowie, it is necessary to move beyond the scientific tradition of solely looking at culture as something that one can measure. Culture implies something that one can merely document rather than measure.

Stuart Hall (2005) outlines several key issues of cultural representations. His article begins by recognizing the crucial role that language plays in negotiating relationships among students. He discusses the structure of language in forming power relationships. He defines power as "including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way" (p. 307). Those who control the labels within a school have a privileged position. Therefore, how others represent an individual through languages is laden with issues power dynamics that a researcher needs to address. Gee (2004) notes that culture is not a finite or concrete item and essentially defines what "counts as relevant" (p. 45). The attribute that defines what is "relevant" further complicates an interrogation of a culture because individuals are autonomous, although interconnected through social frameworks, agents who decide what is meaningful to them and also how they want to react to labels of inferiority.

Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) provide a thorough breakdown of the concept of culture. They begin by summarizing Edgar Schein's six properties of culture:

(1) shared basic assumptions that are (2) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it (3) learns to cope with ways that (4) have worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, (5) can be taught to new members of the group as the (6) correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p.121)

The first five properties are not problematic for most organizations; however, for schools, the sixth property raises a significant question of is there only one "correct way" to act as agents within the school? Schein's properties seem to a bit too broad for a school, and Weick and Sutcliffe's (2001) narrowing of Schein's six properties into three categories "assumptions that preserve lessons learned...values derived from these assumptions that prescribe how the organization should act...and artifacts or visible markers and activities that embody and give substance to the espoused values" seem to be a better fit for schools (p.121-123).

Weick and Sutcliffe state that, "If timely, candid information generated by knowledgeable people is available and disseminated, an informed culture becomes a *learning culture*. The combination of candid reporting, justice, and flexibility enable people to witness best practices that occur within their own boundaries and to move toward adoption of them" (emphasis theirs, p.136). Within a school, educators ultimately must create a means of getting information to students that outline what it means to be successful. The culture of success within a school seems to replicate itself throughout a building by teachers and administrators recognizing successes and publicizing them so

that other students will have knowledge of them and then the other students will emulate certain behaviors. The primary drawback is that in most educational environments changing the culture of a school is difficult and can become a long term project. However, when administrators understand the concept of school culture and its replication factor, they are able to implement elements for cultural change within the school. As long as they have a position within a school, they are able to build upon the culture created and sustained by both previous students and teachers. One primary role of an administrator is to address the issues within a school's culture and present them to all members of the school's faculty and staff. When a school makes a cohesive, they are able to act with a unity that allows for maximum pace for change of the school's culture.

School culture differs from school climate. Although the differences are subtle, a major difference between the two is how an investigator conducts research on the concept. School climate is often measured using quantitative assessments that seek to document the big picture of a school. School culture relies on qualitative methodologies to describe how individuals act. Weller (2002) provides a concise understanding of the differences between school climate and school culture "School culture differs from school climate in that the culture is the sum of strongly held and widely shared basic assumptions and common values found and practiced in the school. Culture is more a symbolic social system which is often abstract and open to interpretation" (p. 48). For this project, the last sentence is the crux of the argument in that cultures of success are "abstract and open to interpretation.

## Cultures of Success

Culture as I have outlined is a multi-dimensional aspect of human experience. Culture exists as an amalgamation of many influential factors. Most simply, Rodriguez (2008) states that “school culture is *what schools do and how they do them*” (p. 761). Broadening this definition of school culture, I suggest that school culture is what members (students, staff members, teachers, and administrators) of the school do (both collectively and individually) and how they act according to discursive structures within the school. With this definition of culture, I am able to describe how individuals use language to establish meanings.

Using the terminology of a “culture of success” as stated by both Jones (2004) and Rodriguez (2008), I describe how one school’s Discourses of success create cultures of success. Gee’s (1999) definition of Discourses as being “language plus other stuff” establishes a foundation for using multiple methods to describe what is meant by a culture of success (p. 17). I intend to analyze how individuals use languages, visual displays, and artifacts to create a culture of success. By focusing on multiple ways of creating meaning, I plan to describe how individuals use the term of “success” and how they situate it.

## Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the literatures on which provides a foundation for this project. The primary areas on which I have focused are Discourses, School Culture, Middle Schools, Educational Leadership, and Success. These areas within the literature review are each unique; however, my ambition in this chapter is to stitch each section of

the review into a quilt that has new strengths and uses. Rather than being separate sections, I purposefully selected and blended them into a cohesive chapter. As Rogers (2004b) discusses the concept of analysis in CDA, I feel that I have made a distinction as to how I situate the difference between discourse and Discourse. This distinction guides the methodology chapter and the data analysis chapter. Discourses of success are present within schools in many ways. In the methodology chapter, I will layout the tactics that I intend to utilize to capture the experiences of individuals within the school. The data analysis will largely depend on careful description and interpretation of the data collected from the school.

Middle schools are unique institutions within the framework of American schooling. They are places that offer students the opportunities to develop their individual personas within a structured environment. These spaces allow students the opportunity to explore individual interests and act on their ambitions. However, spaces exist within middle level education that empower some while stripping varying degrees of power from others. What I hope to accomplish in the methodology chapter and the data analysis chapter is to focus on ways to document power relationships within the culture of success. Some power relationships are quite visible in that power flows from the leadership of the school down to teachers, staff members, and finally reaches students where it becomes a new amalgamation that may or may not resemble its initial format. In order to understand the power dynamics present in the school, I will utilize CDA methods as well as ethnographic methods that will develop an analysis of languages of success used within the school. I will use Gee's (2004) conceptualization of "discourse" to guide basic description of words used; I will also the counter conceptualization of "Discourse"

to guide the interpretation of the actions, icons, and other relevant aspects of the dynamics of culture.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

In Chapter 1, I outlined the basic scope and general framework that I utilize in the course of this study. Chapter 2 developed the theoretical foundation necessary in the literature and discussed how I borrow from various literatures to create a project that focuses on how Discourses of success within a school are developed, sustained, and mediated by individuals and groupings of individuals within a school. The second chapter focused on multiple areas within educational literature that are relevant to this study in particular: Critical Discourse Analysis, Educational Leadership, Middle Schools, and Culture. This chapter develops the theoretical framework and methodology (for both data collection and data analysis) and states limitations that demarcate the boundaries and foreseen shortcomings of the project. The project relies upon Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a foundation from which to collect and analyze data; however, I also use ethnographic methods to collect data from students, teachers, and administrators.

#### Theoretical Framework

The unit of analysis for this project is the school's culture of success as described by its participants. In order to define the concept of success in its many Discourses, I will

seek the narratives from individuals within a school who create definitions of success and embody the label of success. Furthermore, I will attempt to document the ways that the school promotes definitions of success using iconic images (artifacts) and displays within the school (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001). Because schools are representations of public institutions, Discourses are present in many areas within the school and are both visible and invisible depending on their situations (Foucault, 2004; 1980). Some Discourses of success within the school are created by students while others are created by educators (Fairclough, 2004). Those that are created by students are influenced or mediated by the administration's view of the school's stated and implied values as verbalized through the purpose and mission statements. Ultimately, the school involved in this study creates and maintains both a climate and culture of success that includes voices of representatives of each group (students, teachers, and administrators) within the school.

In order to understand the culture of success within a school, I interrogated the school's leadership according to Weick and Sutcliffe's (2001) three areas of school culture "assumptions, values, and artifacts" which have philosophical relationships similar to Fairclough's (2004) "genre, Discourse, and style." To understand both the assumptions and values of the school, I employed two methods of language analysis. The first involves interviews of administrators, teachers, and students. The second method of language analysis used written responses; students answered eight open-ended questions in English classes about "success," what it means to be "successful," and what images in the school represent "success." Because the culture of a school is multidimensional and is influenced by discursive practices, I also document and describe how students and teachers' contributions to the overall culture of success reflect the administrators'

articulations of success. To understand how the school uses artifacts to represent its culture of success, I photographed images and areas that were symbolic of the messages that the school portrays about success according to the administrators, teachers, and students and also include interviews that look at each interviewee's thoughts about the image or area and will ask why he or she selected that space in the school building.

### Research Site

The research site for this project is Mallard Middle School (MMS), which serves students in grades six through eight and includes students in both general and special education populations. The school has 562 students with a diverse population of students according to races and classes. The majority (72%) of students identify as white or Caucasian (non-Hispanic). The percentage of students who identify as African American is 24%. The remainder of students identify as Hispanic (2%) or "other" (2%). The percentage of students receiving free/reduced lunch is 36 %.

The school's administration consists of one principal and one assistant principal who each have specific responsibilities and obligations. The faculty includes 36 teachers who have an average of 13 years of experience teaching. The percentages of the highest degree for the faculty are 40% Bachelor's, 55% Master's, and 5% Educational Specialist or Doctorate (Ed. D or Ph D). Over the last five years, the school has grown at an average pace of 15 students per annum. The total number of classified or support employees (those whose positions do not require teacher licensure) is 16 and includes the positions of secretary, book keeper, paraeducators, custodians, nurse, and members of the Cafeteria/Nutrition Program (CNP). MMS has two feeder elementary schools and is

centrally located within its district. The district is in a state in the southeastern region of the United States. The district serves approximately 16,000 students, which makes it one of the largest in its state.

### Research Participants

This study used volunteers as research participants. Beginning with the faculty, I asked for volunteers from the administration, teachers, and other adult personnel within the school. Each adult participant received a copy of the IRB approved consent letter as well as a brief overview of the project. My idealistic goal was to include most, if not all, of the adult personnel in the school, but my actual target was to interview half of the adults in the school with at least one representative from each classification. I agree with Gee (2004) that including representatives from all types of employees classified staff (custodians, secretaries, paraeducators, etc.) and certified (teachers and administrators) will provide a wealth of data about the school. Some questions varied depending upon the classification of the employee.

I gave all students with the IRB approved consent letter. This letter provided parents and guardians with information about the project and should the parent or guardian consent that the student being part of the project included a place for his or her signature. Only those students who volunteered and returned a signed parental consent form and assent form were included in this project. All students who volunteered contributed through open-ended responses as part of their English classes. Each English teacher had a protocol to follow that served as a flexible guide for lessons that will culminate in short responses on the topic of success. Each English teacher explained the

research project to her students. I was available in each class to answer any potential questions when the teachers introduced the project. Students who chose to be part of the project were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The only identifying information that I collected about the students to use in the project was basic demographics consisting of their age, racial classification, grade, and gender. Students self-selected in all of the demographic categories. Each category had an open-ended statement such as “The gender that I identify as is \_\_\_\_\_.” or “The race that I identify as is \_\_\_\_\_.” The total number of students who choose to participate in the study by contributing responses was about 30% of the student population with representatives present from each grade, race, class, and gender. From the students who participated in the open-ended response portion, I selected ten to fifteen students to interview in small groups from each grade. I gave these students a flyer that explained this portion of the project in greater detail. Students were interviewed in small groups of 4 or 5 during regular school hours.

### Critical Discourse Analysis

To answer the questions that frame this project I used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); to articulate how I use this framework, I will briefly discuss what I mean by CDA. Gee (1999; 2004) and Rogers (2004a; 2004c; 2005) provide a thorough introduction to CDA and how researchers can use it to analyze relationships of power within an educational context. Gee (1999; 2004) provides a link from Foucault’s (2004; 1980) semi-abstract philosophy to practical application. This link is essential to understanding power dynamics within a school and speaks to how an interrogation

reveals what is happening below superficial levels. To complete this investigation, Gee (1999) states, one needs to analyze the language that is used, which ties the philosophical thoughts of Foucault and Bakhtin together. This tie between Foucault, Bakhtin, and CDA is important because I will primarily look at the ways that individuals use languages to create definitions of success.

CDA has three primary components: Critical, Discourse, and Analysis. Each of the terms is theory laden and comes out of a variety of research traditions and literatures. The term “critical” according to Rogers (2004), Gee (1999; 2004), and Fairclough (2004) is summed up by the study of power relations. This brief definition is overly simplistic; its deeper implications speak to a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals are controlled by powers and control others by similar means. Critical theory rejects much of the scientific assumptions that were accepted within the twentieth century that prevailed in social theories (Rogers, 2004; Gee, 2004). Some twentieth century social theories seem to concentrate on changes at the macroscopic level and do not to focus on the power dynamics that control individual choices. By focusing on power relationships at the microscopic individual level rather than just the macroscopic, institutional level, this project will follow a reverse course than those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century social science paradigms. For this project to be considered “critical,” I will attempt to document how power relations mediate uses of language in general and languages about “success” specifically. My goal for this project is to describe how success is used or interpreted by individuals regardless of their position of power and to look at the ways that the concept of power influences these definitions.

This project follows in the critical tradition of looking at power relationships among all individuals (students, teachers, staff, and administrators) within the school.

Rogers (2004b) lists eight principles of CDA:

1. CDA addresses social problems
2. Power relations are discursive
3. Discourse constitutes society and culture
4. Discourse does ideological work
5. Discourse is historical
6. A sociocognitive approach is needed to understand how relationships between texts and society are mediated
7. Discursive analysis is interpretive and explanatory and uses a systematic methodology
8. CDA is a socially committed scientific paradigm. (p. 2)

Each of the eight principles seems to build upon the other. “Social problems” inevitably involve power structures within society and within schools. Discourses frame how members of society function, which I interpret as meaning that culture is an overarching term of how people act and interact with one another. Culture would then inform the ideas that individuals have about their past, present and future experiences. Individuals’ knowledge is informed by internal and external factors, and it is crucial to understand the powers that “mediate” choices and decisions. The descriptive attribute of CDA allows researchers to document experiences and create a synthesis that reflects the whole of an institution rather than just a top down approach. CDA seems to allow a researcher the liberty to move from and within the dynamics of the micro and macro to locate situations in contextual languages that speak to the “social” situations present.

Henry Giroux (2001) outlines the history of Critical Theory and how educators and researchers can use it to create schools that are more inclusive. Ultimately, he states that educators need to think more complexly than just having a focus on “technique,

organization, and administration” (p. 193). This focus on what I call “non-formalized teaching areas” is equally important as “formalized teaching areas.” “Formalized teaching areas,” using Giroux’s (2001) terminology, are those areas within a school that are related to the management of classrooms and schools. “Non-formalized areas,” reading into Giroux’s omission, are those areas within a school that deal with how individuals interact in non-teaching/management spaces within the school. Schools have multiple purposes; however, the primary objective of schools is to increase students’ knowledge through learning which will prepare students for lives outside of K-12 education. To accomplish this, teachers and administrators develop pedagogies and implement them through strategies that are meant to lead to students leaving formalized education equipped to go into the world and become contributing members of society. Schools are responsible for more than teaching content standards; they ultimately teach students how to understand socially accepted behaviors and how to act and interact with others. The non-content standards areas within a school are symbolic of larger dynamics of power relations within society. For this project, I focus on how power relationships within a school drive Discourses of success and how Discourses are employed throughout the school’s culture with both the formalized and non-formalized arenas.

Foucault’s understanding of the term “Discourse” is essential to speak to how CDA theoreticians use the term. Rogers’ (2004b) differentiation between “Discourse” and “discourse” aligns with Gee’s (1999; 2004) definitions of the two terms and also borrows from Fairclough (2004) to establish meanings relevant to the field of CDA research. Lower cased discourse is the “language bits of what is said” (p. 5). For the purposes of clarity, I will only use the term “discourse” when I am looking at a

superficial interrogation of the language that one uses in either interviews or observations. When I use the term “Discourse,” I will align my distinction with Gee’s (2004) definition: “A Discourse is a whole package: a way of using not just words, but words, deeds, objects, tools, and so forth to enact a certain sort of socially situated identity” (p. 40). By basing my own understanding and definition of “Discourse” on Gee’s work, I am able to bridge the gap between spoken languages and iconic images of artifacts. “Discourse,” as Gee (1999; 2004) notes, necessitates that a researcher understand both the “utterance-type meanings” and the “utterance-token meanings” of language uses (p. 25). Gee’s two types of meanings both involve a “correlation between the form and function in language” and only differ based on the researcher’s understanding of situated meanings (p. 25). “Utterance-type meanings,” one could infer, are related to definitions of discourse (Gee, 1999; 2004; Rogers, 2004b; 2004c; Fairclough, 2004). “Utterance-token meanings,” to make a similar inference, are more closely related to definitions of Discourse (Gee; 1999, 2004; Rogers, 2004c). Therefore, the primary emphasis of this project will be to focus on Discourses of success rather than discourses of success because I want to look beyond the surface level of what is said.

Analysis has long been part of research traditions. Basic analysis began when the earliest human began to question some aspect of nature and began to logically process the data of his or her experiences. Rogers (2004b) notes that differences of opinion exist within the CDA research community and states that “the analytic procedures depend on what definitions of *critical* and *discourse* the analyst has taken up as well as his or her intentions for conducting the analysis” (p. 6). I choose to situate this research project with Gee’s understanding of analysis as articulated by Rogers (2004b): “Gee’s analytic

procedures include a set of connection-building activities that includes describing, interpreting, and explaining the relationship between language bits (small ‘d’ [discourse]) and cultural models, situated identities, and situated meanings (big ‘D’ [Discourse])” (p. 7). In the course of this project, I follow the incremental process and arrange a discussion in the findings in the following manner: first, description of what is present within the school; second, interpretation of the described experiences; and third, explanation of the “relationship” of the discourses and Discourses of “success” within the school’s culture. Rogers (2004b) makes an important statement about the analysis of CDA: “CDA is an analysis of not only what is said, but what is left out—not only what is present in the text, but what is absent” (p. 7). This point of view is influential especially in the phases of description and interpretation, but it is even more poignant in the phase that begins to wrestle with how relationships exist inside of the school’s culture.

## Methodology

This study is a case study that uses ethnographic methods. As a case study, I only examined one school and attempted to include as many voices from all representative groups as possible. The school that I selected is one that has a history of maintaining a culture of success, and one that has demonstrated academic success in prior years based on standardized test scores. However, academics only represent one aspect of success that I describe. I also examined how social and personal elements of success are represented and articulated in the school.

Artifacts, one of the Weick and Sutcliffe's (2001) three aspects of culture, allow a researcher to document the physical representations of an experience. In this study, I explored how the school uses artifacts to promote, define, and establish a culture of success. Van Mannen (1990) states that "Objects of art are visual, tactile, auditory, kinetic texts—texts consisting of not a verbal language but language nevertheless, and a language with its own grammar" (p. 74). Documenting how artifacts are used and placed within a school allowed a glimpse of the physical properties of the school's culture of success. I blend the iconic grammar of images with the verbal grammar of words and phrases to have a more robust description of the culture of success languages.

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) provide insight into how to collect ethnographic data. They state that writing is a complementary process to conducting research (p. 11). The point of view that I will attempt to remain throughout the research process is third person (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995, p. 57). The third person point of view allows the researcher to investigate and document what is said and done without influencing the words or actions. Because this project relies upon languages to describe cultures of success, I used various writing procedures to document how individuals use words and phrases to convey meanings. I used jottings and field notes when I am observed individuals within their "normal" school environments. "Normal" environments can include, but are not limited to, participation in classes, extracurricular activities, lunch times, and after-school functions such as sports or clubs. I also used a camera to document displays of success in the school. The research for this project does not rely heavily on in-school observations. These types of observations were sporadic throughout the school year.

Weiss (1994) provides the basics of interviewing methodology which are a crucial part of the study. The project included interviews with the principal, assistant principal, teachers, staff members, and students. Participation in the project is completely voluntary and will follow the IRB procedures for conducting research with individuals and with minors. All minors who choose to participate were required to attain written consent from their parents or guardians. Interviews with adults within the school were conducted either in small groups or individually depending upon availability of the adults' schedules. Students were interviewed during times allotted by the administration of the school. Students were selected for interviews purposefully according to administrator and teacher recommendations and based on their responses to the open-ended responses portion of the project.

Carspecken (1996), Rogers (2004c), Gee (2004) and Fairclough (2004) develop the framework for how I use CDA in the study. The term "Critical" implies that issues of social justice (race, class, and gender) or power dynamics may be present in the words or languages of Discourses of success within the school. I use CDA to guide how I structure both questions in interviews and the writing prompt. Participants will have the opportunity to respond to questions that attempt to access information about race, class, and gender. From their responses, I used CDA to analyze how concepts of power related to success are mediated within the school. Gee (2004) and Rogers (2004c) essentially state that using a CDA framework has multiple methodologies. Since CDA does not have strict procedural mandates for conducting research, I intended to utilize a collaboration of methods.

Sarah Pink's (2006) book *Doing Visual Ethnography* provides insight into the ways to incorporate images into the study. Pink notes the history of using visual images in research designs has paralleled the increase in technology of photographic equipment. She summarizes that improvements in camera technology have led to greater access to this type of research. Most current digital camera technologies allow researchers to document images and have an instantaneous access to the image rather than pushing the button and waiting until the film is developed to begin analysis. Any image that includes a participant's identity or references that would allow another to access their identity were eliminated or blurred for their protection.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) address most of the basic aspects of qualitative methodology that I use throughout this study. Their work provides specific details for both collecting and analyzing data from qualitative inquiries. All data was securely collected and stored throughout the research process to protect the identities of participants. Once I began to analyze the data, I created a list of general codes that looked for themes in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Weiss, 1994; Carspecken, 1996). Once I created general codes, I went through the data and looked for categorical codes that reflect the relationships between and among general codes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Weiss, 1994; Carspecken, 1996).

Sandoval (2000) discusses the ways in which power relationships should be recognized and challenged. An awareness of the power dynamics present is important for researchers to understand as they interrogate the relationships between students and between students and educators. Some of the power dynamics that I will focus on are the following: Who controls languages of "success" within the school? How are "successful"

behaviors defined within the school? and How do individuals respond to others' definitions of success? By looking at the power dynamics within the school, I planned to describe how power flows throughout the school. Prior to conducting the research, I hypothesized that the power dynamics of the school would reflect Foucault's (1980) cyclical model in which power flows through all individuals and is not solely owned by adults within the school. I also base this hypothesis on the work of Jones (2004) who conducted a study on the culture of success in a school.

The methodology for this project began with getting IRB approval and the appropriate permissions from the university, the school board, the superintendent, and the principal. Once all parties agreed to the study, I began collecting data in the school over the course of the 2009-2010 school year.

### Data Collection

Data collection primarily consisted of observations, interviews, and photographic documentation. I observed students' behaviors, teachers' behaviors, and administrators' behaviors during both school hours (hallways, classrooms, lunch, and assemblies) and after school hours (faculty meetings, club meetings, sporting events, and PTO events). I documented all of the observations in field notes that served as a reflection of both the connotations and the denotations of languages of success within the school. This project had four basic phases of data collection and was organized based on which category the respondents qualified as.

## Phase 1

I began Phase 1 by the interviewing the principal and the assistant principal and used a protocol that provided structure that sought their beliefs as to the nature of the culture of success operating within their school. I also asked them about the stated objectives (mission statements and the purpose) and the implicit or unstated values that they derive out of the mission statement as they create policies within the school. I also asked them about different Discourses of success within the school (social, cultural, and academic). After these interviews, I used a semi-structured interview process whereby I walk with the administrators (independently) and asked them to show me areas of the school that they believed were iconic artifacts of the school's values on success. I looked for other artifacts that represent the school's culture that were displayed. I photographed the images using a digital camera to document the scenes. I also asked them questions as to why each image is important to the culture of success in the school. After I completed these interviews with the principal and the assistant principal(s), I interviewed teachers in small groups or individually. I used the same protocol when I conducted the interviews with the teachers and the classified employees. In all, I had 25 adults participate in the project.

## Phase 2

To give the majority of students the opportunity to voice their opinion, I utilized an open-ended response narrative. I met with the English Department and presented them the option of being part of the project and using the student-protocol as part of their classes. I went over the basic aspects of the project and what I hoped to capture by having as many students as possible contribute. Teachers were able to change the design of the

formatting or the wording the questions used. After the meeting, I made the necessary changes to the lesson plans, the rubric, and the design of the assignments. The principal then reviewed the updated version of the protocol. She had the option of making any necessary changes before approving this part of the project. Teachers were then presented with copies of the finalized protocol, Informed Consent Forms, and Assent Forms.

Students who chose not to participate in the project or did not attain parental/guardian consent still completed the assignment although their work was not included in the project. Prior to beginning this phase, I gave the teachers an informational flyer to send home to explain the project and included a copy of the IRB approval as well as a parental/guardian consent form. I asked parents/guardians to consent that I may use their child's essay as part of the study. Only those students who returned the permission forms were included in the study. Parents who decided not to consent that their child may not participate do not have to return the consent forms. Parents or guardians who later decide that they no longer consent for their child to be part of the project could notify me or the principal in writing and all references or data to those individuals were eliminated in their entirety. Students may also choose to remove assent and the aforementioned deletion of data will occur.

After the initial part of phase two, I collected the responses and coded them for both general and categorical concepts and ideas. I used the information contained in the data to create questions as part of phase four. I also analyze the data to look for potential subjects to interview in phase three who were omitted by the teachers or administrators' recommendations. My goal was to collect essays from half of the students at the school.

The actual amount was about 200 and was dependent on the number of consent and assent letters that students return.

### Phase 3

After the interviews with the teachers and administrators, I asked members of both groups for examples of students who demonstrate success to them. I contacted parents with a letter that describes the purpose of this phase of the project and essentially said that your child's name was submitted as an example of what it means to be successful at school. I also provided details for the parents to contact me with their questions if they would like further information. Once I had parental/guardian permission, I planned to interview about 10-15 students from each grade in an acceptable setting (the library during or after school). I interviewed students in small groups (3-5) initially and then independently when I felt as though the respondent had more information to provide for the study. I asked the students questions that drew out responses that prompted them to elaborate on the nature of success within the school. I asked questions about peer groups and what it means to label actions as successful. The series of questions that I used incorporated Weick and Sutcliffe's (2001) three basic principles of culture: assumptions, values, and artifacts. I used these basic concepts to create a more complex description of success. The questions began with rather simplistic questions that asked students to describe the languages of success within the school. I used open-ended questions and follow-up questions that integrate students' responses.

### Phase 4

I began the final phase of the project by returning to the administrators and teachers with questions that precipitated from the students' written responses and

interviews. I purposefully selected those who I felt had more to contribute on the concept of success that what was said during the first interview. The questions began with statements that used the students' words and phrasing and then asked the respondents to speak as to how it is relevant to the overall culture of success within the school. I gave ample opportunities for them to elaborate and to expound as they answered the questions. I inquired as to how they interpreted the languages from students' responses. To bring closure, the teachers and administrators had the opportunity to comment on the overall culture of the school.

I concluded the data collection phases by contacting participants in this project with a letter that thanked them and provided contact information for them if they should desire to no longer have their input included. I did not intend for the research to be invasive and cause any participant undue harm as to warrant post observation interventions. Should the need for interventions presented, then I planned consult with those individuals on a one on one basis according to the guidelines of the IRB regulations and planned to involve members of the dissertation committee as to how to approach each situation encountered. Fortunately, this was not needed.

### Data Analysis

To begin analyzing data, I transcribed all interviews and field notes. Students' written responses were be collected and sorted into one file. I began the coding process by generating initial codes that appeared from the data. With the first reading of the transcriptions, I marked initial codes that seemed relevant. I then compiled a list of codes and went through the data again and marked codes with the idea of documenting the

relationships between and among general codes used throughout the data into categorical codes. After this process, I assessed the general codes and intentionally looked for category codes according to the combinations of general codes. I then applied the same general and categorical codes to the photographs. The third time that I read through the data, I looked for how categorical codes related to one another. I also looked for the ways that languages of success fit into the three categories of administrative cultures of success, pedagogic cultures of success, and student cultures of success. I then looked within each of these three large categories and examined how aspects of academic, social, and personal success were specific to each group of respondents.

#### Example of Data and Data Analysis

At this point in the chapter, I think that it is beneficial to give an example of how I intended to analyze the data collected prior to conducting the actual study. To do this, I provide a brief transcript of a conversation that I had about success with two teachers from my school. Both teachers voluntarily agreed to allow me to record a sample conversation and use their words as an example for this section. In this brief example, the researcher's words are in bold while R1 and R2 each represent the different respondents.

#### **What does the word “success” mean to you?**

R1: I think that it means having all students...um... ready or prepared to go to the next grade level. Students should have mastered the objectives of the Course of Study.

R2: I agree with what she said, but I think that “success” varies depending on whether you mean success at life or success just in school. Success in life...means...thinking about what you mean to do and acting on those desires. Success in school...I would say, deals with making good grades and not getting into trouble.

#### **How does a student “master” an objective?**

R1: They show that they have the abilities to do what the objective states. For example, one objective is to have students divide fractions. If a student can successfully

demonstrate or show that they can divide fractions then they show they mastered the objective.

**What does it mean to you for an individual to think about actions and act according to those thoughts?**

R2: Well, for me it means using reason and emotion to develop a plan...I mean that I like to think that I am a logical person, but I also base decisions on emotion. For a student when they become an adult, it means using what you have learned in school and applying it.

**What might one learn in school that will aide in decision making?**

R2: They learn how to...um...analyze a situation and interpret or determine the possible positives and negatives.

R1: Reading is beneficial because it allows them to seek resources to make a more informed decision.

**What does it mean to you for a student to be “socially” successful?**

R1: It could mean, you know, having a lot of friends, but it could also mean just getting along with other students and teachers.

R2: I think that the socially successful student acts in ways that he is supposed to act. Not breaking the rules and getting along with others.

**What does it mean to you for a student to be “personally” successful?**

R2: Personal success relates to what I said before about acting based on rationalizations. Being confident is a type of personal success.

R1: Personal success is achieving goals and making good decisions.

When I began to code this simple dialogue, I looked for basic themes that appeared in the text. Some of the codes that I generated during an initial reading are obj—objectives, cos—course of study, fut—future, pwr—power relationships, frd—friends, log—logic or rationalization, and emo—for emotions. During the second reading, I used these general codes and others to go through the text to identify their appearance in the data. The third step in the coding process required that I group general codes into categories; I created three categories of ACD—academic areas of success, PER—personal areas of success, and SOC—social areas of success. Some general codes fit into

only one category while others were in multiple categories. The last step in the process was to look for relationships present in the data.

Analyzing the data revealed that the teachers seemed to group all three areas of social, personal, and academic success together in a general understanding of “success.” Although the teachers noted that academics play a crucial role in one’s future, they seem to conceptualize that a truly successful person attains success not only in academics, but also personal and social spheres. The teachers both identified mastery of objectives as a way of determining academic success. However, R2 extended mastery of objectives to include mastery of higher order thinking skills. For R2, a successful adult or individual is able to rationalize why a choice is the best choice or the most appropriate one to make. Agency for this teacher means that an individual is capable of analyzing a situation and being able to act in a way that demonstrates both the desire and innate beliefs that drive certain actions over others. The teacher then gives recognition to the fact the academic success is determined by the norms that others have created. Both “getting good grades” and “not getting into trouble” signify that a student be complicit with the overarching power structures of a school.

Personal areas of success in this excerpt reveal that the teachers believe that students can attain personal levels of success through controlled behaviors. R1 stated that “achieving goals and making good decisions” demonstrates personal success. One could argue that “making good decisions” will lead to the attainment of a goal, but that necessitates that the “decisions” are made in light of the specified goal. What happens to decisions that are spontaneous and are new and are not related to a previously thought goal? If one contemplates the adjective “good,” it seems to imply that a “good decision”

is one that weighs the risks of choice against the potential rewards or outcomes. In doing this, one can base decisions on “rationalizations,” as R2 stated. Personal success seems to be dependent on individuals making decisions on both logic and emotion. One thread that seems to be silently woven into this conversation on personal success is the ability of a person to see the big picture. Although the researcher did not target the area of students who are not capable of making rational choices because of lower mental capacities, it appears that not allowing for others who are not capable of comprehending the dynamics of a situation or the possible outcomes of a choice should be expanded because success can take on qualifications that take into account the individual’s abilities.

The teachers associate social areas of success as largely being determined according to the relationships between students and between students and educators. R2 uses the clause “the socially successful student acts in ways that he is supposed to act.” This statement contains at least two different constructs within the words that are used. The first is the student recognizing what is “acceptable” behavior and acting accordingly. This may mean simply following the rules of a relationship between individuals which translates into a changing level of trust across the continuum of relationship statuses. On one side of the spectrum stands the “stranger” where the level of intimacy and trust is quite low, and at the other end depending on the individual is the “best friend” or immediate family where the level of trust is great and individuals tend to know a great deal about one another. Generally, when an individual acts according to socially accepted norms and nothing occurs that diminishes the status of the relationship, the level of trust increases the longer a person knows another. The second construct in the teacher’s statement is the concept of norms shared by other members of society. To paraphrase the

statement and add what the researcher may have thought was underneath the surface of what was said, society dictates what it means to be socially successful by creating norms for how individuals should both act and interact with others.

The overarching theme that seems to bind the categories of personal, academic, and social success together from the small amount of data is the concept of an individual being aware of what is required of him or her and making a conscious decision to act. One could summarize the theme as being following the rules of the academic, social, and personal areas of education leads to success. However, to challenge this finding some individuals achieve success and carry the label of successful and are known for challenging the rules or “thinking outside of the box.” This researcher suggests that success operates in multiple ways and cannot be confined only to a simplistic statement of following rules. Society wants people to follow rules, but it also wants people to challenge the rules to create new trends and new ways of thinking. Critical theory seeks to interrogate the powers that control rules. Two questions from the data are who creates the rules and what happens to those who do not follow the rules. Both of these questions would benefit from a more targeted inquiry in which the questions deal more specifically with the power dynamics present.

In this brief example of how I intend to analyze and interpret the data I have attempted to provide an example for clarification purposes only of the methods that will be used to conduct the actual study. The findings from this example will not be included in the actual study. I intend to follow the same basic procedures for coding and interpreting data; however, I plan to substantially expand the amount and types of questions so that they will meet the criteria of this project.

## Conclusion

This project attempts to describe, as Gee (2004) states, both the “form and function” of languages of success. I also describe and analyze Discourses of success present in the school using the inputs of individuals who represent the school in its entirety. This project while being similar to the one that Jones (2004) conducted will expand the literature on success and will allow consumers of this information to have a resource to aid in how they understand power relationships within schools. I also contribute to the body of literature on middle level education that comes with many unique qualities that make it a particular branch in the field of educational research. I made the project open to hearing the voices of anyone who wished to participate and did not privilege one voice over another. I feel that by including representatives from all members of the school, I was able to have considerable findings from the data. The next chapter will involve a close analysis of the data collected using the methodology described in this chapter. I will follow the guidelines of CDA in the course of analysis as I discover the findings from my time at MMS.

## CHAPTER 4

### CULTURES OF SUCCESS: LANGUAGES IN SOLUTIONS

Give me the child of any healthy, normally intelligent man, and I will make a perfectly competent Chatterley of him. It is not who begets us, that matters, but where fate places us. Place any child among the ruling classes, and he will grow up, to his own extent, a ruler. Put kings' and dukes' children among the masses, and they'll be little plebeians, mass products. It is the overwhelming pressure of environment (Lawrence, 1962, P. 171).

In D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, he presents the idea that if institutions take a person, regardless of his or her social standing in society, and raise him or her in certain ways, then they can change the outcome of that person's life. Looking at how to apply this to schools in general and the concept of success in particular, then one can see that this boils down to the classic "nature versus nurture" debate. Schools cannot do anything to change the natural abilities and talents that students possess when they enter the building; however, they can enhance the abilities to make students able to perform at higher levels through pedagogic means. Therefore, schools and school personnel are limited to the roles of nurturers. Schools largely have in place a series of procedures and policies that define what it means to be successful and how its members are supposed to carry out that mission in all that they do. Simply to say that success exists as a static norm or construction is not truthful because inputs change from year to year according to the students who enroll and also from day to day according to the inputs

from external factors such as the media and the larger society. In the school that I used for data collection, I noticed how the fluidity of culture seeped into all aspects of the school day and materialized through a dominant Discourse that defined who the students and teachers are and established a set of values for how all people in the school should act.

### Administrative Cultures of Success

The administration of the school has two members: a principal, Ms. Ledford and an assistant principal, Mr. Hogle. Ms. Ledford has 28 years of experience in education as a teacher (16 as an administrator and 12 as a teacher), and Mr. Hogle has 10 years of experience in education (3 as an assistant principal and 7 as a teacher). Ms. Ledford has been the principal of the school for all 10 years of its existence. MMS was established to ease overcrowding at the other middle schools in the school system. Ms. Ledford is often characterized by teachers as having a strong sense of leadership and also a strong sense of “care” about the students, teachers, and staff at the school.

Ms. Ledford and Mr. Hogle have similar definitions of success. Her definition of success is, “Reaching a goal that you have established and being happy at what you are doing.” In this sentence she has two aspects of success that reverberate with the responses from others in the school: goal attainment and happiness. The former implies that a person has gone through a process of setting a goal and then making the necessary steps to achieve it. The purpose of the school is outlined in the mission statement that was recently adopted as being “Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day.” It seems logical to extend her definition of success to the mission statement of giving students opportunities

on a daily basis to better themselves. The second part of Ms. Ledford's statement about success is "being happy at what you are doing." This aspect of success adds the concept of emotions' internal motivational factors. Happiness as a factor has the possibility to extend beyond one's own self to include the others' opinions, so what it means for an individual to be happy or to recognize a goal is related to how others view my goal attainment.

Mr. Hoggle is well immersed in the culture and fabric of the school. His understanding of success seems related to Ms. Ledford's definition:

Success is defined individually, by individual students... success depends on first of all what that student expects of themselves and what you as a teacher or as an administrator or as a counselor or anybody that works with that child what the success is defined by that individual student what their goals are depending on where they are coming from, their ability level all of those factors should be considered to determine whether that student is successful or not. Not just grades.

The important factor that Mr. Hoggle notes is that success is dependent upon the individual and also individuals' goals. He points to the concept of the future and the importance of students recognizing that it is up to them to establish "where they expect to be [and] where they expect to go." Two important verbs in this statement are the words "be" and "do." Both seem rather simple terms, but they have deeper implications. The word "be" is a verb that is often used to establish the meaning of someone or something. In this instance, the word "be" is used with the word "where" and means that the place or position that students attain in the future will define who they are, which also has a different meaning because it is attached to the phrase "where they expect to go." With this addition, Mr. Hoggle notes that the end result is not the lone definitive variable of success because "go" implies that the journey of the student to a particular place is equally as important as its finality. He continues this line of thought and discusses the

importance of educators who have the privilege of experience to help shape, mold, and guide students' understandings of the future and the importance of establishing "expectations" of self. By creating "expectations" students become intrinsically motivated to act or perform in school. As Mr. Hogle notes though, these expectations can come with obstacles associated with "ability levels."

Mr. Hogle speaks to the nature of social success in a school:

There is success as far as socially interacting with students, being socially appropriate: respecting each other, respecting each other's cultural backgrounds, respecting language, respecting abilities...I think there is success as far as setting goals and achieving goals whether it be through extracurricular activities sports, band, scholar bowl...

He defines social success as being "socially appropriate" and links it to a series of ways to respect fellow students. The word "appropriate" seems to imply an understanding between students as to how to act toward one another according to a set of social norms that are agreed upon either through verbal contracts or nonverbal communications. For example, a student may act in a way that is detrimental to another student's academic performance by disrupting class. Social success, as Mr. Hogle states, is strongly based upon the negotiated spaces between students. Success as he states can perform in areas outside of the classroom that students participate in through the activities that he lists. Furthermore, it is in these areas and others where students are able to interact with each other and build relationships that they negotiate according to the expectations that they place on each other.

## Administrative Understandings of Cultures of Success

The administration articulates similar definitions of success. To understand the school's cultures of success, I asked the administrators questions, and then asked them about spaces that represented success. They took me to various places in the school and showed areas that they labeled successful. Both administrators specifically stated that a culture of success starts from "the top down," meaning that definitions employed by the members of the school are derived according to the definitions established by the leadership of the school. To make definitions of success, the administrators both state that the words that they use are equally important as their actions. For example, Ms. Ledford discussed how important it is just to pick up paper in the hallway and often recognizes students for doing tasks that they may think are unseen, but valued within the school by giving them a PAWS card. PAWS stands for "Praise Aimed at Worthy Students." The administrators encourage teachers to also give out the PAWS cards in recognition of students who are doing something that is valued in the school culture.

I asked Ms. Ledford about what the phrase "culture of success" means to her. Her response was:

I think that it means when you walk in this school I hope that we are presenting a culture of success in that we try to teach our students on a daily basis how to act, how to conduct themselves, how to make good choices, how to be a friend, how to set goals, how to follow through with commitments those are all things that I think cultures of success would be tied to.

Her response is largely dependent upon two variables: appearance and presentation. First, she states that the appearance of the culture is noticeable to outsiders and to school members alike. How does the school appear at first to someone when they enter the building seems to be the logical question, but it goes beyond that because as she

discussed in another question, the school's appearance in the community is multi-faceted because of the use of the school's website and publicity in the local media. The second aspect, presentation, is linked with appearance, but, as she states, presentation is involved through the act of teaching. Many of the areas of teaching that she states deal with topics surrounding character traits that the school wishes to instill in the students. One could argue that through the combination of presentations and appearances of success the school creates definitions of what it means to be successful.

Mr. Hoggle also focuses his attention on the concept of presentation:

I think that is where you have a belief system not just a motto of the school but you have your teachers buy into all students can achieve at some level...The strategies that they are going to use to teach their curriculum and...fostering a good environment that is going to make them want to be successful...it starts with the ideas that the administration has that all students can learn and so that has to be bought in by the teachers that through their instruction in the class...they can teach every student and help each student set a goal.

He ties the presentation of success to the school motto, which as previously stated, has been shortened to "Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day." The school's Discourses of success seem to filter from the administration to the teachers and finally to the students. Although the administrators did not state that they provide the ultimate definition of success in the school, they seem to control the framework from which all definitions of success come. As Mr. Hoggle states, the importance is placed upon the individual and it is up to the individual student to decide how he or she wants to participate in the school whether it is socially, academically, or personally. The role of the teachers in creating and sustaining definitions of success in the school culture, according to Mr. Hoggle, is to know the students who are in their classrooms, their ambitions, goals, and motivations and to establish their own personal goals for students to achieve in their classes.

## Academic Success

Academic success seems to often focus on the aspect of grades, but as many the administration pointed out the focus of academic success should revolve around the concept of learning. Learning implies that a student has grasped some type of knowledge and is able to apply that knowledge to new situations. One could infer that the respondents were referencing elements of Bloom's taxonomy where students move from one stage to the next in an ever increasing capability of applying what they have learned. The administration seems to grasp the idea that different levels of academic success exist and a one-size fits all conceptualization of academic success does not fit. When asked to describe a student who is academically successful, Mr. Hoggle responded with the following statement:

In general, let's say a student that may be a B student. Let's say that student is a student that does all of their homework. Let's say that student is someone who regularly attends school, [and] has a supportive family base a support system at home maybe outside support...that can support them and they are doing the very best that they can do based on what they have available to them as far as at school They are using all of the resources they have available whether it is tutoring programs, after school programs any thing they have available to them outside of school inside of school and they are doing the very best they can do.

The first part of academic success, according to Mr. Hoggle, seems to be that the he refers to grades as symbolic of student achievement of success. He relates the concept of academic success to full implementation of abilities when he states, "they are doing the very best they can do." He states that the "best that they can do" is dependent on their utilization of the available resources both at the school and in their communities. The word "best" is relative to the individual and may differ from one student to the next according to what they are capable of doing inside of the classroom. A student may be able to fully participate in class and do his or her work and yet is unable to attain an "A"

or “B” for many reasons such as test anxiety or poor performance of graded work. Ms. Ledford addressed this aspect and stated, “It may be Cs and Ds, and if they are doing their absolute best then they are successful; they are still working hard; they are reaching out to do the best that they can with their lives.” She links the aspect of academic success to the much larger aspect of success in life. By adding this phrase, she relates academic success to the degree of success that students will or might have after leaving formalized K-12 education. Students who perform at their “best” are more equipped to face the challenges or obstacles that they will have to negotiate on their own outside of the framework of the school.

### Social Success

In the course of the interview, I asked both administrators to discuss the concept of “social success” and how it relates to academic success. My thought behind specifically focusing their attention on social success was that by bringing up the topic, even if they referred to it previously, they would focus on the specific interactions between students and between students and educators. Ms. Ledford states, “I look at that (social success) as being accepted by your peers. Again setting good examples amongst your peers in school outside of school wherever it might be.” She relates the concept of peer acceptance to achieving social success. “Being accepted by your peers” seems to imply that one has a type of membership status whereby one has rights and responsibilities in relation to others. Once a person attains “acceptance” by others, he or she has a duty or obligation to reciprocate actions that benefit the larger group. Primarily,

group membership is often filled with informal and formal negotiations about how to act so that one person does not detract from the goal of the group.

Mr. Hoggle addresses the relationships between students in his response to a definition of social success:

I think social success is has to be they have to achieve social success in order to focus on academic success. They have to be appreciated. They have to feel that they are appreciated, respected, they have friends there is a support system there...And if they do have that, whatever that level may be, you have some friends that seem non-social that are still very good students academically. Whereas you have other students that seem very social and have a lot of friends that are involved in a lot of other things and they too are successful and they go about it in different ways. No matter what, they feel socially accepted by their friends by those that they are in contact with at school. They feel like they have a place in the school.

He begins by discussing how social success has to exist in tandem with academic success. Mr. Hoggle seems to identify three key elements necessary for socially understanding success: appreciation, respect, and support. These three areas, according to Mr. Hoggle, seem to establish the conditions necessary to allow students to academically perform. Schools are able to nurture the student's non-academic persona by facilitating positive relationships while simultaneously teaching academic content standards to improve students' skills.

Ms. Ledford discusses how the social relationships between students impacts academic performance. For her, the relationship between students is predominately related to how students view others' reactions in times of crisis and triumph:

Social success is more noticeable than academic success. I may make an A in a class and you may never know what my grade is, but you see me every day and see how I act. You see how I conduct myself when things are good and how I conduct myself when things are bad and that is true for our students. Students see other students and see how they respond, how they present themselves and they formulate an opinion of whether or not they are successful or whether they would make a good friend.

Actions and responses dictate how students view other students. She condenses the nature of students' relationships all down to the statement of "whether they would make a good friend." Students witness each other's actions and reactions to situations. When a positive view of one student's character is held by another student, that student is more likely to establish and maintain social relationships to others in the group. Middle school dynamics are often dependent upon the social structures in place that validate how one views others. From this administration's point of view, the social culture of success varies according to the opinions between students and between students and adults; social success, as they outlined, is related to academic success.

In describing a student who is socially successful, Mr. Hoggle describes a student who is so socially successful that his academic success suffers.

I have a student... that seems to have a lot of friends, seems to want to really want to come to school, has a reason for wanting to come to school, but it is more for the relationships that he has at school, that he has on the bus and going to and from school. It is more about what he gets from that than it is achieving any thing. It is because of the lack of support or lack of encouragement and maybe the living arrangement that he lives in. It is just not a priority to achieve high. Others that live in the household have not achieved, have dropped out of school. This student is just one who comes to school for friendships the girlfriend the interaction with his peers rather than receiving any kind of motivation other than school goes (academics).

The student that he describes comes to school for the sole purpose of establishing and developing relationships with others rather than being academically focused. Hyper social success can be detrimental to the primary purpose of schooling, academic achievement. Mr. Hoggle rationalizes that the student is more focused on social success than academic success because of the norms that are established at home. The relationship between the school and the home environment has to be one that works in

unison if the academic aspect of schooling is going to be truly understood by students. Students may see others in their family who have “dropped out” and say to themselves that they did not value education and they did ok, but some students do come from homes where dropping out is not an acceptable option. So, one can only speculate as to how schools can maximize the potential benefit of parents or guardians. However, students’ home lives play a significant factor in determining how they interact with the academic norms established in the school. Mr. Hoggle adds to the description of a socially successful student by stating that teachers must know “what motivates them, [and] how to encourage them.” The primary front lines of the school are dependent upon the teachers knowing the students that they teach and reaching those students in ways that maximize students’ abilities and further their education.

### Personal Success

Personal success is a type of success that when I wrote the questions to ask in interviews I envisioned as pertaining to the success that one feels at accomplishing some type of goal. Mr. Hoggle states,

Personally successful goes back to the goals...I think that student[s] set for themselves. Personally successful has to do with what that student feels like their goal is. The goal that they set for themselves goes back to personal success. While some success may be coming to school and getting a hot meal twice a day, others may be coming to school and success may be more academic driven than someone who wants their needs met as far as food and relationships.

Goal setting and goal attainment are crucial elements of maturation and relate to the concept of individual development. Schools, as I infer from Mr. Hoggle’s statement, have to play significant roles in developing students’ abilities to set and attain goals. The proactive approach of discussing what is a goal and what logical steps are necessary to

achieve that goal should be implemented so that students in the middle school level can begin to practice setting and working toward goals. However, a crucial element of setting a goal is to understand how to evaluate the goal. Evaluation occurs in every aspect of the goal. Initially, when one sets a goal, the individual makes a decision about what is relevant to them. Although the goal may be one that is influenced by an educator or a parent such as academic achievements, ultimately the goal has to have importance to the child. So, evaluation continues from establishing relevance in the initial stage to the developmental stages of a goal where individuals ascertain the progress that they are making toward the goal. The last stage of evaluation occurs when a person realizes the goal's completion or realizes the failure to succeed in the goal. One of three things can happen if the latter occurs: 1. A student abandons the goal. 2. A student continues toward the goal making changes based on experience. 3. A student decides on an alternative goal based on knowledge gained from the previous goal.

As Mr. Hoggle states, relevance for a goal has to come at the level of the individual. He or she establishes what is important and also decides on an appropriate course of action to achieve the goal. He gives two examples of what views of personal success might be: "While some success may be coming to school and getting a hot meal twice a day, others may be coming to school and success may be more academic driven than someone who wants their needs met as far as food and relationships." In the first example, the student's personal success is driven primarily by primal needs for sustenance provided by the school lunch program. The second example that Mr. Hoggle gives is of students who are "academically driven." In this type of student, one may be focused on achieving certain grades, all As, A-B Honor Roll, or just passing. Whatever is

the case, because of his use of the dichotomous juxtaposition, in the second example the assumption can be made that this student does not have to worry about basic necessities such as food.

Ms. Ledford extends the development of establishing personal relevance for a goal, “When they have set goals and they can reach their personal goals. Whether that may be school related, friendship related, or church related they have an idea of what they want to do with their life and they personally pursue those dreams.” In this statement, she highlights an element of goals that is important in the middle school setting when she uses the phrase “can reach.” It is not enough for schools to help students set goals; schools have to assist students in the processes of understanding the “realistic” goals that they can achieve. Although schools should encourage students to dream for extreme examples of personal success, dreams have to have some aspect of reality. In a post interview conversation, Ms. Ledford addressed this aspect of goals. She stated that students need to realize that only a small percentage of people who attempt to achieve goals such as playing professional sports actually see that goal materialize. She said that she encourages students who state that these are their goals to get involved. “For example, if a student wants to play in the NBA they have to begin playing organized basketball and the school offers basketball and other sports and activities such as band and choir for students to begin to experiment with various endeavors.”

The administration’s view of personal success is explained by Ms. Ledford’s example of a former student:

I can think of a student that...really had a level head on his shoulders and knows what he wants to do with his life and presented himself in such a positive way, strong character, and because of that was nominated to go to the People to People

conference but it is because of his personal goals and success that allowed him to be recognized by adults and be nominated for an award for something like that.

This student's attributes of personal success seem to be based on his knowledge and his presentation. She uses the phrase "level head" to imply that the student had the abilities to assess and adapt based on his understanding of the situations around him. Having knowledge and the ability to rationalize seem to come together through the way that the student presented himself to others. His goal achievement and the recognition he garnered from his teachers allowed him to be nominated for an award. One of the primary responsibilities for schools to do is to make sure that they recognize students who excel in achieving their goals. For MMS, it is this student who is capable of making sound decisions in the goal process and whose character presents an iconic manifestation of the values that the school holds.

### Spaces of Success

After the series of questions about different types of success, I asked the administrators to show me areas of the school that visually represent success. Many of the areas represent school achievements by individual students and teachers and also as a collective unit. However, some of the areas of success that they and other teachers pointed out were more motivational in nature. Other areas of success were intriguing because I had not previously associated them with the concept of success. The primary goal in examining these areas was to document how the school uses physical spaces populated with material objects and icons to promote the concept of success and to also display the prevalent values that its members esteem.

## Historical and Archival Places of Success

In the historical or archival places of success, the school presents the accomplishments of previous students and teachers and documents the students who matriculate out of the school. One wall near the office has framed panoramic pictures of all of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes that have been at MMS. Each picture clearly shows the faces of the individual students. Although other areas of the picture may not be as in focus, the camera clearly represents the face of students who have attended MMS in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Although in some ways it may seem rather simplistic and quite comparative to a school annual, the picture seems to represent for Ms. Ledford the spirit of students who led the school. In each picture, only students are present. In the absence of the adult figures of the school, the pictures seem to imply that students are the emphasis of MMS, and it is important to achieve grades that will place students in positions as leaders in the school.

Mr. Hoggle states

We take a picture of our 8<sup>th</sup> grade students every year. This gives a sense of history and tells our sixth graders that I want to be in that picture in two years and not three years or four years. It gives them a sense of pride and belonging, I want to be in that class graduating out and going to high school, and I want to be with my friends that I came in with.

The definition of success that the pictures seem to imply is through the emphasis of the final year of attendance at MMS. The qualities or characteristics that are valued stem from the two areas of “pride and belonging.” Both terms are rather psychological in nature and speak to the concept of ownership. “Pride” can mean that one is aware of the responsibilities of a situation and can act in ways that best represent the status. For some students, pride may develop out of the experiences of success that they have both in and out of school. For others, pride may develop according to the sense of achievements that

they accomplish. There are many different reasons for why “pride” is represented in the picture: school pride, individual pride, or collective pride. Whatever the reason, the picture has the meaning of completion and serves as a marker between the delineated space of middle and high school.

Mr. Hoggle also addressed how the picture can help to motivate students to want to perform academically. He discussed the students who are in danger of failure and might be motivated to not be in the picture with “younger students.” Students who do not pass five out of six classes or fail English or math are retained. Some students who are retained in a grade a second year become classmates with students who initially began school a year after the student who failed. This sense of shame seems to be the opposite of the pride that he believes the pictures instill. The other concept that Mr. Hoggle points out is based on the word “belonging.” Students as social beings create emotional bonds to other classmates. These friendships play a crucial role in how students define what it means to be successful. Peers assist each other in the process of meaning making by conversing either casually or formally in various areas of the school. “Belonging” to a group seems important as students develop their personas throughout the formative stage of middle level education.

#### Motivational Places of Success

Many places within the school display symbols that are meant to inspire students to work hard to achieve or to develop inner strengths that focus on issues of character. The first area that both administrators showed me was the bulletin board that congratulated students for performing at the highest levels on state-mandated standardized test scores. The standardized test scores are used to determine accountability

under the NCLB mandates. The school uses test scores in reading and mathematics to place students into classes, either an “Advanced” class or a “regular” class. The bulletin board highlights those students who scored the highest, a four, on one or both of the tests. The score of a three is also acceptable. If a student scores a two or lower, then that child is placed into a “strategies” class for reading, math, or both. Each child who scores a four has his or her name listed on the wall, which is quite colorful and is divided according to grades. Students who are currently in the sixth grade are recognized for their performance at the elementary school.

Mr. Hogle walked from the test scores bulletin board to a plaque that recognizes the generosity of the school’s namesake, Mrs. Mallard. Her family donated money for the school’s revitalization and transition from a high school to a middle school. The plaque gives a brief biography and lists the accomplishments of her dedication to improving the community and also working diligently as a business leader. One key quote from the plaque is based on her graduation from the school when it was a high school. “I can always say that I went to [Mallard High School] and be proud. I think you have to be proud of where you’ve been as well as where you are going.” The sense of pride that the plaque displays is in line with the motivational areas around the school. Mr. Hogle states that he wants students to feel proud to go to the school, but pride in school attendance is not enough. She also discusses how it is necessary to be proud of one’s decisions and history and understanding their role for what students are going to be in the future. The concept of a future is a significant element of success. Students who have set goals and strive to reach those goals are capable of performing at the highest levels individually. Mrs. Mallard’s quote speaks to the relationship between her early experiences and those

that came later. The plaque displays a brief overview of the philanthropic areas in which Mrs. Mallard worked in the community. All of the activities seem to speak to the importance of doing a lot for others in the community. It is not enough to have a wealth of available resources and squander them on your own frivolities.

Mr. Hoggle states, “We mention her and use her story as an example of a person who gave a lot for the students for this building to have a place to come and learn everyday. Her generosity is something that we talk about.” By using the donor as an example of success, the school has broadened the definition to include generosity to others. The school uses the plaque as an example of what it means to be responsible to others in the community. Attaining wealth is a secondary aspect of success according to the plaque in that it speaks to the actions that she undertook to better the community in which she lived. When she died, she bequeathed another sum of money for the library which many teachers highlighted as representative of success. So what other lessons about success might the school use the plaque? For one, the school showcases an alumnae who used the skills and abilities that she initially developed while matriculating through the school. It seems logical to value the accomplishments of former students as a way of motivating students to achieve academically, socially, or personally. Another possible use is to motivate students to go out into the world and be successful and then remember the important formative areas that assisted them in that success.

Another area that both administrators noted was the banner displaying the abbreviated mission statement.



This picture shows the mission statement for all students to see as they come into the building. It is on the main hallway next to the office. It is also displayed on similar banners throughout the school. Mr. Hoggle talks about the necessity to shorten the mission statement and its purpose:

It is our motto that all students can achieve. We have it out there when you first walk in the building. Our school motto is “Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day” kind of says that every child when they enter this building they are given the chance to achieve their goals. We used to think that our students had to memorize our mission statement which is a big long paragraph and students could memorize the paragraph, but it really didn’t communicate anything to them.

The concept of success as understood by Mr. Hoggle depends on the belief that “all students can achieve.” Without qualifying the word achieve, the school shows a foundation of individual betterment according to the unique abilities and talents of every student rather than a “cookie cutter” mold to which students have to conform. This belief seems to speak to the students about their position and status in the school. The school places an emphasis on students understanding that everything that is done in the school is for the students. However, the proximity of the statement that includes “Every Child” to the bulletin board that only showcases students who excelled in academic achievement is problematic because it omits the majority of the students.

Mr. Hoggle also notes the important shift away from having students memorize a longer, more cumbersome mission statement. When students are able to know the

mission statement, then it seems more likely for them to embrace the values associated with it in their academic, social, and personal endeavors. Some areas of success that seem to be embodied in the mission statement are those that focus on a sense of purpose. The purpose of each action performed in the school is for the students. Students should know when they evaluate the mission statement that the school aim is to provide them with the “opportunity” to be successful in ways that are personally meaningful to them.

Communication between the adults in the building and the students seems to play an important role in understanding how Discourses of success operate. By communicating the values of the school as being student-centered, the school displays its purpose in developing the relationship between the individual students and the school as a whole collectively bound by an agreement of a focus on developing students’ abilities.

The school also has several posters and pictures that are placed throughout the school that combine a picture of success with an inspirational wording. Most of the pictures seem to display aspects of character such as “Desire,” “Teamwork,” “Perseverance,” and “Dedication.” Extrinsic motivation seems to focus on students understanding the values of the school and acting accordingly so as to implement those values into the choices that students make on a daily basis. The school uses multiple ways of motivating students to perform. When one takes a step back and looks at the overall artifacts of success that the school displays, all of the spaces work toward the goal of improving the lives of all of the students. Success, when viewed at this level, is as Mr. Hoggle states, “being better when you leave.”

Mr. Hoggle uses a nontraditional object as a teaching tool for students who may have difficulty understanding the school's view of success. The front doors are a space that every student and faculty member must traverse on a daily basis.



He states,

An old retired teacher told me that a door is one of the greatest tools to use for motivation. You have to come in the door and you have to go out of the door. You should leave the door better, different than you came in the door. I think that is one of the most important things I have been told. I use that in the classroom as well. We call it the door of opportunity; it opens and closes and so when you come in and when you leave each day you should be changed whether it is your first day or your last day when you walk in it and out of it. We tell our students that every door is a door of opportunity whether it is the teachers' classroom doors or the door coming in the building it is a door of opportunity and they should leave better than they came. You are not doing your job and your school is not doing what they say it is if it is not changing the life of the student.

Success in a school often depends on the traditions that are passed down from one generation of teachers to the next. Using a concrete example of the door, Mr. Hoggle is

able to teach students about how opportunities exist and can sometimes be dependent upon time and space restrictions. Students have three grades in middle school to improve their understanding of how social, academic, and personal areas of success interweave in their lives. The purpose of the school and the doors symbolize that inside of this place students' lives are changed. Some changes occur because of the curricula that the teachers teach and others occur because of the relationships formed between students and between students and educators. The doors provide access to students' whole education.

### Athletic Spaces of Success

The school has an active athletic program that provides male and female students with opportunities to participate in the following sports: basketball, football, baseball, softball, cheerleading, wrestling, golf, track, and volleyball. In each sport, students must first try out for the team. One of the issues that surround athletic teams is the amount of money that students' parents must be willing to pay for their children to be able to participate in a sport. Both administrators and many teachers discussed the cost associated with playing a sport. In many sports, the athletes must pay for uniforms and personal equipment that the school does not provide. Some sports can cost parents and guardians hundreds of dollars. Sports such as football, track, and wrestling have a relatively low cost and are much cheaper than say cheerleading, golf, baseball, or softball.

When students compete in competitions, the school recognizes success of sports teams in many different ways. The most obvious way is a trophy case in the gym. The location of this trophy case is interesting, because in many of the schools that the

researcher visited prior to deciding which school to include in the research project the athletic trophy case was in a main hallway near the front doors. The location is symbolic in that it recognizes students for their athletic achievements, but it does not place the emphasis of the school on its athletic programs. Rather, it houses the awards and trophies in an area of the school dedicated primarily to athletics.

Ms. Ledford often commented on the way that she uses the intercom system to recognize students for their success in athletics. She described how she would promote the group's accomplishment by stating "specifically" what the team had done. She also noted that she would use the intercom to recognize specific students for individual achievement that they contributed. By recognizing students for their accomplishments as a team or individually, the school defines what it means to be successful. One teacher discussed how even when the school's athletic teams did not win, the principal acknowledges students for their hard work and participation. Within the languages of success, the principal broadens the definition to include students' willingness to participate and dedication to improvement along with the concept of winning.

### Collective Spaces of Success

In the front hallway is a trophy case dedicated to non-athletic awards, trophies, and certificates. In this trophy case, students and teachers' accomplishments are recognized. When asked about the importance of displaying this type of success, Ms. Ledford responded,

I think that it is important that our kids see that we are involved in a variety of things. Whenever we do something, I praise them over the intercom. "Hey, we raised \$1,000 for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. Ya'll did a great job! That is a great way that we can help our community, help people who are less

fortunate than us dealing with medical conditions or whatever it may be.” “We had a guest speaker this morning, and your behavior was wonderful. Our speaker commented on how great you were. I want you to know how proud I am and thank you for showing the positive MMS behavior. They need to know when they do something positive and do the right thing.

Raising money for a philanthropic organization such as Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation seems to bridge a crucial gap between the school and the community. In addition to the certificate stating the accomplishment of raising the monetary funds, Ms. Ledford also discusses how she again uses the intercom to recognize students for their participation in raising the money and meeting a goal. Success in this aspect is not just what individuals do within the school alone, but what all of the members of the school do as a collective group and meeting the goal set for the group. Ms. Ledford also discusses how she comments on the school as collective group behaved during an assembly. By recognizing and praising students for their positive behaviors, the school embraces the concept of behavioral success in which students behave in “appropriate” ways. Assemblies also provide an opportunity for the school to come together as a whole. One of the positive sides that Ms. Ledford noted was that school spirit and school pride can develop from these events.

#### Mission Statement’s Role in Success

The mission statement of MMS plays an influential role in forming all of the policies and procedures that take place inside of the building. The administration often pointed out that everything that they do should be able to be supported by the mission statement of the school. The mission statement also informs the definition of what a student is and how the purpose of the school is to develop that child so that he or she is

able to leave the school with the abilities to progress later in life into full membership of a “global society.” Ms. Ledford states,

Our Mission Statement says, “MMS and our community of support,” we are including teachers, parents, community members whoever, are dedicated to providing a safe, positive learning environment where all students feel accepted, challenged, and compelled to achieve their highest academic and personal potential.”

In this understanding of the mission statement, the administration has a view that education only works when it is in unison with the larger “community of support.” By uniting internal (faculty members, classified employees, and administrators) and external (community organizations, parents, other citizens, etc.) factors together, the school links what they do inside of the physical walls with the norms and values in the community. The school is not a vacuum where education only occurs between the hours of eight and three and for approximately nine months out of the year. Education occurs in all spheres of a student’s life whether that is in the school or outside of the school in the community or at home.

Ms. Ledford uses the three verbs of “accepted, challenged, and compelled” to describe what students should feel inside of the building. In the first, “accepted” means that the child is able to engage in meaningful relationships with both peers and teachers. Interpersonal relationships are an important aspect of social success. When a child is capable of relating to others, it can be a symbiotic relationship where each one is able to assist others and benefits by having the other. She uses the word “challenged;” challenged can mean that the student feels as though the content that he or she is learning is new and at a deeper level than it was previously thought. However, it can also mean that the student feels as though the material presented in school is meaningful and creates

a sense of inquiry whereby the student goes out into the world to further investigate what was taught. The last word, “compelled,” speaks to the innate sense of need to go beyond the minimum standards to achieve and to press toward a goal. Compelling someone to do something can come from internal or external motivations depending on the student and that student’s situation.

Mr. Hoggle speaks to the way in which the larger society and the school interact.

I think the mission statement, not only does it have a goal in mind for what we want to achieve and what we want our students to achieve at our school but the mission statement also includes what we think society expects from our students. The mission statement includes the words “global society” which we know that companies, employers, colleges want...[students who are] able to communicate with various groups...so we know that society expects a lot from our students...The mission statement includes what society expects from them and our “Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day” is more of a right now it is more of what we are providing right now and what we know you can do. Whereas the mission statement looks way ahead and we are telling them this is what you are going to be expected to do. This is what we are providing you with, but the world is going to expect this of you too.

Mr. Hoggle focuses on the important fact that students are one day going to leave formalized schooling and will have to find gainful employment. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is not enough to only look at the microscopic community as a place for people to work. National and international companies are looking to schools to provide students who are capable of adapting to situations and applying what they have previously learned to new situations. In this understanding of success, the mission statement plays a vital role in forming how students are educated in all three areas of success personal, social, and academic. The school is responsible for blending definitions of success to align with the school’s mission statement. Mr. Hoggle speaks to the difference between the longer mission statement and the shorter version that was adopted after the most recent accreditation review of “Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day.” The difference for him

is that the shorter version, which he and others in the school often refer as the motto, addresses the present situation whereas the longer mission statement links the previous schooling with the present and possible futures of students. Schools play the role of an intermediary in that they are responsible to both the students and to the larger society. Society and communities decide what values are important and what ideals schools should equip students with prior to their exits into the “real world.” Students often are limited as to the range of time that they can envision, and schools in general and MMS in particular are responsible for foreseeing what challenges or expectations will meet them once they leave K-12 education.

Ms. Ledford addressed the shortened motto and its role in the school.

“Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day,” that is our reason for getting up and coming to school. We want to give every child every opportunity or chance that they get every day that they come in here. The child has to want it as bad as we want it for them for that to be a possibility, but we offer them opportunities through clubs, sports, and competitions like the Spelling Bee and Geography Bee, Scholars Bowl things like that. Do the majority participate in those things? No. What percent? 30% of our students participate in something like that would be my guess. You think about filling in a football team of fifty, volleyball team of 15, basketball team, it is just you know you have got 575 kids so you are talking about 30% of your students get involved in athletics, Scholars Bowl, something.

The school adopted the motto to replace the longer, wordier mission statement so that students could have a working knowledge of the school’s mission statement. She also speaks to the role that teachers play as they work with students and embody the words of the motto. For her, the teachers have to value each student on an individual basis throughout the instructional day. This also speaks to the three areas of success in that the teachers are motivating the students to excel socially, academically, and personally as they pursue their goals. The role of the school in this situation is to provide the available opportunities for students to succeed.

She does discuss the fact that only a minority of students participate in extra-curricular activities. Some issues of power are present in that the students who can participate are often those students whose parents have the resources available to provide transportation and monetary support not covered by the school. All after-school events require the parents or guardians to pick up students rather than riding the bus. Some, however, such as the spelling bee and geography bee take place during normal school hours and can benefit from someone in the home taking the time to assist the student in preparation for the event. Definitions of success at the individual student level or at the collective school level are defined according to the willingness of students to participate in areas of the school beyond academics.

Another important aspect of the motto is that students have “to want it as bad as we want it for them.” The students and the school have to work in unison in order to achieve the goal. If one party fails to live up to its side of the bargain, then the school is not successful in achieving its stated purpose. Students have to recognize that MMS is providing opportunities on a daily basis for them to succeed. It is also providing them with the nurture and support to attempt to go beyond the basic academic setting as they represent the school athletically and scholarly in the community. The motto not only acknowledges the responsibility of the adults in the building, but also makes students aware of their responsibilities. Ms. Ledford states,

We are trying to teach them to be on time, because they have to be on time when they get a job. We are trying to teach them to be respectful to adults in this building. I expect respectful responses to any adult not just a teacher, not just me, a custodian, a lunch lady an aide. It does not matter. If it is an adult in this building you are going to answer them with respect...We are teaching them to conduct themselves in positive manners...All of the character traits that we want them to have; we are working on.

Teaching students to be responsible varies from the basic concept of punctuality to respecting those in authority positions. In the case of the latter, the school defines what it means to be successful as they respond to addresses from adult figures. She notes that it does not have to be a teacher or an administrator; it can be a classified employee with little responsibility for managing students' behaviors or it can even be a parent who is volunteering. By making students aware of how they are projecting an image of the school to the community when they are representing the school athletically or on a field trip, the school is defining what successful behavior looks like. She uses the word "positive" to address the "traits" that students should embody as they make personal decisions of how to act. In this way, the school defines success according to the way in which it appears to others beside the individual. This attribute of success plays a significant role later in life as adults make decisions about what to do and who to be based on how others view and interpret their actions.

Mr. Hoggle also discussed the way that the mission statement acts within the school:

It (the mission statement) makes the teachers look ahead...I think that our mission statement makes us focus on the student not just today but four or five years from now, and we have to plan for that and make sure that our students can see that far ahead. A mission statement goes back to saying our mission is not just for you right now, our mission is to prepare you for life. And that starts in middle school and that is a hard thing to communicate to them, but that is what we try to do not just through the words of the mission statement but in the way that we teach and the way that we do things in school every day.

Mr. Hoggle identifies the transitional role of the middle school as a place to prepare students for the high school setting. In this time of transition, the school prepares students to make decisions and choices that can have a life-long impact. When students leave MMS, they have to make a crucial decision as to what diploma they are going to receive

when they graduate from high school. This choice is largely a decision made between students and parents; however, it is influenced by the teachers' recommendations for course selection. For most students who are in the general education curriculum, they have to decide between three diplomas. The major distinction between the first choice, the lowest level of diploma, and the other two choices is the decision to take advanced math and English classes. The higher two choices require four years of advanced classes and the highest requires Advanced Placement (AP) classes in the senior year.

The school is responsible, according to Mr. Hoggle, to prepare students for their future. When looking at the possible definitions of success that stem from this understanding of the school's mission statement, one can see that they are influenced by the actions of the teachers as they undertake the responsibilities of teaching students content knowledge (academic success), interpersonal relationship skills (social success), and goal setting strategies (personal success). In all of these areas of success, the teachers are the "front line ambassadors" for presenting success to students. The teachers implement the decisions of the administrators as they seek to allow "every child" an opportunity to learn on a daily basis.

#### Faculty Members' Conceptualizations of Success

In this section, I will describe and discuss how teachers and classified employees believe that the culture of success at MMS operates. I used the same protocol as I did with the administrators in which I first looked at how they define the word success. I then describe how they viewed academic success, social success, and personal success. These definitions will also include discussions of spaces representative of success in the school.

The last part of the section on teachers will address their interpretations of the school's mission statement and their beliefs about how the school can better represent success in the school.

I asked each teacher and staff member to define the word success without first prompting for different categories of academic, social, and personal success. Many teachers and other adults in the building provided definitions of success that overlap the boundaries between the various categories of success at MMS. Mr. Hobbs, a science teacher, states,

In a school setting it would be reaching a level of competency where you are able to pursue your interests to the level you are interested in. It is not that you are good at everything, but what you want to succeed in at least you have got those tools. You have got the opportunity then you are successful at that. You are not going to be good at everything but at least you have the opportunities there for you. What you do with it is up to you to decide what that success is going to be.

He discusses the concept of equipping students with tools necessary to pursue success in areas that may require one to apply previously learned material in a new or different way.

One interesting note that he makes is that a person is “not going to be good at everything.” In this way, a student is able to have the opportunities present to strive for success and it is up to the individual to make strides or progress toward the goal. The second interesting concept that he states is that “it is up to you to decide what success is going to be;” in this, the student or individual is placed in the position of establishing a concept of success and then acting on it. Mr. Hobbs expands the concept of success and its possible definitions to include anything that the individual values and achieving that valued goal rather than stating that this or that is success.

In coding the data on teachers and staff members' definitions of success, I found that they routinely related the concept of happiness to the definition of success. In many

instances, the concept of happiness meant being “happy” with the achieved outcome. In others, it meant that one was “happy with him or herself” for doing something regardless of whether or not he or she achieved something other than experience. And yet in others, the definition of “happy” meant that one was “satisfied.” In all three different uses of the word “happy,” the word implies when placed as a modifier of success means that a person has a feeling of joy about what he or she has done. In the first use of the word happiness, the speakers implied that being happy was dependent upon reaching a desired goal. In this sense, success exists when a goal is achieved and failure exists when it is not. In the second use of happiness, the speakers implied that success can be attained by learning from a situation without necessarily achieving a goal. It is this use of happiness that is most important to understanding the culture of success at MMS because the process of learning is the most important aspect of education rather than the concrete outcomes derived from purposeful actions. Speakers who referred to the third use of happiness implied that the individual accepts the situation in which they are placed and understands the status or position in which they find themselves as a result of their decisions and actions. Schools can do little to encourage the accepting nature of success because it is largely an interpersonal decision that develops from one’s values or morals.

Ms. Calvin, the school’s librarian, states that “I think as far as career success and what you choose to do with the rest of your life, success is when you wake up every morning and you are happy to go to do your job, and that is it for me because nothing else really matters.” In speaking to her personal definition of success, she describes the sense of “happiness” that she feels in completing her work. She references the concept of being paid for doing your job, but she makes the explicit point that money is not a motivating

factor for her as she decides to come to work. In this larger definition of success, she seems to use the second definition of happiness in that she attains success by assisting students in the library on a daily basis. For her, she feels as though she has completed her goals by helping to guide students through an expansive library to find books that are exciting to them. Students should understand by the time that they leave formalized K-12 education that they are going to have to do something contributive with their lives, and for Ms. Calvin, success is choosing to do something and pursuing that goal so as to attain a sense of fulfillment.

The school's definition of success can and should include the concept of fulfillment because fulfillment can powerfully motivate students to work hard toward stated objectives and tasks. Mr. Holtz, a band teacher, makes an interesting connection between happiness, success, and fulfillment:

I guess that can be defined in different ways, but my terms of success are basically becoming better than you started. Setting a goal and then reaching toward that goal, success is not always reaching that goal, but it is making good progress towards that goal. Sometimes success is predetermined by what others might think, but there is intrinsic motivation...I think that the process is more beneficial than the product. It is going through the process and getting better and learning in particular.

He initially describes success in relation to an individual's advancements in personal development. The school's purpose and mission statement also reference the way that a student should be capable of performing and thinking on higher levels than at their initial enrollment in a grade or class. He continues his line of thought throughout the entire section of the interview and relates success to his class specifically. In band, progress comes through experience and training. Learning to play an instrument has many degradations of success and ranges from a beginner where notes are played and sounds are

made to a concert professional where music is read and emotions are conveyed through the music. In a middle school band, Mr. Holtz has to work with students who have to take it upon themselves to practice outside of class or to utilize all of the available opportunities that they have to increase their performance.

He also makes an interesting connection between how others define success and how an individual defines success. “Intrinsic” means that within an individual student, there exists a set of factors that compel a person to want to do something. This is rather crucial to understanding definitions of success in that it is this space within one’s persona that schools cannot change. However, schools can attempt to make students aware of their “intrinsic” desires and provide them with opportunities for how to act on them. In band, Mr. Holtz has established a practice regimen that allows students to prepare music to “pass off” on to achieve the next level. In this example of classroom teaching, Mr. Holtz has made success available to each student based on their unique playing abilities. He does decide which students should participate in whole-band and individual competitions. The important thing that he does is to make students aware of what they should do far in advance of the deadline for placement in these competitions. Mr. Holtz blends the concept of happiness, success, and fulfillment in his course of daily procedures and yearly objectives. Each one of the terms is intertwined with the others and derives meaning from one’s understanding of the position he or she is in as it relates to the larger picture.

Ms. Loren, a special education teacher, talked about how she forms definitions of success as she assists students with unique abilities and limitations in the Special Education Department. She states,

To me success in education is academic. It is a sign of success, but I think it is developing the whole student, not just developing the academic part of the student. I think that they are successful if they can learn to be responsible and to do what they are supposed to do and study and yet still have the values that come with being a productive individual, a productive citizen eventually. It is like respecting authority and helping others.

She bases much of her definition of success on the concept of responsibility.

Responsibility often exists in one's personal awareness of the expectations that teachers and others have of students and the individual ambition to be prepared to meet those expectations. In her definition of success, she states that responsibility is an attribute that can be learned and, conversely, taught. Different types of responsibility exist: personal, interpersonal, and community. Personal responsibility implies that one is responsible to him or herself in as much as others cannot constantly do or perform actions for their benefit on a routine basis. In the case of being prepared, students need to associate that bringing required materials to class is an important aspect of defining what success means to them. In this case, personal success begins where a student comes prepared to better his or her abilities or talents and thereby increase the definition of success to higher more meaningful objectives. Interpersonal responsibility is often associated with social success, but it can be more foundational than that in mere recognition of the other's existence regardless of their needs. Community responsibility often means that one is aware of how a group needs certain inputs from the individual to exist.

In all three areas of responsibility, the individual has to have an awareness of the expectations that he or she has of him or herself, of others, and vice versa. She notes that "respecting authority and helping others" is an essential aspect of being a "productive citizen." Schools define authority by delineating positions often in a hierarchical structure. "Respecting authority" does not mean, according to Ms. Loren, blindly

following those who are higher in status in the organizational chart. “Respecting authority” means to follow the leadership and guidance of those who are over you, but one should be able to learn to develop meanings for him or herself that may align with those in authority, but they may also contradict.

Ms. Sutter states in her definition of success that, “It varies from person to person. It is personal goals that are a success for me. I [ask is] this is what I want to do, and if I get there then I have succeeded. Success doesn’t mean that you are captain of the cheerleaders or on the baseball team or football team but sometimes they don’t see that.” Establishing and developing personal goals is an essential aspect of success because meaning has to have worth to the individual rather than just to others. How a school conveys the importance of definitions of success that are valued by the individual is a question that develops from the artistry of teaching. Being a leader in a school group such as an athletic team is an important position and worthwhile goal, but merely being an active participant on the team can be equally as fulfilling and allows more people an opportunity to succeed. The areas that Ms. Sutter recognizes as examples of success seem to convey the historical definitions of masculinity and femininity in that the captain of the football team, baseball team or cheerleading squad have historically represented the ideal hetero-normative definition of success for male and female students. She does point out that it is crucial to extend definitions of success beyond these narrow scopes to include more students.

In this section, I highlighted how some of the teachers and faculty members at MMS define the word success for themselves and for students. What is particularly of interest is that they often project their internal beliefs or philosophies into the classroom

through teaching strategies and motivational talks. I find, as a teacher, that relating to students on a personal level is often the most rewarding aspect of the profession and it is through the development of relationships that educators are most likely to have an impact on students' understandings of success. Whether it is through helping them see the big picture or to refocus their attention on "important" aspects of life, relaying the experiences that have taught adults lessons in their pasts to students can be crucial to how they act on their own value-defined conceptualizations of success.

### Academic Success

In this section, I describe how teachers and faculty members in the school view the concept of success and how it operates in the school. After the preliminary question of how teachers defined success, I asked them specifically about academic success. In doing so, my intent was to have the respondents deal with the obvious definition of success in education. Many of the teachers stated that academic success was based on the concept of learning rather than just making a specific grade. Some added that grades only have meaning if they truly reflect the amount of material that a student has mastered. Teachers also described how students' below average grades can help to define what it means to be academically unsuccessful. In this section, I describe how teachers view success in relation to grades and also in relation to the knowledge gained over the course of a school year. I then use some of the descriptions of students who represent to teachers what it means to be academically successful.

When students complete assignments, they show what they have learned through how they apply their knowledge. Because of the importance of documenting students'

progress, assessments should be meaningful and purposeful and should not be based solely on effort. Ms. Mercury describes a student who demonstrates academic success in the following way:

I have a young girl who completes every assignment and takes her time to get it done right. When she misses something, she goes back and checks to see what she missed. She goes the extra mile, like when we had a presentation, she dressed up, and she is happy and gets along with other students too. And she doesn't seem to be too stressed out. I have worried about her being a little bit obsessive about being successful, but she will take a fall easily.

This girl goes beyond the basic definition of academic success by interrogating what she did incorrectly and learns from her mistakes or misunderstandings. Teaching often requires this complex step in evaluation to maximize its effectiveness. Other forms of evaluation besides testing often promote deeper levels of knowledge and understanding. When students do something creative, they are going beyond basic levels of knowledge of recall and application. She describes the student as being enthusiastic about the presentation and doing the presentation in a way that is inviting to other students to learn and participate. True failure seems to be when a person does not learn from a mistake or attempt to correct the flaw. In defining success, it is important for schools to assist students in understanding that positive things can come from a "fall." By associating a "fall" as merely an opportunity to learn rather than a final outcome can be beneficial to students as they progress toward adulthood.

Ms. Calvin shared what she tells her own children about success. She spoke about the qualities that make individuals successful and also compliant with the rules and expectations that those who are in authoritative positions set.

I think this is what we say at our house to our kids is the key to success is to do what you are told, when you are told, better than you are told and that is the key to me. When you have a kid, a student, that does everything that they are asked to do

and they do it when they are supposed to just a little bit better than you would expect that kid is always going to be successful every time.

Her declaration seems to speak to the nature of individuals' actions in relation to academic success. "To do what you are told, when you are told, and better than you are told" superficially implies that those in authority positions (teachers, administrators, para-educators, etc.) make declarative statements and establish a series of procedural mandates that students must comply with in order to achieve success. However, she notes that it is up to the individual to decide to what degree "better than you are told" one is going to do something. Rules or statements in classrooms, according to Ms. Calvin, are minimum statements, meaning that this is the base line and one should strive to complete tasks or assignments at higher levels. Another underlying factor is present in this statement, and that is that the authority figures should have the students' best interests in mind when giving directives. What is peculiar about the relationships between educators and students is that the end results are students who are prepared to enter the world and make decisions for themselves rather than solely relying upon the decisions of others.

Going beyond the basic requirements for students and teachers is largely an issue of personality. When a teacher decides what he or she is going to teach and how he or she is going to teach it, a crucial aspect of the lesson planning is how to motivate students to learn. Ms. Johns, an English teacher, noted that "A student who is academically successful is a student, who is organized, prepared, they care about their assignments, they care about the way that they look to their teachers about their reputation, and they spend the necessary time at home preparing for school." In developing the students' academic personas, she highlights an important aspect of learning, individual "care" or concern. "Care" can mean that a student has a desire to perform at a specific level and is

also emotionally invested in the outcome of the actions, whether they are positive or negative.

Ms. Johns points to two specific areas of “care” that students may focus on as they complete work for a course: “reputation” and homework. The former is a complex aspect of the relationship between an educator and a student, and it is based on how the teacher comes to establish a definition of what is “normal” for this child. Languages of success are often involved in forming definitions that establish the possible meanings of one’s reputation, which is rarely fixed and can vary over time. The second area of “care” deals with the issue of students completing work at home or outside of class. Students who are most successful academically are often those who extend what they have learned beyond the scope of the classroom and hone their abilities through individual practice. Again, assigned homework has to coincide with the best interests of the students rather than being redundant practice that does not improve the students’ learning or abilities.

Ms. Derby, an English teacher at MMS, discussed academic success and extends the concept of “care” to an example of academic success:

I would say that it is a student who is able to apply what they have learned because even with advanced students you see where education can be set up where they memorize and can make an A, but have they really learned the material? So I would say if they can apply it then they are successful.

Caring about what grade a student makes on an assessment is predominant concern educators see in schools. Ms. Derby makes a statement about the value of grades in the structure of education. Memorizing the material that a teacher teaches has relatively little value in the macroscopic view of the world because situations are rarely replicated in the exact fashion that require students to recall from rote memory a list of definitions or other concepts. However, students are often going to be asked by society, once they obtain

non-student status, to apply what they have learned to new and varied tasks. Memorizing a list of prepositions may only be applicable in an English class, but knowing how prepositional phrases function to modify other parts of speech is important in varying the writing style and structure from a résumé to an in depth report.

When examining the nature of individual students' abilities and their awareness or understanding of content standards, teachers are often faced with a wide array of talents and limitations. Academic success truly has individual quality in that it is ultimately defined by the student. Ms. Winfrey, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher, stated that

I have some students with different levels of abilities because I teach a math strategies class which is very low ability wise, through advanced math. Some of mine that have been the most successful are even some in my lowest groups because they are challenged and struggle with things, but those that show the most success are just the ones that really want to do. You can sit down with them and they really want to learn. Once they see something where they have succeeded in something then it spurs them on to do more, but I just think that it is those who really dig in and want to do something. I see them being the most successful.

Students with lower levels of abilities are potentially able to show the greatest gains in comparison to students who perform at higher ability levels. The significance is that students with relative low levels of ability can often process what they should have previously mastered in lower grade levels at higher rates because they are cognitively able to comprehend the material and apply what they have learned at greater rates.

Academic success should be based at least partially in relation to the content standards for a specific class. Ms. Johns does speak to an important aspect of learning, desire.

When a student desires or “wants to learn” or to improve his or herself, then the greatest gains can stem from the teacher and student working in unison toward a goal that involves each of them doing what they should to insure adequate progress. Students who have a desire to better themselves through increasing their knowledge are more likely to

actively participate and will generally spend more time in class engaging the curriculum. Many teachers identified that one's innate desire is a personal characteristic that is noticeable in other non-academic areas of the school such as organized sports teams and clubs.

Academic success, as teachers seem to understand it, is largely understood through students' levels of participation with the instructional content and material presented in classes. Grades, although problematic, serve as a way to gauge their progress when teachers measure the students' abilities rather than their effort. As a school, the teachers seem to understand the complexity of issuing grades to students and documenting the amount of progress that students make to achieve standardized levels. Elements of academic success bleed into the teachers and classified employees beliefs about the other areas of social and personal success. Academic success is largely determined according to individual characteristics and does not fit into a one-size fits all construction. The faculty members spoke often about how terminologies impact the languages of academic success in the school. Definitions of academic success seem to reflect the personal characteristics of each participant, but the dominant discourse outlined by the administration was apparent in the almost scripted, politically correct responses.

### Social Success

In the last section, the boundaries of academic success blurred into the domain of social success through the ways that individuals, adults and students, in the school relate to one another. Establishing, developing, and maintaining personal relationships is an

important aspect of human existence, but these steps seem most important for teenagers in middle school who often base their own levels of success according to how they believe that others relate to them. In this section, I describe how faculty members define social success in the school and believe that social success operates in adult-student relationships and in student-student relationships. During the interviews, I asked teachers first to tell me what they thought social success meant and then provide an example of a student who demonstrates social success.

The most basic and common response to the first question about how the adults defined social success was based on friendships that students develop with one another. There are many different levels of friendship that faculty members described, and most stated that reciprocation is the primary factor that determines the level of friendship between students. Mr. Holtz stated,

It [a person who is socially successful] is not necessarily that class clown person that is joking around all of the time, but it is that person that is genuinely friendly, that person who is there for you when you know that you are going to need it. When I think of socially successful students, I think of ones who are not the trouble makers who are not the ones trying to get attention, but the ones trying to do their good deeds behind the scenes or they are just friendly and approachable and they develop good interpersonal relationship skills.

A person who actively seeks negative attention from a teacher often fits the categorical definition of “class clown” because he or she is attempting to entertain the class and distract them from the objectives that the teacher is attempting to cover. Students, according to Mr. Holtz, realize the significance of these types of behaviors and make judgments about students who wish to negatively impact the class dynamic. Mr. Holtz uses “genuinely” to describe how students relate to one another. Genuine implies that the motives behind students’ actions reflect the way that students feel about each other and

themselves. This type of reciprocity in valuing each other has substantial meaning as students create definitions of social success. When students are able to count on another student to “be there,” they are able to create a stable foundation for other relationships as well as other actions. A foundation is essential for developing and maintaining friendships at later times because a socially successful student is “approachable,” which means that a student can seek out another student and know that because they have a history then an open communication can exist. This type of communication is necessary to establish what Ms. Frank states as being socially successful, “To be with different groups of students rather than just their one little cliquish group.” By creating a foundation for friendships, students are able to increase their social spheres to other students that have differences, either small or extreme, in personalities or personal characteristics. Teachers, in general, note that students need to have a variety of friends in order to be socially successful.

Ms. Shelton speaks to the issue of diversity and students’ awareness of diversity in school as it relates to social success:

To me, it means being able to get along with the students around you, noticing their...even if it is diversity amongst you, you can still even when people are different, if it is race or they like different things, you can accept those diversities and be able to live and cooperate. That is the main thing, being cooperative.

Issues of diversity are present in schools because students come from a wide array of backgrounds and have many different levels of ability. Recognizing diversity can be both beneficial and harmful. Students who realize that they are part of a diverse population and celebrate that fact by seeking out other students for relationships regardless of their races, classes, genders, or abilities are more likely to demonstrate social success. Ms. Shelton uses the word “cooperate” to describe how students work together. This word

does not imply that students are friends with each other, but it does imply that they are able to work together for each other's betterment.

When students realize the status position of other students, they have to make a judgment decision as to how they are going to interact with those students. Ms. Derby defined social success as follows:

I would say it is someone who feels comfortable with different groups of kids not always just their little clique. I would say that it is kids who demonstrate understanding of others. I have some students who are really very kind to students that some other kids ostracize but they go out of their way to be really sweet to them. That to me would be someone who is socially successful that they just have compassion and empathy.

When students are ostracized by others, they are alone and have little foundation for friendships. There are many possible reasons for a student being ostracized by others, but regardless of reason, the students who are placed in these social situations have the greatest obstacle to overcome before they can develop relationships with others.

Sometimes, a student is ostracized because they are new to a school and have to create or establish new friendships. In this situation, the aspect of being empathetic, as Ms. Derby states, allows a student who has already an established position in the group to extend friendship to the new student. Ms. Derby uses several adjectives to describe a socially successful student: "kind," "sweet," "compassion[ate]," and "empath[etic]." In all of these adjectives, the implication is that a student who is socially successful shows a "genuine" concern for other students and goes beyond the realm of only relating to students with similar characteristics.

The ability to communicate with others, students and adults, came up as an attribute of social success on a routine basis. Ms. Winfrey states that a socially successful student is "able to communicate with others." Communication is essential to all levels of

friendships (establishing, developing, and maintaining) because it allows individuals to know and transmit needs and desires which as psychologists note is a primary aspect of human relationships. Ms. Thompson's definition of a socially successful student uses communication as a foundational requirement for developing a group of friends:

Someone that is socially successful has a pretty positive attitude and...they have some good friends that they can talk with and vent with and share feelings with, that they have good communication skills that they can get along with others and that they can be a friend...I don't think that social success means that you have to fit in to any particular clique or group but you just have a core group of friends that you like and you can get along with and it is a positive group of friends. You can have a bad clique and they all get along with each other but they have bad attitudes and they are talking bad about other people, obviously that is not socially successful. Someone who is socially successful needs to be positive and respect people too.

"Good communication skills" mean the ability to both say and listen to the words that convey meaning. When students are conscientious about what they say, then their word choices are "genuine" about their thoughts and feelings. Students are aware of the consequences of saying something or omitting something from conversations with others and make choices about what should or should not be said. The concept of reciprocity seems to play a significant role in how students relate to one another. According to Ms. Thompson, establishing a "core group of friends" is necessary for social success. A "core group" allows one to establish a sense of security and safety that allows one to experiment with other students who exhibit different personality types or different interests.

Personal areas of interest seem to dictate the interests of the group, meaning that if a person is interested in developing "positive" social relationships that are based on respect for others, then that person is more likely to find a "core" of friends that share his or her similar interests. However, deviancy, which suggests breaking rules or going

outside of the normal parameters of behavior for an individual, can spread to others who call that person a friend and lead them to those same types of behaviors. Within the group dynamic, personalities of the individuals seem to merge into a group persona. Along the continuum of relationships, there are varying degrees of positive and negative behaviors. The position of any group is constantly mobile and is rarely fixed. If social success is defined as having a “core group of friends,” then those people who establish that can exhibit both positive and negative attributes. On one hand, a group can have a positive persona that follows rules and attempts to better each individual and others outside of the group. However, the negative aspect appears when the core group of friends is focused on doing things that are typically labeled as deviant behavior such as theft, bullying, or property destruction. The intent of Ms. Thompson’s statement is that “real” social success occurs when individuals establish a nucleus of friends that allows them to “branch” out to others and broaden the types of friends and have positive effects on each other’s lives.

Ms. Darcy and Ms. Clancy, the school’s nurses, stated that basic definitions of social success have to include “getting along” and “respect.” Respect can be based on a philosophical understanding of the value of another individual, many students at the middle school level may not have rationalized the worth associated with another human life. Although formalized steps to develop one’s individual understanding of the worth of another are rarely made by individual students, the school’s counseling curriculum addresses the interpersonal relationships of students and adults in the school. The primary example of respect in MMS is through the character pillars of the 3-Rs (“Be Respectful, Be Responsible, and Be Resourceful”) displayed in many of the classrooms and in the hallways. In the materials that addresses “respect,” many of lessons that teachers have at

their availability are used to formally address how students view each other and define for themselves a basic set of values that determine the base line of what many teachers referred to as “you should at least act [like this]” towards others. Basic respect for others can include being sensitive to the needs of others, being aware of the problems that others face, and knowing that respect is often reciprocal in nature. Ms. Green stated that an important aspect of respect is “being willing to help” other students when they are in need. Other teachers also identified that being helpful is a form of respect for students and the most common need for students in school is to learn, and students demonstrate basic respect by allowing each other to maximize their learning potential.

Ms. Turner, a special education teacher, made the following statement about social success: “Coming from middle school, it would probably be to get along with their peers. Because they are really into who does what and who knows what, just being able to get along with their peers and not have confrontation.” Ms. Turner seems to understand that students at the middle school level have the complexity of handling social issues as well as their own physical and mental changes. Ms. Turner identifies that at this level of education students are very aware of other students’ perceptions and are influenced by a need for recognition. Recognition by other students can develop through both positive and negative behaviors. A series of negative behaviors can allow irritation to lead to frustration which can lead to confrontation either verbal or physical. When students “get along” with each other, it is far easier for individual students to avoid confrontation which leads to increased levels of social success occurring in teachers’ classrooms.

Confrontations often occur because of students’ differences. Several teachers noted that students who go against the grain of social norms can exhibit a different type

of social success. Mr. Hobbs provides an in depth discussion of students who do not typically fit a label of social success:

I think that a lot of that [social success] is that they have found their group. It doesn't mean that they are the most popular kid at school because there are some kids here who are very happy with who they are and who their friends are and they are sort of on the periphery of the rest of the kids at school. They dress differently, walk, and talk differently. They are the weirdos at school. They don't make any apologies for who they are. They maybe trying to fit into a mold, but they are not trying to fit into that little cookie cutter that all of the other kids are around here. And they are ok if other people think that they are different or weird because they like who they are. And amongst their group, they are as popular and beloved as they can be, and of course we have the other kids, and I don't know of anybody that dislikes them. They are generally going to be better looking, well off, good at sports, pretty bright,

In this detailed description of students who make a decision or choice to “be different,” Mr. Hobbs identifies that establishing a “core group” of friends is the primary element for their definitions of social success. The “weirdos” in the school seem to celebrate being different from the norm in their appearance and how they act. However, he makes an interesting assertion that acceptance by one's group is fundamental in understanding the relative level of happiness. Acceptance is an aspect of social success that is important to “weirdos” and non-wierdos alike because it allows individuals to feel valued by others. One of the basic aspects of acceptance is acceptance by self which means that a person embraces who they are and what they value in life. Sometimes, a generation has a certain dress code that defines what is normal attire or style. Clothing and hair styles are often influenced by media such as music and movies. Different “scenes” seem to have different ideas of what represents them. Many middle school students feel the need to dress in ways that brand or label them as a member of a certain group.

I asked him later to identify some of the students whom he referenced as not trying to fit the “cookie cutter mold;” he pointed to a group of male and female students

who were walking together in a group and dressed in outfits similar to ones in the movie *Twilight*, which is based on the novel by the same name about teenage vampires. Their clothing was gothic and black seemed to be the predominate color. This group of students was juxtaposed against another group walking the opposite way who he identified as conforming to the mold. This group of students all had name brand North Face® fleeces even when the temperature was seventy degrees. The girls who were walking in the second group were also uniformly dressed in Nike® running shorts. Dressing in certain ways, or sharing the same basic style is an aspect of group acceptance. Comfort or actual need does not seem to dictate clothing choices unless group one decides to practice vampirism or group two decides to climb a mountain or suddenly go for a jog.

Social success also has another element that determines the degree to which one is accepted by their peers. Ms. Loren, a special education teacher, speaks to an issue that is significant for establishing or maintaining relationships:

There are so many that have a real hard time with social skills. Number one, they have got to have interpersonal relationships. They have got to be able to develop a sense of communication with their peers...As far as socially too, a lot of them don't realize that cleanliness, hygiene a lot of times they are not socially accepted because, and it is not like they have to have name brand clothes, it is just taking a bath, having your hands clean, your hair clean and that helps a kid be socially because kids don't want to sit next to the kid that might not be smelling so great. I think too that they have to respect their peers.

Aspects of hygiene can possibly increase or decrease a student's degree of social success because it physically represents the degree to which one cares about him or herself. The adjective "dirty" is often used to describe students who have, either consistently or inconsistently, have an odor about them. Apparel that appears dirty can suggest to other students that a student is of a lower socio-economic class. Students are often "class conscious" as they make and develop friendships and relationships in school. Social

success is often associated with a lack of stigmas. When students label other students negatively, the label can last long after a problem has been corrected even if it is no longer true or accurate. It seems that attaching a negative label has more potency than a positive one because it can take years of positive actions to counteract the negative. The vast difference between the amount of positive actions and negative actions suggests that students have to constantly be mindful of the way that they present themselves to others.

Achieving social success can sometimes lead to students not achieving academic success. This occurs when a student is more focused on the way that they present themselves to other students than their class work. Ms. Calvin, the librarian, spoke at length about the conflict that students face as they make choices and decisions about how they want to be. She stated that by focusing attention on how others view you can cause a student to expend the amount of available resources (time, energy, and attention) and leave little to use on completing assigned class objectives and tasks. The opposite situation also exists in the school. She stated, “When you have a student that is struggling with their peers and then they give up on the academics and they give up on school in general because of the social relationships that they are not being successful in.” When students do not feel that they are socially successful in school, this can lead to inappropriate behaviors, acting out, and poor academic performance. Schools must be aware of the necessity to create an environment that fosters positive social relationships so that learning can occur. Ms. Mercury summarizes this position: “I think that it affects their academics if they are not socially successful. It means a lot to them. You can see it in their face and you can see it and I think that we as teachers help that out, but we can

mess it up too.” Teachers, as the front line ambassadors of the school, bear the responsibility to make every student feel welcomed and valued on a daily basis.

The second question that I asked faculty members about social success was to “Describe a student who is socially successful.” Many teachers used the term “popular” to describe the students who achieve social success more frequently than others. However, other teachers associated socially successful students with those who did not necessarily fit the “popular” category but were “well-liked.” Students who were “well-liked” often were described as maintaining a positive persona that is attractive to other students. Teachers seemed to display more connection with these students rather than the “popular” kids because they were more approachable. One teacher after the completion of the interview talked about the parents of “popular kids” as being “helicopter parents.” This term has a negative connotation because the parents are “hovering over” their kids and will defend their children against the reprimands of teachers and administrators. This teacher’s definitions of social success have gone beyond the demarcated boundary of students to include their parents. The faculty members often asserted that positive-parent involvement can lead to greater social success because parents and educators work in unison with the objectives of educators to improve students’ abilities or behaviors.

Issues of gender presented in the data. In an interview with Ms. Donald, the counselor, she discussed “girl drama” as being the conflicts that female students have with each other about issues such as “boys,” “reputation,” and “appearance.” Girls’ romantic relationships often begin to materialize at this stage of maturation because they attach feelings to other students. These feelings can cause students to feel competitive with each other as students move into and out of “boyfriend-girlfriend” relationships. The

second aspect of girl drama is based on her “reputation” with other students. Reputations are often another name for labels and may or may not be accurate. Reputations can be based on non-sex activities such as kissing, petting, or sex itself. Ms. Donald said, some students may label other girls who have “gone all the way” as being a “slut” while other students may view the same girl as more attractive because she will “[go] all the way.” The last aspect of “girl drama” is “appearance” and often speaks to the way that students present themselves through clothing, hair styles, make up, and accessories. These areas often bleed into the area of reputation. One teacher described a student who dressed “like a boy” as being labeled a “lesbian;” this caused hostility and resulted in a physical altercation between the students and then bullying by other students later on.

Social success, as understood by the faculty members, is similar to academic success in that it is based on the individual. Students who achieve social success can be “popular,” but popularity does not only include those students who are socially successful. Popularity, as Ms. Green noted, can reflect students’ socio-economic class status. The faculty members defined and described a wide array of students who are and are not socially successful. Social success seems to be a relevant aspect of schooling at MMS and in the lives of students as they develop relationships with each other and with the adults in the building. It is in this environment that students are able to practice establishing, developing, and maintaining relationships with others that will later play pivotal roles in their adult lives. It seems that the faculty members believe that true social success occurs only when students create a balance between their relationships and their academic work.

## Personal Success

When the interview questions moved from social success to personal success, the answers and definitions that teachers provided became less diverse. Because of similar understandings of personal success, I altered the discussion of data in this section from the two previous areas to focus the primary definition of personal success as faculty members understand it as being setting or establishing goals, working toward those goals, achieving goals, and evaluating goals. Other aspects of personal success that presented in the data were spirituality and self-esteem. Once a description of how faculty members believe that personal success operates in the school is established, I focus on their descriptions of students who demonstrate personal success in the school.

Mr. Lincoln, a mathematics teacher, states that many of the problems that he sees in students today in middle school are that “kids don’t set goals.” This problem often impacts the type and amount of progress that students make in general in furthering their education. He states that a person who demonstrates personal success will often have both short-term and long-term goals. In the former, students should have an idea of what they want to accomplish in each unit that they are studying or each semester. In the latter, he states that establishing goals of five, ten, fifteen, and twenty years will often allow a student to develop a consensus of what choices they will have to make to achieve those goals. He adds that in middle school it is difficult for students to often see beyond the present and into the future and because of this it is even more difficult for students to create a logical path that will allow them the opportunity to achieve their goals.

Establishing a goal is often a difficult procedure for even adults; however, in middle school the task is even more difficult because students usually have little

background knowledge of the requirements necessary to achieve the goal. When teachers, counselors, and administrators work with students to establish or define a goal, they should stress that it is important that the students have to desire the goal. Mr. Hobbs, a social studies teacher, defines personal success as being “if you feel that you are succeeding in what you want to do.” When an individual “wants” to attain a goal, they often will attach personal meaning to the goal and will be able to develop the “why” of a goal. He continues and states that it has to be something that is “not just what other people want you to do.” He adds, even if one is successful in what they are doing and “don’t like what [they] are doing, then [they] are not personally successful.” This often presents in classes that students do not like when they make the declarative statement of “I won’t ever use this again.” Educators should be able to assist students to a mental place where they understand that many times things that do not seem relevant are often crucial in allowing them to take one step in a sequence of events that will allow the chance to accomplish their goal.

Ms. Green, a Family and Consumer Sciences teacher, stated that personal success is not based on monetary assets or material possessions, but “what you accomplish in life.” When a person accomplishes goals, they gain knowledge through their experiences. This knowledge will often bring personal limitations of ability to the surface that one should be knowledgeable about as they establish and work towards future goals. Ms. Winfrey, a math teacher, used the phrase “best of their ability” to describe students who achieve personal success in middle school. By adding this descriptor, the languages of personal success broaden to include a wide range of students and not merely the students who are the “brightest” or “smartest.” Students of all abilities will need assistance as they

progress from setting a goal to achieving a goal. Ms. Winfrey also adds that the students who demonstrate the greatest levels of personal success are those individuals who can “find help that they need to accomplish that goal.” MMS has many routine activities that are meant to assist students in all areas of the continuum of goals. Most of these activities are headed by the counselor and the curriculum that she presents in monthly meetings that students have with teacher-mentors who work in small groups with students to discuss goals as well as other issues relevant to middle school students.

During instructional times, teachers are often observant of students’ behaviors as they enter the classroom and can often understand students’ attitudes or desires. Ms. Sutter, a math teacher, described a student who came into her classroom at the beginning of the year and seemed apprehensive about the subject matter. She soon found out that his behavior was directly related to his inabilities in mathematics. In a private conference, she discussed with the student what he would like to accomplish during the year in math class in particular and in other subjects in general. In setting these goals, they had a verbal agreement that his definition of personal success was going to be determined by the amount of progress that he made throughout the year. This student demonstrated to her what it means to be personally successful because he was able to work with the teacher’s help to accomplish goals that had an effect in all of his academic classes. Reaching a goal is often a dual point of crises and a point of enjoyment. Ms. Johns, an English teacher, stated that personal success is “reaching a goal and moving forward.” In the “moving forward” aspect many people are faced with dilemmas of what to do next and it is in this position that long-range goals are of assistance with individuals as they move from mile stone to mile stone.

When one reaches a goal, the next crucial aspect is to evaluate the goal or the effectiveness of the procedures made to achieve the goal. Measuring a goal is often difficult for teenagers who place so much emphasis on what others think. Mr. Holtz, the band teacher, stated that:

Personal success means setting goals for yourself and going for those goals and knowing how you measure those goals and not necessarily how you measure them against, some times we do it I guess we all do it, measuring those goals by what everybody else does or what everybody else says is successful, but knowing how far you have come personally, knowing that you have reached the goal that you have set for yourself.

One's knowledge of the progress that they have made is an important aspect of personal success because it allows a person to develop or define success according to obstacles that they overcame or the difficulties that were faced to achieve a goal. To achieve a goal can have differing requirements based on levels of abilities. For example, a student may enter a band competition and win a medal or award for their demonstrated abilities; however, all of the contestants who enter the same competition have different histories. One student may have taken private music lessons, while another student may have to overcome a physical limitation to play his or her instrument. Although these factors are very different, they each play a role in forming how the individuals measure their success. For the first student, the award may seem insignificant because of the amount of experience. However, for the second student the award may seem substantial because of the physical obstacles that he or she overcame to achieve that level of success. In both examples, the award's meaning has to be based on how the individuals measure their success rather than what those who are "outside" of the situation say about the achievement.

Evaluating goals can be a difficult process for adolescents who are in the process of developing independent definitions that may borrow from the ideals or philosophies of the adults in their lives. Ms. Frank, a special education teacher, stated that “They [middle school students] are still finding out who they are and what they want to be like.” The dynamics of students’ definitions are often varied and can mutate from one definition of personal success to another, or they can broaden to include more targeted goals that include a previous goal. Self-discovery is often a process that is led by individual experiences over time and incorporates physical, social, and cognitive surroundings. Within all of these surroundings is the understanding that goals seem to have more meaning when they are “wanted or desired.” Ms. Loren, another special education teacher, stated that personal success is “if you become what you want to become.” In this sense, the “what” is a specific person which may include a broader spectrum of adjectives to describe it, but the noun is the person that students are or will be. In this way of setting and establishing goals as “whats” allows students to strive for positions within society, and it is in these positions that they are likely to find adjectives to describe their lives.

In seeking to fulfill personal goals, Mr. Pittman, a social studies teacher, discussed at length about the role of religion or spirituality in informing students’ definitions of personal success. He defines personal success in the following way:

Knowing who you are as a person, and if you stick to that then you are successful. You might have a goal that you want to achieve. You might achieve it, or you might not, but you don’t compromise what you believe in. you don’t compromise your principles and your faith. **(Interviewer) Do you think faith is important in developing personal goals?** I think so. For me, it is who you are. Your beliefs, your faith, to me, it is hard to separate your faith and your beliefs from who you are as a person. So I think that is a big determining factor in success in who you are as a person and where it is going to take you down the road.

By interweaving faith and goal attainments as foundations necessary for personal success, Mr. Pittman comments on an area that is often disregarded in public schools because of the “separation of church and state.” In this way, he acknowledges the multidimensionality of personal success in school. For him, “beliefs” and “faith” are often crucial to how students form boundaries for their actions. He uses the verb “compromise” to mean that a tenant of one’s beliefs has been crossed. Although schools are limited in the ways that they can discuss religion, Mr. Pittman sees the importance of understanding how students’ beliefs impact their actions within the school. Mr. Pittman and others often refer to their own religious beliefs and their connection to how they act as faculty members. The school, from my observations and the interviews, seems to have a basic set of shared values; some of them happen to be religious while others one could classify as being secular. It seems apparent that the dogma of Christianity is understated by the school personnel, but it is interwoven into the fabric of the school’s culture nonetheless.

Within the school’s culture of success and its fabric, the school does a lot of activities that focus on how students develop and increase their self-esteem. In this way, the school addresses issues that are often also addressed by religious institutions; Ms. Donald, the school’s counselor, describes personal success as “if they feel positive about school and relationships in school, social aspect and their grades and home stuff comes in to play here too...Everybody has their lot in life.” In this description of personal success, she discusses how students “feel” about their environment. Her final comment about how “everybody has their lot in life” is often one that is associated with a negative stigma because it can imply a limitation of the higher ranges of success. A better way to make

this statement is that all people are going to have obstacles that they are going to have to overcome to achieve what they want to be. Part of the necessary developmental processes is how students come to positions where they can evaluate their own feelings about their situations whether it is at school, at home, or in the community. Outside factors, those beyond the individual, influence and inform the ways that students feel about themselves.

Ms. Derby, an English teacher, states her definition of personal success:

I believe that we are here for a purpose and a reason and that your purpose is not just for your own success but in some way you contribute to society, you contribute to someone else's life or someone's well being. Obviously as a teacher we have a big chance to either positively or negatively impact our students. For me, as a person, my success would be am I fulfilling my purpose in life. Then as a teacher, am I doing a good job? Is that child different when they leave my classroom in a better way? Hopefully.

Relating personal success to the success of others and the larger community speaks to the ways in which individuals who live within groups are able to impact each other's lives.

She speaks about her own understanding and evaluation of success, but this is also applicable to students. The verb "contribute" means that the sum of actions taken by individuals benefits others in ways that are greater than if individuals' lives are counted separately. "Contribute" also implies that students are adding to each other rather than detracting to each other's worth. Individuals are capable of achieving a certain level of success, but, as she implies, the degree of success is greater if assisted by others. The position of contributor is important because if one does not make contributions or makes them incorrectly then the impact on the individual's life is "negative." Adults in the school shoulder more responsibility for insuring that their contributions lead to betterment in each student.

Personal success definitions range from basic goals to self-esteem to spirituality. In all of these possible definitions of personal success, the dominant thread started with the administrative cultures of personal success continues. Ms. Thompson, a science teacher, states that personal success is “a good balance between being emotionally stable and academically stable and spiritually stable.” In all of these types of stabilities, students are in positions for growth as they continue to mature. Growth is often based on “stability” or fixed parameters from which new life springs.

When faculty members were asked to describe students who demonstrate personal success, they often used students who had established and attained goals both in and out of school. Ms. Calvin’s discussion of personal success speaks to the larger cultures of success in the school:

So many kids at this age think that they are not good enough, they are not cute enough, they are not pretty enough, they are not popular enough, they are not smart enough, they are not anything enough. So personal success at this age is just to have enough self-esteem and confidence to be just who you are and those are the kids who leave here with confidence and they go on and become successful in every area of their life and it seems like this is where we capture them and say “You know who you are is valuable. You may not be the smartest, but you do this well.”

In this description of students, it is often the ones who feel that they are “not anything enough” whom schools can potentially impact the most. Creating a culture of personal success involves recognizing the validity of every individual in the school. Faculty members play important roles as front-line ambassadors of the school. Students who achieve personal success are often the ones who feel a greater sense of “confidence.” Being confident in one area or another will often lead to successes later in life as students mature from adolescents into adults.

## Spaces of Success

I asked faculty members to describe spaces of success present in MMS. Many faculty members described the same areas as the administrators. However, I highlight the two primary areas of success within the pedagogic culture of success that came from faculty members' interviews. Ms. Darcy, the school nurse highlighted an area that no one else identified, the school garden.



The students in the “self-contained classroom” work as part of their life science curriculum to create a garden with flowers, a pond, vegetables, and benches in the school’s courtyard. In this space, students, who are often overlooked by the general population of students and teachers (because they have little interaction), demonstrate their success for both the school and the community. The space is inviting, colorful, and

vibrant. Students who rarely cross paths with students in the “self-contained” classroom are able to cross the barrier and enter the classroom and visually see the worth and value of each student in that class. It is in this way that the school’s culture of success fluidly passes through physical boundaries to include all students in the school.



The library serves as a space that is also able to reflect all students in the school. Ms. Calvin, the librarian, comments that the library is a place that she is “proud” of and she designed it to reflect students’ interests. Their primary interest is in each other. She talked at length about how students will enter the library and focus their attention on the artwork. Students paint ceiling tiles in the library to resemble popular books, authors, and artwork. Ms. Calvin states, “You would not believe the conversations and how the kids just love those ceiling tiles on the ceiling...It is very important that they own, have a little piece of ownership in my area.” Beyond having a space that they can jointly “own,” the library allows students to develop areas of success that they embody in their daily choices as they select reading materials of personal interest.

## Faculty Members' Views on the Mission Statement and Purpose

The faculty members at MMS seem to agree with the basic understandings of the administrative cultures of success as they pertain to the school's mission statement and purpose. Most teachers used the abbreviated mission statement rather than the longer, more formal version. The majority of the teachers stated that the mission statement influences the cultures of success in the school by "providing a framework" or a "point of reference" to guide individual actions within the school. Ms. Derby commented that "If you are here for the right reason, you don't need a mission statement. If you are here for the wrong reason, you are not going to care about the mission statement." When a person works in a school for the "right" reasons, the person's philosophy drives his or her actions to work with students to increase the knowledge of students in the hopes that the students' lives will be better and more productive once they leave school. Most faculty members described the mission statement as necessary and relevant, but essentially "forgettable" because it is something that does nothing more than establishes a goal without prescribing how to accomplish the goal.

Ms. Donald described some of the frustrations that educators have as they attempt to teach all students and face students who do not want or desire to learn. She stated, "You want to give every child every chance, but it is difficult to constantly see little return on your investment." This statement is one that was repeatedly offered by teachers and marks a distinct movement from the administrative cultures of success. It seems that within the pedagogic cultures of success, faculty members wrestle with the ideals behind the philosophy of the mission statement and how they are put into practice in the classroom. The teachers seem to believe the intent of the mission statement, but they also

“read between the lines” of it to allow the intent of the mission statement to manifest in varying degrees to each individual student.

### Overall Pedagogic Cultures of Success

The pedagogic cultures of success seem to differ from the administrative cultures of success partially because of the proximity of teachers, para-educators, nurses, and classified employees to students. The relative closeness that faculty members have to students allows them to know the inner workings of students as they observe and work with students throughout the year. Aspects of academic, social, and personal cultures of success carry over from the administration to the teachers through the dominant Discourse of success, but through the filtering process, faculty members take standards established by the administration and work to develop ways and means in which to put them into practice. Teachers seem to understand that students’ cultures of success are often variations of what administrators and teachers establish as norms. Faculty members seem to understand the importance of ideals in education as it pertains to desires for “all” students to perform at a given level. However, the spaces of success that students must negotiate are often demarcated according to students’ individual desires and ambitions which, as one teacher stated, “can explain progress or a lack of progress and also the degree of success that students feel toward their own successes and failures.” Within all areas of success, the pedagogic cultures seem to place an emphasis on students’ individual personalities and how they create a path from youth status in elementary school to high school. In these formative three years, teachers have a wide range of student abilities that are most likely attributive of the differences in physical and

cognitive maturation. Recognizing the differences not only between one grade and the next, but also between students within each grade is an aspect of the artistry of teaching.

### Student Cultures of Success

I asked English teachers to use a written response protocol to collect data from a wide range of students. The total number of students who completed the responses and returned the IRB Assent Form and the Consent Form was about 200. In these responses, students were asked a series of open-ended questions. Each student was told that there were no “right” answers and that their comments would be confidential as to encourage them to be more candid. Some of the responses were quite comical, but they yielded little value to the project. Other responses were rather broad and spoke in rather general terms that also provided little usable data. However, the third category of responses, a minority, was genuine and spoke to the specifics of the school. From these responses, I was able to select a group of students that was representative of the student body’s population demographics. Thirty students took part in group interviews. In this section, I discuss aspects present in students’ written responses and the interviews about the following areas: definitions of success, the concept of unsuccessful students, academic success, social success, personal success, spaces of success, and the overall student cultures of success.

### Students’ Definitions of Success

Before I began to collect data, I thought it was essential to list a few of the “expected” definitions of success. In doing so, my intent was to list all of the

prefabrications that I held as an educator prior to beginning the data collection so that I could know what assumptions that I had before interrogating what was actually present. I also wanted to ensure that I was not projecting my views onto the data. Within the data, I found support for my presuppositions as well as extensions beyond what I initially identified. I will structure the definitions of success section into two categories, expected and unexpected definitions.

The primary list of possible definitions of success that I created had five components: money/material, dreams, rule following, positive educational path, and hard work. Each component has support from the interview and written response data. Sharon, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade female student said that success is “lots of money and junk like that.” I am assuming that “junk like that” is intended to mean material wealth or possessions that display one’s personal financial status. The second component was the concept of achieving a goal. Myra, another 6<sup>th</sup> grade female student, said, “the word success is when you have a dream or goal and later on it becomes a reality.” Myra makes a distinction between having a dream and realizing the dream; the latter she states is exemplary of success. Many students identified the concept of “rule following” as an aspect of success and did so in response to the prompt to describe a successful student. Many students also had similar responses to the question about academic success; however, Joy, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, stated, “A successful student is someone who makes good grades and graduates high school and college, and gets a good job to take care of a family.” Joy identifies the expected educational path that seems to be accepted in society that marks progress of success according to educational milestones and culminates with the hetero-normative

idea of having a family, which shows a replication of the cycle. The cycle of progress, for Joy, involves the aspect of how hard individuals work toward their goals.

Seeing the expected definitions of success in the student data had little contributive value other than supporting my presuppositions. However, many students brought new or interesting conceptualizations to the definitions of success that broaden the languages of success present at MMS. Ross, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, said that “A successful student should be a student who studies, makes good grades, hangs out with the right people and stays out of trouble.” Ross seems to link most of my previous ideas of success into one concise statement, but he interestingly notes that a successful person has “good friends.” The word “good” was used quite frequently as a modifier of all things successful. Brenda, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student, extends the basic concept of being good as necessary for success to include “always being ready for a new challenge.” Adaptability is an interesting concept within the languages of success because it speaks to one’s flexibility rather than rigidity when faced with new terrains or environs. Mike, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, said that a successful student is “Someone who tries as hard as they can to get the best possible grade they can make. If that grade is a D, as long as they’re trying as hard as they can.” Mike makes a noteworthy statement because he and other students recognize that individuals’ abilities play a significant factor in deciding what is and what is not successful. Tom, another 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, extends individual abilities and explains “I believe that the word ‘success’ means to do well with your life to be the person you strive to be. Success isn’t just having a lot of money, or a big house, or a lot of cars, it’s making the best of the life you are given.” Another 8<sup>th</sup> grader, Wayne, stated that

“Success is to do good and make a name for yourself. Success also means to accomplish something in life or do something to change the world.”

This progression in the data from doing the best that you can to “making a name for yourself,” “accomplishing something,” and “changing the world” shows that within the student cultures of success at MMS individual personality characteristics and abilities determine what is possible for a person to do. Success is then defined according to how an individual uses his or her abilities to “do something with his or her life.” The pinnacle of the progressive organization is “to change the world” which implies that a person does something that betters the lives of others or has a positive influence. The idea that a thirteen year old male student has in place the ambition to go out and change the world speaks to the level of understanding that is present in people who have not even attended high school. It seems that within these definitions of success, the languages that students use seem inclusive of everyone regardless of ability or personal characteristics.

### Unsuccessful Definitions and Descriptors

When I began to form the questions to ask students on the protocol, I thought that the label of “unsuccessful” as a crucial element to the understanding of how students position those students who are not successful. The data show a clear contrast to the definitions of success within student Discourses. The question that I asked students was “Describe an unsuccessful student.” In describing the students who are unsuccessful, which was the most heavily answered question, the students primarily responded with descriptors of students’ behaviors: “disrespectful,” “dropout,” “negative,” “cheater,” “joke,” “barely,” “rule breaker,” “careless,” “few friends,” “not confident,” and “no

desire to learn.” In all of these descriptors, the one that was used repeatedly is the word “barely,” which was often followed by a verb. Within student cultures of success, they seem to associate an unsuccessful student with one who “barely” does something. For example, Tia, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade student stated that an unsuccessful student “barely passes.” The concept of “barely” is related to the aspect of minimums in which passing is the minimum criteria of success in a school. At MMS, making a grade of 60, or a D, is passing, so success as other students pointed out in the interview was to make higher grades of a C or higher.

Tina an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, said, “Some will say ‘People who fail,’ or ‘People who make C average or below,’ but I don’t think there is a definite line between ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful.’ To me, an unsuccessful student is someone who doesn’t care and doesn’t try. You are unsuccessful when you throw away the talents you have been given.” Tina makes two important points in this statement: 1. Demarcations between successful and unsuccessful are not concrete. 2. Unsuccessful students are those who do not use the abilities that they possess. Tina’s understanding of success seems to be one beyond her years of experience and to be reflective of both the administrative and pedagogical understandings of success within the school. Another possible notion is that Tina might be reflecting her parents’ or guardians’ perspectives of success. Whatever the case, Tina and other students place success and unsuccess as dependent upon the individual and the outcomes of his or her actions. The students’ reflection of the dominant Discourse of success is apparent through the ways that they associate unsuccessful students with not actively participating in their education.

## Students' Definitions of Academic Success

I asked students about academic success in both the interviews and the written response protocols. The responses that I got were rather bland and rarely went beyond the idea of a “good grade” as the epitome of academic success. However, a few students made noteworthy statements about academic success. Amelia, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, stated, “Academic success means getting good grades so you can get into a good college and get a good job.” The distinction that Amelia makes is that “good grades” are necessary for later aspects of education and life. Achieving academic success, according to Amelia, will eventually lead one to have a “good job.” Although, the word “good” is vague, it seems that as other students described occupations in the interview, they most commonly related “good” to the aspect desirability. George, a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, talked about how one of his teachers often talked about the “shoveling horse manure jobs” when a student did not do his or her homework. He continued to say that these types of jobs often require physical labor and are “low-paying.” The student and pedagogical cultures of academic success in this example seem in unison and further showcase the dominate ideology of success in the school.

Continuing the shared understandings of academic success is the concept of “understanding or comprehension.” Students who went beyond the idea of academic success as defined according to grades often described the degree to which students learned or comprehended the content of courses. Beth, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student said, “To me it [academic success] means that when you’re in class and you learn something new if you don’t understand you ask questions until you fully understand it.” Academic success, according to Beth, occurs when a student completes a class and has increased his or her

knowledge or abilities so that he or she can perform at a higher level. Beth also speaks to how one's desire to learn can compel them to seek out answers to their questions.

Claudia, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, stated:

Academic success...means going all the way through middle and high school and understanding what has been taught. This success would include a high school diploma and at least a four year college or university. Graduating from college with some kind of major would also be a key element to academic success. Then you can do what you want after that.

Although Claudia recognizes the traditionally accepted aspect of academic success of going to a four-year college or university, she does not have a grasp of the importance of other post-secondary schools such as community colleges that equip a large portion of the population in the United States with the abilities to create a high-functioning, successful career. Academic success, for Claudia and others, seems to rely heavily upon the path established by the school system and does not include "dropping out" in any way.

### Social Success

In this section, I describe and discuss how students viewed the concept of social success and how they see it operating within the school setting. I asked students both in the interview and on the written response to describe social success. Many students attributed social success primarily with having a "core group of friends" or a "positive peer group." In both of these, the dynamics seem to predicate on the understanding that one's friends can have either a positive or negative influence. One student said "just because you have a lot of friends, it does not make you socially successful." In this

reference, Nancy, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, stated that if you break rules or laws, then you may have a strong group of friends and acceptance, but you may be labeled as an “outcast” by other members of your larger peer group because of your deviancy. Don, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader stated that “social success is where people know you as a good person.” What is interesting is that at even the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level, he is concerned by how he is known by others. By incorporating how one is known into one’s conceptualization of social success, the ethical or moral aspect of defining “good” came into play and allowed the foundational aspects of right and wrong to partially contribute to students’ definitions.

Social success for many students goes beyond how they are known by other students. Many students described “the ability to communicate with others” as a necessary aspect of social success. Gina, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student described how she communicates with adults at school and her peers are crucial aspects of her definition of social success. Heidi, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, stated, “Being able to feel comfortable in society, is successful socially. Most people aren’t successful socially because they have trouble finding things or skills other people have in common with them. This could lead to them feeling like outsiders, foreigners, or different.” Heidi describes the isolation that can occur with a school because of one’s inability to communicate with others. Justine, also an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, used the word “people skills” to describe how one relates to another. It seems that from the students’ responses aspects of social success are learned through their experiences interacting with others. Kevin, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, said that social success is “not being socially awkward.” He continued to state that students who are “socially awkward don’t have many friends.”

Ethan, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student, stated that social success is having “lots of friends, [being] popular, and [having] a good girlfriend/boyfriend.” Many students described how they believe that romantic relationships can be factors of social success; however, some students in the interview discussed how a relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend can lead to “drama.” Fran, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader described how she acted after her friend broke up with her boyfriend: “We ended up getting in a fight because she thought that I liked her boyfriend and he dumped her for me. That was real drama. I never said that I liked him and plus, my parents won’t let me date until I am older.” This type of hostile situation was referenced by the school’s counselor as “girl drama” which can often, as Ms. Donald stated, begin with the ending of a relationship. Within all of the interviews, students brought up the topic of girlfriends/boyfriends and most descriptions were about casual romantic involvements. However, Debbie, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student described one girl who has “gone all the way” as not being socially successful because she is a “ho” and will “do it with all of her boyfriends.” Other students in the interview group agreed and seemed to show disdain for the student she mentioned.

Beyond friendships and romantic relationships, students’ definitions of social success seemed to broaden. An unexpected definition of social success was apparent in many students attributing achieving social success to the way in which one interacts with his or her community. Lauren, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, said that to achieve social success a person has to do “something successful for your community or other countries.” Lauren recognizes both the local and global societies of which she is a part and goes beyond the microscopic definitions of just interpersonal relationships. Lauren later described how a person who benefits others in society “usually has all of that other stuff.” Social success

seems to boil down to the reciprocal relationship of knowing and being known within one's peer group, local community, and even possibly the global community. Within the course of these responses, students often used the exact wording of the adults of the school. Students may have the ability to choose who their friends are, but the definitions of social success within the student culture are heavily influenced by the administrative culture of success.

### Personal Success

Students primarily attributed personal success to goal achievement. Beyond this basic description, only a few students added some variety to the data. The data show that goal attainment is related to how one defines personal success. Defining a goal had more variety because students discussed how they incorporated what their parents, teachers, and others in their community viewed as successful in their definitions. One of the most interesting concepts students discussed was how a goal had to be personal and “meaningful.” Kate, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, stated:

“Personal success is reaching the goals you set for yourself. I think it is best to focus on this, rather than goals others set for you. For example, some people's parents expect them to excel in sports when the student is more interested in something else. The student should not be disappointed in themselves if they do not succeed in something others expect them to be good at.”

Middle school students are at an interesting position in the maturation process because they often go from usually accepting what their parents tell them to possibly challenging their parents' expectations and create their own meanings as they develop their individual personas.

As students develop their individuality, they are often faced with moral dilemmas. Many students used the word “integrity” to define personal success. Lisa, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student stated that “Personal success is when you try your best and do the right things even when adults aren’t around; that’s integrity, and it shows character in that person.” Matt, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, discussed that an aspect of personal success is “not [being] ashamed of yourself.” Other students used phrases like “act or feel about yourself” or “to live without any regrets” to describe personal success. Within all of these, the common thread of personal success seems to be the way that students present themselves to others and acting on a moral foundation of “integrity.”

### Spaces of Success

Within student cultures of success, they discussed many of the similar spaces of success at MMS that both the administrators and teachers did. Students identified that the hallway bulletin boards and posters displayed positive messages about how to be successful and examples of successful students.



Some of the other positive messages were “Don’t Do Drugs!,” “Stay in School,” and the “3 Rs: Be Respectful, Be Responsible, and Be Resourceful.” Grant, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade student, said, “Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ is always yammering on about those 3 Rs. I mean I know what they

are.” Grant said that the “3 Rs” often made him consider the consequences of his actions for himself and for those around him. Grant did seem to not appreciate the repetition of the teachers “yammering on[s],” but he did explain what each word means within the list to him. Students seem to take in the messages like the “3 Rs” that are displayed in hall ways and classrooms in active ways. A few examples of areas that fit into the category of successful students were the bulletin boards with the “P.A.W.S. Cards,” the “Honor Role,” and the top Accelerated Readers. Students associated areas of the school’s website as promoting success as well as the use of the local newspaper. Using a variety of tactics to recognize students who are successful seems to be beneficial to creating a culture of success. The most often referenced area of success was Ms. Ledford’s use of the intercom system to recognize students for doing well or achieving success. Students seemed to think positively about hearing their own name and other students’ names mentioned to the entire school.

Assemblies at the school were the second most referenced space of success. Students seemed to like getting out of class to hear speakers. One student in the interview said that getting the “whole school together is usually just as good as the message.” Although the administration chooses speakers for their content, a secondary positive aspect comes from the assemblies by building a closer community. The close community is related to the shared ideologies that are presented in the assemblies. Other students who discussed the positive messages of the assemblies talked about how they “try harder to do their work.” The motivational assembly serves to reinforce the dominant Discourse of success through the ways that students work and behave. One student, Nelly, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, said, “We have last chance café, which is where if you forget to do your

homework you can do it at lunch.” MMS has a space for academic success that students can choose to use to complete assignments and learn. Teachers can often suggest that students utilize this space. One could argue that this area allows students the greatest opportunity to learn because they choose to complete an assignment rather than having adult figures mandate it for them. Other students discussed tutoring programs that are available before school as also representative of success in the school. The tutoring programs and the “Last Chance Café” both require the students to consciously decide to actively participate in their education.

Many students also discussed areas of success within the school that repeated what teachers and administrators identified as successful places: the library, the trophy cases, “advanced classes,” “the band room,” and the office. Students often discussed how they liked viewing artwork in the library that students completed even if they did not know the artist. The school has two distinct trophy cases, one in front of the gymnasium and the second next to the office. The first displays trophies for athletic achievements. The second showcases teachers’ awards, school awards, and students’ academic awards. Lillie, a 7<sup>th</sup> grader said, “I like the separation of trophies because it shows the difference between using your brain for these things and using your athletic abilities.” The athletic trophy case contains trophies and awards from the school’s ten year history. Each award identifies the sport and the year. No individual sports awards were on display.



Advanced classes allow students, who achieve a four on the standardized test the prior year, to take a class that more adequately presents materials and content at levels that will challenge students who have demonstrated higher abilities. It is interesting that students associated these classes with success because the same content and course standards are used for both the “Advanced” and the “Regular” classes. Students also recognized the office area, in the front entrance of the school, as signifying success. Vanessa, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student said, “The front part of the school because that is where all of the grown ups go. The bathrooms are snazzy. [Our] bathrooms are gross.” In this distinction between the realms of the adults and the students, Vanessa speaks to the acceptability of standards. The office and the adult bathrooms may not be intentionally cleaner, but may only be a result of the differing amounts of individuals who use the facilities. Vanessa identifies

that how the school presents its values to members of the school and its community is predominantly dependent on how physical spaces transmit meanings of success. The “front part of the school” is the place where everyone enters and exits the building.

Schools often have spaces of success that are historically defined like bulletin boards and trophy cases; however, some students brought up two events that they stated displayed success: “The Beauty Walk” and “The Cutie Walk” The former is a beauty pageant open to all girls in the school. Girls wear a “gown” and “walk around the stage” while a panel of adults rates each one. The judges produce a top ten list, then after the announcement the girls in the “Top Ten” complete another lap around the stage. Each grade level has a winner and runners up. Vanessa, stated, “The most popular girl won [this year]. I don’t know about Sam, but all of the guys that I know think that she is incredibly hot, and they all want to go out with her.” I asked her “Does the beauty walk say this is what a successful young woman is?” She responded, “No, but they should do more than just choose the most popular one or the prettiest one. It should be the one who is well rounded.” She then went on to discuss how the pageant should have a talent aspect in addition to the walking criteria. Girls who are not involved with the “Beauty Walk” seem to associate success with the winner and use the winner as an embodiment of female beauty.

The “Cutie Walk” is a spin off of the “Beauty Walk.” However, the difference is that in the “Cutie Walk” boys get to cross gender and wear “girls’ clothes.” Vanessa said, the “Cutie Walk is where the guys get to dress up like girls. The girls get to dress them.” Sam, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader who was in the “Cutie Walk” talked about how much fun it was to wear a dress and parade “in front of the whole school.” I asked his group if it “would be

acceptable for a boy to dress as a girl on a non-Cutie Walk Day?” Suzy, a 7<sup>th</sup> grader said, “I guess that it is not a problem if you feel like you want to do that. It would be awkward.” Kathryn, also a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, stated, “That would be very strange. A lot of boys don’t have the guts to do that because they know the girls would make fun of them.” Within the spaces of the “Beauty Walk” and the “Cutie Walk” gender identities are created, altered, and changed according to what is “acceptable.” Students were the only group in the school that identified these two events as spaces of success.

### Overall Student Cultures of Success

Students seem to place one’s individuality as a student as the primary factor for how they define success. However, it seems that students view their individuality through the lens of how they relate to other students within their peer group. Student cultures of success often reflected both the administration’s culture of success and the pedagogic culture of success. Students discussed the fluidity with which they negotiate spaces of success in classrooms and hallways. Students recognize how the adults at the school inform their own definitions of success, but do not seem aware of the dynamics present within the school for how meanings of success are controlled from the administration down. Although, the students seem to feel positively about how definitions of success are present within the school as established according to the parameters of the adults in the building. Students often addressed deficiencies within the school’s success as based on budgetary items. For example, many students when asked about what the school needs to do to increase the overall culture of success in the school stated that the school needs increased funding for “teachers,” “classrooms,” “supplies,” “sports,” and “more variety

of classes.” Students are aware of the budgetary shortfall, but they seemed content that the administration and teachers were “doing everything that they can to make MMS successful.”

### Conclusion

The school’s overall culture of success seems to flow from the administration to the teachers and finally to the students. Within each subordinate culture of success (Pedagogic and Student) the definitions of success seem to align with the dominant Administrative culture of success. The definitions of success originate with the administration. Faculty members then take those definitions and apply them to their individual classrooms or job requirements. Students act within the parameters established by the adults. For some, it is acquiescence and for others it is willful compliance. I argue that for the second, they are at a higher stage of development in which these students are able to take the parameters and not see them as limitations for how to act and be, but to use them as a framework for broader definitions of success. One interesting aspect is the concept of autonomy, which for the two subordinate cultures is imagined because they have the ability to choose how they behave and what definitions of success they embody, but their choices are predetermined according to the administration.

Within the school, aspects of race do not play a significant aspect in the definitions of success for the administrators, teachers, or students. However, issues of class and gender were often present in the data with students and teachers. Class issues are often seen in the monetary assets that a person has available. In discussing with students about academic success, they often stated that “coming to class prepared” is

necessary for academic success. However, beyond the basics of school issued books and work books, school supplies are an expense for students and their parents or guardians. Teachers also associated the physical appearances of students as examples of success. “Clean” clothes are often a signifier of the relative wealth of a household. Students who wear “name brand” clothing were more likely to be identified as being successful while students who were wearing “clean” clothes that were not name brand were lumped in the middle and overlooked. Schools often play a role in forming gender identities. In the MMS, the school uses its dress code to enforce the appearance of “acceptable” attire for students to wear. In doing so, they say what is permissible for a male or a female student to wear to school.

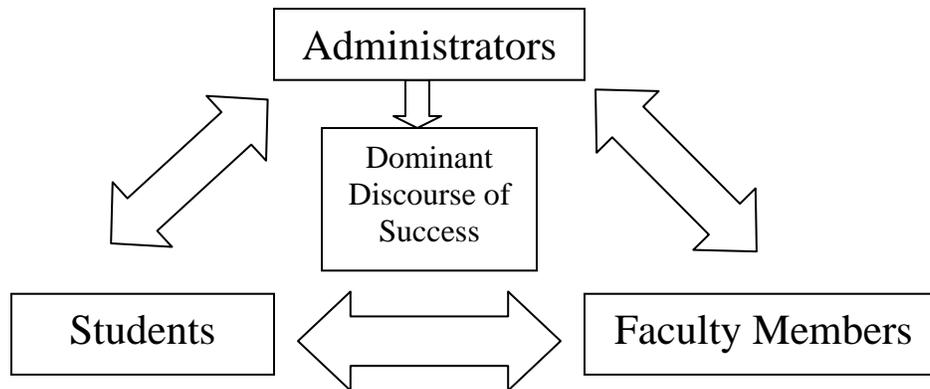
## CHAPTER 5

### DISCURSIVE CULTURES OF SUCCESS

Mikhail Bakhtin (2004) states that "...language for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other" (p. 677). In the school setting, the languages of success have two interesting aspects of definitions and meaning making. The school as a whole has a culture of success that has many formal and informal definitions that require individuals within each group to choose how they make meanings that are relevant to them. Students and faculty members seem to rely on the dominant Discourse of success as articulated by the administrator to form their conceptualizations of success. In this chapter, I look at how the definitions and ideologies of success intersect between groups according to the three areas of success: academic, personal, and social. I will also look at how this research project engages previous studies on success and will discuss some implications for instructional leaders who are currently involved in schools. I will then look at limitations to the study and discuss some possible avenues for future research.

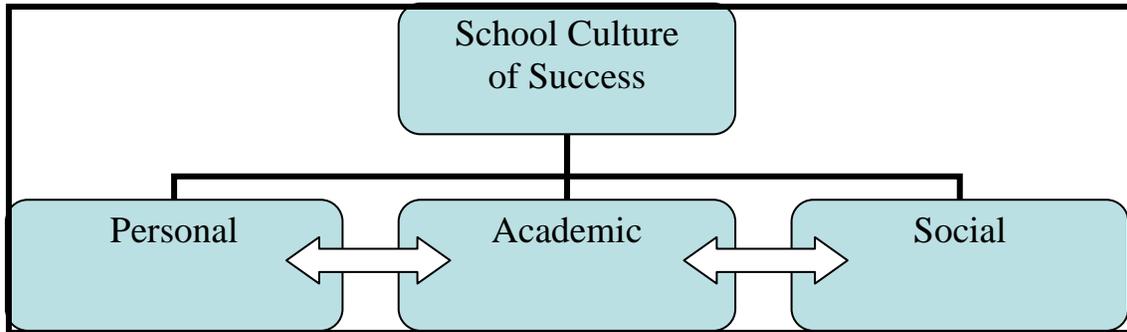
Within MMS, the school's members (administrators, faculty members, and students) spoke to the nature of the culture of success present in the school. When I began to look at the data, I approached the data from the standpoint that the power dynamics of

the school are in place to transmit ideologies of success and often begin with the administrators and filter to faculty members and students. I found that the nature of the school's culture superficially followed a circular flow. In the diagram below, I show how the administration's



view of success follows the hierarchical power structure currently in place. The administrators seem to communicate their ideological understandings of success to both faculty members and students. This flow holds true for each of the other two groups so that each group communicates aspects of success to the others. This diagram shows how the various cultures of success at MMS reflect Discourses present within the school. Each group seems to have established understandings of how success operates; however, for the most part, the ideologies of success seem to originate from the administration. Both faculty members and students made statements that reflected the administration's ideologies of success, but members of each group articulated subtle differences from the administration's conceptualization of how cultures of success operate within the school.

When I began to draft my preliminary understandings of how I thought cultures and Discourses of success would operate within the school, I created the following diagram.



The way that I distinguish between capitalized Discourses and lowercase discourses is that Discourses includes languages, expressions, visual spaces, and artifacts (Gee, 1999). However, after completing the study and compiling the data, I found that the original diagram may be true for the macroscopic framework of the school, but it seems that the data show how cultures of success operate according to the articulations of each specific group at the school. However, within the school the thread that seems to consistently appear is the administration's ideologies of success. The macroscopic concept of the school's culture of success is present at the intersection of languages of success that the administrators, faculty members, and students use. Each group uses languages of success to create its own culture of success, but the languages and definitions of success are shared between groups. The administration had a specific definition of success, but some aspects of their definitions were present with the articulations of both faculty members and students. Each group speaks in some ways that shows how each shares common themes with another group. In other instances, groups had a significant shift from what the administrators stated. For example, the faculty members often discussed the

challenges that they face when they try to teach every student. One teacher said, “You want every child to succeed, but they are not all going to.” The difference here is based on the shift from the ideological vision of every child attaining an education to the reality that one’s education has to involve the “desire” or “want to” of the individual.

The Administrators, faculty members, and students shared some similar themes of success when discussing how spaces of success exist in the school and how languages of success function in various cultures within the school. Many members of each group identified that the library is a display of success. The large room is filled with books, periodicals, computers, reading areas, and artwork. The librarian described the atmosphere that she wanted to create as “inviting.” The primary way that individuals identified as displays of success came occurred when they discussed the ceiling tiles on display. Both current and former students have completed art projects in the form of ceiling tiles that resemble “book covers,” “famous artwork,” and “authors.” In this artwork, students are guided by the art teacher who assists them in their endeavors, but the majority of the assignment resides in the students’ decisions for what to create and how to create it. Many tiles display students’ careful attempts to paint an accurate resemblance of the piece that inspired them. Current students are linked to the history of former students through their artwork.

In the same way that the library was widely recognized as displaying success, individuals in all groups identified the two trophy cases. The trophy cases are separated by space and each house different types of trophies and awards. The athletic trophy case is in front of the gymnasium where athletic awards and team trophies are on display. The trophy case contains many awards from the school’s ten year history in athletics. The

second trophy case, next to the front office, contains “non-athletic” awards for individuals such as band competition awards and a list of the Honor Society and for the school as a collective for outstanding academic achievement on standardized tests and recognition for charitable contributions to the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation. Each trophy case seems to display different types of success that are present within the school and also serves as place where “artifacts” of success are displayed. These artifacts are crucial to how members of the school define success as a collective group.

Two other areas that the different groups shared were the displays of 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes and the “dip hall” that has the school’s mascot and the signatures of students from the first group of 8<sup>th</sup> graders. The assistant principal discussed how he viewed the pictures as a space that can compel students to pass each grade so that they are in the picture with the class that started with him or her in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Few students articulated this exact reasoning as to why this place is successful, but many students talked about how they are proud to see their picture on the wall as a permanent reminder that they matriculated through the school. An 8<sup>th</sup> grade student commented that she felt that it is important to have displays such as the pictures of all of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and said, “I really like that they had the first group of students sign the wall. It is like a piece of history.” When thinking about how the school chooses which artifacts to display within the limited amount of available space, these two areas place the focal point on students, which as the principal stated, “They are why we are here.”

Aspects of personal, social, and academic success exist within the visual displays of the school, and they are also present within the languages of success that individuals use. The most commonly shared area of success came when individuals described and

defined academic success. Many individuals articulated that grades were the primary factor in deciding the level of academic success, but an equal number of respondents identified that learning is the ideal way to define academic success. Grades, for some, had little meaning to the administration and to faculty members because most spoke to how very little knowledge is actually measured in standardized assessments and in classroom assessments. Teachers often talked about how a student's grade usually reflected the amount of effort that they put forth to complete assignments rather than their knowledge levels. Many students described academic success according to their future by using the word "prepared" to describe how they want to be when they go to high school and beyond.

Aspects of personal success had the second most widely shared beliefs among the different groups. The primary way that individuals within all groups defined personal success was according to "goal attainment." Within the context of goal attainment, administrators, faculty members, and students spoke about the spectrum of goals from the initial goal setting, to reaching the smaller goals that comprise a larger goal, to the achievement of a goal, to evaluating the level of goal attainment and possibly modifying the original goal to create a new goal based on previous experiences. Many individuals discussed how personal attributes such as faith and character are essential to how personal success is defined. One group of students in an interview described how they have changed their personal goals according to what they have learned at church. One student said that "If God doesn't want me to play professional baseball, I am fine with that because I know He has a different plan for me." Another group of students talked about how they define personal success according to the level of "integrity" or "honesty"

that they have. Faculty members and administrators used these two terms quite frequently to describe a student who demonstrates personal success.

Social success had the least amount of shared intersections between groups. The primary definition of social success was based on how well one gets along with their peers and having a “positive peer group.” Within this understanding of social success, the adults within the school have to be aware of how the dynamics of social relationships impact other areas of success in the school. One teacher stated that students are more likely to pay attention if they feel comfortable with the other students in the class and are willing to work cooperatively. Ms. Ledford, the principal, addressed the relationship between academic success and social success. She talked about how aspects of social success are often more noticeable than academic success because people pay attention to “how you react” to situations.

The shared ideologies of success at the school seem to develop from the power structure that is in place. Primarily, power originates with the administration, and they seem to control the parameters of the different Discourses of success by incorporating specific languages of success that filter into the lexicons of members of the other two groups. To shape the different Discourses of success that are present in the school, individuals use language to communicate ideologies and transmit a series of common underlying assumptions. One way that ideologies are controlled is through the establishment of a norm or ethic of success. For example, when looking at academic success, many students commented that they believed that grades were the embodiment of academic success. The parameters of success that are present include placing different values on the different available grades. Students who maintained all As or all As and Bs

were recognized throughout the year on a bulletin board and at the end of the year at the Awards Day. The problem with recognizing some students on the bulletin board is its proximity to the abbreviated mission statement that stresses “Every Child.” In this contradiction, some students are omitted from recognition.

Within other areas of success, social and personal, similar types of parameters seem to be established, but students have more freedom in deciding how they choose to operate within the defined boundaries or go outside of the boundaries. Definitions of social success had the least amount of intersections between groups because the adults’ view of social success varied from the students. Students placed much more emphasis on how their peers view them rather than how they relate to their peers, which was opposite of what teachers and the administrators often discussed. Teachers related social success to the ways in which students relate to one another, while the students heavily emphasized the role that peer acceptance plays in forming their understanding of success. Students also brought up the label of “outcast,” and they seemed to be well aware of the stigmas attached to a person once a label is attached. In the process of meaning making, students seemed to focus on what labels are attached to their names or personas. Many students wanted to attain positive labels that described how they are beneficial to others in their community. Adults spoke to the aspect of attaching labels to students, but they did so more in the context of negative labels that noted “bad things” such as promiscuous behavior or “being lazy.” The latter term bridges the gap between all aspects of success because its implications are relevant for how one chooses to participate in their education (academic success), how one works or does not work with others (social and academic success), and how one pursues goals or ambitions (personal success).

Differences between the groups were often subtle, but they were present in the data. The variations between the differing articulations seemed to still align with the administration's ideology of success. The relative number of differences between the groups was most noticeable between the adults and the students because they seem to take the established parameters and alter them slightly as they make choices. In making choices, the students have an imagined autonomy. They are able to choose how to act and how to develop their own ideologies of success, but the adults within the school, the administration in particular, has established which ideologies they must choose from. The parameters for students' behaviors are established according to the rules and consequences that the school has in place. The label of "deviant," which Thomas Scheff (1984) develops in his work on labeling theory, seems to play an integral part in the frameworks of success within the school's culture. Scheff (1984) discusses how a "deviant" is one who does not follow rules and challenges authority. When talking with Ms. Ledford, the principal, she discussed how sometimes changes in understanding or thinking can occur when students challenge the rules that are in place. Students and teachers described Ms. Ledford's leadership style as very open to discussion and change rather than being strictly autocratic.

Students often spoke about social success in ways that are reflective of the greater society of which they are apart. Many students talked about how they view social success through their interactions with other students over the internet on social networking websites such as facebook.com or myspace.com. Students seem to have a broader awareness of the actions that they perform outside of the school and the implications that those actions can have at school. During an interview, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student talked about

how she spends many hours a day posting on others' "walls" or chatting.

Communications between students have gone beyond the real world and have entered the domain of the virtual through text messages and social networking websites. Students are often at the forefront in what technologies are important to them, and, usually, adults become aware of what students are doing after the fact. Social success is no longer something that schools have to be mindful of between the months of August and May.

Because students are often inundated with technology, they have created both new discourses of success and Discourses. Gee (1999) states that lower case discourses are the basic grammar of language, and capitalized Discourses as being "language plus other stuff" (p. 17). The generation in school has created new types of both. Students will often use new discourses of success through the influx of text message abbreviations. These languages are often shorter forms of phrases that individuals have used for many generations, but they seem to have a time stamp that reflects aspects of the current society. These abbreviations were often used in the open-ended responses. The most common phrase was "IDK" which stands for "I don't know." One student used the phrase "URGR8" to answer the question "Describe a successful student." His meaning is that a successful student is "great." In using new discourses of success like these, students have also created a new Discourse of success that typically does not involve parents or educators.

The reason that some differences between groups exist within the school is based primarily on the languages of success that they use and how they use them. Within the culture of the school, the concept of success is similar in nature to a fluid. In this fluid, different aspects of understandings of success from the different groups and different

individuals within those groups seem to intersect and blend into an almost homogeneous solution. When looking at success as a concept rather than a variable in the school, the term takes on a wide range of possible meanings, and because of the many variations of meanings, one should ask the question Does success as a concrete aspect of a school's culture actually exist? To answer this question, the data seems to show that individuals are the ones who largely determine what success means and merely borrow from how their own peer group or other groups within the school construct definitions of success. Individuals are the ones who predominately have to make meanings of how they want to be successful, whether it is as an educator or a student. Conceptualizations of success seem to play a crucial role throughout one's life. These conceptions are important to understand because other social institutions beyond education will add to multiple Discourses of success.

### Precipitates of Success

In Chapter 1, I discuss the scientific concept of precipitates, and elaborate on how physical properties of success manifest in the school's culture. Before conducting the research, I thought that aspects of success would have a considerable amount of difference between administrators, faculty members, and students. However, what I found is that very little variation actually occurs between the three groups in the school. The actual precipitates of success in the school are related to the ideologies of success as stated by the administration. In developing the metaphor of precipitates, I discussed how an element precipitates out of a solution. In this school, the solution of the culture of success circulates to all of its members, and they seem to reflect the ideologies of success

as stated by the administration. Other physical properties of the school's culture of success are prevalent in the school's choices of "artifacts" that serve as displays of the school's history and transmit the "values" of the school to its members. In the science experiment that I describe in Chapter 1, I discuss how the physical properties of matter cannot be destroyed, and even in the solution the element only changes from a solid to a liquid and then in later stages of the experiment the element reemerges as a solid.

Applying this concept to this study, I argue that the definitions of success are the physical precipitates of the administration's ideologies. Individuals who are not the administrators have an imagined autonomy. Their words and phrases that define what it means to be successful may seem to be defined according to their own beliefs, but the breadth of possible choices is controlled by the administration.

### Race, Class, and Gender and Success

The data that I collected had many insightful contributions from administrators, faculty members, and students. When examining the data through the lens of Critical Theory, power dynamics were clearly present within the cultures of success at the school. Foucault (1980) states that it is necessary to begin data analysis of the structure of power relationships in an "ascending manner" from those with the least amount of relative power and progress to each step of the hierarchy. In the school, definitions of power seem to be very present in how students negotiate relationships with each other to create and sustain languages of success that have meaning for both individuals and the group as a collective. Discourses of success that shape the way that individuals view success are often based on the hierarchical power structure of the school. Ms. Ledford, the principal,

communicates a vision of what she defines as success for both her and the school. The vision is then shared with teachers and other faculty members and then it is passed on to students. The only individuals who had a slight shift from the administration's understanding of success were a few teachers who talked about the difference between the "ideal" constructions of success versus the reality. They seemed to be well aware of how their statements could potentially have negative consequences. Power to shape the Discourses of success (both visual and verbal) seems to lie with the administration and how they implement definitions of success as a set of parameters except in the areas of social success that students mentioned. Within the power dynamics of the school, the data support that the adults had little variation from the administrative culture of success and the students had more variation.

Although very few respondents mentioned race within the contexts of data collection, some students and faculty members seemed to speak to the existence of a hegemonic norm of success equating to whiteness. The majority of the student body and the faculty members are not of color. In the observations that I had during my time in the school during school hours, I noticed that students whom teachers had identified as successful were often those who wore the same name brand clothing or had a similar appearance. One teacher stated, "Most African-American students here are not like the ones at other schools that wear sagging pants and want to be thugs." The distinction between African-American students at MMS and at other schools could possibly stem from the socio-economic make up of the school.

Issues of class are present in the data and surface in the way that people at the school describe students who are successful. The foremost example of class comes in the

physical appearance of students who wear clothing that reflects their parents' or guardians relative wealth. Groups of students seem to wear similar clothing that displays their social groups of friends. For example, many students labeled other students who dressed in a certain manner as preppy and were more frequently identified as being successful. The student body population has a wide spectrum of wealth. The majority of students do not come from conditions of poverty, but roughly thirty percent make up a substantial proportion of the student population. Students described successful students as "coming to class prepared." Students whose parents do not have the ability to purchase school supplies are usually at a disadvantage to those who do. Some teachers talked about how they provide school supplies for those students. However, one teacher said that she labeled the cabinet where she kept the supplies as the "poverty closet." Although the label superficially sounds quite negative, she added that those supplies are for students whose parents cannot provide them, and "I give them out without other students knowing."

When looking in the data, some aspects of success deal with the concept of gender. The primary discussion took place with a group of 6<sup>th</sup> grade students who discussed who labels of success are attached to the Beauty Walk and the Cutie Walk. The Beauty Walk is primarily a fundraiser, but it also defines what "beauty" is for female students at the school. For those students who do not "place," they feel emotionally disturbed or angry. In this event, the school embraces heteronormative ideals of gender identity where the girls are the princesses and the boys are the gentlemen. The school seems to continue this heteronormative dichotomy in the Cutie Walk because they are not embracing cross-dressing male students and are mocking or laughing at how "queer" a

male student looks in a dress, heels, and overzealous make up applications. Students who identify as non-straight may seem bothered at a school sanctioned drag show. Definitions of success seem to take on identities of gender. Within the school's overall culture of success, the definitions of success seem to be specifically defined for a male student or a female student. Adults foster students' gendered understandings of success by allowing these types of events to happen and deciding who gets to participate in the "Cutie Walk." Students who do not get to participate are the observers and see who the adults choose. What the observers decide about how to incorporate this event into their own definitions of success can be based on how the observer thinks that the adults view him or her. The observers see who the adults label as an ideal successful boy or a girl because those students who have the label get to participate either in costuming or as participants.

#### Success and the Literature

The literature on success as a quantitative variable was quite extensive, and studies primarily showed how other variables contribute to the overall school success (Lagemann, 1992; Lebdina-Manzoni, 2004; Somech and Ron, 2007). As a dependent variable, school success or student success was largely defined according to the independent variables that have an effect or correlation. These studies used quantitative means to collect data and attached the label of "success" to a set of assumptions. This work has sought to bridge the gap between the body of work on the quantitative definitions of "success" and the qualitative definitions of success as they exist in one school. Many of the quantitative studies in the literature fail to conceptualize how success operates and seem to view the term according to progress against some type of

measurable statistic such as standardized tests or the number of students who graduate. When looking at the macroscopic aspect of a school, it is helpful to attach a label of success so that educators can question why the school as a collective unit or individuals within the school succeeds.

DiPaola and Hoy (2005) state that Socio-Economic Status (SES) is the highest predictor of student achievement, but they also found that Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) was a close second. OCB is a quantitative variable that generally means the jobs that educators do that are not required. Some examples of these behaviors are being helpful to other teachers, performing duties that do not get monetary compensation, and using personal money for classroom materials. Many of the teachers at Mallard seem to be aware of the responsibilities that they have for exceeding the expectations set forth as contractual obligations. Teachers and support personnel often talked about how they are involved with activities that take place during the time before or after school hours such as sponsoring clubs or tutoring. The school as a whole has been labeled as being successful according to the reports from the state department of education. The data from the school's test scores show that students score above the requirements as established according to the NCLB criteria. I believe that the success of the entire school is impacted by educators OCB within the school. They do so in two ways. First, educators have an impact on scholarship by performing extra duties. Second, when educators perform OCB, students see that they are investing in their lives. This investment is usually discussed as "care." In many of the interviews, I asked students which teachers help them feel successful and explain. Students routinely answered that the teacher that they felt contributed to their success the most was the one that they felt cared about them or that

they related to. Students seem more likely to participate with their education when they feel as though the adults in the school have a vested interest in their lives.

The research that uses the term “success” as a qualitative variable is very limited. Two studies in particular had specific impact on this project Rodriguez (2008) and Jones (2004). In the first study, Rodriguez (2008) defines culture as “a set of processes informed by the intersection of school structures, cultures, and individual agency” (p. 762). His findings from his study showed how students are positively motivated to achieve academic success through personal relationships and their history of interactions with both peers and adults in a school. This project extends his findings to show how social cultures of success exist within the school to form languages of success that include both student-student relationships and student-adult relationships. According to standardized test scores, MMS is an “academically successful” school. The school meets and exceeds all areas of accountability as dictated by NCLB. According to the logic of Rodriguez, the academic success of the school is at least partially attributive to the wealth of personal relationships that exist in the school. However, the scope of this project was to describe the multiple Discourses of success that are present at the school without assessing the level of success for the school as a whole.

Rodriguez studies the concept of how a school’s culture impacts success, and he is primarily using the word to mean academic success. He defines school culture as “a set of processes informed by the intersection of school structures, cultures, and individual agency” (p. 761). At MMS, the data show that the overall school culture is controlled according to the underlying ideologies established by the administration. This came out of the teacher interviews, student interviews, and students’ open-ended responses through

similar responses. The power dynamics within the school are present in all three of the avenues that inform the definition culture. With structures, the adults within the school have created a formal structure for how the school operates and students create informal structures that seem to be evident in the replication of the adults' ideologies of success, or the ways that students go beyond the basic parameters of definitions of success.

Rodriguez (2008) states, "school culture is also the frame of reference that creates boundaries, categories, and rules in which meaning is negotiated" (p. 761). Definitions of success seem to only have meaning at the individual level because no one singular definition of success exists, but the dominant Discourse of success influences how those members of the school who are not administrators articulate ideologies of success.

The second crucial work to this project is Jones (2004) study of a "Knowledge Is Power Program" in Houston, Texas. In this study, Jones creates two distinct categories of success "frontstage definitions" and "backstage definitions" (p. 72). The former, she classifies, as being visible statistics, and the latter as "inner" qualities that drive students to succeed (p. 73). As previously mentioned, MMS has statistics that show the "frontstage definitions" of the school's academic success, but it also has identifiable displays of students' achievements and positive character traits. This project documented some of the "frontstage definitions" of success in the school, but the primary goal was to document the "backstage definitions" of success as articulated by students, faculty members, and administrators. This project attempted to replicate some of the procedures that Jones used to capture what "backstage definitions" are present within the school. Jones does little analysis of the specific languages of success that exist. The data seem to provide a glimpse of the languages of academic, social, and personal success at MMS.

The “backstage definitions” of success show that within this school, the cultures of success seem to be relatively homogeneous. The adults in the school gave responses that one could consider to be the “right ones” that mirrored the school’s motto that places an emphasis on the belief that every child can succeed. Students did not seem to be aware that their responses were reflections of the administrators’ ideologies of success, and they believed that what they said was an authentic representation of who they are.

Jones’s (2004) study of success is similar to Rodriguez’s (2008) study because both conceive of success according to academic criteria or personal goal attainment. Neither of these two studies seems to document individuals’ meanings of success or how different languages of success function within schools. My data show three distinct areas or types of success: academic, personal, and social. Individuals within the school often used different phrases for each type of success that demarcated a line. However, languages, like Discourses, do have some common intersections in definitions. These intersections show that some aspects of success are applicable to more than one type of success. For example, one student described a successful student as being “well rounded.” He phrased his response in a way that showed how he compartmentalizes each of the different types of success, and then he has an overarching conceptualization of success that is measured according to the success within each of the different areas.

This research project sought to examine how Discourses of success operate within the school’s culture. When looking at culture, I used Weick and Sutcliffe’s (2001) assumptions that culture has three basic tenets of “assumptions,” “values,” and “artifacts (p. 121-123). The “assumptions” of the school are essentially the school’s history or lessons learned over time. The school has preserved its history through the visual displays

on the school and the memories that the adults have. Students preserve some of the history of the school, but students will eventually leave the school. Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) use the word “values” to mean how a school should act according to the lessons learned in its history. Ms. Ledford has been a constant in the school’s culture because she has been the only principal in the school’s history. She spoke about how changes are made to school policies and procedures based on prior experiences. “Artifacts” are defined as visual representations of an organization’s history or ideals. The school uses many different types of artifacts that showcase what it values. The underlying theme among all of the displays is the emphasis on students’ lives and actions. The school attempts to motivate students to care about what they are doing at school through positive messages and reinforcements that highlight students who perform according to “high academic” standards. Other artifacts show how students who either attended the school or attend the school performed at various competitions from athletics to band. Other artifacts of success highlight how the school as a whole has contributed to charities or has given back to the community through school-sponsored community service.

### Implications

Any educator who enters a school has some type of understanding of the word success, but many fail to see the complexity of the multiple types of success that exist. This research shows an administrator who has envisioned a specific conceptualization of success and communicated that vision to the adults and students in the building and parents and other members of the community that they are apart. Students were well aware of the visual displays around the school and were able to quote various signs,

bulletin boards, and posters. These “artifacts,” to use Weick and Sutcliffe’s (2001) phrasing, visually show the ideals of the school. Administrators should thoughtfully consider all of the physical aspects of the school and assess whether or not each area best represents the message that a school wants to communicate. Teachers should assess the areas within their individual classrooms and examine content individually and collectively.

Discourses of success are able to change because of the impact that different individuals have on its definitions. Sometimes, new ways of communicating materialize because of a change in technology. Educators should be well aware of the technology that students use outside of the classroom and the many possible implications for the limited amount of time spent at the school. A decade ago, social networking websites did not exist in the formats that they do today. Students incorporate some of the content that they and others post on the internet into their definitions of success. Other areas that educators should stay abreast of is the types of media that students are consuming, so that the messages that students mimic by quoting song lyrics or lines from movies can be accurately assessed. One student entered a group interview by singing the Taylor Swift song “Love Story,” and we spent some time discussing the existence of middle school students’ romantic relationships. As a teacher, I think that it is in any teacher’s best interest to be aware of the circumstances that exist within the social setting of classroom. Students who do not feel comfortable in the classroom environment because of social factors are less likely to learn than those who do feel some level of comfort.

All adults in the school are responsible for communicating a shared understanding of success, but they need to be open to possible changes from new definitions to slight

alterations. I think that flexibility is the primary asset that any teacher should want to possess because it allows students to develop their academic, social, and personal conceptualizations of success that reflect their ambitions and desires. When definitions of success are limited to a few basic factors, some students are eliminated from ever achieving some level of success before they ever enter the classroom or open a book. Students have a variety of learning styles and personal attributes that can vary widely even in a small class of 20-30, and in the same way that a teacher will use multiple methods to teach the same content; he or she should be open to multiple ways to define success as individuals or as a group.

### Limitations

Users of this material should abstain from attempting to over generalize the findings of this study because the data was only from one middle school. However, some aspects of the findings are applicable to other elementary, middle, and high schools such as the existence of different types of success and how a school's power structure controls the way that individuals use languages. The concepts of power dynamics present at MMS were similar to schools in other studies (Habegger, 2008; Somech and Ron, 2007).

One major limitation of this study was the amount of usable input from students. Students often answered the open-ended questions with sentence fragments or did not go into specific detail. Other factors that contributed to the limitations of this study were the amount of time spent in the school doing observations and the number of students who were interviewed. Although the students who were interviewed reflected the demographics of the entire student body, this study would have benefited from interviews

with more students. The amount of data that students provided that was not vague or overly general had little substance of the ambitions that I had when designing the project. This project would have had more usable data from students had the research design included more emphasis on observing students interactions with each other and with the adults in the school. The participants in this study were primarily white, middle class students.

### Suggestions for Future Research

One of the major areas of Discourses of success that this study did not document is how students interact with each other and with educators. Future research studies on success should use methodologies that allow them to document structured times in classes and unstructured times during class changes and at lunch. Replication of this study should focus more on the amount of access that researchers have as they document students' behaviors. Future research should attempt to increase the amount of usable data from students by making more students want to participate in the study. One of the aspects that could possibly increase the number of participants is to allow students to have an incentive for participation. The IRB limitations on incentives prohibited participants from being able to receive any type of incentive for this study.

Thomas Scheff (1984) states that researchers should use labeling theory for areas outside of psychology, and I think that future studies should advance the ways that society attaches labels like success to students and students' actions. Future studies should seek to interrogate not only the ways that individuals negotiate among definitions of success, but also the implications for how schools create and sustain languages of

success in their cultures. Another area for future studies is the way that languages of success have relationships that can be symbiotic or competing.

Future studies should also look at how the concept of failure is present in schools. In this study, the concept of failure was rarely discussed other than during students' interviews in which I specifically asked them to define the qualities of unsuccessful students. Furthermore, the ideologies of success in the school seem to be so inclusive that the concept of failure does not exist. Future research should interrogate the binary relationships between success and failure. The aim of NCLB is to get rid of failures by 2014, so, in this era of accountability, what happens to the definitions of the ideology of failure.

### Conclusion

During my educational journey, I have grown as a practitioner by interrogating the ways that individuals use languages. The topic of this study was success, but many other terms exist in schools and have a broader range of implications on students' lives both during the time spent in formalized schooling and for the rest of their lives. One professor once stated, "You carry around the voices of your teachers in your mind for the rest of your life." Teachers shoulder the responsibility for communicating their own values and those of the school. As an Instructional Leader, I play a significant role in my school by helping to develop annual strategic plans that address the school's Adequate Yearly Progress and by leading faculty pedagogic seminars. My initial idea to conduct a study on success came while writing a plan in 2006. When talking with other faculty members, I asked myself what does success actually mean. This study has shown that a

school can have a collective definition of success as articulated by administrators, teachers, and students and as displayed using artifacts, but success is not a concrete noun that takes shape as one singular definition. Shared definitions of success exist for individuals and for groups, but meanings only exist at the individual because it is up to individuals to decide how they want to label themselves.

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## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A

### Protocol for Interviewing Teachers, Administrators, and Classified Employees

1. Please state your name and the amount of experience that you have teaching.
2. How long have you worked at MMS?
3. What area is your certification?
4. How do you define success?
5. Other than academics, what are other possible areas of success?
6. Will you give me an example of a successful student?
7. What attributes make that student successful?
8. What do you think it means for a student to be “socially successful” and how do you feel that “social success” is different than “academic success”?
9. Will you give me an example of what it means to be “socially successful”?
10. What do you think it means for a student to be “personally successful” and how do you feel that “personal success” is different than “academic success”?
11. Will you give me an example of what it means to be “personally successful”?
12. What does the phrase “culture of success” mean to you?
13. How do you feel that the school creates a “culture of success”?
14. What do you do that contributes to the school’s “culture of success”?
15. As an (administrator/ teacher) what would you like to see the (teachers/administrators) do differently to increase the school’s culture of success?
16. What areas within the school would you identify as visual displays of “success”?

17. What icons or images does the school use that symbolize success (clothing/"branding")?
18. What meaning does each icon or image have?
19. Do you think that there is a difference between the stated values i.e. the mission statement and purpose and the implied values?
20. What do you think causes the differences?
21. How does the school's Mission Statement or Purpose influence the "culture of success"?

## Appendix B

### Protocol for Interviewing Individuals about Spaces of Success

1. In your interview, you said that \_\_\_\_\_ visually represents success. Why did you choose this space?
2. What represents success in this display?
3. What might other members within the school say about this space?
4. What might those who are outside of the school (parents or guests from the community) say about this space?
5. In your interview, you also said that \_\_\_\_\_ visually represents success. Why did you choose this space?
6. What represents success in this display?
7. What might other members within the school say about this space?
8. What might those who are outside of the school (parents or guests from the community) say about this space?

## Appendix C

### Student Open- Ended Response Protocol

1. What does the word success mean to you?
2. What does academic success mean?
3. What does social success mean?
4. What does personal success mean?
5. How does a person demonstrate each type of success?
6. Is Echols successful?
7. What does the administration do to make the school successful?
8. What do teachers do to make the school successful?

October 9, 2009

Office for Research  
Institutional Review Board for the  
Protection of Human Subjects

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**ALABAMA**  
R E S E A R C H

Daniel Dickens  
ELPTS  
College of Education  
The University of Alabama

Re: IRB # 09-OR-288 "Precipitates of Power within a Culture of Success  
in a Middle School"

Dear Mr. Dickens:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted  
approval for your proposed research

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR  
part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as  
outlined below:

*(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior  
(including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition,  
motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or  
practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview,  
oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation,  
or quality assurance methodologies.*

Your application will expire on October 8, 2010. If your research will  
continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of Continuing  
Review and Closure Form. If you wish to modify the application,  
complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. When the  
study closes, complete the appropriate portions of FORM: Continuing  
Review and Closure.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed consent form to  
obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this  
proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Carpantato T. Myles, MSM, CIM  
Director & Research Compliance Officer  
Office for Research Compliance  
The University of Alabama

152 Rose Administration Building  
Box 870117  
Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487-0117  
(205) 348-5152  
FAX (205) 348-8882

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA  
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

**Title of Research: Precipitates of Power within a Culture of Success in a Middle School**

**Investigator(s): Daniel Dickens**

**IRB Approval #:**

**OSP #:**

**Sponsor: Nirmala Erevelles, Ph D**

**You are being asked to be in a research study.**

**The name of this study is** "Precipitates of Power within a Culture of Success in a Middle School."

This study is being done by Daniel Dickens from the University of Alabama. He is a graduate student working on his Ph D in Instructional Leadership.

**What is the purpose of this study—what is it trying to learn?**

This study is trying to describe the culture of success in a middle school and uses the inputs of administrators, teachers, non-certified staff members, and students within the school. I want to learn how individuals create and sustain languages of success in a school.

**Why this is study important—what good will the results do?**

The results may show educators a better way to improve the overall culture of a school. They may also lead to an analysis of who controls languages of success in a middle school.

Page 1 of 4

Prospect Initials \_\_\_\_\_

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 10-8-19  
EXPIRATION DATE: 10-8-10

**Why have I been asked to be in this study?**

You have been asked to be in this study because you are an individual who works at this middle school. Your status in the school is important because you work with students to create and sustain the overall culture of the school. You identified that you would be willing to participate in the study during the initial meeting that presented the project. You are being asked to be in the study because teachers and administrators have a unique understanding of how schools operate. Many students feel that they want to be successful and are often presented with ways that they can obtain success through education.

**How many other people will be in this study?**

This study will only include one middle school. I am asking that all members of the school voluntarily contribute to this project. I am presenting this project to all students in the school. I will collect essays on success from those students who choose to participate in the study. Students who choose not to be in the study will write a similar essay that will not be collected by the researcher. I am hoping to get at least 275 essays from students. I will interview approximately 30-45 students in small groups of 3-4 at a time. I am asking the entire faculty to voluntarily agree to participate in this project. An ideal number of adult respondents will be approximately 20-25.

**What will we be asked to do in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to explain how you define success and use examples from your experiences at the school to support your statements. To collect data, I will interview you in either a small group of other faculty members or individually depending on your availability. This interview will last about 30 minutes and will be at a time that is convenient for you. I will ask all individuals who agree to this project for simple demographic information such as age and gender.

**How much time will I spend being in this study?**

You will only spend about 30 minutes participating in this study.

**Will being in this study cost us anything?**

There will not be a monetary cost to participate in this study. The main cost to you is the time you will spend in the interviews.

Page 2 of 4

Prospect Initials \_\_\_\_\_

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
 CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 10-8-09  
 EXPIRATION DATE: 10-8-10

**What are the benefits of being in this study?**

There are no benefits to you for being in this study other than knowing that you or have helped to improve education.

**What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?**

There are no major risks involved with being in this study. You will not do anything that could risk physical or mental harm. Should you become distressed about the project, you can tell me and choose to remove yourself from the project. If you decide to no longer participate, I will destroy all data collected and you will not be negatively impacted in any way.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

I will not tell anyone that you are involved in this study. You do not have to answer any questions or give me any information that you do not want to. I will use a nickname to protect your identity.

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**

I will protect your information by giving you a nickname. Your names will not appear on any study document besides this consent form. There is no way to link consent forms and names with the final data report. The data from the study will be kept in locked file drawers in locked offices. No one will have access to it except me. I will publish a dissertation and scholarly articles on this study but no families, towns, or Alabama counties will be identified. No one will be able to tell who you are.

**Do we have to be in this study?**

No, you do not have to participate in this study. If you agree to be in this study it should be because you want to volunteer. You can refuse to be in the study. You can also start the study and decide to stop at any time. If you refuse or if you start the study and then stop it, you will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have, and you will not have any negative consequences from the University of Alabama, the school district, or the school.

**If we don't want to be in the study, are there other choices?**

If you do not want to be in this study, the other choice is to refuse. I will thank you for your time and leave.

Page 3 of 4

Prospect Initials \_\_\_\_\_

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
 CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 10-8-09  
 EXPIRATION DATE: 10-8-10

**What if new information is learned during the study that might affect my well-being or decision to continue in the study?**

If new information about success becomes available that affects education, I will tell you about it. You can tell me at any time whether you want to continue in the study or not.

**What if we have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints?**

If you have questions about the study now, please ask them. If you have questions or concerns later, you can reach Dr. Erevelles at 205-348-1179 or Daniel Dickens at 205-239-4244. If you have questions about your rights as a person taking part in a research study, call Ms. Tanta Myles, The Research Compliance Officer of the University of Alabama at 205-348-5152.

**What else do we need to know?**

You do not give up any of your legal rights by signing this consent form.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep. Save it in case you want to review it later or you decide to contact the investigator or the university about the study.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (IRB) is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and the study is being carried out as planned.

**I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions. Our questions have been answered. I understand what I will be asked to do. I freely agree to participate in the study.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

Page 4 of 4

Prospect Initials \_\_\_\_\_

**NOTES:**

Reading level: 7

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 10-8-09  
EXPIRATION DATE: 10-8-10

## Assent Form

My name is Daniel Dickens. I am a student at the University of Alabama. I am doing a study on how people in a school use the word success. You are an important part of this school, and I think that what you have to say about success is unique. I am asking that you participate in my study.

If you want to be part of this study, your English teacher will give you a prompt to write on. This prompt will be like the one that you will see on a test that you took during your 5<sup>th</sup> grade year or 7<sup>th</sup> grade year. You will see a similar topic when you are in high school and take this test in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. You will have one class period to write what ever you want to about the topic. I will keep a copy of your essay to use for this project. I may also ask you if I can interview you because I thought that your essay was very important. In the interview, I will choose a small group of your classmates and ask you a series of questions about your opinions about success. You will be able to respond with what ever you feel is appropriate. There is not a right or wrong answer, so I hope that you will give your best answer. The interview will take place in the library and will last for about 20 minutes after school. I will record our conversations so that we know what is said.

No one will know who you are. I will give you a nickname that only I will know. I will not tell your parents or your teachers what you say.

Do you have any questions about this process? You can ask me now.

You are a volunteer. You are helping me, but you do not have to unless you want to. This is your free choice. If you start the study and decide you don't want to continue, just let me know. No one will be mad at you. If you do not want to talk about a certain topic in the discussions or answer a certain question, you do not have to.

I do not think there are any risks or harm to you in this study. You may find the discussions helpful to you or it may make you feel good to know you are helping us to improve schools in the future. If you feel uncomfortable, I will arrange a time for you to talk with the counselor.

If you have any questions about this study, please ask me now. If you have questions later, you can call Daniel Dickens at the University of Alabama at 205 239-4244 or e-mail me at [dpdickens@crimson.ua.edu](mailto:dpdickens@crimson.ua.edu). You can also call my professor at 205-348-1179. You can also ask your parents questions if you wish. If you have questions or concerns about your rights in a research study, please contact Ms. Tanta Myles, the University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, at (205) 348-5152.

If you agree to be in this study, please sign your name on this letter below. You can have a copy of the letter to keep.

Thank you very much for your interest.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 10-8-09  
EXPIRATION DATE: 10-8-10

Sincerely,  
Daniel Dickens

Do you want to be part of this study? Circle Yes or No

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person obtaining Assent Date \_\_\_\_\_

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 10-8-09  
EXPIRATION DATE: 10-8-10

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Page 1 of 4

Prospect Initials \_\_\_\_\_

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 10-8-09  
EXPIRATION DATE: 10-8-10

**Why have I been asked to be in this study?**

Your child has been asked to be in this study because he or she is an individual who attends this middle school. His or her status in the school is important because he or she is a student. He or she identified that he or she would be willing to participate in the study during the initial meeting that presented the project. Your child is being asked to be in the study because students have a unique understanding of how schools operate. Many students feel that they want to be successful and are often presented with ways that they can obtain success through education.

**How many other people will be in this study?**

This study will only include one middle school. I am asking that all members of the school voluntarily contribute to this project. Input from teachers and administrators will also be part of the research design. I am presenting this project to all students in the school. I will collect essays on success from those students who choose to participate in the study. Students who choose not to be in the study will write a similar essay that will not be collected by the researcher. I am hoping to get at least 275 essays from students. I will interview approximately 30-45 students in small groups of 3-4 at a time.

**What will we be asked to do in this study?**

If you and your child agree to be in this study, your child will be asked to write an essay in response to a prompt to be used as data. This prompt or topic will be one that is similar in design to ones that are present on standardized tests. The essay prompt will ask students to explain what they believe is success and use examples from their lives to support their conclusions. I will ask all individuals who agree to this project for simple demographic information such as age and gender. From the essays, I will choose 10-15 students from each grade to interview in a small group setting. These focus groups will seek deeper understandings of success. The groups will meet for about 20-30 minutes after school in the school's library.

**How much time will I spend being in this study?**

Students who complete the essay will spend one class period being part of this study about 45 minutes. Students who are interviewed will spend an additional 20-30 minutes participating in a small group discussion after school.

**Will being in this study cost us anything?**

There will not be a monetary cost to participate in this study. The main cost to you or your child is the time you or he or she will spend in the interviews.

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**What are the benefits of being in this study?**

There are no benefits to you or your child for being in this study other than knowing that you or your child has helped to improve education.

**What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?**

There are no major risks involved with being in this study. You or your child will not do anything that could risk physical or mental harm. Should your child become distressed about the project, he or she will have time to talk with the school counselor.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

I will not tell anyone your child is involved in this study. Your child does not have to answer any questions or give me any information that he or she does not want to. I will use a nickname to protect your child's identity.

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**

I will protect your child's information by giving him or her a nickname. Your names will not appear on any study document besides this consent form. There is no way to link consent forms and names with data. The data from the study will be kept in locked file drawers in locked offices. No one will have access to it except me. I will publish a dissertation and scholarly articles on this study but no families, towns, or Alabama counties will be identified. No one will be able to tell who you are.

**Do we have to be in this study?**

No, your child does not have to participate in this study. If you agree to allow your child to be in this study it should be because he or she wants to volunteer. You can refuse to be in the study. You can also start the study and decide to stop at any time. If you refuse or if you start the study and then stop it, you will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have, and you will not have any negative consequences from the University of Alabama, the school district, or the school.

**If we don't want to be in the study, are there other choices?**

If you do not want to be in this study, the other choice is to refuse. I will thank you for your time and leave.

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**What if new information is learned during the study that might affect my well-being or decision to continue in the study?**

If new information about success becomes available that affects education, I will tell you about it. You can tell me at any time whether you want to continue in the study or not.

**What if we have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints?**

If you have questions about the study now, please ask them. If you have questions or concerns later, you can reach Dr. Erevelles at 205-348-1179 or Daniel Dickens at 205-239-4244. If you have questions about your rights as a person taking part in a research study, call Ms. Tanta Myles, The Research Compliance Officer of the University of Alabama at 205-348-5152.

**What else do we need to know?**

You do not give up any of your legal rights by signing this consent form.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep. Save it in case you want to review it later or you decide to contact the investigator or the university about the study.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (IRB) is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and the study is being carried out as planned.

**I have read this consent form. I and my child have had a chance to ask questions. Our questions have been answered. We understand what we will be asked to do. I freely agree that my child and I will take part in it.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Research Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Investigator**

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**NOTES:**

Reading level: 7

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