

UNDERSTANDING HOME ENVIRONMENTS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS  
RAISED IN POVERTY

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examined the home environments of graduate students raised in poverty. Present literature has demonstrated that there is a growing achievement gap experienced by students raised in poverty. However, students from poverty are still able to defeat the odds and succeed academically with advanced degrees. Research focusing on the home environments of students raised in poverty and their academic success through graduate school is limited.

To understand the home environments of academically successful students raised in poverty, nine graduate students who self-identified as being raised in poverty were participants in this study to examine their experiences that led to academic success. This study applied basic qualitative inquiry and utilized constructivist narrative analysis as a framework. Data collection methods included face-to-face and telephone interviews. Data transcriptions were coded and analyzed using the constant comparative method.

Two major themes emerged from the data: there was a broad support system available, and academics became an escape. All participants described factors that contributed to their academic success. The graduate students raised in poverty identified a broad support system inside and outside of the home. They also indicated that activities and routines were critical to their continued academic success.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my son, Dominic and my *Abuelita*.

Dominic, you are the reason I did not quit so many times before I finished. You were only a dream when I started on this journey, but I finished because of you and our future. Words will never express what you mean to me.

*Abuelita*, from an early age I remember you loving and supporting me in every way possible. You remained my rock. I will never forget:

*Piano pianito.*

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## NOMENCLATURE

SES	Socioeconomic Status
HMHP	High Minority, High Poverty
WIC	Woman, Infants and Children Program

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The impact of poverty on academic achievement has been of interest to educators and policymakers for many years (Abbott & Joireman, 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Brunner, 1948; Burney & Beilke, 2008; Crooks, 1995; Guo, 1998; Ramey & Ramey, 1990; Sirin, 2005; Smith, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1997; White, 1982). Two major meta-analytic literature reviews have been conducted on socioeconomic status (SES) and academic achievement (Sirin, 2005; White, 1982). White's initial meta-analytic study focused on articles published before 1980. Sirin conducted a replication of White's study with articles published between 1990 and 2000. Both reviews concluded that academic success is greatly influenced by the SES of a students' family. A third meta-analysis focused on academic achievement and SES, but also introduced peer socioeconomic status into the analysis (Van Ewijk & Slegers, 2010).

Over the past decade, several national reports have been published highlighting the achievement gaps experienced by students raised in poverty (Aud et al., 2013; Coley & Baker, 2013; Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2012; Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiJulio Jr, 2007). Unfortunately, with the number of children living in poverty continuously increasing, the problem persists. In 2010, 22 percent of children under the age of 18 were living in poverty compared to 17 percent in 1999 (Aud et al., 2013). Though some gains have been made over the past 20 years, students from poverty still lag behind their counterparts in high school and college graduation rates (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2004; Wirt et al., 2004).

The Condition of Education Report (2004) grouped high school students by economic quartile. It reported that students from the lowest quartile of family income are six times more likely to drop out of high school than their counterparts (Wirt et al., 2004). By 2007, the high school dropout rate of students living in low SES was roughly 10 times greater than the rate of their peers from the higher-level SES families (Cataldi, Laird & KewalRamani, 2009).

In spite of these alarming statistics, there are students living in poverty who are succeeding academically (Bausmith & France, 2012; Olsen et al., 2007). Students from poverty who manage to defeat the odds and flourish academically are of special interest to researchers who are trying to gain insight into ways to reverse the lower rates of academic success among students living in poverty.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Multiple reports detail the value of secondary and postsecondary educational attainment in breaking the cycle of poverty (Aud, KewalRamani, & Frohlich, 2011; Gabe, 2013; Ryan & Siebens, 2012). In 2012, 39.1% of 25-34 years olds without a high school diploma lived in poverty while 21.5% of those with a high school diploma lived in poverty. In contrast, only 5.6% who had a bachelor's degree were living in poverty (Gabe, 2013). Unfortunately, the poverty gap continues to limit the academic success of students, even in college. Lower levels of academic attainment results in the perpetuation of low SES for families and individuals. The US Department of Labor Statistics (2012) reported that an individual without a high school diploma has a median income of \$24,492 compared to \$33,904 for a high school diploma and \$55,432 for a

bachelor's degree. This has a long-term effect on society since low SES is also related to child abuse and neglect (Ondersma, 2002), domestic crowding (Melki, Beydoun, Khogali, Tamim, & Yunis, 2004), family violence (Pearlman, Zierler, Gjelsvik, & Verhoek-Oftedahl, 2003), and increased rates of crime and incarceration (Kelly, 2000).

The impact that living in poverty has on academic achievement starts in early childhood and continues through years of schooling. At a very young age, children from low SES home environments have lower levels of literacy concepts and therefore reading comprehension is negatively impacted (Dyson, Hett, & Blair, 2003). Duncan and Seymour (2000) reported that when children from poverty enter school, they are behind their counterparts in letter recognition and basic literacy skills. Factors such as the length of time in poverty, family assets, and the poverty level of the family when children are younger than five all affect a child's cognitive development and readiness for school learning (Anand & Lea, 2011; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Burney & Beilke, 2008).

Not surprisingly, the achievement gap continues through college. According to Gladieux (2004), 60 percent of high school graduates from families earning less than \$33,000 a year attend college, compared to 90 percent from families earning more than \$88,000 a year. Within five years of entering college, more than 40 percent of students from the top income quartile of families actually attain a bachelor's degree, compared to 6 percent of students who attain a bachelor's degree from the lowest income quartile (Fitzgerald, 2004). The origins of the achievement gap between students raised in poverty are evident from an early age and continue through a student's academic career. Students from better backgrounds do not experience the same achievement gap.

## **Impact of Low SES on Pre-k-12 Achievement**

Understanding what is happening in the household and at school will help one understand the impact that poverty has on children and their academic success. Since at least the mid-1960s, it has been well accepted that SES is correlated to cognitive ability and achievement during early childhood years and longer (Coleman et al., 1966; Sirin, 2005; White, 1982). Guo and Harris (2000) suggest that a child's early cognitive skills are related to the level of cognitive stimulation in the home during the preschool years. The home experiences, which build the language and literary skill during the preschool years, set the stage for later academic achievement (Murnane, 2007). These home experiences are different depending on the SES of a family (Rothstein, 2004).

**Vocabulary.** Vocabulary is a key aspect of language and literacy development. Children raised in poverty do not have the same kinds or number of opportunities to develop their vocabulary as their counterparts from middle class. Researchers have provided insight into the role of economics in vocabulary development (Hart & Risley, 1995; Tough, 2009). Hart and Risley (1995) argued that economic differences relate to children in middle class homes having a larger vocabulary before reaching school age. Tough (2009) found that parents in middle class homes spoke an average of 487 statements or words each hour while their counterparts in low SES homes spoke 178 per hour. A key aspect of vocabulary is language and literacy development, which is more available to children raised in middle class homes.

**Literacy skills.** Children from poverty also enter school with lower levels of other literary related skills, such as letter recognition, and comprehension (Duncan &

Seymour, 2000; Dyson et al., 2003). As Rothstein (2004) explains, this difference develops as a result of the hours a child is read to during the preschool years, presence of books and other written materials in the home, and the types of conversation between parents and children. Children from middle and high-income families are often read to daily before the start of kindergarten (Rothstein, 2004).

A second possible reason comes from limited literary resources available to families and children living in poverty (Kim, 2004). Children living in poverty have fewer books available for reading enjoyment and have less educational materials at their disposal. The limited access to books in print or basic materials that would enhance their literacy is a common concern and stress for poor families (Kim, 2004; Neuman & Celano, 2001).

**Language development.** One of the main reasons for the achievement gaps seen in childhood between more and less advantaged children is the quality of language development in the home (Magnuson & Shager, 2010; Turkheimer et al., 2003; Tyler-Wood, 1993). Rothstein (2004) explains that middle-class parents usually ask their children questions and solicit opinions from their children, encouraging them to think and evaluate as they respond. However, lower-class parents typically communicate in more directive manners. Children in these home environments are not encouraged nor expected to engage in complex thinking.

The lack of development of the necessary language and literacy skills needed to be successful in school impact not only the early years but adolescence and high school. Georges (2009) makes the case for the long-term effects of poverty on school

achievement. He found that when children in poverty start behind, they remain behind. Chapman, Laird, and KewalRamani (2013) report that students from poverty drop out of high school at a higher rate than those from middle class. Students living in families at the bottom 20 percent of the economic scale had students that were five more times likely to drop out of high school than students from the top 20 percent (Chapman et al., 2013).

Research focusing on the home environments of students from poverty and their academic success through graduate school has been limited. Recent research on the academic success of students in poverty has concentrated on high school students and support systems during undergraduate degrees (Aud et al., 2011; Gabe, 2013; Ryan & Siebens, 2012). A review of the literature identifies significant gaps in exploring factors contributing to the impact of the home environment to later academic success.

For this reason, it is important to gain an understanding of how the home environments of graduate students raised in poverty affect their ability to overcome the academic obstacles brought on by poverty. This information is critical to not only increasing the number of students from poverty enrolling and completing college degrees, but to the societal goal of moving more people out of poverty.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the home environments of graduate students raised in poverty. Graduate students were chosen for this study because they have accomplished one of the highest forms of academic success. This study seeks to explore the extent to which their home experiences impacted their later

academic achievement. To understand the home environments of graduate students from poverty, qualitative methodology, specifically narrative inquiry, was used to study a group of graduate students raised in poverty from a Tier I institution in Texas. This study will provide students, families, educators, and community service personnel with greater insight into how to better serve families and schools with children living in poverty.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions were generated to guide this study:

1. How do graduate students raised in poverty describe their home environment?
2. What do graduate students raised in poverty perceive to be home environment factors that contributed to their academic success?

### **Definition of Terms**

Socioeconomic status (SES) – Economic and sociological combined total measure of a person’s work experience and of an individual’s or family’s economic and social position in relation to others based on income, education and occupation.

Poverty – General scarcity or the state of one who lacks a certain amount of material possessions or money.

Trustworthiness- Establishing the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

A systematic review of the literature on home environments of undergraduate and graduate students raised in poverty was conducted. This systematic review provided the context for this study. This review is organized into the following areas: 1) the impact of low SES on college achievement and 2) support systems for success of low SES students in college.

#### **Method**

##### **Inclusion Criteria and Search Strategies**

Three criteria were used to select studies for this review. First, the participants were in college, either as undergraduates or graduate students. Second, the studies identified participants from low SES households. Third, the study outcomes addressed the home environment or support systems from childhood through college.

A systematic search was performed to retrieve peer-reviewed articles addressing the home environments of graduate and/or college students raised in poverty. A number of electronic databases and search engines were used for locating studies. The most fruitful effort was performing a search in Academic Search Complete, Education Full Text, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, ERIC, and PsychINFO using the following keywords: *poverty, low SES, academic achievement, higher ed, college, and home environment*. Dissertations were also included in this search. The date of the final search was October 2013. These results were culled to identify articles that seemed especially

relevant to our understanding of the college academic success of students raised in poverty.

From the relevant searches, a total of 474 articles were initially screened. Two different screens of the relevant literature yielded thirty-two abstracts and then full articles were evaluated for fit with relevance to the literature review. The first screening process eliminated articles that did not have an empirical study. A second screening process eliminated articles that reported on studies outside of the United States. This left nineteen articles; a final screening eliminated an additional five studies because they did not report on undergraduate or graduate students from low SES in their findings. In the end, fourteen studies were used for this review. Of these, four were quantitative, four were qualitative, and six employed mixed methods.

### **Coding of the Studies**

The characteristics of the studies included in this review were coded as follows: (a) bibliographic reference: full APA-style article reference, and year of publication; (b) sample descriptors: number of participants in the study, age, school completion; (c) research design descriptors: design (quantitative, qualitative, mixed method) and (d) focus of study: home environment, support systems, resiliency.

## **Findings**

### **Impact of Low SES on College Achievement**

In examining the 14 studies of low SES college students identified for this review more closely, the impact of the family environment on the study participants varied from no mention of family support on the impact of academic success to specifically

mentioning the support of family (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Davis, 2008; Hudley et al., 2009; Hudson, 2008; Johnson, 2009; Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; Jordan & Plank, 2000; Madera, 2009; Miller & Erisman, 2011; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Owens, 2010; Reddick et al., 2011; Reyes, 2007). The studies that did not mention family support identified support systems a student experiences while in high school with non-familial individuals such as counselors, teachers, etc. (Miller & Erisman, 2011; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Reyes, 2007). The neighborhood in which one lived in was also identified as a separate type of support system (Owens, 2010).

Davis (2008) assessed first year college students by merging longitudinal data such as grades, satisfaction level and the academic self-esteem of over 30,000 freshman students from 115 colleges. The descriptive results of the study found that SES background impacts all outcomes measured in the study. It found that parental education level is more strongly associated with student outcomes during the first year of college than income or family status (i.e., single-parent family).

To better understand the many barriers facing first-generation college students for academic success and completion of their degrees, Bryan and Simmons (2009) conducted a qualitative study examining the experiences of 10 first-generation Appalachian Kentucky university students (mean age = 21 years). They found several factors that contributed to the educational success of these students: close-knit families and communities, separate identities (one at home and one at school), and the knowledge of college procedures.

Bryan and Simmons (2009) point out that all participants felt pressure to succeed from parents and community members. Most of the participants spoke to someone at home at least once a day. Family members were familiar with what participants were doing at school at all times. Participants did not feel that parents understood what they were doing in school. At times, participants were hurt by families not displaying more support, but realized it was from their parents being intimidated by the college process. The limited information participants knew before going to college was from the early intervention program often seen as a support system.

Only a few studies mentioned the role of the home environment as a means to success. Cabrera and Padilla's (2004) studied two graduates from Stanford University who came from impoverished backgrounds. Now in their early 20s, these participants (a man and a woman) came from home backgrounds of extreme impoverishment. Both participants attributed their academic success to the support given to them by their mothers and their personal motivation to succeed in school. In-depth interviews uncovered the challenges the two respondents faced in school, beginning in kindergarten and continuing through their graduation from Stanford. For both participants, their mothers were a basis for their academic development even though their mothers were often limited in their ability to help with homework. Both mothers monitored homework for completeness and created more academic work for their child such as penmanship practice. These mothers also stressed the importance of education in their households.

For one participant, the father worked long hours to support the family, even though they were poor. The father was seen as the enforcer of the family and

demonstrated to the participant the negative effects of not having an education. The other participant had an abusive step-father after the age of 7. The presence of the stepfather had a negative impact at home for future academic success. What appeared to be a negative effect of the home environment turned out to serve a constructive purpose as the two participants capitalized on their negative home environment and used it as motivation to excel in college (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004).

### **Support Systems for Academic Success of Low SES Students**

There is a strong argument that a college student from low SES needs support systems, either familial or non-familial, before they attend college in order to be successful in college. These support systems were found to be essential to academic success during both high school and college (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Reddick et al., 2011). Support systems include the relationships students have with other adults, students, families, and programs that are designed for student success. Students often mention the importance of high school teachers, counselors, college admissions personnel, and parents as key elements in the support systems needed for their academic success.

A support system outside of the home is also important for the success of students raised in low SES/poverty and other marginalized situations. Reyes (2007) explained that students who would not normally be considered "college material" can be successful when given the opportunity and appropriate support.

Many high school graduates who have the academic ability to continue their schooling do not pursue higher education. Jordan and Plank (2000) believe this is partly

involved with financing of high education and are concerned about the critical talent loss. Using eight in-depth interviews with guidance counselors from an urban school district and national panel data, they suggest that social capital, exposure to a high content curriculum, and the availability of school resources all play a part in determining postsecondary trajectories. In this study, social capital was operationalized as the exchanges between students and significant adults in their schools and families.

Reyes (2007) described five students of Mexican descent from marginalized lives who were a part of College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) in which they took part in a support and retention scholarship program. These case studies document how the five students in the intervention program perceived their learning and how they transformed after their initial collegiate experiences and CAMP involvement. As an English Language Learner, one participant did not feel prepared to begin her collegiate career; however, she gained self-confidence after her involvement with CAMP and a successful first year. Another participant, a teen mother with two children, recognized that successfully completing college was the only way out of poverty.

Hudley et al. (2009) explains that students who talked to teachers and counselors with whom they had strong relationships experienced better social and academic adjustments and exhibited more positive attitudes towards school. The author suggests that this preparation may be especially important for perseverance among at-risk populations. Such susceptible populations include first-generation students, who spend the least time of any group talking to teachers outside class.

When criteria such as first generation or learning disability are added to standard criteria during the college admission process, it is interesting to note that self-efficacy and parental involvement were found to be important predictors on the academic performance of the college students (Hudson, 2008). This finding was based on a sample of 117 college students (89 women and 28 men) at a large Research I university in the southeastern United States.

In seeking to identify promising institutional practices for retaining and graduating low-income, first-generation transfer students, Miller and Erisman (2011) concluded that academic and social support systems were key to the success for college-transfer students. The authors stressed that academic success did not end at the point where a student successfully transferred to a four-year college. Instead, academic success is achieved when a student completes his or her end-goal, which in most cases is a bachelor's degree.

The importance of school support systems was affirmed by Hudley et al. (2009), who identified the importance of a strong relationship between supportive teachers in high school and students from poverty. The more these students talked to their teachers, the more academically competent they felt in college. These students were also more likely to seek resources as they transitioned into college.

After examining students from high minority, high poverty (HMHP) high schools and considerations for postsecondary goals, Reddick et al. (2011), explains how students who found support for their higher education goals through invested teachers, counselors, community members, and peers differed from students who experienced

unsupportive examples from these same populations. It seems that students who may typically be overlooked or neglected in a school system can be successful with a supportive system of school staff. Reddick et al. (2011) reports that strong support systems allow students from poverty to negotiate negative stereotypes about their schools and communities, while holding positive attitudes about themselves.

Neighborhood resources can help predict whether a student raised in poverty will earn a bachelor's degree. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Owens (2010) analyzes how both school and neighborhood circumstances are mutually related to college graduation. The interactions between school and neighborhood qualities shed light on the low potential of educational attainment among students from lower-SES neighborhoods. Their counterparts from middle and upper class neighborhoods have better potential for academic success.

The economic composition of one's neighborhood often serves as a proxy for attributes that are conducive to postsecondary success. Using a longitudinal sample of Texas high school seniors of 2002 who enrolled in college within the calendar year of high school graduation, Niu and Tienda (2013) examine the variations in college persistence according to the high school and neighborhood from which they attended. Students who graduated from affluent high schools have the highest persistence rates, and those who attended low SES high schools have the lowest persistence rates. Multivariate analyses indicates that the advantages experienced by their affluent counterparts are partly explained by high school college orientation and academic rigor, family background, pre-college academic preparedness or the institutional



characteristics. High school college orientation, family background and academic preparation largely explain why graduates from affluent high schools experience a higher level of academic success.

The struggles that students raised in low SES/poverty experience seem to be highlighted even more when such students attend an elite university (Johnson, 2009; Johnson et al., 2011). Johnson completed seven separate studies investigating students within the context of an elite university and found that individuals from low SES/poverty backgrounds retain a stigmatized identity and experience anxieties regarding their academic fit and self-regulatory issues from managing these concerns.

Students graduating from high poverty schools are less likely to attend college and face great challenges in accessing higher education than their wealthier counterparts. Reddick et al. (2011) suggested that this could be addressed through college support programs for new students, staying connected to family and peers, and receiving assistance with applications and financial aid. However, Cabrera and Padilla (2004) contend that a student's knowledge of the "culture of college" was more essential to their transition into college.

In a study that most closely aligns with the focus of this dissertation, the academic success of college students raised in poverty, Madera (2009) studied eight Latina women who overcame adverse conditions and fulfilled their academic potential. Intensive life history interviews were conducted that probed their understanding of what has been critical in their development and academic success. Madera concluded that supportive adults and access to financial opportunities were critical factors in their

academic achievement. It seems that academic resiliency, a strong supportive family, and institutional support systems go hand in hand.

### **Conclusion**

The present review sought to examine the relationship between being raised in poverty and academic success in college. Although students raised in poverty are less likely to succeed academically, certain factors have been found to help such students succeed. The findings from the fourteen studies included in this review support the importance of academic support from families and school. However, there is a lack of research about the home environment and college-level success because few studies look at the long-term academic success of such individuals combined with social and emotional support systems. There seems to be a more robust body of knowledge on the racial achievement gap relationship than there is the SES relationship on academic success. Much of the recent literature that does evaluate the impact of low SES/poverty has revealed some of the struggles that students experience during their academic careers, but focuses on their experiences in college, not their home life experiences. Therefore, the question posed in this study is how the home environment of children raised in poverty impacts the academic achievement of college and graduate students.

Research has shown that academically successful students raised in low SES/poverty face many challenges (Reyes, 2007; Johnson, 2009; Johnson, 2011). Support systems and academic resiliency have been shown to be factors which help sustain a students' success through college (Bryan & Simmons 2009; Hudson 2008; Reddick et al., 2011). Studies have indicated that students from low SES/poverty are

more successful when surrounded by supportive adults as they proceed through their academic programs (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Reddick et al., 2011). A few studies (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Davis, 2008; Hudley et al., 2009; Hudson, 2008; Johnson, 2009; Johnson et al., 2011; Madera, 2009; Niu & Tienda, 2013) did identify specific factors within the home environment that contributed to the academic success of students raised in low SES/poverty and the relationship of home environments to later academic success.

Although the relationship of poverty and school success has been discussed in the previous studies, many of those studies limited their focus to specific ages, such as studying the relationships between home environment and academic success at the elementary level, support systems and academic success at high school level, or support systems and academic success at the college level. The influence of the childhood home environment on graduate school students from poverty seems to be missing from most research studies. Understanding the impact of a child's home environment and the elements from those experiences which helped promote success in school is critical to parents living in low SES/poverty today if students from poverty are to achieve the academic success needed to function successfully in society.

The findings of this review suggest the need for a more in-depth understanding of the impact of the home environment for students raised in low SES families and to determine the factors or experiences that allow such students to be successful in college and graduate school. The study reported below was conducted to help address this need

by investigating the home environment of graduate students and the factors that ultimately led to academic success.

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

#### **Research Method**

This study was designed to provide an in-depth understanding of the impact of the home environments of graduate students raised in low SES families. This chapter begins with a description of the methodological framework and rationale for using qualitative inquiry as the method for this narrative study. Next, the researcher's role in the study is discussed. Then, a description of the research design used in the collection and analysis of the data is presented. Finally, techniques used to ensure trustworthiness are described.

The qualitative inquiry framework allows participants the opportunity to reflect on their thoughts and attitudes concerning their home environment and its impact on their current academic success. Qualitative inquiry was the best suited for this study because it relies on the social constructions of meaning created by individuals. Qualitative inquiry research seeks answers to questions concerning how meaning and social experiences are created through the participants' own words (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The primary design for this research was the narrative approach in which the researcher records the retrospective reports of another person's experiences (Creswell, 2012). The participants' stories reveal insights into how their home environment impacted their academic success. Data were gathered through extensive interviews and analyzed using the constant comparative method.

## **Participants**

The participants for this study were selected from current graduate students at a Tier 1 university in central Texas at the time of the study. Participants were either pursuing a Master's degree or a doctoral degree. Graduate level students were chosen for this study because it was assumed that anyone admitted to a graduate program at a Tier 1 university has achieved academic success.

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to select nine participants. This sampling process allowed the researcher to locate participants from different academic fields and seek gender and ethnic diversity. Purposeful sampling provides the opportunity to identify participants who can serve as typical representatives of the phenomenon of the study (Maxwell, 2008). The participants met the following criteria: (1) the participants were currently enrolled as a master's or doctoral student at a Tier 1 research university; (2) the subjects were in the second year or beyond of their program; (3) the participant self-identified as being raised in low SES/poverty for most or all of their childhood.

The participants were recruited by asking professors and advisors from different departments and colleges for names of students who might meet the above criteria. Professors and advisors were provided with an informative email to distribute to students within their departments. This email provided professors and prospective participants the contact information of the researcher. Additional students were found using the researcher's network of graduate students and provided opportunity for more graduate students to participate. The snowball technique was also used to increase the pool of

potential participants as needed (Merriam, 2002). That is, participants in the study were able to identify other potential participants. Of the twelve participants initially screened for the study, three did not meet the criteria for the study as outlined by the researcher. Another participant was originally thought to not fit the criteria of the study, but further analysis of the data proved that this participant met the listed criteria. One participant was out of the state after defending her dissertation and completed the interview over the phone. The researcher scheduled eight face-to-face interviews and one phone interview. Seven of the nine participants were doctoral students at least a year into their program. The other two participants were master's students. A list of these participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 Demographic Profile of Participants at Time of Face-to-Face Interviews**

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Program	Level
Henry	M	Hispanic	Sociology	Ph.D.
Michael	M	Caucasian	Health Education	Master's
Agustina	F	Hispanic	Sociology	Ph.D.
Dylan	M	Caucasian	Sociology	Ph.D.
Bea	F	African American	RPTS	Ph.D.
Aida	F	African American	Sociology	Ph.D.
Helena	F	Hispanic	Sociology	Ph.D.
Kimberly	F	Hispanic	Health Education	Ph.D.
Samuel	M	African American	Health Education	Master's

## **Participant Information**

### **Henry**

A Hispanic Sociology doctoral student in his fifth year of his program, Henry grew up in a small city in southern California. He was raised in a two-parent family. His parents were born in Mexico and came to the states during their teen years as migrant workers. He has one brother and three sisters and two of his siblings attended college as well. His mother has a junior high education and his father has completed some high school. There were six individuals in the household as he grew up, including his parents and three siblings. Henry grew up in a low-income home, and his family used unemployment benefits and welfare to assist with living expenses. Henry recalls living in a small house and sharing a room with his brother. His two sisters shared a room as well. Henry participated in the free and reduced lunch program at school.

### **Michael**

In his second year of his Master's program in Health Education, Michael, a Caucasian, grew up in a mid-size city in the northeastern region of the United States. He was raised by his mother and had four siblings. Michael had only one sibling attend college. His mother had a high school education, and his father only completed some middle school. Growing up, there were six individuals in the household, including his mother, himself, and his four siblings. Michael participated in the free and reduced lunch program at school. He recalled being raised by his single mother until she remarried when Michael was in elementary school. He considers his step-father as his father. Michael described living in the ghetto, growing up in a rental house, and using Woman,



Infant and Children (WIC) food products in the house because of the family's financial struggles.

### **Agustina**

Agustina is a Hispanic Sociology doctoral student in her second year of her program. She was born in a Mexican border town. Her parents were both born in Mexico and raised her together in a household with two other siblings. Agustina explained that her aunt was always around and her grandparents also helped to raise her. Her mother received specialized job training after completing the sixth grade, and her father has completed some college. Her two siblings also attended college. Agustina's family moved to a Texas border town during her younger years. She received free and reduced lunch at a public school. Her family lived on a limited income until her father was able to acquire a full-time job. At that time, Agustina had just entered middle school. She described the house where she lived as a humble home that her family was always remodeling.

### **Dylan**

A Caucasian third year Sociology doctoral student, Dylan was raised in a Massachusetts city. His mother is from Germany, and he has a step-sibling through marriage. His mother had a high school education and had been offered several scholarships to college, but declined them. His father had some college education. Both of his parents and often times his maternal grandparents raised him. Dylan was not sure if he qualified for free and reduced lunch since his grandparents often contributed to his household finances. Dylan experienced poverty in his home, as his parents struggled to

maintain their living expenses throughout his child and adolescent years. Dylan explained that often times his father struggled in many ways to consistently provide for the family through adulthood.

### **Bea**

An African-American Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences doctoral student in her third year of her program, Bea was raised in a metropolitan city in Texas. She was raised by both her mother and father and has three siblings, two of whom also attended college. Her mother had some high school education completed when Bea was younger, but has since then completed her undergraduate degree and a Master's program. Her father completed high school. Bea's family moved from a one-bedroom apartment to a three-bedroom rental house before Bea was born. Until she was seven years old, Bea's grandmother lived with the family until her passing.

### **Aida**

Aida, an African-American, is a third year Sociology doctoral student whose experiences in a low-income home were quite different than the other participants. Aida was born into a middle-class home with her father and mother. After her parents' divorce, she experienced severe poverty and homelessness as she and her mother struggled to re-stabilize their lives. Aida's mother completed a Master's program in the middle of these excruciating circumstances. Aida has one sibling and talks about some of the driving forces that pushed her through her childhood and adolescence. During her most difficult times, Aida's family struggled with finding the resources that they needed to manage.

**Helena**

Helena, a Hispanic second year Sociology doctoral student, was born in a city in Mexico. Both her mother and father raised her in Mexico where they lived in low economic conditions with Helena's two siblings and members of her extended family. Growing up, Helena's family totaled seven, including her parents, two siblings, an aunt and her grandfather. It was not until Helena moved to the United States that she qualified for free and reduced lunch in her later adolescent years at public school since free and reduced lunch is not a program offered in Mexico. Helena's mother has some technical education completed and her father has some elementary education completed.

**Kimberly**

Kimberly, a Hispanic Health Education doctoral student, grew up in a large city in central Texas and is in the second year of her program. She was raised by both her parents and lived with two siblings who both attended college. Her father completed high school and her mother earned her GED while Kimberly was in middle school and high school. She also participated in the free and reduced lunch program while in school. Kimberly lived with her family and extended family on the same residential block. She grew up with her parents and two siblings while her grandparent's lived next door. Her uncles and aunts lived next to them within a one-block radius block.

**Samuel**

An African American second year Health Education Master's student, Samuel was born in a large metropolis city in Texas. He was raised by his mother in a household of four, including one brother and two half-siblings. His brother also attended college,

and his mother and father both completed some college. Several extended family members, like aunts and cousins, had also attended college. Samuel also lived with a stepfather for most of his early and adolescent years. He qualified for the free or reduced lunch program when he was in elementary school. Samuel grew up in a two-bedroom apartment for the first five years of his life. Later, during his high school years, Samuel chose to live with his father and step-mother.

### **Instruments**

The researcher was the instrument used for this qualitative study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain the use of the human as the research instrument is beneficial because it permits a qualitative researcher to: (1) collect responses and provide an explanation; (2) view data gathered holistically; (3) interact with the participants and the situation to guide the discussion; (4) build upon the base of tacit knowledge; (5) provide an analyze of the given responses to gain comprehension at a higher level.

To ensure the qualitative researcher effectively practices the above, “there must be frequent, continuing, and meaningful interactions between the investigator and the respondents” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 107). The investigator gathered data through interviews.

### **Procedures**

This study employed IRB-approved protocol that was developed for the purpose of this study using a standardized open-ended interview to guide the interviews based on the methods described by Patton (2002). The wording and sequence of questions were determined before the interviews began. All of the participants were asked the same

questions in the same order. Questions were worded in an open-ended format. Before the interviews, participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix A) to ensure confidentiality. A full list of the scripted questions for the standardized open-ended interview is attached as the interview protocol in Appendix B. A table displaying the interview questions, intended outcomes, and the connected research question is also attached (Appendix C).

The researcher scheduled the interviews at the convenience of the participants. Some interviews were conducted in conference rooms while others were conducted in participant's homes or offices. Measures were taken to ensure the privacy for each participant. The interviews were conducted in English, audio recorded, and later transcribed verbatim.

Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes and were conducted face-to-face, except for one interview completed over the phone and all interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews started with a general "tell me about your background" question. The researcher then asked the questions with each of the participants, checking off questions as they were answered in the interview. Although the researcher was guided by a list of prepared questions in a sequence (standardized open-ended interview), the researcher provided the opportunity for participants to share relevant information at the time they saw fit. The opportunity to add information to the questions is useful in obtaining complete data for each participant (Patton, 2002). The researcher also used informal conversational interview techniques, which allowed the researcher to ask questions in order to elicit additional responses beyond the listed

questions. The more informal structured interview format addressed the criticisms that often arise about the traditional interview format, such as the lack of flexibility and the ability to personalize (Patton, 2002).

Observational notes were taken during the interview to document nonverbal behaviors. Field notes, which Denzin and Lincoln (2005) defined as notes and documents from the field in which the researcher attempts to make meaning about what he or she has learned, were taken in the setting in which the data were collected. Additional interactions with participants were documented with additional emails and memos.

Transcripts were sent to participants for review and correction after the audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed. In the process of member-checking (explained below) some participants were concerned with how they sounded in their transcript. The researcher used pseudonyms in lieu of the participants' names.

### **Analysis of Data**

The data obtained through interviews and field notes were analyzed using the constant comparative method as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Analysis began when the researcher initially read the interview transcripts and then developed a reflexive journal (Spradley, 1979; Spradley, 1980) in which the researcher expanded on ideas, added comments and questions about the interview and initiated analysis.

As the transcripts were read multiple times, the researcher created and applied single units of meaning (open codes) to the data using grounded theory guidelines (Charmaz, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Charmaz (2011),

states “Grounded theory leads the researcher to ask: What is most significant in these data?” (p. 170). This resulted in 1101 cards of single units or open codes. The units were then grouped into 99 categories using descriptors drawn from the participants’ responses. Tentative definitions of each category were noted in a reflexive journal. The units were then read repeatedly to allow for new categories to emerge and to ensure the new units would have a good fit with the other categories. The researcher reviewed categories for consistency and for overlap with other categories, and sought to discover relationships between and among the data. Categories were collapsed and expanded as needed to adequately account for themes that emerged from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Before emergent themes were finally recognized, five categories (potential themes) were identified.

What seemed most significant in the initial coding were the participants’ experiences with their parents in the home and the support they perceived outside of the home. Support outside of the home was manifested through neighbors, teachers, counselors and advisors. Thus, broad themes such as parent influence; school support, activities, resources and escape were initially applied to the data. After the preliminary coding, what appeared most significant were the different levels of support identified by the participants and the value of reading and academics. After deeper analysis, the five potential themes were collapsed into two emergent themes: a broad support system and academics as an escape. This supported the constant comparative method, where units of data are identified and unitized and categories with similar properties are established (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Constructivist Paradigm**

A constructivist paradigm assumes that there are multiple realities and that the researcher and the participants co-create understandings in the natural world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). By applying a constructivist paradigm, I was able to gain understandings in the ways by which individuals construct meaning from their multiple realities. I was most interested in interpreting and making meaning of the home experiences of graduate students raised in low SES and the factors that led to their academic success. As a constructivist, I believe that realities are constructed by experiences, perceptions and interpretations and the relationship between myself, as the researcher, and participants is one of shared interest and knowledge in the field of higher education.

## **Researcher's Positionality**

I am a Latina, first generation American born, and part of my family's first generation to graduate from college with an undergraduate degree (my cousin and sister being first and second). I am also the first in my family (nuclear and extended) to complete a Master's degree and I am currently finishing my doctoral degree in Educational Psychology. I grew up in South Texas, an area that is predominately low SES and I am a former elementary school teacher of children from low SES and Title 1 schools. My interest in initiating a study examining the home environments of graduate students raised in poverty is due to my own experiences.

After completing my undergraduate degree in Sociology, I began a two-year commitment with Teach for America in New Orleans, LA, teaching under-served students. As a first grade teacher, I quickly began to understand the importance of the



home environment of a child prior to entering school and the impact this home environment has on continued academic success. I continued to teach in under-served communities when I returned to Bryan, Texas, to pursue a Master's degree in Educational Psychology.

As a young person, I always knew that I would go to college, but I never truly understood how to get there. While navigating through the obstacles of being a graduate student from a low-income area (i.e., identifying resources and finding support systems), I often wonder what elements of my home environment have supported me through the years. I am interested to know how families and schools can support their children to complete not only their undergraduate degree, but their advanced secondary degrees as well.

My perspective on the home environments of children raised in low SES is rooted in the perspectives emphasized in my experiences as an elementary teacher in New Orleans, LA and Bryan, TX. Although I have experiences highlighting the negative impact that low SES has on education and general academic success, I have been a witness to academically strong students that clearly came from home environments that valued school and education. Certain practices were in place that allowed these young children to excel in school. As an elementary teacher, I often was unable to see the long-term academic pursuits of my former students.

I have my own conceptions and assumptions of how doctoral students from a low SES background navigate their educational paths; however, I would like to investigate how other students have navigated their experiences. In pursuing this research, I

attempted to be mindful of my own biases and rely on techniques that are suggested for trustworthiness (citations provided below).

My self-identification with growing up in a low SES area while becoming academically successful and pursuing a doctoral degree gives me the opportunity to be both insider and outsider as a researcher. I hope that as an insider, I might be more sympathetic to any potential disconnect between home experiences and academic success. As an outsider, I do not have personal experience with the participants' home environment experiences, which are unique for each individual. In both senses, I need to monitor my own feelings of identification/non-identification and include these in my notes as I collect data.

### **Establishing Trustworthiness**

A fundamental element of any qualitative research study is its trustworthiness. Trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, or confidence in the truth of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To build trustworthiness in this research design, the researcher participated in prolonged engagement, member checking and peer debriefing for the study's data collection and analysis, all of which establish credibility.

### **Prolonged Engagement**

The researcher gained information through prolonged engagement with the participants, spending adequate time to understand the phenomena of interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The initial interview followed the general interview protocol, and then both the researcher and participant determined additional formal and informal interactions as needed after the interviews. Additional interactions with participants were documented

with email and memos in the reflexive journal. Contact with the participants remained flexible as areas needing more input were addressed and clarified. The researcher developed relationships and rapport with the participants during the data collection process. The average time spent with each participant spanned a time period of four months.

### **Member Checking**

Member checking is one of the most important aspects of building credibility in naturalistic inquiry (Erlandson, Skipper, Allen, & Harris, 1993). It allows the study's participants to evaluate the researcher's categories of information and interpretations gathered from interviews (Erlandson, Skipper, Allen, & Harris, 1993). There was a brief member-check following each interview. The researcher summarized the content of each interview as they were completed and checked for accuracy and understanding. A second member check was conducted by providing each participant with an electronic copy of the interview transcript, allowing the participant to clarify or delete any information. Participants received a cover letter along with their transcript that included directions for the member checking process as well as the transcription syntax, and use of pseudonyms, to facilitate participants' understanding of their transcript. At this time, participants were informed of their pseudonym for the study and were given the opportunity to change it if they so desired. One participant changed her pseudonym to honor a supportive relative.

Member checking procedures were as follows: (1) Participants who were satisfied with the content of their transcript did not need to respond. Participants were

notified that if the researcher did not receive a response with corrections for the transcript within 10 days of receiving the transcript, the transcript was assumed to be accurate. If the participant needed additional time beyond the 10-day review period, the researcher requested that the participant notify her by email or phone. Participants also were informed that they could request a phone conference with the researcher if they would like to discuss their transcript in depth; (2) Participants who wished to make *minor* changes to their transcript (defined as fewer than 5 individual words or 1 phrase/sentence) were instructed to make the change via track changes on the transcript and then resend to the researcher. (3) Participants who wished to make *major* changes to their transcript (defined as more than 5 individual words or 1 phrase/sentence) were advised to contact the researcher by email or phone to set-up a phone conference to discuss the change(s). Four of the participants had changes to the transcripts and were able to make changes via track changes. Five of the participants did not submit any changes to their transcript. It must be acknowledged that some of those participants may not have examined the transcripts or taken the time to report any perceived inaccuracies.

### **Peer Debriefing**

Peer debriefing helps to build credibility in the research study by gaining additional insight from a peer with the credentials necessary to understand the nature of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing also allows the researcher to vent any frustrations and/or concerns that may turn into researcher bias and adversely affect the truthfulness of the study's findings. The researcher peer-debriefed with a fellow graduate student also involved with qualitative research and has an understanding of the topic.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Each participant's story is told in this section of the dissertation. Although different from each other, these separate stories contain a thread of similarity. Each graduate student faced a number of challenges because of their economic background, but each found their own path in becoming academically successful. Each participant is described, including their gender, ethnicity, the place they grew up, parental levels of education, number of siblings and other family members in the home, and a brief description of their living environment.

#### **Henry**

Henry is a Hispanic male raised in California. He is a fifth-year student in his doctoral program. His parents were born and raised in Mexico, and he considers himself a second-generation American. He stated:

My parents came here when they were young, in their teens as migrant workers. And they came along with their family, of course, and their parents were migrant workers. This is during the time when it was easier to immigrate between countries so they all came here legally, because they were able to go back to Mexico then come back to California and work.

Henry's parents finally settled in southern California in a small, humble home where he shared a room with his brother while his two sisters shared a room. "I look at it now and it's a nice neighborhood but it's a poverty stricken neighborhood. It's one of those areas where they didn't have sidewalks. It's just dirt sidewalks. No streetlights.

That kind of deal.” The neighborhood experienced gang problems throughout his childhood. His oldest sister was in college at the time. He did not remember much about her from those early years growing up, but now spends considerable time with her because of their proximal locations.

Henry was not sure of his mother’s highest level of education. She completed junior high in the United States while his father had a high school freshman level education. With six people growing up in his family’s home, his parents and three siblings, Henry recalls, “Both of my parents were unemployed, and we were living off welfare.”

Henry quietly discussed the domestic violence he experienced in his household. Henry recalls most of the problems stemmed from a lack of money. After his father was permanently injured on a job, leaving him disabled and unemployed, he started drinking. When his father would notice that there was no food in his home, he would go on a drinking binge, during which he would become verbally and physically abusive to Henry’s mother.

Henry’s mother stayed at home, even though she was capable of working and wanted to work because his father would not let her. Henry explains, “She hated that we are on welfare. We didn’t have food. There were a couple of times when she attempted to get a job and he [my father] actually wouldn’t let her go to work.” In retrospect, Henry is shocked at how controlling his father actually was. Henry identifies a very strong attachment to his mother:

I felt like she has been the strongest person in the entire family because she had to deal with my dad. She doesn't drink, she doesn't smoke. She has always done what she could...my dad ...always did what he could to bring her down.

Henry's parents rarely spoke about the importance of academics to him. In their eyes, it was more important not to continue the cycle of poverty his parents were experiencing. The family seemed ashamed of their situation. Everybody in the family knew about their struggles, but there was no discussion about it.

His parents occasionally telling him to do well in school led Henry to feel as if his father did not care about school or homework at all. "I would come home and my homework would be used as a coaster." Henry often received the message from his parents that his education was not really that important.

Henry recalled a specific event in his life that broke his mother's heart. When he was about fourteen years old, he was stabbed twice by a group of boys while hanging out with his friends. While Henry and his friend were returning home, unbeknownst to them, a phone call was made to Henry's mother. By the time he arrived home, his parents were waiting for him. As Henry walked in the house, his parents asked him to take his clothes off. After some dispute, Henry complied. Although Henry could not feel the stab wounds on his body, due to the adrenaline in his system, he remembers hearing his mother gasp when she saw the wounds. "It was pretty harsh to hear her response, her reaction and that was nasty. Not the stab...I just kept breaking her heart. I just kept hurting her," adds Henry.

Henry gave little thought to academics until his older sister came home for a visit. Her experience in college allowed her to influence Henry in ways that his parents did not. She took him on a tour of her campus. She talked to him about his future and about where he would be studying after high school. His brother also invited Henry for a college visit. Henry recalls his sister being more of the academic type, while his brother showed him the social aspect of college. He remembers these as moments when he was exposed to college life at a more intimate level.

Henry was not involved in school activities. Friends did not come over to his house. He pretty much managed himself in the household. There was very little food in the house and he often went to bed hungry. In the morning, he would make sure he walked to school on time so that he could eat breakfast. On occasion, his parents would tell Henry to do well in school, but that was it. There was no additional direction concerning academics. In retrospect, Henry feels this happened because his own parents had limited formal education. On the occasion that his parents did mention school, Henry remembers his parents telling him to get good grades, but it was a rarity:

There was always this notion that you have to succeed in school. You have to do good in school. You want to be able to get a degree, you want to be successful when you get older because- my parents never said, 'Hey, you don't want to live like us the rest of your life on welfare' or whatever, but they are just like, you don't want to be living on the street, essentially.

In many ways, he felt that his family and school life were quite separate. Henry did not feel as if his parents cared much about what he did. He recalls doing well in



elementary school and junior high. He did well academically because of the rewards he would get. “I would latch on to a teacher who would express some sort of interest in my work, whatever I was doing.” Even now, Henry thinks about these times and wonders if he was trying to find a substitute father figure.

His elementary and junior high years marked the start of getting into trouble. “I did get into lots of trouble and some of it was justified and most of it was not... In the sense that I was just being targeted.” After junior high, Henry’s parents were able to send him to a Catholic school for a few years. He returned to a neighborhood public school for the last two years of high school where he graduated almost last in his class.

He knows he could have been a better student, but the problems at home made it more difficult. Henry did not start off on the path to college when he finished high school:

I barely graduated high school then I went to work full time. But I could sense a little, it was very much of a disappointment to them. It was a little disappointment to my mother even though they never really...said anything but I could sense that it was a disappointment to them that I didn’t go to school after that. But I was screwing up big time and I was just in a different path.

When Henry was 18 years old, he got a full time job in a corporate environment. He moved up quickly in the ranks, managing huge accounts. Henry recalls being young and looking young while working alongside college educated folks in business suits. Not knowing why, Henry remembers being treated poorly. “Even though I graduated at the bottom of my class, it’s not like I suddenly became unintelligent, you know what I

mean?” Around that time, Henry made the decision to go back to school. When he told his mother he was going back to college. She was ecstatic and couldn’t believe it. Henry often wonders if he kept going to school because it would make his mother happy. His only intent was to get an Associate’s Degree. As he got close to finishing his degree, he decided to transfer to a four-year college for his bachelor’s degree. “I felt like I didn’t have a path yet. I didn’t know what to do. Why did I keep going to school?”

Henry attended several junior colleges, some international schools when he studied abroad, and finally made his way to a Tier 1 Research school. Although both his older sister and his brother attended college, his sister was the only one of the four siblings who graduated from college.

### **Summary**

Despite the limited academic support he received from his parents, Henry has done well in his life. The moments with his brother and sister in an academic setting proved to be more powerful than even he expected. Even though Henry struggled with issues of domestic violence in his home, he has succeeded. Most importantly, he has a need to make his mother proud of him. Henry had support from not only his mother, but his siblings and teachers at school. He also used his academics as a way to escape the day-to-day life in his home.

### **Michael**

Michael is a male Caucasian Master’s student from the Northeastern region of the United States. Michael immediately starts talking about his mother. She was 17 years old when she had him. His mother and father were married and divorced by the time he

was a year old. She raised him as a single mother. He recognizes his step-father as his father figure until he was around 16 years old.

Michael remembers his family always being in a financial struggle. “I was making more than my mother when I was 18.” For Michael, it was clear that he lived in a family with limited resources. His family took part in the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) food program. He specifically remembers the WIC cheese and milk. Jokingly, Michael added that his family drank way too much milk.

Michael and his family lived in a rented house with neighbors upstairs. When he was growing up, his bicycle was stolen several times, and the hood ornaments of his grandmother’s car were stolen. His family rarely had brand new things. He laughs as he remembers the one clip-on tie and his one uniform for private school, while his schoolmates had a number of variations of the uniform.

Michael describes living in the ghetto as a younger child and continuing to live in a low-income neighborhood when his family moved years later. In order to protect him, his mother would not allow him to do certain things in the neighborhood nor allow him to talk to certain people that lived in the neighborhood. When his family later moved, Michael was able to attend Catholic school because his grandmother paid for the tuition. He remembers that his family was the “poor family”, with the “poor kids” that went to Catholic school with only one uniform that was then passed down to younger siblings. “Luckily, I was the oldest. I got the first set.”

Even though Michael does not have contact with his biological father, he sees his step-father as a very supportive person:

He is probably even more supportive than my mother, which is kind of interesting. He has done everything from help ship my car here from New York to you know, just random. Anything and everything and probably like I said, more than my mother.

Although it was his mother who urged him to practice his handwriting and read on a regular basis, it was his stepfather who sat at the table with him working on homework. Since his stepfather was a mechanic, he was able to be home while Michael was at home. Evenings were structured. Michael would come home and relax for an hour or so, have a snack, start homework, eat dinner, and then complete homework before he went to bed.

Michael remembers reading at home, at least once a day. In fact, he recalls his mother reading often as well. Michael describes having a Teddy Rubskin and a large amount of books. After his mother would read to him, he would be encouraged to read to his brothers. All of the time spent reading meant certain television shows were not seen in the home. "I remember explicitly not being able to watch The Simpsons and being at lunch and people talking about it and having no idea what they were talking about." While at home, he and his siblings partook in games with flash cards, multiplication tables, memory games, etc. There was an abundance of books in the home from the Golden Books series to Dr. Seuss books to a Highlights magazine subscription.

From early in his childhood, Michael recalls how success in school was very important. Even his poor hand writing in school prompted his mother to find

handwriting workbooks that he worked on every day after school. Such resources were often provided by one of his grandmothers:

When we needed anything, school supplies, anything like that, it was always grandmother. If we went on a field trip and you needed to buy, we had pizza on Friday for a dollar a slice and at lunch or once in a month for some reason we got McDonalds's... It was 'Call your grandmother,'" explains Michael as he discusses how his paternal and maternal grandmothers would buy Michael and his siblings the items they needed when his parents could not.

Michael's family had clear expectations that school would be important and support would always be available, one way or another. From his mother and step father to his grandmothers, there was always somebody to support him if he needed it. "If I needed something school related, it was gonna happen. If it wasn't school related, probably not."

Michael spent quite a bit of time with his grandmothers. He describes one memory of Easter when he was put up on a chair, and dyed eggs in boiling water with his grandmother. He also remembers spending time with his grandmother while his younger brother was sick and in the hospital. Since his mother was so young, Michael describes spending long periods of time with either of his grandmothers and feeling supported by them as he grew up.

Eventually, Michael's mother and stepfather separated. His grades dropped quickly. He remembers having a discussion about the divorce with his mother and then one with his stepfather. This was also about the time that he switched from a Catholic

school to a public school. For years, he felt that his poor grades led to him having to leave Catholic school. It was not until years later that he realized he moved from Catholic school because his grandmother could no longer afford to pay for the private school tuition.

Michael was often urged to go to college, but he was specifically told that he should be focused on attending a community college. He started at a community college, but educational opportunity programs based on financial need provided opportunities for him to move beyond community college. His mother was somewhat familiar with the programs, but Michael was exposed to these opportunities because of a guidance counselor. His main guidance counselor had suggested he go to community college. When this guidance counselor got sick, a younger and more aware guidance counselor steered Michael into a program that would help lead him to greater opportunities down the line. He associates his success in school with other mentors he had along the way as well. Michael also explained how very supportive his mother has been:

She helped me in every way that she can and still loves, like she will do anything for me. Even if she can't do it. She's helped me along the way with everything and anything that I can think of whether it's emotional things just kind of talking to her.

When I asked Michael how he felt he got to where he is now, a guidance counselor from school immediately came up in the discussion. "It's just for some reason I end up with these mentors that come out of nowhere but that guidance counselor at my high school that literally happened by chance that ended up in my life," adds Michael.

## **Summary**

Though a young mother with limited finances raised Michael, his support system, consisting of his mother, step-father and grandmothers, was strong and allowed him to get what he needed for his later academic success. He also credits the evening routines established by his mother as providing a foundation for his success in school. Michael learned to take care and value his belongings. From early on in his life, school was valued in the home and his family made efforts to make sure he would go to the best schools available. Michael also had support in school from his guidance counselor.

## **Agustina**

Agustina is a Latina doctoral student who grew up in Reynosa on the southern border of Texas. Her parents emigrated from Mexico. She attended a university in South Texas for her undergraduate program. She was primarily raised by her mother and father, but also had strong influences from her extended family including her aunt and grandparents. She has two siblings whom have also gone to college. Her mother completed her education at the sixth grade in a public school in Mexico and then continued on to training school where she completing two years of a specialized education. Her father, on the other hand, had completed some college. As a younger child, Agustina remembers the family income was very limited. Years later, her father started a full-time job and the family income eventually almost doubled in size.

As she grew up, Agustina did not think of herself as growing up poor. She admits:

I didn't realize how poor we were. I was not really thinking that we are poor until there were certain things that I wanted and I couldn't have, but my friends could have without having to worry about it. The whole fact, like going in McDonald's with other families. You know, we're going out like three times a week or whatever and it's not a big deal. It's not going to break the budget, but like us. We could get McDonald's once a month and it's like that.

She did, however, understand that most people around her were low SES. The middle class students were often considered the "rich kids" in school. In middle school, she noticed some students coming to school with the latest technology like Walk Man radios and expensive, name-brand jeans. Agustina grew up having clothes made by her mother or bought at a thrift store.

Agustina's mother was probably more influential than her father. Agustina adds: One of the lessons my mom taught us that I appreciate to this day; it's not following or trying to beat the Joneses or whatever that saying is. You're always trying to one up your neighbor. Mom was always like, 'Do you have shoes? Do I have things? Do you have more food to eat? And since we eat, then you're rich. You know there's a lot of kids that don't have food.' Even though we might not have all these luxuries, we were still very blessed. She would always remind of me of that.

Agustina also recalls valuable lessons that her parents taught her at different times throughout her life. She reminisces:



The value of a dollar was also taught early on, so it helps keep perspective in terms of what type of life we had growing up, how much money and comfort the types of work we will possess.

As a child, Agustina was often sick. Her family did not have insurance. They would go to Mexico for medical care. Agustina soon understood that some jobs have no benefits, no health insurance, and this is the type of care they would have to find elsewhere. Agustina also understood they would need to be creative in the ways they earned extra money to buy things like snacks:

For me, wanting chips and a soda meant raising money to do so. My neighbors [kids] and I would make things... such as taking old seat belts they had and flowers we would find in the neighborhood and make pins and decorations. We would go around the neighborhood and do door-to-door sales. I laugh because I think the neighbors thought they'd help because even though I think they looked cool, looking back, they weren't the best thing. However, we'd sell them for 50 cents. Back then that was enough for chips. If we sold enough we could have snacks at lunch all week.

As her family remodeled their humble home, she was taught to reflect on where she was and what she wanted to do in her life. Agustina commented on how those conversations were critical in shaping her views on life and helped her look forward to the future.

During those times, Agustina remembers spending lots of time with her parents at home:

When I was younger they would both get home for a little bit and then we'd see them and hang out with us a little bit, and then they'd take off again either to a second job or they had odd hours, so they'd have to take off and go to work.

Since Agustina's parents worked so much, she would often spend time with her extended family. Agustina adds, "My aunts lived down the street and it was great. As soon as I was done there, if I didn't have homework, I would take off down the street because we were on a dead end road. I would take off down the street and go hang out with my cousins and play until the sun went down because at that point there was only one streetlight. It was scary."

Agustina has fond memories of her family. She recalls, "Within the home my parents were very loving and supporting. My siblings were bullies, but loving non-the-less. Our parents always told us they believed in us and our abilities to do good in school."

Agustina identifies daily routines in the home as playing an important role in her academic success:

A typical night would be coming home and my mom would be making dinner, so my job was to just put out all the placemats, then put all the napkins and silverware and make sure that that was set up. And then we'd all so sit down and we eat. We talked about the day and what we have for homework and if there was anything that needed to be signed.

As we started talking about how her home environment affected her later academic success, Agustina immediately started talking about her parents being very strict:

Dad was very strict. My mom was always making sure that we did our chores every day. Once we were done with our chores inside, we'd still have to help my brother and my dad outside. This is a weekly event. Just sort of nonstop cleaning, She remembers having to take care of chores first and foremost, and then completing homework. Once chores and homework were completed, Agustina was able to go outside to play or watch television. She had no choice as to what to watch. That choice was left to her father. Agustina attributes the discipline she learned during those years to her academic success.

“One of the things that my mom would tell us while we were cleaning and while we were doing chores inside and outside, she would tell me, ‘Do you want to do this for the rest of your life?’” adds Agustina. Her mother would always talk to Agustina and her siblings about the choices she had. “Do you want to pick in the fields? Do you want to be a maid? Being inside was a luxury, it wasn't like everybody got to stay inside and work inside,” recalls Agustina. Both of her parents worked as farmers growing up.

Education was valued in Agustina's home. The constant support from her parents has proven crucial to Agustina through the years:

When I was regularly sick with common things, they would tell me I was capable of doing the work and would express their wishes for A's. I'd get A's and B's and sometimes C's and at this they would always express, ‘You can do better.

Keep at it. Ask the teacher questions. Don't let the embarrassment of asking questions or asking too many questions ever stop you from asking. Because who will suffer from poor grades will be you (aka me) and hence that would have consequences that would mean the inability to get a great job later.'

She continues, "We were always given a choice, but we were always I guess influenced to go to school. That was my mom's dream and she always told us, all the time." Agustina's parents wanted her and her siblings to finish school:

You know, I would rather you get an education because I do not want you to have to depend on anyone.' Her mother would continuously talk to Agustina about her fears of her marrying somebody abusive or that did not provide. 'I don't want you to suffer,' she would say, 'so go to school.'

However, if Agustina had a question about math, she knew to ask her mother since she was very good at the subject. If her parents didn't know how to help Agustina with her academics, they would suggest Agustina ask her teachers. Her parents knew the teachers were a resource to help explain things from class in ways that they were unable to.

In second grade, Agustina contracted meningitis and then encephalitis. Most people that experience such diseases do not bode well. In fact, most fall into a coma, die or develop long-term learning disabilities. Her parents told her that they wanted her to finish school, but because of her illness did not pressure her the same way they pressured her siblings. Though her parents did not continuously pressure her to do well in school, because of her illness throughout her childhood, she does remember them being

encouraging and telling her to try and make an attempt. Her parents would help her with certain things when they could. They were always in contact with her teachers. Agustina felt that her teachers had higher expectations of her because they knew her older sister. Her teachers were also not aware of her health issues.

Although Agustina and her family members did not do a lot of activities outside of the home, she remembers a fondness for the library:

One of the things that I remember the most about growing up was even though we couldn't buy books or go to the movies, very often my parents would make time to take me to a library. And the library was a very favorite place of mine, any type of library. We'd go for a story time or I take out books that I will then read for the week or they'd have some kind of movie or event going on, so they would take me to that, when they could. And I always appreciated that.

As she grew up, books became an important part of Agustina's life. She would even use books as an escape from the moments of domestic violence going on at home:

I always liked books. What I really liked about them was they would take you somewhere; your imagination would come to life. I would love that about it. It wasn't, well I'm going to go outside and read a book about being outside. No. It was this magical land and you'd really stretch your imagination of what that would be like. And then when you would play games outside, you'd be incorporating that part of the imagination, 'Oh, we're on lava. We can't touch the ground. We're going to burn.' It was expanding your imagination. And I really like the science books and the art books because my brother would draw. I

always wanted to get better. He taught me a little bit about how to draw and then I started getting books to make myself learn new techniques and try to do some stuff that look like...not exactly like, let's say like Picasso or Van Gogh, but something in their style.

School rewards were also impactful to Agustina and her academic success. She recalls being in the fifth grade and having a reading challenge at school. Agustina and her classmates had to read a certain number of pages in order to earn a reward. She became obsessed about doing well with her reading, but more importantly, the reward she received was even more important:

That's why I had such a drive to get all these good books read because I knew as soon as I was finished and got to a new planet, I would get this pan pizza. And I'd tell my parents, you know I had this certificate and if they could take me to Pizza Hut on the way home. And they'd stop and I'd get my pizza, and I was super happy because I'm having junk food.

One of Agustina's neighbors was a teacher. She always provided opportunities and extracurricular activities that Agustina's family could not afford. Her neighbor's daughter and Agustina were friends. She would invite Agustina to activities like dance or lessons for a new language:

I would sometimes sit in on her class, whatever her daughter was doing. That helped me a lot to see what was available, what was out there. And she let me participate in some university programs that were student mentoring programs that they had. That helped me out significantly because they taught us about

writing, reading, and specific stuff. In school also, well one of the things that really liked helped out also being rewarded with junk food...and I laugh about it now, but it works.

One of the struggles Agustina experienced in school was being bilingual. The teachers would teach the bilingual students at a slower pace. Therefore, the bilingual students were soon behind than the English only class. In the fifth grade, Agustina noticed that there were two classes, the English classroom and the bilingual classroom. “The bilingual students were covering things that we did two years back.”

Agustina knew she had to work hard to deflect such academic obstacles. In her home, homework was very important. Agustina would often deal with her homework on her own, except for problems in math. Agustina’s mother naturally excelled in the subject so enjoyed helping her. Agustina also got help from her brother. She adds, “My brother, I think he’s about five or six years older than me, my brother is a math teacher now, so back in the day, he would help me out with math.”

While discussing what impacted her the most, Agustina recognized that being able to adapt to situations was critical to her success. She explains that living in a bi-national and bi-cultural experience kept her family “on their toes” to strive to get a higher education and a higher paying job. This meant helping not only her nuclear family, but her extended family as well. “All the while being grateful for what we had and the experiences we were able to have.”

Even though Agustina wanted to go to college early on in her education, she knew that her family would struggle with it:

Even though that was my dream and that would have been a possibility in terms of what I would be because I have the grades for it, my problem was the money. I couldn't afford the extra tuition to go. Financial aid it would only give you so much and then after that you're on your own, and my family couldn't afford the rest. They let me know during high school if I wanted to get my bachelors elsewhere they couldn't afford to help me.

Agustina remembers many of her friends who had financial support skipping class by choice or not paying attention in class. For Agustina, it was important to do well in school, pay attention, and do the best that she could. She adds, "I knew the value of that class. And so always keeping in mind the bottom line, "How much money do I have to pay for class?" Agustina struggled financially all through college. Agustina stayed on campus and completed all her homework at the library or the student union. She became involved with university programs.

Although Agustina had older brothers that could help her with questions she might have about college, she found herself seeking out the help of professors. College professors were mentors to her. She specifically remembers attending a presentation about a summer program at a Tier 1 university. Agustina was completing a master's degree at a smaller university at the time. Speaking to the professor and other graduate students at the time inspired Agustina to apply for a doctoral program far away from home.

Agustina's family did not show support for her doctoral work. She decided they did not support her because they were afraid that she would fail. Agustina recognizes



that her family was scared, but more than anything, Agustina recognizes apprehension because she was the first one in her family to ever attempt a doctoral degree:

No one could help me. Once I started this program, no one could help me from the house. There's nothing that they could help me with. Because it was then a matter of survival. I had to and I was not representing myself only, and I was representing not only my family but the valley and Latinos.

Agustina struggled with imposter syndrome. She was astonished when she got accepted into a doctoral program. She did not know what to do next. Agustina thought she would go back to work for a time and forget about the new dream she had of being a PhD student. Her father showed her his support, "It's in your heart. This is what you'd do ... if you need to do it, then you need to do it." However, her mother, sister, and brother voiced differentiating opinions, "No, it's stupid. Don't do it. You need to go back to work. This is enough fooling around. You already have enough school. You're done,"

### **Summary**

Agustina grew up in South Texas and Mexico from a poor family, even though she did not think she was poor. She grew up in a household where discipline was important and taught mostly through chores. Her mother has a strong influence on Agustina and her entire family is supportive of her education. She also had support from a neighbor and other mentors along her educational path. Agustina remembers going to the library often and reading books as a child. Beyond that, she remembers school rewards being some of the best motivators for her academic success. Agustina

used books to escape her daily life at home and recognized the value of reading and education as a way to escape poverty in the future.

### **Dylan**

Dylan is a Caucasian third year doctoral student raised in a Massachusetts city by his parents and his maternal grandparents. His mother is from Germany and has a high school education. Dylan's father attended less than a semester of community college and went on to work odd jobs. Although his father was around, his mother was more influential while he was growing up. His grandparents also assisted in raising him. Dylan has two stepsisters and a stepbrother.

His mother, a very intelligent woman, has dealt with some very difficult situations in her life. "She had full-ride scholarships to several institutions, but then she got pregnant with me and they all forfeited their scholarships to her. Along with her pregnancy, Dylan's mother also had to deal with her father, a man who had established strong family control with his money. Dylan's mother was one of nine children, and one of the two children most hated in the family by their grandfather. After his mother became pregnant, his grandfather beat her up badly. "But because grandpa was such a respected man and at that same time feared, people didn't do anything about it." As part of his grandfather's control of the family, he also made sure that Dylan's mother did not receive any financial support. Shortly after these experiences, Dylan's parents married. Dylan's mother left and never returned home. In the process, Dylan believes that his grandfather called the universities that had offered scholarships to his mother and informed them that his mother would not be attending.

After Dylan's birth, efforts were made for his mother and grandfather to re-establish relations. "Mom says that I am the key or the link that I've facilitated the process of her getting back in touch with her own father and mother." When his grandparents re-established ties with his mother, Dylan began to spend lots of time with them. His grandfather would have him "earn his keep". Dylan remembers coming home from kindergarten through fifth grade and having to work for his grandfather. Dylan recalls grueling tasks that had to be done daily and his grandfather assessing his work at the end of the day to see what he had earned. Although Dylan experienced the harsh realities of his grandfather, he also saw another side of him, the side that would take him to school and pay for his meals and those of the other students.

The family income was quite low from his birth until about 5 years of age. During this time, his family moved around often (seven different locations) during those first five years. For the next decade, Dylan remembers his parents' income slowly increasing with the different job promotions his father received. As Dylan grew up, he remembers the influence his father had on the family and the struggle with money they experienced. His mother also started a secretarial positional in order to support Dylan in private school at the time. His mother wanted to make sure Dylan went to the best school possible.

To Dylan's parents, it was important that everything appeared to be great, even though the family was struggling. As Dylan describes it, they were "Competing with the Joneses". Dylan remembers that soon after, more money started coming into the family

as his father's position climbed in his work. However, his father was bad at managing his money. Dylan remembers teaching his father how to balance his checkbook:

He had no concept of money. His concept was that there will always be money. His idea of accountability was that you should have a zero balance at the end of each paycheck or between each paycheck. So therefore, that means all of it should be used.

Dylan remembers times full of frustration and stress at home as he grew up. "Stress, because I had to be the perfect child. Stress because there was such a high expectation and demand on me. And stress—well, just the overall, just the tensions and difficult relationships."

Eventually, Dylan's mother decided to divorce his father. Dylan's father left a large amount of debt for his mother. "Things went downhill real bad real fast. Almost like the cycle had been repeated from 25 years previously," recalls Dylan while describing a recurring theme of poverty and cycles of money in his family.

Dylan was not sure if he qualified for free and reduced lunch since his grandparents often contributed to his household finances:

I had only found out years later, that there were times when grandpa would bring me to school. And it was always within the first week that school started that at least one time he took me to school and then he would tell me, 'Go off to class,' and then he would go see the principal. And it wasn't that he was buying any safety for me or anything like that, but years later, I found out that he actually is going to the principal and the school secretary and asking them how many

students need help and he would write a check for the whole year to take care of their meals.

Dylan was completely unaware as a young child that this was happening, but in retrospect understood that his grandfather was financially assisting other students at school as well as himself.

Education was very important to Dylan's grandfather:

He pushed heavily and he grilled me on so much. If I made a book report, he would read it and then he would ask me questions like, 'Why do you think this is a good idea? Why do you think this is a bad idea? In your own words'.

As he grew older, Dylan's grandfather would ask what his plan was for his future. However, when asked what contributed to his academic success, Dylan explains it was "All me". He feels that he himself was the one to push himself in ways that his parents or even grandparents were unable to do.

Dylan attended numerous colleges and universities in his path towards his doctoral program. He has received many academic awards along the way from the Academic Deans' Award to being a presidential scholar.

### **Summary**

Dylan was raised by his parents and grandparents. His own parents struggled financially through the years and often times Dylan's grandfather would take care of the finances of the family, even to the extent of using money to control his family. Dylan would often have to "earn his keep" with his grandfather. Later, Dylan had to teach his parents about money and still helps his parents. Education was highly valued in his

home, although Dylan was typically on his own with his education. More important to his parents was the impression that they had it all, even though that was not the case. Dylan's support system consisted of his parents and grandparents. They provided Dylan with the support needed to become academically successful.

### **Bea**

Bea is a young African-American, third year doctoral student. She initially started with a Master's program but soon realized she was compelled to initiate a doctoral program. Bea has three siblings, one of whom is a half-sibling from her father's previous relationship.

I recently met Bea's mother and father. I immediately recognized similarities between Bea and her father. I had assumed Bea's mother would be "rough around the edges", "hardcore", if you will. Her history of working hard, persevering during very difficult times, and raising three and often four children is something that would typically take its "toll". I expected a woman aged before her time. But my assumptions could not have been more wrong. Bea's mother was beautifully dressed, put together, and looked flawless. I simultaneously thought about what kind of an impact this woman must have and will continue to have on Bea.

In listening to Bea's story, I could see that most of her narrative, in essence, lies in the story of her mother. Growing up, Bea's mother had only a high school education. When Bea was in high school, her mother started working on her bachelor's degree. As Bea started on her own bachelor's degree, her mother worked to complete her degree. She eventually went on to complete two Master's degrees. Her father, on the other hand,

completed only his high school diploma. Bea was raised in the Dallas area, in an older part of a very fast growing city. She grew up in a house her parents moved into the year she was born. “My mom basically was sick of being in a one-bedroom apartment with my sister and my dad. And she was like ‘We’re moving.’ And my dad was like, ‘I don’t want to move.’” Needless to say, the family moved. “Basically, my mom found a house, rented it and then literally she was six months pregnant with me and loaded the truck, got all the stuff and moved to the house.” Bea’s grandmother lived in the household until she passed when Bea was seven. Years later, Bea’s aunt came to live with the family.

Bea’s father had drug and alcohol issues for most of her life. Bea recalls:

There were times when we would just be left at school. Sometimes, I had to call my mom and so she usually was the person that picked us up. She would have to drive all the way from where she worked to come get us. So usually, it will be a Friday when my dad will get paid and he just—wouldn’t come pick us up.

Bea remembers playing outside while growing up, but her mother was quite strict about where she and her siblings could play. “We had a really big backyard. We couldn’t really –like a lot of kids get to ride their bikes and some stuff around the neighborhood and play with the neighborhood kids. We weren’t allowed to do that.” When Bea was younger, her next-door neighbor was good friends with Bea’s mother. While this particular neighbor was in the process of moving away from that house, she informed Bea’s mother that the person buying the house was a registered sex offender. Her neighbor wanted to warn Bea’s mother knowing that she had several children that could be affected. Bea’s mother informed her children and as Bea admits, “She communicated

that to us too as children and so we, me and my sister and my younger brother, we all just lived in fear.” Bea and her siblings spent most of their time playing in the backyard with their dogs. When Bea and her siblings received bikes as presents, her parents would have to drive them to the nearest park to ride around.

At home, Bea often watched TV:

We watched a ton of TV,” Bea discloses, “There was a TV in every room of the house. There was a period of time there for four or five years where we didn’t have cable, but most of the time we had cable.

In the meantime, however, Bea also read often. “I love the American Girl series. That was my thing. Loved it.” Everybody in the house read:

My dad would take us to the library and have us check out books. It wasn’t just the school library. We also went to the public library. My dad would take us there and let us go online on the Nickelodeon website because we watched Nickelodeon all day long. We checked out books and used the internet there.

At home, a schedule was maintained. As part of their daily routine, Bea’s dad would wake up early for work. He was a bus driver for the city and would start his route at 6 am. Because her father was gone so early, Bea’s mother would be in charge of waking up the children. Bea’s mother maintained several jobs as the years went by from owning a wedding cake shop to eventually working in corporate America. Morning routines could often be disrupted or changed. Their next door neighbor would step in to drop Bea and her siblings off at school.



Bea's father would pick her and her siblings up from school, make sure they had something to eat, and then provide a time for homework to be completed. He would even check homework for them during their elementary school years. When Bea got to fifth or sixth grade, her father was able to assist with spelling homework, but soon struggled to help with other subject areas. "When we got to certain problems, math problems specifically, he was like, 'I'm sorry. I don't know how to do this new math.' That's what he would say, 'I don't know how to do that new math.'"

Bea's father made huge efforts to support her and her siblings as he was able.

Bea adds:

My dad would make an effort to actually go up to the school and say, 'I'm sorry. I couldn't help her with this problem. Can you explain to me how she's supposed to do it?' So he would make an effort to do that sometimes.

When talking about the influence of her parents, Bea describes times of not really having them around as often as she would like:

My mom was just really busy all of the time. When she wasn't in school, she was working two or three jobs. Luckily my aunt was there a lot of the time to make sure that we ate because she would be at work. She didn't know how to do our homework, but she made sure that it was done.

At the same time, Bea remembers her father being absent at times as well. She continues, "There were periods of time when my dad just didn't have his life together." Bea's mother was either working or back in school. Weekends were not dedicated to

spending time together or going to the park. They were dedicated to her mother completing academic assignments.

Growing up, Bea had another neighbor who was also an elementary school teacher. The neighbor provided different activities for her to do on the weekends or when Bea's mother was working or busy with school assignments. Bea fondly remembers the arts and crafts projects she completed with her neighbor.

In Bea's home, success in school was very important. Her mother had high expectations. Bea remembers having it engrained in her that there is no such thing as failing. "We don't fail." Bea does not recall any of her siblings ever coming home with failing grades. "That kind of achievement was instilled in us that like it's not really an option to fail. I think it still presses for me, I mean, not from some of my siblings, but for me."

One of the most influential people in Bea's life was her grandmother. The interactions she had with her before her passing and the stories Bea heard about her grandmother have stayed with her through the years. Bea's grandmother had a fifth grade education and her grandfather had a sixth or seventh grade education:

She was orphaned to the point to where basically her dad left her with an uncle, but his uncle basically gave her to one of his wives and then his wife basically neglected her and kind of just left her to do whatever she was supposed to do. She didn't have access to school and neither did my grandfather.

Bea and her sister are relatively close in age. When Bea was four and her sister started school, Bea was upset that she did not get to go. She cried when they dropped her

sister off at school with her lunchbox and uniform. Bea's mother had to eventually buy the same things for Bea because she was so upset.

To get prepared for school, Bea's family used the *Hooked on Phonics*© program. When they went to school, some students made fun of Bea because she used the program, one typically reserved for students struggling with reading. Bea recalls telling them, "No, no, no. I used *Hooked on Phonics*© before I went to school. I knew how to read before I got to kindergarten. They didn't get it." Bea's mother bought the whole set of *Hooked on Phonics*© for Bea and her sister to play and practice with while they were at home.

When Bea's mother was growing up in Africa, boarding school was a big part of one's education. If you were unable to go to boarding school, that meant you were extremely poor. Bea's mother values the status and image of her family. She made certain that Bea and her siblings went to a private school, especially an Episcopalian school, since she had attended an Episcopalian missionary school while growing up in Africa. Although it was expensive, Bea's mother found a good school in the area and learned of a scholarship to assist with part of the tuition. Bea attended this school from pre-k through first grade, until her mother could no longer afford the expensive tuition.

At one point, Bea's mother noticed that was a problem at the private school Bea and her sister attended. Bea's mother realized that issues were arising because Bea and her sister were the only African American students at the school. Because of her concern for her children, but also wanting them to be at a good school, Bea's mother found a way to be at the school. She started working in the kitchen as a lunch lady. Eventually, she

left that job, returned to work in a bank and progressed through other jobs as Bea and her siblings grew up.

Bea and her sister moved to a public school, in a neighborhood school near their house. They attended this school for a few weeks and their parents found out it was a low performing school. Bea's parents immediately found a way to transfer them to another school further from their neighborhood. In the city they lived in, students were not bussed in elementary school, but were in middle and high school. Since the bus could not pick Bea up for school close to her house, her mother would drive down the road and drop Bea off in front of some random person's house so she could get on the bus for middle school.

The move to a public school proved to be difficult for Bea and her sister. To some degree, Bea felt that her family was financially more stable while she attended private school. She was not aware that her mother was working hard to pay the tuition for the private school. Her move to public school was met with an awareness that her family could not afford the things she thought they could.

Some of Bea's strongest memories were during wintertime. More specifically, a couple of winters when they were without heat because her family was not able to afford heat:

I remember space heaters all around. Whatever room we were in, we had to stay in that room because that's where the space heater was. So, we shut all of the doors so we can stay warm. And then, I remember my mom turning the oven on on Sundays so that we could stay warm.

The household would often become very complicated for Bea:

My parents would argue a lot in front of us. Arguments and things like that would happen at two am. I can see how they affect me now, specifically in my professional life. I didn't like to deal with confrontation. If anybody raised their voice at me or started yelling at me, I shut down.

“Academically, out of all of my siblings, I'm the most- and I don't want to be cocky and sound cocky in any way, but I am one of the most determined out of my siblings.” Her sister got through college, but Bea explains:

It was hell. It was really hard for her to get through. And my little brother is just now making it into a four-year university this year. He went to community college and then finally got in. He just didn't do well in high school academically. He was a social butterfly.

Bea continues, “I think that shaped who I am academically now to where when there's discussion going on in class or something is happening, you'll see me be really quiet for a second because I'm just observing what's happening.”

The levels of support from Bea's parents were very different between her father and her mother. Bea explains:

With my dad, the support was off and on. When he is present, he's supportive. I remember getting yelled at because I couldn't spell the word beautiful. I remember because that's a really hard word. I could not figure it out and he would yell at me like ‘That's not right. Again, again.’ I remember early on in

elementary school, he would really push us. But then, as we got older, I think his drug issues got even worse and so he kind of just fell off.

Bea's mother did not support Bea and her siblings academically the way they felt was necessary:

My mom wasn't big on checking our homework. She just looked at it like, 'Okay, it looks like it's done'. When she gets home from work, she's just always tired. My mom was just always tired. She was just always exhausted. She just didn't have the energy. She was just like, 'Just make sure your stuff gets done.'

Bea remembers discipline and academics being tightly related:

My parents were very hard on us especially behavior in school. So, a lot -- what you see stereotypically a lot of complaints that certain teachers have about students of color and their parents. They try to or they do this thing where they're like, well, they don't ever believe the teacher. They always believe their child first and say their child was the one who wasn't misbehaving and the teacher is just picking on the child. No. My mom had a rule that teacher is always right. I don't care whether you were doing it or not. Behavior was important, which then I think led to academic success.

Bea's mother would also have Bea and her sister check each other's homework. There were times when Bea and her sister did not have help from anyone. Bea's mother was more concerned with paying bills and supporting the family. "My mom was very stressed out about paying bills because my dad would blow his whole paycheck on

stuff.” Bea’s sister would go to school the next day and ask the teacher for clarification on homework.

Growing up, Bea was aware that she was on free and reduced lunch, as were many other students at her school:

I knew that I have to have my 40 cents if I wanted to eat lunch or I would have to have a peanut butter and jelly. So there were times when my mom would drop us off and she would give me four dimes...and I would lose a dime and I would be freaking out because I knew I had to pay 40 cents for reduced lunch.

One day, Bea did lose her dime and the lunch lady gave her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Bea adds, “I remember crying.”

The financial struggles and the household often become very complicated for Bea:

My parents would argue a lot in front of us. Arguments and things like that would happen at like two am. I can see how they affect me now, specifically in my professional life. I didn’t like to deal with confrontation. If anybody raised their voice at me or started yelling at me, I shut down.

Bea also remembers getting rides to school in their older family van. “I remember being made fun of.” It was a huge van with seats that would lay back. Bea was known for that outdated van. As her father would drive away after dropping her off at school, other students would see the van and know that Bea was at school. There were instances when other students made fun of Bea because she was poor or didn’t have certain things. “I related more to people that were on free or reduced lunch with me.”

She became familiar with the conversation that included talking about what was happening that weekend and what their parents could not afford.

Bea attributes much of her mother's perspective on status as part of her culture: African people, they are very proud people to the point to where when they don't have, they don't express that to people like when they need help. Sometimes they don't say they need help. To this day, my mom does not—like if something happened, mom needs the bill paid or something like that, very rarely will you see that she calls her brother or sisters and say, 'I don't have it.'

Bea remembers a particular event that exemplified her mother's pride:

I remember one time, I had a sleepover and this was when I was in private school and...nobody packed my bag for me and she (mother) didn't tell me which one was my nightgown and which one was a robe. What she had packed was like-she thought it was going to be really cold so it was this wool kind of gown. And I was like, 'I don't think that's my nightgown.' She bought something brand new for me because she knew. 'She's going to be with all these rich white kids and so I'm going to make sure she has this.' It was something that I didn't recognize as my nightclothes.

While at her friend's house, her friend's mother got one of her daughter's nightgowns and had her wear it instead:

And oh my God, when I got home, I was in so much trouble. I was in so much trouble because my mom said, 'It was in your bag. Your nightgown was in your bag and you don't use...you just embarrassed me because the way you thought



that I just didn't—you just didn't have a nightgown and I didn't pack it for you and that maybe you don't have nightgowns.'

Bea's mother was quite upset. Bea pleaded with her mother about the mistake and her mother's response was quite pointed, "Don't represent me in a way that makes me look or makes us, our family look like we're poor." Bea's mother always made sure her and her siblings dressed nicely, looked nice and dress appropriately. Wearing clothes with holes was unacceptable.

Bea and her siblings were taught to speak and act in certain ways as well. It was difficult for Bea to then grow up and find people who both looked like her and sounded like her. Bea was made fun of because of the way she talked. As she got older, people would try to connect with her because they recognized Bea for speaking a certain way. Bea would respond:

I didn't come from where you came from. We struggled growing up. I lived in a house, but that doesn't mean we had things. I remember winters where we didn't have anything to eat. My mom is still paying for our house. She rented it for a couple of years and then he sold it—the owner sold it to her.

While her parents were a great influence to her academic success, Bea also feels that her grandparents have been influential as well:

Instances...about my grandparents and how they had nothing, which that -- those stories really attribute to my determination now because it was, it's literally my mom tells me all the time. 'When you graduate -- every time you graduate those degrees, that stays in the family. So when you become a doctor, I'm a doctor too

and so is your grandmother and so is your grandfather and everybody who came behind, everybody who's coming in front of you, everybody who came behind you, that's their doctorate. It's not just yours.

Bea continues:

For the first seven years of my life, I was with my grandmother and she was -- she very much was just like, 'You go to school.' Every single conversation we ever had was, 'Look, I'm not playing games with you. You're going to school. Don't tell me you're not. Don't ever drop out. If for any reason, I'm not here, don't think I'm not watching you.' She very much instilled that in me, the school thing. And then, when my grandfather came from Africa, he was blind, but I was in high school and he was like, 'So, where are you going to school? Where are you going to college?' And, to the point to where he was a very proud person to where if anything ever happened, he would be like, 'No, that's my granddaughter. Nothing is allowed to happen to her. How much money do you need?'

### **Summary**

Bea was raised in a family that valued education. Her mother has worked hard to support Bea and her siblings through school. Education was highly valued even though the family was struggling in different ways. Bea's broad support system not only included her mother, father, and grandmother, but also included her neighbor and teachers. Bea has been able to continue with her academic journey and continues to be successful.

## **Aida**

Aida is an African-American female in the third year of her doctoral program. She lived in a middle-class family until her parents divorced when she was in elementary school. Her mother struggled to make a life for herself and her two children.

For most of Aida's life, there were three people in the home, Aida, her mother, and her sister. While talking about her mother's background, Aida explains:

My grandmother has a sixth grade education, came from the deep south. And her and my grandfather moved up to Philadelphia during the Black Migration to escape the racism in the south. So they really want a middle lifestyle class for their kids. So my mother grew up very middle class for black people at that time like they had a piano in the house.

Aida talks about the role her mother's upbringing had on her own expectations of marriage and a family. When her mother got married, Aida describes:

She really wanted to perpetuate that same living standard. She married my dad and we had a very upper middle class home. I went to private Christian school. I danced at a really prestigious ballet academy. But my dad is an alcoholic and their marriage – he suffered terribly because of it. He became extremely abusive to me. Physically, he beat me for years. He cheated on my mother a lot.

At home, she felt like she could never do anything right. Aida received her validation at school because when she would go home, her father would brutalize her. School was the only place where she got “good jobs” on her homework. Education and

school became a source of validation, empowerment and self-worth for Aida from a very young age.

Before the divorce and before her father's alcoholism got out of control, Aida explains that there was a mindset surrounding her:

When you're black you grow up in places where black people don't do well. And you do well. It's very much like I need to show that I'm different. I need to show right so for my sister and I, we were really an extension of my parents' middle classness. So the fact that they put us in certain schools, that we danced at certain academies, that we had as sort of an extra-curricular activities, we were really -- my dad really wanted to have little ladies and really be models of his social mobility. My grandparents were the same way. My one grandmother had a piano in her home. My other grandmother had an in-ground pool. And that was really these older black women who grew up with nothing saying to their white neighbors 'Look what we've been able to do. We're different.'

Aida spent considerable time with her grandmother and aunts. Hard work was valued in her extended family. Aida would learn about her family's experience in Philadelphia and their journey to financial success. Aida remembers, "Excellence was something that was drilled into us. My grandmother would always say, 'We moved out of the fields for you guys to give you guys this life.' But they weren't the type of people to create trust funds." Although her extended family was more financially secure, Aida's grandmother was more concerned about Aida and her sister working hard for their education and future. Aida is the first grandchild that did not go into the military.

Although Aida's father was abusive to her behind closed doors, he was a very successful banker. She was always shown that not only are these the types of jobs you want to get, but the way to get there was through an education. Aida remembers her father being quite supportive of her education. He would give Aida and her sister words of the day. He would give a word and a definition like facetious or loathe. She would then go to school and use those words all day in her conversations. Aida also remembers that her mother wanted them to be learning constantly. Her mother would play *Hooked on Phonics*© for Aida and her sister while they were playing. After the divorce, Aida lost that daily practice and routine.

When Aida was completing elementary school, her parents got divorced. It took Aida's mother some time to divorce her father. She was in graduate school at the time and Aida remembers her mother explaining to Aida that she stayed in the abusive household because she knew she had to be able to support her children (Aida and her sister) before she could leave the marriage. Her mother knew the value of an education and was working diligently to finish her master's degree in order to better provide for Aida and her sister. Aida continues, "I think implicitly I've learned that education gives you a better life. My mom's also – she's a therapist, ironically."

Aida remembers her family started living in poverty during the divorce. When her father left her mother, "He took everything. He also took the house. We lived in a state where who gets out first gets off free," Aida adds. Things happened very quickly and quite suddenly to Aida and her family. Aida continues:

We hit rock bottom pretty fast. We lost everything. I mean my mother came into my room and told me to grab everything I could and whatever I can grab, we can take. So my pictures, my toys, all my memories, notebooks, diaries, all of that stuff just gone and we lived on nothing.

Although, Aida's mother had a job at the time, that money went towards the expenses and debt accrued by her father:

She [her mother] lost her house. She lost her car. She had no credit. And I mean, God bless her, she was paying off the house and car he bought for his mistress. So that's how we really kind of had the rug pulled from underneath us and just shoved into this new socio-economic status.

Her father also refused to pay child support. During those early stages of the divorce, the courts did not pursue her father for the money Aida and her mother needed to survive. Aida's relationship with her father declined dramatically. "He was supposed to pay for our tuition, he refused. He was supposed to pay for our health insurance, he refused. So my mother was paying cash for everything. So on paper, when she goes for assistance and for housing help and shelter help, they always turn her away," interjected Aida.

When Aida's father left the family, her mother was left homeless and all of the debt her parents' had accrued. Her mother had to start over. For the majority of her teenage years, they lived in a truck. Eventually they moved to the inner city. Aida remembers that her activities were not ideal during this time:

When you live in the inner city and you're living in that level of poverty, your activities are not the best. You spend your free time in a lot of dangerous places doing dangerous things...But I was around drug dealers and all types of just not necessarily the most positive things and that's why I was around.

Aida recalls:

We didn't have cable for years, didn't have electricity half the time, didn't have a working phone half the time. All we have really was books for entertainment when we got home. And I would read these books. So I would read books by – I remember the first time I read *Race Matters* by Cornel West, I was nine. I was nine. That's what happens when you just have nothing.

Aida and her mother would go to food banks or to their church for groceries because they could not afford grocery shopping in grocery stores. During that time, Aida's mother struggled to provide food for Aida and her sister, but was unable to receive the assistance she needed from the free and reduced lunch program at school:

My mother actually went to the high school and the middle school and argued because she's like, 'Listen, I cannot feed my kids. I cannot afford to feed my kids and I can't even afford to give them the \$1.20 every week to get lunch. I need to get them the \$0.30 lunch.

The school denied the free and reduced lunch program, mostly because the household income was not low enough to receive assistance:

Because of her job, she knows that there's aid out there and she knows that so many people are on it and abuse it and she's like listen, I just need help because

my husband is a son of a bitch. Like I don't want to buy a new TV, I just want to feed my kids until I can get back on my feet.

Before her parents' divorce, Aida attended a private Christian school. She remembers that her education was understandably skewed towards Christianity and was more rigorous in the areas of math and science. "By the time we got kicked out for not paying the bill, I was leaps and bounds beyond my peers when we went to public school. And my exposure to those resources."

When she attended public school after the divorce, it was a trade school. The goal was to get a job, not necessarily go to college. Aida remembers having to fight her guidance counselor in order to get help. Moving from private school to public school allowed Aida to truly see the difference between the two school systems. Even the quality of education was different and she was often amazed at what the students in public school were unable to accomplish or had not learned yet.

Aida started to notice this difference more at a class level:

It was class because at the private Christian school, we used to be 90% white kids and then 10% rich black kids. I think I was able to begin to identify what socio-economic status meant and the importance of education. When I went to the public school, they didn't want more because they've never been exposed to more. They didn't know more existed. And I really started to make the connection that education – it unlocks the door and I don't know what's behind that door but I just knew that something was. I kind of lived in both worlds and



so I've been able to reflect on both with that knowledge, whereas most people only really lived in just one track.

Aida's mother tried to be very involved with her homework. When she arrived home from school, her mother wanted to see her homework. A common routine in the household was to complete homework and then her mother would provide supplementary materials like workbooks and other reading books. Aida remembers completing her own homework and then working on a few pages of the workbooks that her mother gave her. Her mother would check her work. If Aida got too many problems wrong, her mother would provide more pages.

During those times, Aida learned some important lessons about her work. She explains:

I quickly learned to slow down and check my work, to not turn anything in until it was excellent, to not give her a rush job because I learned that rushing and just seeking instant gratification would only hurt me. So she really taught me to slow down and she also really instilled in me and this is one of the things she also said as an African-American woman, you have to do extra because the color of your skin to be considered average. You're friends only do homework from school and that's fine, but as a black woman you're going to have to do more. You have to do this work and this workbook and your homework from school and if it's not perfect, you don't get to play.

Aida remembers reading often when she was young. Her parents had an extensive library before the divorce. They were professionals with a strong black identity

and provided a large selection of Afrocentric literature. After the divorce, Aida and her mother steadily lost possessions. She saw even her library dwindle. At point, Aida remembers living in a beautiful home with no electricity.

During the hard times in the family, Aida and her sister would spend time at the library. Aida's mother could not afford to go on trips anymore. They no longer had homes in other locations. Instead of the vacation trips, Aida's mother would take them to the library twice a week. Aida also remembers her mother taking them to school with her. Aida feels that she probably took them because she could not afford a babysitter. Her mother also wanted to expose Aida and her sister to higher education. After the divorce, Aida's mother would complete homework with them every day. She read and studied with them. Aida's mother was very involved with the teachers and was present at every PTA meeting.

Education was valued in different ways in Aida's family. She would get \$20 from her grandfather for every A on her report card and thus was saving a considerable amount of money. At a certain point, her grandfather told Aida that he would not pay for her good grades. Understandably, Aida was upset, but her grandfather told her, "Why should I pay you for the thing you should be doing?" And that just stuck with me," adds Aida.

While Aida's mother was putting the pieces of her life back together, she would tell Aida how important it was that she had an education. Aida's mother did not have her home anymore, but was aware that she was able to get out of her situation faster because she had an education and was working on her Master's degree:

My mother would always say ‘Thank God for that degree.’ We didn’t have a home but it was – it could have been longer. But because of my degree, I was able to get us out of living out of a car much quicker than a woman who only had a high school education.

The value of an education was clear to Aida even as she graduated from high school. Aida adds:

My mother was clear: college or the military, one or the other but you can’t sit here and do nothing. And if you just want to get a job, that’s fine but you can’t live here and do that. Like you’ve got to get on your own. So yeah it’s always been education – whether implicitly or explicitly, there’s always been an expectation to do well and to – and for education to be that conduit to make that happen.

Those next years were tough for Aida and her family. These were years with no food or clothes. Aida had to step up and be a parent to her sister and mother alike. Aida’s mother fell into a horrible depression because of all of the events they had experienced. Aida had to get a job to help her family:

One of the things that I realized was if I don’t go to school and do better, we’re never going to get out of this hole, you know. And so the same way was my salvation when I was, you know, being abused, it became my salvation but for different reason. So it just became this real mechanism for upper – upper mobility. It was the capital I needed to avoid, you know, stank.

After the divorce, her mother was battling depression, she was not nearly as involved in Aida's education. Aida's education was still important to her mother, but she just did not have the energy to be more involved in related educational activities.

Routines had been important. The family would talk about what they would want to do in school and talk about other events as needed. After the divorce, those conversations were not taking place. Aida's mother was working two jobs and working 12 hours a day to keep her family off of the streets and in a two-bedroom apartment. "It was not nearly as structured, I mean definitely living with no resources because we had nothing really affected the attention she paid on our education and the attention we paid."

Aida continues:

When she [her mother] had the resources she could be very attentive to our needs and to our education and to our future. But when she – but when we lost everything, it was about keeping food on the table. She would go hungry so many times. I'd hear her stomach growling and I knew she was hungry and keeping us fed and then wanting us to still – I think she got very guilty about the divorce so wanting us to have things that our friends had, over compensating.

Aida's behavior changed after the divorce as well. Her parents were divorced while Aida was in elementary school. By the time she got to high school, she was starting to miss school. At some point, Aida recalls only attending school two days a week. This resulted in Aida attending Saturday Academy. Aida remembers having teachers who knew she was capable of producing well academically:

I was lucky because the teachers who were there really taught me. That's where I learned calculus. That's where I learned physics. That's where I've really had to learn how to want it on my own because I – God I've never thought about it this way. I didn't have my parents or family pushing it on me anymore like I had to make a decision, do I want this for myself or not.

Aida also remembers learning how to network with other teachers during this time. It became an important lesson to her to figure out who she could count on outside of her household.

When asked what pushes her to keep going, Aida explained:

I think all of these experiences that I've talked to about really – they really pushed me. I joke about it but I am terrified of being poor again. There's nothing worse than living in a car. I mean it is just horrifying and the stigma of it and the shame and it's just a horrible experience. So I definitely think that my fear of being in poverty drives me more than anything. I think I also like I picked my area for very personal reasons and that really drives me because I believe in what I do. It's really an extension of myself to those – for those who know me they can see me, myself and my work. So it's really a way for me to articulate myself to the world. Teaching even though has lots of ups and downs – my first time teaching I had all focused group students so they were all first generation underprivileged college students and so I really saw myself in them, and I got to see what happens with education.

Aida specifically recalls a teacher who helped her when she really needed guidance. She adds, “It’s really important to me to pay it forward because like I’ve mentioned I had this calculus professor who wouldn’t let me fail. Who was like, ‘I get it you’re going through a lot but you can do this.’ And so I try to be that person for my students from really big on karma and paying it forward. And so that really drives me.”

In the process of discussing how all of the past experiences may have impacted the relationship between her mother and herself:

We have a complicated relationship because of the divorce and because I had to take such an adult role at such a young age. I was like so young when I started raising my sister and so young when I started working. That we’re not very mother and daughter, we’re more like partners and that can really bad. It can be bad because you have a 15-year-old daughter with boundary issues, who wants to know about the bills and who’s asking you about why didn’t you spend this on that. She lives through this. And she so gets excited whenever I publish, God help her. She’d pass this sheet out at churches and stuff. She’s so proud. She’s so proud. And so I sometimes think that I mentioned before you just look back at your legacy and it just stopped.

Further discussion about events that led to her academic success in graduate school:

I went to really prestigious private all girls’ school in North Carolina. And I think that was my way of really rebelling, really seeing what poverty is like and so me and my sister joke all the time and we always say to each other our biggest fear is

being poor again. That's our biggest fear, you know what I mean? It's like I'll never be poor again. Been there, done that.

### **Summary**

As a researcher and educator, I am familiar with the plight of a child being raised in poverty. Aida's story is different. She was not born into poverty. She had the two parents, the great household, the loving mother. But she was thrown into poverty at a critical age in her life. Aida's long-term struggles show the impact of poverty on a family, regardless of "when" it happens. Aida identifies the need for education as a means to escape her future in poverty and recognizes her mother, grandparents and teachers as her support system.

### **Helena**

Helena is a Hispanic female in the second year of her doctoral program. She earned her Master's degree at a university in west Texas. Her mother completed elementary school and then attended a technical school to train as a secretary. Her father completed the fourth grade of school in Mexico. Helena lived in a household with her parents, two siblings, an aunt, and her grandparents near the Mexican border and is the first in her family to graduate from college.

Life at home was very distressing for Helena. She remembers times when all they had to eat was potatoes. "That's really tough, especially when you're going to school where kids have more stuff. Not only are you absolutely poor but you also feel relatively poor compared to others," explains Helena. Helena's mother wanted to work

outside of the home. Her mother felt like she could handle it and wanted to provide more for her children.

Helena's mother would cross over stateside to work as a maid four days a week and return to Mexico in the evening. When she started working, things got better in the household. But then her father's traditional mind-set created problems:

He didn't like that my mom was working but also my mom was desperate I guess because we didn't have a lot of the basics covered and most of us were going to school. Even though schools are supposed to be free in Mexico, there's still need on maintenance payments that they have to make. And they have to buy uniforms and materials and all sorts of stuff. So she definitely wanted him to-for us to, you know, go to school, but he didn't.

Helena remembers that her father and mother became estranged. "He sort of washed his hands from the whole family. He started working less. He's a mechanic so he worked independently but work started being really scarce." Helena's father had a strong influence on the household as well:

He pushed my brother a lot to work with him as a mechanic. My brother ended up quitting school because the pressure was too much. He was going to middle school barely. He had to work the whole afternoon with him so he wouldn't have time to do homework. He ended up not graduating from middle school because he failed one single class and he barely got his middle school diploma a few years ago.



In her younger years, Helena remembers that her father, even though he praised her for good grades, did not really want her to go to school. In his eyes, it was important for her to learn how to be a better home-maker and not attempt to work outside of the home as her mother often did. During her teenage years, Helena remembers her father taking her to school every morning. He would tell her, “You shouldn’t be doing this. You should be working and contributing to the family household. You’re wasting your time.” At 16, Helena had her first job. She went to school and took care of the household when her mother was working. Helena worked in a maquiladora (a Mexican sweatshop), but the job did not last long.

Helena remembers getting home from school, having something to eat, which her mother took care of, and then spending the rest of the afternoon doing homework, watching television, and playing with cousins. She would read at home. As she got older and her mother was working, Helena would be picked up from school by her father or uncle and then go home, feed family members, clean the house, and complete homework. Although there was always a lot going on at home, Helena always tried to prioritize homework.

Since her mother was so busy working and taking care of the household, Helena does not remember her mother completing any school activities with her after school. In the meantime, Helena became very involved in helping to take care of her younger sibling. Eventually, Helena was in charge of coming home after school and taking care of the cleaning and feeding of her sister, a little cousin, and her grandfather. Helena was

involved in many activities through her school years from basketball for a year to First Aid Club and church activities.

Even though Helena grew up poor in Mexico, she attributes much of her success in school with the schools she attended. “I had really strict teachers, a lot of discipline and a lot of no-nonsense,” adds Helena. “I learned a lot about discipline and sitting down and getting stuff done.” Helena’s mother knew she had great teachers in Mexico and never gave up on the dream of giving Helena the best opportunities.

Helena remembers a school teacher being key to her love of reading:

It started in elementary school with this teacher I had in fifth or sixth grade. She was really cool and she did this exercise where each of us got a book and then we would read that book in a week and then we would write a summary for the next Monday. And then the following week, we would rotate all our books and do the same thing. By the time the year ended, I had read a lot of books and I realized that I love reading.

“I was always encouraged to get good grades and sort of reprimanded when I didn’t. They sort of always wanted me to do well in school. It was an interesting dynamic because there was domestic violence going on,” explains Helena. Alcoholism and stress from lack of money were often causes for many of the problems in the household.

Helena does not recall her parents telling her to do her homework. That was something she did on her own. She remembers having a typewriting class in Mexico. Her father was often bothered by her completing her homework late into the night.

Helena remembers how important school was to her. “My high school was really extreme. The situation and the environment was sort of an escape for me. And I always liked reading a lot too. That was sort of a – I guess a path for me.”

Her father’s wishes for her not to go to school fueled a desire in Helena to get an education:

Now I’m going to get it just to spite you. That was my first- but then I just enjoyed it a lot and once I became an undergrad and became involved in research...al lot of doors opened for me. There’s a lot that can be done.

After securing permanent resident papers while in high school, a process that lasted ten years, Helena’s mother moved Helena and her sister to the states to continue with school since it was not affordable in Mexico. After she moved to the states, she took part in the free and reduced lunch program. Helena’s father did not join Helena’s mother when they moved to the States. At that point, her parents separated and Helena, her mother and sister moved in with an aunt with nothing but their clothes. Helena was finishing high school by this time, but her brother was unable to secure papers and stayed in Mexico with their father. He went to technical school to learn about computers and eventually landed a desirable position in Mexico.

One of the most influential things in Helena’s life was the example of discipline set forth by her mother. “The fact that I saw my mom, that she did a lot of things with her time. It made me think that it was possible for me to also organize myself and do things and get stuff done,” explains Helena. “Nobody really had a lot of schooling, so I didn’t have like a role model or somebody that I can look up to,” adds Helena.

Helena's mother is very happy she is pursuing a doctoral degree. Even though she may not understand what all it entails, she is happy. "She used to tell everybody that her daughter is in a PhD program. Some people don't believe her. She still works at the Wal-Mart."

Thinking about her mother places Helena in a difficult position. "Sometimes I feel bad about that. I'm still here in school and sometimes I feel like it's not my place. Like I should be working and helping her more instead of her having to work her ass off." When Helena lived at home and was working on her Master's degree, her mother would tell her she spent too much time on the computer. Her mother had an assumption that she was not doing anything significant on the computer. At the time, Helena was working on data analysis and writing:

I guess if she would see me, she wouldn't understand why my work only entails reading and writing. My family feels like I'm faking getting a college education. I received a lot of heat when I said that I was going to leave for a PhD. When I did my master's, I was okay, you know. It's a master's I guess. But now when I said I want to do a PhD, I just got a lot of heat from a lot of people.

"My dad died when I was about to start my master's, and then my mom got super sick so I was the only one working. I had to have all these jobs and I was going to my master's full-time." When her mother got better, she got another job. Things started to get better, and Helena decided to start a PhD program. Her brother, on the other hand, had a problem with this. In his eyes, Helena needed to get a job. He did not understand that Helena was working three jobs. Her aunts also had a problem with her going to

school. “When they see me, they talk to me like going to school is a hobby, like a meeting or something.” Her aunts would often refer to her as an “old maid”.

“Since I was a child, I always had this desire to escape. The situation is pretty f--- up. So I just wanted to escape.” She adds:

When I was growing up, I never thought about going for my PhD. I just wanted to get a master’s. My full-time job was at community college as a staffer. Just a regular clerical person, but you know, I knew a lot of instructors and lecturers and I liked what they were doing. So that was my plan. I’m just going to get a master’s.

As Helena got closer to graduating with her Master’s, she felt like she was just floating through her program. She had very little guidance. She felt as if she was taking classes but had no direction. At that point, her adviser suggested she apply to doctoral programs. She took Helena under her wing when she saw how lost Helena was. “She just put my academic life in order.” Helena adds, “When she told me to make a list of programs, I did it sort of an assignment and then all of a sudden I was applying and then I got offers and then I got accepted.” Helena also thinks that go to school for a doctoral program with several friends also helped. Had Helena been alone in the process, she does not believe she would have made the necessary changes in her life to move.

Helena’s friends also became a much needed support network during these changes. As her family saw pictures of Helena on Facebook and transitioning in life, her family thought she would have a hard time:

Education was a survival mechanism in many fronts. Not only psychologically because I needed something to take me out of the environment that I was in, but also sort of the only way that could pull me out of poverty. That was the route for me. I guess I always thought if I study hard enough, if I keep going to school, I'm not going to be that poor.

"I had the help from the right people when I was in college." Even as she completed her undergraduate degree, Helena remembers meeting the right people. She continues, "I met wonderful professors, all females that encouraged me a lot and they were all Caucasian. I didn't have that many, no, I don't think- I only have one Latino mentor from all of my mentors."

Helena also talked about her struggles as she went through school. Helena battles with the realities of her family back home and her own life now as a graduate student:

I guess it feels weird. It's like I have two separate lives, like my life at home and my life here and my family still lives in a project. I just feel out of place even though I'm doing good in classes. The professors tell me 'You're good. You should be here.' I just feel weird like when I go home I go back to my mom and you know, they're still struggling. My mom and my sister, they live paycheck to paycheck. I'm always sending money home. I have colleagues that might be Latinos but their parents are professors or they're doctors so I see where it's coming from. But in my case, it's like nobody in my family understands even what a PhD means. Nothing. I miss them a lot and not that I don't want to but when I'm there I also feel I'm not equipped. So it's a feeling of inadequacy in

both places because here I don't feel that I have the upbringing. The interactions I have with people here which I have with grad students and professors with the interactions back home where no one has education. It's a constant feeling of being inadequate.

Helena attributes her success to her mother:

This is what she came for. She didn't cheat on her husband even though they were in a bad relationship. He's still her husband and when he died, she was really depressed. So I know she had feelings for him. So I think that if the opportunity is presenting itself I must do it because this is what she came for. She wanted us to have an education. She wanted us to just have a better life than she did. And I think it'll be a waste to a lot of things if we didn't do it.

Helena recognizes that her mother supports her in whatever she does. She was very supportive but not necessarily in material ways, because she did not have the means to do so:

I mean they support and my mom supports whatever I do. You know she's very supportive but not on the material sense like not – I mean she could never be doing homework or I mean she would help with like do you need a notebook? Let's go buy you a notebook once she started working. But the help was more like I support you, go for it.

### **Summary**

Helena was raised by a poor family on the US-Mexican border. She was taught by teachers and her mother to value her education, although she received dissenting

support from her father. To Helena, her education became a source of escape from her familial situation and continues to drive her academic endeavors. Teachers from her earlier education instilled a strong work ethic and her mother continues to support Helena in her efforts. Helena recognizes her mother and grandmother as part of her support system as well.

### **Kimberly**

Kimberly is a Hispanic female from a large city in central Texas. She is in the second year of her doctoral program. Kimberly attended a magnet high school near the Section 8 housing. She lived with her immediate and extended family. Kimberly's grandparents lived right next door and her aunt lived next to them:

My grandpa had to come over from Mexico, I don't even know when, and then he bought these houses from a family that had owned the first five houses of the block. It was a white family. And, they sold the houses really cheap to my grandparents because I think maybe the owner -- I think she was really sick and my grandpa might have done landscaping for her or something. And, she ended up selling them from what my grandpa says kind of cheap because they all had moved to -- the whole family moved to a different state and they needed to sell all the houses.

Kimberly grew up around her cousins. While her father had a job outside of the home, Kimberly's mother's job was to care for Kimberly's cousins. "Even when I was young, there was always at least 10 cousins in my house that my mom was babysitting." While talking about growing up in poverty, Kimberly states:



I didn't know I was poor growing up. Actually, I didn't notice a lot of things. I didn't notice I was poor. I didn't notice I was bullied so much for I guess being really smart. I remember when I was younger, I went to middle school and then we had -- I mean, I had such a large family. I have 30 cousins or 40 cousins on my mom's side. We would just pass down clothes like uniforms because we wore uniforms. My older cousins would pass -- the boys would pass down like once they grew out of it, then my brothers would wear it and then once my brothers wore it, then the people younger than them would wear it. We got hand-me-downs and I don't think I noticed that until later because I remember people giving me some shit in the middle school.

Growing up, Kimberly also did not understand how money was impacting her family. This understanding changed when she got to college:

I thought a lot of places were really expensive and then when I was in college, I was on a scholarship in college so I had extra money. Then, I was able to go eat wherever I wanted to eat. And now, I'm like, 'That's not too bad.' I mean, it's not \$50 a plate, but like Olive Garden and stuff like that. Because sometimes I -- I value my life too much and I have to tell myself I had this life, I have best friends and have the exact same life, but my friend got pregnant at 16.

Kimberly's mother did not earn her GED until she was in her early 30's. While in middle school, Kimberly remembers helping her mother earn her GED. Her parents have known each other since they were about 11 and started dating while in middle school. Her father graduated from high school while her mother dropped out during her

junior year. She tried to go back and finish, but soon got married, became a housewife, and started raising children.

Kimberly's father attempted college but did not care for it and only lasted a few weeks. Kimberly remembers her father telling her that he tried going to school, but it was very hard. At the time, her mother was not working outside of the home and her father worked two jobs to support the family. However, he would often tell her, "You should go to school because I've tried really hard to go to school, but I couldn't because I ended up taking care of my family."

As Kimberly grew up, she remembers taking time to assist her mother in her schooling. Her mother was strong in reading but did poorly in math. While Kimberly was learning algebra in middle school, she would teach her mother algebra after school until she finally passed.

Sitting down with her mother to teach her algebra was just one of the routines in the house:

We got home, our mom cooked for me and all my cousins because she babysat all my cousins. My dad would come home, we would do homework and stuff. I guess before my dad -- my dad worked for UPS so he would work 12 or 14 hours depending on the season. During Christmas, he would work all day.

On a typical day, Kimberly's mother would make breakfast for her dad, breakfast for the rest of the immediate family, and then breakfast for all of the cousins that got dropped off at six in the morning. She would get everybody in the car and take them to

school early. Since Kimberly's mother did not work, she was the PTA and volunteer mother for at least ten years.

Kimberly loved reading as a child. She attributes her exposure to reading to her kindergarten teacher. Kimberly remembers reading the *Boxcars and Goosebumps* books as a younger child:

I'm the reader that likes to get so engaged in the book that I think I'm in the book. My brothers don't like reading. My parents don't like reading. For the most part, most of my family doesn't like reading. I don't really know why I liked reading. I just did.

There were books available in the home, but Kimberly does not remember anyone else having a passion for reading:

My parents bought me books even though they didn't really like reading. They always bought me books. But I remember my dad liked reading small books to me and my mom. My mom was the typical Hispanic housewife that just did everything else besides, besides working and reading, she'd cook and clean and take care of my little brothers. I've been really obsessed with reading since I was a child. Probably, I'm one of the only ones in my entire family, besides one of my cousins. His dad read a lot and his mom -- that's my only tía that is educated.

Kimberly liked school very much and knew it was important to her. She was able to attend a magnet school that was coincidentally located in her neighborhood. She describes a school where half the population was for the academy and half was regular

students from the neighborhood. Compared to her elementary school and middle school, her high school was extremely diverse.

Kimberly's father has always been supportive of her education. As time went on, her mother earned her GED and got a better job. Kimberly started to see the value of education and where it would help take her family. She remembers her parents and aunt being advocates for her education. From early on in her life, she heard them explain to her that she needed to graduate high school and attend college. As a teenager, Kimberly's parents were in their 30's and felt that they were too old to go back to school. Although they felt they could not go back to school, Kimberly's parents supported her.

Kimberly cautiously admits that she grew up in a home that dealt with domestic violence. She often used books to help cope with what was happening in the home. Most of the domestic violence happened before she was six and before her brothers could remember it:

I'm still trying to be psychologist for my dad. From what my mom said, my dad grew up in a really violent home. It happened when I was a kid and then my brothers really don't remember and then it kind of went away. My dad needs help. First of all, my dad needs Jesus and then second of all, my dad needs medications because he's bipolar. But he's Hispanic so he doesn't need medication. I think based on my dad's childhood, based on my dad's temper, based on something now that I like theorizing my life or something, based on

these machismo things that he grew up with and the mentality that is on all kind of Hispanic men to be a certain way.

Kimberly also believes her father was having extra marital affairs throughout her childhood, which created a confrontation when her mother found out. These situations also led to more experiences with domestic violence. Kimberly remembers such things happening when she was young and then starting again when she was about fifteen.

Kimberly recalls that when she left for college, it started again. She explains:

I was scared to leave my house to come to college because then I would be away because I was the oldest, right? So then eventually, I had to come, I had to come to school. I couldn't just stay in Dallas because a lot of people stay in Dallas for school and then they stay in Dallas.

During those years, Kimberly also remembers acting as if she was happy. Or as she stated, "Fake happiness -- I want to say fake happiness." She remembers putting up a front for her friends and family and hoping that nobody really knew what was going on in the house.

Escaping from the day-to-day realities of her family was normal for Kimberly and her siblings. Like her, Kimberly's brothers escaped in their own way:

My brothers really, really love soccer. My middle brother does. And, yeah, I feel that might have been an escape for him because he had soccer practice all the time and soccer tournaments. And then, he had his own soccer friends, he played for a classic league so you've got to pay, but my brother was on a scholarship because you have to pay like the coach like \$2,000 a month or something. And

so, he was definitely on scholarship because we didn't have that kind of money, but all -- a lot of his friends were really, really wealthy. All of his friends were really wealthy.

In school, there were several people who supported Kimberly and helped her along the way. Specifically, there was one teacher who mentored Kimberly and spoke to her in realistic ways:

I have a lot of teachers that I like, but there was one teacher, a middle school teacher. He taught a precollege prep course and we would do the random stuff now. It was a precollege prep course. I always went back and visited him after middle school. In high school, I would go visit him and then even through undergrad, I went and visited him all the time. He would always give it to me real straight like, 'You need to do something with your life Kimberly. You need not come back to this shit place. You just need to do something.' And during middle school and high school, he would always be -- and a lot of girls get boys crazy and he's like, 'You do not do that shit. You didn't -- not get boy a crazy. It's like that's it, you're going to get pregnant and you're going to stay here forever.

Sentiments about school changed throughout Kimberly's upbringing. She explains, "I went to college and my parents were like, 'Go to college, not graduate from college, just go to college.' Then, I was going through college, they're like, 'Okay, graduate college.' And, I feel this shift."

As the years went by, it was clear that Kimberly's mother was bettering herself with her own education. Her mother started to look at her own life and saw some of the things going on in the home. Slowly, it seems, things in the household started to change. Such changes lead to her mother changing how she saw Kimberly's future and the choices she would make. Kimberly adds, "As I've come along, I think I've caused my mom to come along. Before, my mom would say 'Kimberly, you have to finish your undergrad,' I mean, she was kind of worried about the whole married and when you have a kid and... At some point -- and now, she's like, 'Do whatever you want to do. Go travel the world. Eventually, you'll get married. Eventually, you'll have kids.'"

Although there were many struggles in the household, Kimberly values her Christian upbringing:

We grew up in a church home because my dad was raised in a church and all his best friends, like yeah, I know, it's very -- so, I got slapped the Bible a lot whenever we did, yeah, my dad was totally a Bible thumper. I grew up in church, but I felt like I've got saved before I left to college because I was so scared to leave.

### **Summary**

Although Kimberly grew up in a household that experienced limited resources and domestic violence, she comes from a home that valued education. Kimberly also used academics as a way to escape her day-to-day life. Her own parents learned to value education and thus supported Kimberly as she became academically successful. Her extended family (grandparents and aunts) are also identified as supportive family

members. Mentors at school also helped Kimberly get into college and becoming successful.

### **Samuel**

Samuel is an African-American male in the second year of his Master's program. Samuel was raised in a part of town that had many low SES neighborhoods. He has one brother who attends college. Samuel grew up in a two-bedroom apartment and remembers money being tight. He did not get the types of things other friends did. Samuel explained that in the black community it is common for kids to get Jordan's or the newest Nikes every other month, along with the newest technology. "My mom wasn't about this. She was very frugal and often clarified that she wasn't spending her money on this," Samuel explains.

Samuel and his brother also had chronic health conditions. Samuel deals with sickle cell and his brother was born with a disorder that led to needing a shunt in his head for the brain fluid to drain. In school, Samuel was not as active as he could have been:

I was in and out of the hospital. That affected a lot of my early childhood experiences. Just because I wasn't able to interact with other kids. Or do many of the things other kids, particularly like that of my male peers. As far as the black community and black kids particularly, young black males, going into sports is an integral part of the experience. I kind of got involved but my sickle cell kept complicating it.



While talking about how his illness affected his mother and in turn his own life, Samuel remembers:

She didn't want to take the chance all the time and me missing school and her having to pay for a lot of extra health expenses. So she took me out of sports. Being that she worked so much, I couldn't replace sports with anything, so all of my activities had to be at school. If it was at school, I had to have a ride home or something like that. I really didn't participate in things other than if it was at school. Most things I participated in was choirs, band, or something like that.

When he got to middle school, Samuel was able to start using the bus as after school transportation. "She did believe in spankings. So I wasn't really a bad child, but my mouth got me in trouble a lot," explained Samuel.

Samuel spent much of his childhood in the hospital. This is where he picked up his love for reading:

I didn't have anything else to do. They had a library and also a media center where you could play video games and stuff like that or you could check out the video game systems and bring them to your hospital room. But I wasn't really that into games. So I just read a lot.

While discussing the importance of reading, Samuel recalled a teacher from his past:

I remember my fourth grade English teacher. She used to have these reading groups or reading times, and it was just so interesting to me. I was just so amazed. She used to pass out these *Scholastic* newspapers where we could buy

books and stuff like that. So I begged my mom to buy me the collection one year, and she bought it. That was my favorite reading material. Even if I was on punishment and I didn't have anything to read, I would just read the book over again because it was so long and it would take all the time that I needed. Like if I was on punishment for two weeks then I would take two weeks to read the book.

When Samuel would get home from school, he would complete his homework even though nobody ever asked him about it. Samuel would also go to the library and use his library card to check out more books. The only books at his home were the *Harry Potter* series. Samuel would read those over and over. Samuel still has those books. "I wasn't really challenged, because I was really book-smart. It didn't take much from me to complete assignments. I would always pass in class."

When Samuel did make a poor grade, his mother really would not say anything because she knew he would quickly make up the grade and the work. Samuel does not recall his mother being very concerned about his grades. Partly, he gathered, was because he really did not struggle in school. Samuel did not recall his mother ever being concerned about him going to college. When asked why his mother felt this way about college, Samuel explained, "I think it was more so just because of her husband, who she was with at the time. He was like, 'Everyone doesn't go to college', because he didn't go to college."

Samuel noted that the value of school was instilled differently with him and his brother:

His schooling was different. She put a lot more time into his school, but he had a learning disability. He needed that extra love and attention. I didn't really need it.

Whether or not I'd get the extra help, I felt like I probably would have passed regardless of whether it was a C or a low B, I would still make the grade.

Samuel's parents were not supportive about college until his junior year of high school, when they realized that he might actually be able to graduate from college. That is when his parents would give him a few dollars when he needed it. He finally started to feel some sort of support.

Eventually, Samuel and his family moved to a different part of town. His step-father at the time was working more and Samuel remembers moving to a more affluent area. Samuel recalls, "I guess the income in the house had changed. But as far as resources, I didn't see much of a change."

Samuel's parents were not very involved in his schooling. From what he can remember, there was an occasional "good job" prior to high school. During his first semester of 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Samuel ran away from home. "There were a lot of reasons," Samuel adds:

Mainly because my mom didn't like tattoos at the time and I went ahead and got one. And she gave me an ultimatum. We still disagree at this, on this conversation, because she's like, 'Well, you made the decision'. And I'm like, 'You did tell me to get out, because you did give me an ultimatum.' She said, 'Either you go get a job, work, save and remove the tattoo or you're going to have to get out of my house.'

Three months later, his biological father found him and took him in. Prior, his had not been involved in raising Samuel:

They [my dad and his wife] were very capable of helping. Their income has changed over the years. He [my dad] was working at a Coca-Cola for the most part of my childhood. And you don't have any kids in the household. They just chose not to.

This marked a change in their relationship. During this time, Samuel was experiencing resistance on both sides of his family. Both his mother and father had remarried and were working on their new families. Samuel didn't feel like he fit in at all. When he was struggling, Samuel did not seek help from his father:

As far as teaching you how to be a man, he thought that was taught by my father. My father thought that he (my step-father) was going to take that. We had problems with me being accepted and by that time I had identified my sexuality to my mom and my father. That created problems. Not only at home, but at school because that was very taboo. People weren't accepting of that. They were like 'Oh, you're gay, oh no, no. You can't hang out with us.' You can't do certain things, because they are scared that somebody's going to think that they are gay or something like that. Yeah. Because the high school that I went to, or the neighborhood that I grew up in, after we moved out of the apartment was very much so. The community is very segregated. Whites have their area and their children hang out with their people and blacks have their area.

Samuel knew he wanted to be accepted somewhere and to also be able to express himself, so he started going down the wrong path. He recalls:

So I started hanging around the local gang members which they never were a real gang. Real meaning drug trafficking, robbing, promoting violence, etc. But it had started to become an issue just in the community because people started thinking that they were really certified gang members. And so you had instances where people were trying to fight. That was my first time really getting into trouble like that. It really wasn't a lot that we were doing. It was just like 'Oh, somebody wants to fight you', it wasn't like, 'oh, we're getting together, we're going to rob/shoot somebody' or 'we're going to get together and go steal' or something like that. It was not like that. It was just like beef between two groups. My mom is from Chicago. And her brothers and my uncles and cousins, they're real gang members. My uncle was doing 25 years in a penitentiary. So she didn't know how to accept that because – and I don't blame her, because she was equating that to what they had gone through – so it was like it automatically clicked that 'Oh, well since you are in this, this must be what you're doing. So the household really got tense and it was just too much going on.

Samuel's mother reacted to all of this while Samuel was in high school. Samuel adds:

In the end, she was also going through things that I didn't know about. Now that I know, she was also going through some issues with her husband at that time. It's really crazy, because I just found out that he was involved in that type of

lifestyle too. It was like a lot going on behind the scenes that was being covered up. I didn't really know. I attribute that to my mom not wanting the label. She didn't want that to be our story. But it was our story.

Samuel remembers that his mother made every effort to keep him away from a negative lifestyle. However, one day his uncle told him that his mother was somehow involved in a questionable lifestyle herself. Shortly after, Samuel's stepfather confirmed the truth about his mother. Samuel knew as a young man that a questionable lifestyle was being lived by some family members. He recalls living in poor housing, yet having flashy cars around him. "If you're able to afford these cars, why are we not moving up? You know what I'm saying?"

After Samuel ran away, his father offered to have Samuel live with him while he finished high school. At the time, his stepmother was the only person he knew who had gone to college. Samuel admits that there were problems with his father and stepmother, but she was able and willing to initiate conversations with him about college and future plans. His mindset started to change about school. It helped that Samuel's grades never suffered, even with all of the chaos he experienced during those years.

Samuel's stepmother was the first person who introduced him to college life. She was vital in teaching Samuel about thinking and planning ahead. But because the household was so tense, Samuel also saw college as an opportunity. "College was my ticket to getaway. I could only move out once I graduated. I ended up graduating a semester early from high school and going straight to college the next semester."

While in college, Samuel needed support. He sought out an advisor who provided him with much needed guidance:

My undergraduate advisor has been very instrumental in a lot of decisions that I have made. She was really the one who guided me to what to do and not to do and how to go for it. Or if you are going to take this type of career then this is how you need to move forward and be successful. And she is also kind of found a way for me to be away from negativity. She would encourage me to get involved with health education or an honor society. I was interested in joining this organization because I need to get involved in something. I got involved and then the President of the organization, I guess she wasn't doing her job and Dr. Martin thought it was her time to step down. She said 'You're going to step up and take this position.' She kind of appointed me and I was like wow...I don't know but I felt like someone finally just believed in me. But it was like a whole other experience for me. So I took the offer and ran with it. And that's really what got me here today. And she knew everything about my past and I had to be open because if I'm trying to be marketable in the professional job pool then I need to know what I can work with. I needed to know my options and to do that I had to be honest and willing to work hard.

Samuel credits his college advisors with guiding him along his academic path. He adds, "My advisors were my mentors all along. My mentors are important." Samuel also expressed thoughts about what led to some of his academic success:

What impacted me and my success in school was just that I didn't want to have to struggle. I saw a better life for myself. I saw myself being my own boss.

Although growing up, the fact that I couldn't get many of the things I wanted inspired me to be somebody in life. That impacted me to go out and work for what you want. I knew there was no such thing as being unemployed or sleeping all day, you had to work to make a living. And the type of life I want to live would not be feasible without an education. When I started getting deeper into my college studies, I just felt like, my whole childhood could have been different. But because she didn't go to school, because she didn't know, because she [my mother] didn't care to reach out to professionals that might have known that had an effect on my upbringing.

As a final thought, Samuel reflected:

One of the things that is very important is being told I love you. That feeling of being appreciated. I never heard that growing up from my mother. I even asked her about it recently and she told me she didn't need to tell me that. She provided food, clothing and a shelter so that was proof that she loved me. However at times I did feel like more of a burden, than a child who was loved unconditionally. My mother grew up very poor. That is a big part of it. But she never told me that. It felt like I wasn't supported. Not loved. This is one of the reasons why it was so important to have mentors that knew what I was coming from. They knew everything about me, and they still saw something in me.

Samuel continues:



Looking back on what has led to this road to success, I honestly feel as though it was those tough experiences that made me who I am today. Growing up in the ghetto in an environment where the large majority of people you see making money are those that are doing so illegally. Establishing solid foundations is important. Support systems are important. Having academic advisors and professors (white and black) that truly want to see you succeed are important, even if it's just by having an open door and being available to talk for a moment without judgment or fear of them using that information against you. Being a part of an environment that makes you feel welcome is essential.

### **Summary**

Samuel grew up in a household where education was valued, but loosely supported by his parents. He was academically capable from an early age. Samuel used his strength in reading to escape his day-to-day life. He also recognized that academics would allow him to escape poverty in the future. Samuel struggled often through the years and was able to succeed in schools mostly because of mentors he met as he grew up. However, Samuel recognizes his parents, stepmother, teachers and advisors from school as part of his support system.

### **Emergent Themes**

The purpose of this study was to provide an in-depth understanding of the impact of the home environments of graduate students raised in low SES families. This study examined the perceptions of nine graduate students raised in poverty concerning elements of their home environment, which led to their academic success. Each

participant was raised in a different home environment, thus each narrative is unique. Yet, the stories contain similar threads. These similarities provide a context for the emergent themes and findings of this study. Two major themes emerged from this study: 1) a broad support system is essential; 2) Academics became an escape.

**Emergent Theme 1: A broad support system is essential.**

In spite of chaotic home environments, students raised in poverty recognized the importance of broad based support to be successful in school. Internal support systems included at least one parent providing trips to the library, helping with homework, establishing a routine, and providing books to read.

Henry identified his mother as the strongest person in the family throughout his entire life:

There was always this notion that you have to succeed in school. You have to do good in school. You want to be able to get a degree, you want to be successful when you get older because- my parents never said, ‘Hey, you don’t want to live like us the rest of your life on welfare’ or whatever, but they are just like, you don’t want to be living on the street, essentially.

He remembered when he told his mother he was going back to college. She was ecstatic and could not believe it. Henry often wonders if he persevered through school because it would make his mother happy.

Michael recalled when his mother would read to him and after his reading time he was expected to read to his brothers. He and his siblings also partook in games with flash cards, multiplication tables, memory games, etc. There was an abundance of books

at home from the Golden Books series to Dr. Seuss books to a *Highlights for Children* magazine subscription.

Bea's mother had high expectations. Bea remembers having it engrained in her that there is no such thing as failing. "We don't fail," she insists. "That kind of achievement was instilled in us that it's not really an option to fail. I think it still presses for me," adds Bea.

Upon arriving home from school, Aida's mother wanted to see her homework. A common routine in her household was to complete homework and then her mother would provide supplementary materials like workbooks and other reading books. Her mother would also check her work. If Aida got too many problems wrong, her mother would provide more pages.

During the difficult times in Aida's life, her mother was working on her own Master's degree. Aida adds, "My mother would always say 'Thank God for my degree.' Because of my degree, I was able to get us out of living out of a car much quicker than a woman who only had a high school education."

One of the most influential things in Helena's life was the example of discipline set forth by her mother. "The fact that I saw my mom, that she did a lot of things with her time. It made me think that it was possible for me to also organize myself and do things and get stuff done," explains Helena.

It was Henry's sister, who was the first in the family to attend college and gave Henry a glimpse of a different future. He was six years old when she took him on a tour of her campus close by. She would talk to him about his future and about where he

would be studying after high school. At the time, it did not mean much to Henry, but it is a memory that still lingers.

Although his parents raised Dylan, he recognizes the profound impact that his grandfather had on his life. Education was very important to Dylan's grandfather. Dylan would spend significant amounts of time with his grandfather. He remembers being pushed heavily to perform well in school. Dylan's grandfather would talk to him about his future plans and make Dylan work hard for different endeavors.

Eight of the nine participants identified one or more people outside of the family that assisted them in their process of developing academically. The person most often mentioned was a teacher. Henry remembers that teachers would go out of their way to provide books for him. He recalled, "I would latch on to a teacher who would express some sort of interest in my work, whatever I was doing." Henry did well academically because of the rewards he would get from the teachers and he recognized the support he received from these teachers.

Aida specifically recalls a teacher who helped her when she really needed guidance. She adds, "It's really important to me to pay it forward because like I've mentioned I had this calculus professor who wouldn't let me fail. Who was like, 'I get it you're going through a lot but you can do this.' And so I try to be that person for my students from really big on karma and paying it forward. And so that really drives me."

Helena remembers an elementary teacher being key to her love of reading. She adds:

It started in elementary school with this teacher I had in fifth or sixth grade. She was really cool and she did this exercise where each of us got a book and then we would read that book in a week and then we would write a summary for the next Monday. And then the following week, we would rotate all our books and do the same thing. By the time the year ended, I had read a lot of books and I realized that I love reading.

Kimberly recognized that there was one teacher that made an impact and became a part of her support system:

I have a lot of teachers that I like, but there was one teacher, a middle school teacher. He taught a precollege prep course. I always went back and visited him after middle school. In high school, I would go visit him and then even through undergrad, I went and visited him all the time. He would always give it to me real straight like, ‘You need to do something with your life Kimberly. You need not come back to this shit place.’

The teacher cautioned her about getting too boy crazy. “It’s like that’s it, you’re going to get pregnant and you’re going to stay here forever,” she added. He saw her potential and encouraged her to focus on her academics.

Similarly, Samuel remembers a schoolteacher that made a long-term impact on him as he prepared for his own academic success:

I remember my fourth grade English teacher. She used to have these reading groups or reading times and it was just so interesting to me. I was just so amazed. She used to pass out these *Scholastic* newspapers where we could buy books and

stuff like that. So I begged my mom to buy me the collection one year, and she bought it. That was my favorite reading material.

As he got older, Michael recognized that some of the opportunities he had were because of a guidance counselor. Michael explained, “That guidance counselor at my high school that literally happened by chance that ended up in my life because my original guidance counselor ended up being sick.” The new guidance counselor assisted him in finding college at a variety of schools and guided him through the college application process.

It is interesting to note there were always at least two family members in the support system. One of these was always the mother or step-mother. Each of the nine participants identified one or more people outside of the family and one or more people within the family that assisted them in their process of developing academically. For most of the participants, academic related support was shown by encouragement and assistance with homework and access to reading materials on a regular basis.

Although these participants had immediate and extended family members who supported them and valued education, an external support system also helped most graduate students do well in school. The participants were grateful for the support of teachers, advisors, and guidance counselors.

### **Emergent Theme 2: Academics became an escape**

Even though the parents of the participants did not always understand what was going on at school, they were very supportive of academic activities. This focus on academics actually became a means to escaping their current home life. To most of the

participants, school and academic activities were often used as a means to escape their current situation and as an escape from poverty in the future. While Henry, Helena and Agustina used academics as an escape from day to day life and repeating the poverty environment of their childhood, Samuel and Kimberly remember using school or reading to escape from the day-to-day stressful situations. Aida only saw education as a way to escape from repeating the fate of her mother.

Michael, Dylan, and Bea embraced school, but did not see it as an escape. Table 2 shows the participants perceptions of academics as an escape.

**Table 2 Participants’ Perception of Academics as an Escape**

Participant	Escape day-to-day life	Escape future poverty
Henry	X	X
Agustina	X	X
Aida		X
Helena	X	X
Kimberly	X	
Samuel	X	X

**Escaping day-to-day situations.** In talking about school as an escape from their current situation, Kimberly and Samuel found their escape by reading books. They would read as much as possible and would even read when they were punished. Others

talked about the importance of school itself and how they would escape their day-to-day life by working on school assignments.

Agustina loved books. With books, she was able to escape. “What I really liked about them was they would take you somewhere; your imagination would come to life. I would love that about it.”

Since being a child, Helena had a desire to escape her life situation. She knew as a young child that the situation she and her family was in was “fucked up” and she wanted to escape as quickly as possible. She calls education a survival mechanism.

Kimberly grew up in a low SES household that included domestic violence between her parents. In seeking an escape from the everyday issues that arose from her parents, she turned to books. She adds, “I’m the reader that likes to get so engaged in the book that I think I’m in the book. I don’t really know why I liked reading. I just did.”

As a young child, Samuel spent long periods of time in the hospital. He adds, “That’s where I picked up the love for reading. Because I didn’t have anything else to do, and they had a library. So just read a lot.” When Samuel was punished at home, he was often confined to his bedroom and not allowed to watch television. He spent much of this time reading.

**Escape future poverty.** Henry, Agustina, Aida, Helena and Helena valued their education in order to escape from continuing their life of poverty in the future. Often times, their parents would try to motivate them to seek a better future for themselves.

Henry’s parents rarely spoke about the importance of academics to him. In their eyes, it was more important to not continue the cycle of poverty they were experiencing.



To some degree, the family was ashamed of their situation. He adds that his parents would on occasion mention, “You have to do good in school...you want to be successful when you get older...they are just like, you don’t want to be living on the street...”

Agustina has fond memories of her family. Her parents were loving and supportive. She recalls, “Our parents always told us they believed in us and our abilities to do good in school.” Her mother would also guide Agustina. She would tell her, ‘Do you want to pick in the fields? Do you want to be a maid?’

Helena remembers in retrospect that education was a way to survive. She explained:

I needed something to take me out of the environment that I was in, but also sort of the only way that could pull me out of poverty. That was the route for me. I guess I always thought if I study hard enough, if I keep going to school, I’m not going to be that poor.

Aida was the only one who discussed escaping poverty as the only way to not repeat her parents’ situation. Aida realized early in life that the only way she would ensure that she would never be poor again is to advance in her education:

I joke about it but I am terrified of being poor again. Like there’s nothing worse than living in a car. I mean it is just horrifying and the stigma of it and the shame and it’s just a horrible experience.

Samuel also expressed thoughts about his academic success. “What impacted me and my success in school was just that I didn’t want to have to struggle. I saw a better

life for myself...the type of life I wanted to live would not be feasible without an education.”

Samuel’s stepmother was the first person who introduced him to college life. She was vital in teaching Samuel about thinking and planning ahead. “College was my ticket to getaway. I could only move out once I graduated. I ended up graduating a semester early from high school and going straight to college the next semester,” Samuel explains.

Although some of the participants experienced more negative situations at home, all were able to identify reasons for valuing time spent pursuing academic activities. Most of the participants used academic activities as a way to escape from their current situation. Reading at home or working on homework became a routine that allowed them to escape their day-to-day life as well as support them with their academic success.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to gain an understanding of the home environments of graduate students raised in poverty and to better understand which elements in the home environment contributed to their academic success. The participants in this study were selected through purposeful sampling of graduate students raised in poverty from a Tier 1 University. In total, nine participants took part in this study.

The research questions that provided the framework for this study were:

1. How do graduate students raised in low SES/poverty describe their home environment?
2. What do graduate students raised in low SES/poverty perceive to be home environment factors that contributed to their academic success?

This chapter addresses each question, and provides a general discussion of the findings.

#### **Research Question 1: How Do Graduate Students Raised in Low SES/Poverty Describe Their Home Environment?**

The participants described their home environment as both chaotic and structured. Elements such as increased stress from a lack of resources, domestic violence, alcoholism, mismanagement of money, and exhaustion of the parents were identified as contributing factors to the chaos.

The lack of financial security became evident in all of the participants home environment. Henry admitted, “Both of my parents were unemployed, and we were living off welfare.” He added, “She [his mother] hated that we are on welfare. We didn’t

have food. There were a couple of times when she attempted to get a job and he [his father] actually wouldn't let her go to work."

Bea related, "I remember space heaters all around. Whatever room we were in, we had to stay in that room because that's where the space heater was. So, we shut all of the doors so we can stay warm. I remember winters where we didn't have anything to eat."

Aida described her home life, "She [mother] would go hungry so many times. I'd hear her stomach growling and I knew she was hungry and keeping us fed."

Helena recounted, "Not only are you absolutely poor but you also feel relatively poor compared to others...He [father] didn't like that my mom was working but also my mom was desperate I guess because we didn't have a lot of the basics covered and most of us were going to school."

Relationships within the family added to the chaos. Bea added, "My mom was just really busy all of the time. When she wasn't in school, she was working two or three jobs... There were periods of time when my dad just didn't have his life together... When she [mom] gets home from work, she's just always tired. My mom was just always tired. She was just always exhausted. She just didn't have the energy."

Aida focused on the relationship with her mother. She recalled, "We [mother] have a complicated relationship because of the divorce and because I had to take such an adult role at such a young age. I was so young when I started raising my sister and so young when I started working."

Some of the participants described how the neighborhood environment added to the chaos. Aida explained, “When you live in the inner city and you’re living in that level of poverty, your activities are not the best. You spend your free time in a lot of dangerous places doing dangerous things.” Samuel added, “Growing up in the ghetto in an environment where the large majority of people you see making money are those that are doing so illegally.”

In describing the effects of alcoholism, Bea comments, “There were times when we would just be left at school. Sometimes, I had to call my mom and so she usually was the person that picked us up... So usually, it will be a Friday when my dad will get paid and he just, wouldn’t come pick us up.”

Aida added, “My dad is an alcoholic and their marriage – he suffered terribly because of it. He became extremely abusive to me. Physically, he beat me for years. He cheated on my mother a lot.”

In the midst of the chaos, participants recognized there was also a sense of structure provided by routines and activities such as family meals, time for homework and daily chores. Michael remembers evenings being structured. He would come home and relax for an hour or so, have a snack, start homework, eat dinner, and then complete homework before he went to bed.

Agustina described the daily routine in her home:

A typical night would be coming home and my mom would be making dinner, so my job was to just put out all the placemats, then put all the napkins and silverware and make sure that was set up. And then we’d all so sit down and we

eat. We talked about the day and what we have for homework and if there was anything that needed to be signed...My mom was always making sure that we did our chores every day.

To Aida, a common routine in the household was to complete homework and then her mother would provide supplementary materials like workbooks and other reading books. Helena remembered, “The fact that I saw my mom, that she did a lot of things with her time. It made me think that it was possible for me to also organize myself and do things and get stuff done.”

Kimberly added, “We got home, our mom cooked for me and all my cousins because she babysat all my cousins. My dad would come home, we would do homework and stuff.”

The participants in this study recognized chaos as a part of their home environments. Established routines and activities provided a needed sense of structure. The participants feel the established routines contributed to their academic success.

**Research Question 2: What Do Graduate Students Raised in Low SES/Poverty Perceive to be Home Environment Factors That Contributed to Their Academic Success?**

The results of the current study showed that, although the parents of the participants may not have fully understood what was needed to be academically successful, they supported their children by talking to them about school, discussing the importance of education, and providing opportunities for additional learning.

Henry recalled, “There was always this notion that you have to succeed in school. You have to do good in school. You want to be able to get a degree, you want to be successful when you get older.”

Michael remembered reading at home at least once a day. He and his siblings often partook in games with flash cards, multiplication tables, memory games, etc.

Agustina added, “Our parents always told us they believed in us and our abilities to do good in school.” She continues:

You can do better. Keep at it. Ask the teacher questions. Don’t let the embarrassment of asking questions or asking too many questions ever stop you from asking. Because who will suffer from poor grades will be you (aka me) and hence that would have consequences that would mean the inability to get a great job later.

Agustina continued, “One of the things that I remember the most about growing up was even though we couldn’t buy books or go to the movies, very often my parents would make time to take me to a library.”

Helena stated, “I was always encouraged to get good grades and sort of reprimanded when I didn’t. They sort of always wanted me to do well in school.”

Samuel recalled, “So I begged my mom to buy me the (*Scholastic Book*) collection one year, and she bought it. That was my favorite reading material.”

Bea related to this support. “My dad would take us to the library and have us check out books. It wasn’t just the school library. We also went to the public library.” She continued, “My dad would make an effort to actually go up to the school and say,

'I'm sorry. I couldn't help her with this problem. Can you explain to me how she's supposed to do it?'" Bea admitted, "We don't fail... That kind of achievement was instilled in us that it's not really an option to fail... I remember early on in elementary school, he [dad] would really push us.

Aida agreed, "All we have really was books for entertainment when we got home. And I would read these books." She added that additional work provided from her mother was often part of the homework. "You have to do this work and this workbook and your homework from school and if it's not perfect, you don't get to play."

Finally, Kimberly recalled, "My parents bought me books even though they didn't really like reading."

The participants in this study identified the vital role their mother played in their academic success. They felt encouraged by their mother, who would check finished homework and sometimes create assignments for additional practice.

Michael explains that even his poor hand writing in school prompted his mother to find handwriting workbooks that he worked on every day after school. Bea added, "My mom had a rule that the teacher is always right. I don't care whether you were doing it or not. Behavior was important, which then I think led to academic success."

Aida related:

I quickly learned to slow down and check my work, to not turn anything in until it was excellent, to not give her [mother] a rush job because I learned that rushing and just seeking instant gratification would only hurt me.



Family and neighbors stepped in to provide support and activities to aid learning and academic success when the family was unable to provide such opportunities. Dylan recalled:

If I made a book report, he (grandfather) would read it and then he would ask me questions like, ‘Why do you think this is a good idea? Why do you think this is a bad idea? In your own words’.

Michael’s family had clear expectations that school would be important and support would always be available, one way or another. From his mother and step father to his grandmothers, there was always somebody to support him if he needed it. “If I needed something school related, it was gonna happen. If it wasn’t school related, probably not.”

Bea related, “She [mother] didn’t know how to do our homework, but she made sure that it was done.” Bea continued:

You go to school. Every single conversation we [grandmother] ever had was, ‘Look, I’m not playing games with you. You’re going to school. Don’t tell me you’re not. Don’t ever drop out. If for any reason, I’m not here, don’t think I’m not watching you.’

Bea had a neighbor who was also an elementary school teacher. The neighbor provided different activities for her to do on the weekends or when Bea’s mother was working.

Family support was crucial for the participants of this study. Not only were families reported to be a source of support for participants, but neighbors and teachers

were identified as part of a broader support system. A key factor in this support included discussions about the importance of an education as a way to move out of poverty.

Agustina recalled conversations with her mother:

Do you want to pick in the fields? Do you want to be a maid? Being inside was a luxury, it wasn't like everybody got to stay inside and work inside. You know, I would rather you get an education because I do not want you to have to depend on anyone.

Helena related, "She [mother] wanted us to have an education. She wanted us to just have a better life than she did."

Aida added:

I think implicitly I've learned that education gives you a better life... My mother would always say 'Thank God for that degree.' We didn't have a home but it was – it could have been longer. But because of my degree, I was able to get us out of living out of a car much quicker than a woman who only had a high school education. So yeah it's always been education – whether implicitly or explicitly, there's always been an expectation to do well and to – and for education to be that conduit to make that happen.

Although few of the participants had two parents supporting their education as they grew up, most recalled having at least one person, typically their mother, who supported their education. Several participants mentioned the availability of books and opportunities to read. There were a limited number of books in most homes, so the children were encouraged to visit the public and school libraries to expand their reading

choices. Another factor was a time set aside to complete homework. As they were able, parents checked on the homework. The participants understood, from an early age, that completing the homework was an expectation in their family.

Although the participants were raised in low SES, there was a continuous support system in the household, even if it provided the participants with the goal of eventually “getting out” of their current situation. These participants witnessed their parents and extended family members’ working very hard and would often hear comments on how their life would be so much better if they achieved a higher level of education.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

This section presents an analysis and interpretation of the findings in relation to current literature. The findings examining the home environments from nine graduate students raised in poverty from reinforce many areas of research previously explored in the literature review. These areas of research jointly serve as a contextual framework in which to position the present study.

**Vocabulary and literacy skills.** Duncan and Seymour (2000) argued that children from poverty enter school with lower levels of literacy skills. The participants in this study often were exposed to books, reading, and a variety of literacy skills prior to entering school. Several of the participants described using programs like *Hooked on Phonics*© in the home before entering school or reading constantly from an early age. The findings of this study support the importance of exposure to reading materials and related literacy activities. Rothstein (2004) viewed daily reading before the start of kindergarten as an element of success for parents from middle and high-income families.

This study supports the findings of Rothstein (2004). An interesting finding emerging from this study was that students from poverty experiencing reading and learning as an escape. The development of literacy skills provides students from poverty the tools to escape the chaos by getting lost in a book. This finding extends the current research.

Kim (2004) identified limited finances as a reason why children from poverty do not have the resources needed for literary success. The participants' families were able to acquire such resources because of parents or grandparents. They were also able to access resources at their local school and or public library. They always had books to read.

**Family impact on academics.** The findings of this study clarified those reported by Cabrera and Padilla (2004), who found that students raised in poverty often identified chaotic situations at home, but also had somebody in the household providing structure for academic activities. Madera (2009) recognized that the chaotic home environment highlighted the need for a structure in the household.

The current findings also expanded on Cabrera and Padilla's (2004) study by not only identifying the expanded role mothers played in their children's academic success, but also identifying other members of support in the household. The mother, father, and often a live-in grandparent were found to be a source of support for the participants. This study adds clarity to the point made by Cabrera and Padilla (2004) that a student from poverty needs to have at least one parent supportive of academic endeavors from an early age to be successful academically.

Bryan and Simmons (2009) found close-knit families and communities, separate identities, and knowledge of college procedures were factors attributing to the educational success of the students in their study. The findings of this study support and extend the Bryan and Simmons (2009) study by showing the importance of a close-knit family not only in early childhood through college, but it is also crucial to continue the support to ensure academic success at the graduate school level.

Two of nine participants were driven by the desire to make a parent proud of them in spite of what their family situation. This reinforces a similar finding described by Cabrera and Padilla (2004).

In this study, family members were reported to be a large source of support for the participants, as well as individuals outside of the home (i.e., neighbors, teachers, advisors). The support from family and a broader support system as contributors to academic success is consistent with research by Reddick et al., 2011.

**Academic support systems.** The findings reported here agree with those of Reyes (2007) that students who would typically not be considered as “college material” can find themselves in a college program if given the opportunity and the needed support. Jordan and Plank (2000) stated that lack of money for higher education is part of the reason that so many students from low SES families are doomed to academic failure. This study shows that establishing academic support systems while in college can assist these students in finding ways to fund their graduate programs. Madera (2009) identifies supportive adults and access to financial opportunities as factors in the academic achievement of students from poverty. This study revealed that academic

support systems were crucial for most of the participants as they completed undergraduate school and moved on to graduate programs. The findings on the importance of teachers and counselors (Hudley et al. 2009, Miller & Erisman, 2011) in the academic success of students raised in poverty are also supported by this study.

These results are congruent with previous studies (Reddick et al., 2011, Miller & Erisman, 2011) on the role of an extended support system for the academic success of students raised in poverty. The participants in this study had broad support systems that included family and educators, which provided the participants the guidance they needed to become academically successful.

### **Implications for Theory**

This research contributes to theory as it investigated a population and context of graduate students that had not been previously explored. It highlights the home environment of graduate students raised in poverty. Previous literature reported that a support system, is important for academic success (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Hudson, 2008; Madera, 2009). This study expanded on the definition of the support system. Other studies have not fully revealed the breadth of support that graduate students raised in poverty need to be academically successful that was found in this study. Scholars could rethink how they view perspectives of a support system when it comes to the academic success of students raised in poverty.

While some researchers (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Hudson, 2008; Madera, 2009) have reported studies related to a family support system, the present study focused on graduate students. Similar studies (Reddick et al., 2011)

report external support systems as key to success, also focused on undergraduate students. This study highlights the importance of continuing research related to support systems to include students at the graduate level.

### **Implications for Instructional/Institutional Practices**

As the number of graduate students in higher education who were raised in poverty continues to grow, it is important to note that these students need a support system that not only includes their family (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Hudson, 2008; Madera, 2009) but also includes a broader spectrum of support as they continue through to their graduate degrees (Reddick et al., 2011).

Despite the varying levels of support experienced by graduate students raised in poverty, quality programs are needed in high school and higher education for all students. With the focus on needs specific to this student population, campus and classroom practices could be modified to provide services and best academic instructional practices to further support students in their academic endeavors. To increase the numbers of successful graduate students raised in poverty, an evaluation is important to determine student satisfaction in these high school and secondary education programs so that appropriate changes can be made.

Policies that facilitate a broader support network for graduate students are needed to provide academic opportunities outside of regular class times in which graduate students can gain support from professors, advisors and counselors. Policies and programs developed for students of poverty will be able to support the success of these students pursuing advanced degrees in academics. Based on the findings of this study, it

would be helpful for doctoral students to have opportunities to connect with faculty members in a more relaxed environment, such as discussion lunches and programs.

It is important to inform teachers at the K-12 level of the value of reading as an escape for students raised in poverty and to capitalize on in-class opportunities and continued at-home endeavors. If reading has proven to be an escape for graduate students in such complicated home environments, it is crucial for teachers to identify ways to empower students through tailored reading lists, exposure to more texts and provide structured time in the classroom for such endeavors. It would also be helpful to provide mentor opportunities for every student interested in attending college. At the high school level, when such programs are initiated with school counselors in preparation for an undergraduate program, students need to be exposed to the possibility of opportunities offered beyond undergraduate studies (e.g., graduate school, law school, medical school, veterinary school). Knowledge of different graduate programs and funding opportunities should be discussed as early as possible in school with both students and their parents.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. 1) The study was limited to nine participants. 2) Students chosen for this study self-reported being raised in poverty. The exclusive use of self-report measures may be skewed in identifying students that truly fell into low SES. 3) The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Interviewing the parents of the participants or family members or using other data



sources and inquiry methods for the purpose of triangulation would provide a broader picture of the home environments.

Generalizations to different settings and different populations are not appropriate in a qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings were not intended to generalize the experiences of all graduate students raised in poverty. However, the findings of this study could provide a greater understanding of the experiences, related to the home environment, that affect the academic success of graduate students in similar situations.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This study focused on understanding the home environment of graduate students raised in poverty. Based on the findings of this study and the significance of sighted research (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Reddick et al., 2011; Young et al., 2011) implications for future research, theory, policy and institutional practice were identified.

The participants in this study were graduate students raised in poverty at a Tier I university in central Texas. Similar studies could be conducted at Tier I universities in other geographic areas of the country. It would also be interesting to conduct similar studies at private universities and smaller public universities.

This study targeted graduate students raised in poverty. Future studies might explore the home environments of highly qualified students from poverty who begin graduate programs but leave after a semester.

The results of this study shed light on learning as an escape. A further study could address such issues as what factors are needed for academics to become an escape,

how to make learning more inviting, and the role of the school in developing learning as an escape.

## **Conclusion**

Students raised in poverty face challenges all through their academic journey including their pursuit of an advanced degree. People living in poverty are the least-educated demographic class group. The present study described the home environments of nine graduate students' raised in poverty and the factors they recognized as necessary for their academic success. Using naturalistic inquiry, data were obtained from face-to-face interviews. Emergent themes were identified using constant comparative method and thematic analysis.

The two research questions guiding this study were: How do graduate students raised in low SES/poverty describe their home environment? and What do graduate students raised in low SES/poverty perceive to be home environment factors that contributed to their academic success? The participants described their home environment as having such elements like a lack of resources, domestic violence, alcoholism, mismanagement of money and exhaustion of the parents. Although their homes were chaotic in nature at times, participants also reported that their home environment was structured. This structure was seen in the support given by parents and other family members, daily routines and activities that supported academic success.

Two emergent themes resulted from the study. First, a broad support system is essential. Participants recognized that their family was a source of support from an early age and provided structure and resources needed for success. Participants also attributed

much of their academic success to support outside of their family. Guidance counselors, teachers, neighbors and later advisors guided the participants as they grew up. Secondly, participants acknowledged that often times, their academics became an escape from their day-to-day lives. The participants would read often at home and excel in their schoolwork in order to avoid some of the unpleasant situations they were experiencing in the household.

The findings of this study revealed factors that contribute to the academic success of graduate students raised in poverty. Participants reported the need for both family support and external support growing up and as they succeed through school. They described school as an escape and voiced the desire to leave the life of poverty behind.

This study has brought to light the complex issues of achievement of children raised in poverty as they attempt to achieve academic success at the graduate level. It takes many factors over many years and there are no simple solutions. It is important to recognize that the home environment of a child, regardless of SES, is a key building block for future academic achievement.

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## APPENDIX A

### INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: Understanding Early Home Environments of Graduate Students Raised in Poverty

**You are being invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Texas A&M University. You are being asked to read this form so that you know about this research study. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part in the research. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefit you normally would have.**

#### **WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?**

The purpose of this study is to examine the early home experiences of graduate students raised in poverty. This study seeks to understand the extent to which their early home environments impact their academic success at Texas A&M University.

#### **WHY AM I BEING ASKED TO BE IN THIS STUDY?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you have identified graduate student at Texas A&M that was raised in poverty; are in at least your second year of a graduate program at Texas A&M University.

#### **HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE ASKED TO BE IN THIS STUDY?**

There will be 9-12 participants.

#### **WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

The alternative is not to participate.

#### **For studies that give course credit:**

N/A

#### **If this is a treatment study:**

N/A

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IN THIS STUDY?**

The participants will be asked to respond to open-ended questions from an interview protocol. This interview process will last between 45 to 60 minutes.

**Suggested template:**

N/A

**Add, if applicable the following statement:**

N/A

**Add, if applicable the following statement:**

N/A

If you leave the study early, you may be asked to complete the following activities:

N/A

**WILL VIDEO OR AUDIO RECORDINGS BE MADE OF ME DURING THE STUDY?**

Yes, the participants' responses will be audio recorded.

**Required recordings:**

N/A

**Optional recordings:**

The researchers will make an audio recording during the study so that the data may be transcribed in order to support the research only if you give your permission to do so. Indicate your decision below by initialing in the space provided.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

**ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?**

The things that you will be doing have no more risk than you would come across in everyday life. Although the researchers have tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions/procedures that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.



**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?**

There is no direct benefit to you by being in this study. What the researchers find out from this study may help other people with societal benefit.

**WILL THERE BE ANY COSTS TO ME?**

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

**WILL I HAVE TO PAY ANYTHING IF I GET HURT IN THIS STUDY?**

N/A

**WILL I BE PAID TO BE IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not be paid for being in this study.

**WILL INFORMATION FROM THIS STUDY BE KEPT PRIVATE?**

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Jacqueline S. Turner (PI) will have access to the records.

Information about you will be stored in a locked box. This consent form will be filed securely in an official area.

Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law. People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

**WHOM CAN I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?**

You can call the Principal Investigator to tell him/her about a concern or complaint about this research study. The Principal Investigator Jacqueline S. Turner (Doctoral student) can be called at 979-575-1359 or emailed at [jnewberry@tamu.edu](mailto:jnewberry@tamu.edu). You may also contact the Principal Investigator's advisor, Dr. Joyce Juntune at 979-575-3039 or [j-juntune@tamu.edu](mailto:j-juntune@tamu.edu).

For questions about your rights as a research participant; or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research and cannot reach the Principal Investigator or want to talk to someone other than the Investigator, you may call the Texas A&M Human Subjects Protection Program office.

- Phone number: (979) 458-4067
- Email: [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu)

**MAY I CHANGE MY MIND ABOUT PARTICIPATING?**

You have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide not to participate or stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study, there will be no effect on your student status, medical care, employment, evaluation, etc. You can stop being in this study at any time with no effect on your student status, medical care, employment, evaluation, etc. Any new information discovered about the research will be provided to you. This information could affect your willingness to continue your participation.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

**I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. A copy of this entire, signed consent form will be given to me.**

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:**

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Presenter

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX B

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

Name:

Alias:

Phone:

Date:

Degree:

\*\*\*\*\*

**PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- How do graduate students raised in low SES/poverty describe their early home environment?
- What do graduate students raised in low SES/poverty perceive to be early home environment factors that contributed to their academic success?

**Background/demographic questions (to be asked during interview)**

1. Date of Birth:

Month \_\_\_\_\_ Day \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_

2. Gender:

- Male
- Female

3. Your ethnicity is:

- Black
- Hispanic or Latin
- White not Hispanic
- Multi-racial (please specify)

4. Where were you born?

5. Where were your parents born?

Mother \_\_\_\_\_ Father \_\_\_\_\_

6. The language you most comfortable reading and speaking is:

- Spanish
- English
- Both English and Spanish

7. You graduated from:

- High School
- G. E. D. program
- Other

8. Did you qualify for free or reduce lunch?

- Yes
- No
- Can't remember

9. Which college (s) have you attended?

10. Are you currently a:

- Master's student
- Ph.D. student

11. What program are you in?

12. Who raised you? (Check all that apply)

- Mother
- Father
- Stepmother
- Stepfather
- Grandmother

- Grandfather
- Foster Parent or Guardian
- Aunt
- Uncle
- Cousin
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

13. How many siblings do you have?

14. Have any of your siblings attended college?

15. How many in your family have graduated from college?

16. What was your mother's highest level of completed education? (Check one)

- Attended some grade school (up to the 8th grade)
- Attended high school
- Graduated from high school
- Attended a vocational or technical or career training school
- Attended college
- Graduated from college

17. What was your father's highest level of completed education? (Check one)

- Attended some grade school (up to the 8th grade)
- Attended high school
- Graduated from high school
- Attended a vocational or technical or career training school
- Attended college

- Graduated from college

18. How many were living in your household when you were growing up?

19. Can you estimate your average annual family income when you were growing up?

- \$5,000 or less
- \$5,000- \$15,000
- \$15,000-25,000
- \$25,000 - \$50,000
- \$50,000 - or more

### **Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about your background- where were you raised?
2. What was it like to be raised in your home?
  - a. What experiences do you remember best growing up in your home?
  - b. How important was success in school in your home?
  - c. Did you engage in any school-related activities while you were in your home? What type of activities? Were others involved? Who?
3. What do you remember from growing up in your family that contributed to later academic success?
4. Which family interactions do you remember being the most influential for your success at school?
5. What was a typical school night like in your home?
  - a. What was a typical school morning like at your home?

6. How did you like to spend your free time at home?
  - a. Did you read books or magazines did you have in your home? [You could follow up with questions specific related and not related to school]
  - b. Did you do homework at home? Did your parents encourage or require you to do it? Were there other activities going on that interfered with your ability to study?
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your school or home experiences?
8. Looking back, how do you think home-life experiences have impacted your academic success?

APPENDIX C

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

No.	Interview Question	Intended Outcomes	Research Question
1	Tell me about your background- where were you raised?	This is an introduction question to build trust with the participant.	RQ 1
2	What was it like to be raised in your home? What experiences do you remember best growing up in your home? How important was success in school in your home? Did you engage in any school-related activities while you were in your home? What type of activities? Were others involved? Who?	The researcher is looking for examples of what home life was like. These additional questions allow the researcher to focus the interview to reflect on early home environments and academic success.	RQ 1
3	What do you remember from growing up in your family that contributed to later academic success?	The researcher is looking for examples of interactions in the home that supported academic success.	RQ 2
4	Which family interactions do you remember being the most influential for your success at school?	The researcher is looking for evidence of support in the home for academic success.	RQ 2
5	What was a typical school night like in your home? What was a typical school morning like at your home?	The researcher is looking for trends of home life that supported academic success.	RQ 1
6	How did you like to spend your free time at home?	The researcher is looking for examples of academic	RQ 1



	<p>Did you read books or magazines did you have in your home? [Follow up with questions specific related and not related to school]</p> <p>Did you do homework at home?</p> <p>Did your parents encourage or require you to do it?</p> <p>Were there other activities going on that interfered with your ability to study?</p>	<p>support in the home in terms of resources.</p>	
7	<p>Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your school or home experiences?</p>	<p>Closing question to allow participant to add information about home life.</p>	<p>RQ 1</p>
8	<p>Looking back, how do you think home-life experiences have impacted your academic success?</p>	<p>Closing question to allow participant to add information about home life in relation to academic success.</p>	<p>RQ 2</p>