

University of Nevada, Reno

**Family, Peers, Role Models and Resilience: Prominent Elements in the Success of  
Low-income High School Students**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

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## Abstract

This study examined the experiences of high school students from low-income households and what they believe contributed to their persistence to their senior year. The intent of this research was to garner an understanding of the perspective of high school seniors who, despite socioeconomic adversity, have continued to progress in their educational pursuits. The voices of the students were explored using qualitative case study methods (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The theoretical framework that informed this study was social capital. Bourdieu (1983) and Coleman (1988) connected the idea of social capital to educational attainment and showed direct correlations between social capital and educational success. This research study was conducted over the course of one semester. Two participants were interviewed and asked to reflect on their experiences. Study findings suggest that relationships with family, peers, and role models/mentors contributed to students' development of social capital, and these relationships, along with their own qualities of resilience, contributed to their ability to persevere in their educational endeavors.

## Dedication

This piece is dedicated to the two inspiring individuals who allowed their voices to shine through in this study; to the thousands of young people I've had the privilege to call my scholars; and to my children who are my everything.

## Acknowledgements

I want to thank my co-advisors and my committee for all of their help. I also want to acknowledge all of my family and friends for their love and support. Pete, I could not have done this without you. Mariluz, thank you for always believing in me.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Nearly 40 years ago, Bourdieu (1983) developed and published his theories on cultural and social capital, sparking conversation among sociologists, academicians, and educators. Researchers seeking to expand upon his ideas have championed and critiqued Bourdieu's notions of capital (Anyon, 1980; Bodovski, 2010; Coleman, 1988; Contreras, 2005; Dika & Singh, 2002; Keely, 2007; Portes, 1998; Szreter, 2000). Broadly, social capital refers to the social relationships between people that enable productive outcomes (Szreter, 2000). As educational research works its way into the third decade of the twenty-first century, the concepts of social capital continue to hold the attention of practitioners and scholars alike. Of particular interest are the ways in which social capital impacts students from lower socioeconomic households.

The issue of income disparity in education is complex. Decades of research has documented how students' socioeconomic status impacts their educational experiences, relationships, and identities in profound ways (Anyon, 1980; Calarco, 2011; Lareau, 2011). Socioeconomic status (SES) has proven to be a powerful predictor of both college expectations and matriculation; low SES doubles the risk that a talented student will not complete a 4-year degree (Hudley et al., 2009). Students who attend high socioeconomic composition (SEC) schools are 68% more likely to enroll at a 4-year college than students who attend low SEC schools (Palardy, 2013). Low-income students and those whose parents did not attend college are disproportionately more likely to drop out of high school, end their educations at the high school level, enter community college or vocational programs, or have difficulty completing a bachelor's degree (Aronson, 2008). Among high school graduates, only 43 percent of students from families who

made less than \$30,000 immediately entered a post-secondary school; contrastingly, 75 percent of students from families who made more than \$50,000 did so (Long & Riley, 2007). Nationally, lowest-performing affluent students go to college at a higher rate than the highest performing youth from the least-advantaged families (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). This body of research suggests that socioeconomic status has a strong impact on academic opportunities.

Access to equitable education for individuals from low socioeconomic households (typically referred to in the literature as low-income students) is an important subject for academic discourse. However, though there has been attention paid in the last two decades to how socioeconomics influence students' academic achievement (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Aronson, 2008; Caro, McDonald, & Willms, 2009; Choy et al., 2000; Lareau, 2015; Long & Riley, 2007; Williams & Bryan, 2013), little research to date has examined how young people describe their experience. Low-income high school students' perception of their individual experiences and their academic resiliency is examined in this dissertation. For this study, resilience will be defined as coping strategies and supportive structures around individuals, which help buffer risk factors (Ungar, 2011). Ungar's definition refers to the process of resilience and focuses on individual traits (such as perseverance and self-efficacy) and external characteristics (such as family and community resources).

The study examines two high school students' perspectives on how they were able to persevere to their senior year of high school. Xavier's and Sarah's (pseudonyms) stories illustrate the various elements that they believe contributed to their experiences finding success in high school. Interpreted through a Bordieuan (1983) lens, Sarah's and

Xavier's perspectives bring light to four key concepts: capital, habitus, field, and practice (Bergerson, 2007). These concepts are detailed in the Theoretical Framework later in this chapter as well as in Chapter 2. While Sarah and Xavier's experiences are that of only two individuals, the results of the study could be relevant for many students in secondary education, particularly those students who come from lower socioeconomic households.

The results of this research may be valuable for educators and academicians to consider the complex identities of learners from low socioeconomic households; and even more importantly, this study depicts the promise of low-income high school students, reminding educators to look for the substantial potential of this underrepresented population, rather than relying on deficit models of thinking (Foley, 1997).

### **Background of Study**

Though the research question for this study referenced the term *low-income*, it's necessary to also recognize the intersecting concepts of socioeconomic status and social class where relevant (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 2015). Socioeconomic status (SES) is defined in a variety of ways, including dimensions of income and wealth, educational level, and occupation/employment status (Karimshah et al., 2013). Perna (2002) defined SES as a composite measure reflecting parents' level of educational attainment, parents' occupational status, and family income. Other researchers claim that SES is a complex concept that is more accurately measured on an individual or family basis (Cardek & Ryan, 2009; Sirin, 2005). It is also important to distinguish between the definitions of SES in academic literature versus the definitions used in schools. In the United States the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) under the National

School Lunch Program provides a proxy measure for the concentration of low-income students within a school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

The educational achievement disparity between individuals from high socioeconomic households and those from low-income households presents itself in multiple ways. Many researchers have made the argument that the achievement gap between low- and high-SES students is a result of lacking resources: pre-college training, parental support, or lack of role models (Haycock, 2001; McGee, 2004; Rothstein, 2004; Simpson & Schnitzer, 2005). Further, the misinformation and misconceptions about social class can result in stereotyping that can impact students' academic performance (Beilock, Rydell, & McConnell, 2007). Low-income students comprise a majority of the population attending public schools in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019); and the achievement gap between students from high socioeconomic and low socioeconomic statuses continues to increase in the United States (Suits, 2015). Research suggests that equity and accessibility for low-income students has been declining in American schools over the past two decades (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Lareau, 2015; Long & Riley, 2007). Social characteristics at home, among peers, at school, and within the community all play a major role in the development of youth; and SES is often linked to educational outcomes (Aronson, 2008; Choy et al., 2000; Lareau, 2015).

Educational inequity based on income can be found in all levels of schooling; however, specifically related to this study are the findings that increased educational disparities are associated with student advancement from elementary to secondary settings (Caro, McDonald, & Willms, 2009). Essentially, the disparities in educational

achievement increase with the years that students stay in school, with those who belong to the lower social classes performing even worse in high school compared to elementary school (Caro, McDonald, & Willms, 2009). Even when comparing the highest achieving secondary students, those from low-income households are less likely to graduate from high school, to attend selective colleges, to graduate from college, and to receive a graduate degree than their high-income peers (Williams & Bryan, 2013).

Research focuses on the challenges that low-income individuals face, though many students from low-income households go on to succeed academically (Wyner, Bridgeland, & Dilulio, 2007). Lessard et al. (2014) stated, "Risk is simply a measure of probability, not certainty" (p.109); therefore, it is important to consider the ways in which low-income students are able to persevere in their educational journeys. It is crucial to examine what research indicates regarding the potential for high school graduation for low-income students. This study contributes to the literature on high school low-income students and uses Bourdieu's (1983) theory of social capital as a framework.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Pierre Bourdieu (1983) defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 248).

Bourdieu's (1983) concept of social capital can be viewed through four key concepts: capital, habitus, field, and practice (Bergerson, 2007). The first key concept in a Bourdieuan (1977, 1983) lens is capital, which is essentially a form of power in various circumstances. There are three types of capital: economic capital, which describes resources that have monetary value; social capital, which is seen as the valuable networks

or connections an individual has; and cultural capital, which represents a person's cultural status and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1983). The second key concept is habitus. Bourdieu (1977a) described habitus as "a system of dispositions which acts as a mediation between structures and practice" (p. 487). Members of a group use habitus to examine their available choices; the subconscious limiting of available options within an individual's habitus tends to reproduce the existing social order, as people often fail to see choices outside what they see available to their social group (Bergerson, 2007). The third key Bourdieuan concept is that of field, in which each field is distinct with its own rules (Bourdieu, 1993). Within a given field, individuals compete for the available capital, or power, with the goal of safeguarding their positions in that field; therefore, those whose capital is legitimized within the field are able to define the rules of the game (Bergerson, 2007). The fourth key concept is practice, which defines individual actions (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992). Bourdieu (1983) and Coleman (1988) argued that cultural capital and social capital are contributing factors for educational attainment. Stanton-Salazar (2005) defined social capital—particularly with low-income students—as connections to individuals and to networks that provide access to resources and forms of support that facilitate the accomplishment of goals. A lack of social capital can create a barrier for low-income students.

### **Study Design and Research Question**

This study examined the experiences of low-income high school students and what they believe contributed to their persistence to their senior year. The intent of this research was to garner an understanding of the perspective of high school seniors who,

despite lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have continued to progress in their educational pursuits.

The research question was: What elements do low-income high school seniors believe contributed to their perseverance to graduate from high school? Specifically, seniors on track for graduation at a low-income high school were asked to describe their experiences and perspectives. A qualitative case study design was used, and multiple in-depth interviews were conducted with participants.

### **Significance of Study**

In the current literature, the number of studies on low-income/high-achieving students is limited (Rivera, 2014). Correspondingly, few studies have examined the topic of resilience from the perspective of resilient students, and fewer studies focused on resilient students' perceptions of what they need to succeed academically despite exposure to adversity (Williams, et al., 2016). As Lessard et al. (2014) pointed out, researchers have studied students who succeed and youth who drop out, but students who are at risk and graduate from high school have not received as much attention. While there have been numerous studies conducted on perceptions of low-income *college* students (Aronson, 2008; Choy et al., 2000; Hudley, et al., 2009), little previous research exists on the experiences of low-income high-achieving *high school* students.

The literature contains studies focused on immigrant youth and various racial and ethnic groups and their secondary schooling experiences, such as Williams & Bryan's (2013) study on high-achieving African American youth; and Rivera's (2014) study on high-achieving Latino students. However, most research focuses on socioeconomic status

as a subtopic, whereas this study considered participants' socioeconomic status primarily, while of course considering the intersectionality of race, gender, and other aspects of identity.

Finally, while some studies move away from deficit thinking (Foley, 1997), such as Williams et al.'s (2016) study on how school counselors can meet the needs of low-income middle school students, these studies focused on different populations, ages, or considerations than this research. There is a gap in the research related to first-hand perspectives of how high school students from low socioeconomic households persevere through high school to graduation.

### **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter One includes an introduction to the research topic, a brief description of the theoretical framework, and an explanation of the purpose and significance of the study. Chapter Two is a review of literature relevant to the research. Chapter Three explains the research methodology of the study and the researcher background. Setting, participants, data collection, and data analysis are also included in this section. Chapter Four describes the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the significance and implications of the research findings.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

The following chapter is a review of the research literature related to this dissertation. The first section provides an overview for the theoretical framework for the study. The next four sections examine the relevant literature within the four Bourdieuan concepts: capital, habitus, field, and practice as they apply to students from lower socioeconomic households. The chapter concludes with a summary of this literature review.

### **Overview**

Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1989) work in the sociology of education established foundations for thinking about social class and schooling. Bourdieu developed the concepts of cultural capital and social capital. Cultural capital refers to the general culture, knowledge, disposition and skills that are passed from one generation to another (Bourdieu, 1983). Social capital is rooted in the idea that membership in a particular group creates opportunities to acquire knowledge and resources from other group members (Callahan, Libarkin, McCallum, & Atchison, 2015). Bourdieu (1983) and Coleman (1988) first linked the idea of social capital to educational attainment and illuminated direct correlations between social capital and educational success.

Although social capital is the primary Bourdieuan lens used in this study, it is essential to consider the literature from all four of Bourdieu's (1983) key concepts: as these concepts will provide a frame through which to view the participants' experiences in the study. The four key concepts function as constructs within Bourdieu's conception of social capital: The first key concept in a Bourdieuan (1977, 1983) lens is capital, which is essentially a form of power in various circumstances. There are three types of capital:

economic capital, which describes resources that have monetary value; social capital, which is seen as the valuable networks or connections an individual has; and cultural capital, which represents a person's cultural status and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1983).

The second key concept is habitus. Bourdieu (1977a) described habitus as “a system of dispositions which acts as a mediation between structures and practice” (p. 487). Members of a group have habitus in examining their available choices; the subconscious limiting of available options within an individual's habitus tends to reproduce the existing social order, as people often fail to see choices outside what they see available to their social group (Bergerson, 2007). The third key Bordieuan concept is that of field, in which each field is distinct with its own rules (Bourdieu, 1993). Within a given field, individuals compete for the available capital, or power, with the goal of safeguarding their positions in that field; therefore, those whose capital is legitimized within the field are able to define the rules of the game (Bergerson, 2007). The fourth key concept is practice, which defines individual actions (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992).

Other researchers (Bergerson, 2007; Horvat, 2001) have applied the four Bordieuan concepts in their studies. Though these research studies were focused on the influence of SES and social class on students at the college level, they offer insight into how the framework can be applied to results, especially considering the scarcity of research on this subject at the high school level. Bergerson's (2007) case study on the experiences of one college student used Bourdieu's (1983) theoretical framework and found that social class impacts the ability of students to engage in academic work and social events on campus. Bergerson's (2007) study contributed to the conversation of

how educational institutions respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population that includes students from lower socioeconomic households.

## **Capital**

The first key concept— and the one which anchors the other concepts in a Bordieuan lens— is capital, which is essentially a form of power in various circumstances. There are three types of capital: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983). In many ways, these forms of capital blend and intersect, but for the ease of presenting the literature relevant to this dissertation, they will be addressed separately in this section.

**Economic capital.** Economic capital describes resources that have monetary value (Bourdieu, 1983). Bourdieu (1983) considered aspects of the social world to function as markets and explained that underprivileged populations, such as those from lower socioeconomic households, may not have the same access to various forms of capital as their more privileged counterparts. Anyon (1980) referred to economic capital as “ownership relations” and explained how economic—or physical—capital is usually thought of as physical property used to produce profit and derived from money, but it can also be symbolic:

It can be socially legitimated knowledge or skills: cognitive, linguistic, or technical skills that provide the ability to, say, produce the dominant scientific, artistic, and other culture, or to manage the systems of industrial and cultural production. Skillful application of symbolic capital may yield social and cultural power, and perhaps physical capital as well. (pp. 69-70)

Anyon (1980) noted that all forms of capital are related and intersect with one another in a variety of ways: in ownership relations; in relations between people; and in relations between people and their work. This idea is further explicated in the examination of cultural and social capital.

**Cultural Capital.** Cultural capital represents a person's cultural status and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1983). Cultural capital represents ways of talking, acting, modes of style, moving, socializing, forms of knowledge, language practices, and values (McLaren, 2009). In its most simplistic form, cultural capital can be described as what one knows. Bourdieu (1983) identified three intersecting forms of cultural capital: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state.

To begin, the embodied state can be characterized as one's ways of being that are especially valued within a given context (Bourdieu, 1983). This could include the way an individual speaks—their vernacular, vocabulary, mannerisms, inflection, etc.—as well as their levels of knowledge and academic experience. In today's schooling system, these characteristics can have a significant (and often negative) impact on students from lower SES households. The embodied state of cultural capital is particularly valued in schools today. To continue, the objectified state of cultural capital, according to Bourdieu, encompasses the cultural goods that one possesses, such as the number of books, reference works, instruments, computers, machines, and other objects that a person owns. Building on Bourdieu's concept of capital, Anyon (1980) considered cultural capital as physical capital, in which "one must participate in the ownership of the apparatus of production in society" in order to be a "member of the capitalist class in the present-day United States" (p. 69). While Anyon's example of physical capital involves an

individual's stockholding position, this can be applied to teenagers' perceived physical attainment of objects, including clothing, accessories, and especially technological devices. The objectified state is highly valued in our modern school system and is a way in which many adolescents determine social status. Bourdieu (1983) defined a third type of cultural capital—the institutionalized state—as one's educational qualifications, awards, degrees, and so forth. The institutionalized state connects to adolescents in their pursuit of high school diplomas.

Although Bourdieu differentiated cultural capital into these three dimensions, it's important to examine the ways in which the forms intersect with one another and with other aspects of social capital in the school and classroom setting. With this in mind, educators need to acknowledge cultural capital as one of the many elements that need to be addressed in order to progress in this area.

**Social Capital.** Bourdieu (1983) defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 248). Connecting to Bourdieu's theory, Stanton-Salazar (2005) defined social capital—particularly with low-income students—as connections to individuals and to networks that provide access to resources and forms of support that facilitate the accomplishment of goals. A lack of social capital can create a barrier for low-income students, and yet there are those students who manage to persevere and prove to be “at promise” rather than “at risk” (Swadener, 1995). Social capital is seen as the valuable networks or connections an individual has (Bourdieu, 1983). Essentially, social capital is whom one knows.

Numerous scholars have built on Bourdieu's work with social capital (Coleman, 1988; Gamoran, 2008; Jones, Yonezawa, Ballesteros, & Mehan, 2002; McLaren, 2009; Portes, 1998; Tierney and Venegas, 2009). Anyon (1980) established essential aspects of social class that connect to the theoretical framework of social capital (Bourdieu, 1983). According to Anyon (1980) an individual's social capital can be determined by how they relate to aspects of production: ownership relations, relationships between people, and relations between one's own productive activity. Examples of social capital in this regard might be obtainment of resources and networks to further an individual's progress. Of particular relevance to this study are the relations between people and between one's own productive state as these aspects featured prominently in the data. Stanton-Salazar (2005) defined social capital as building relationships with institutional agents, which in turn can be cashed out for resources and opportunities. Additionally, Putnam (1993) examined entrenched social capital, in which voluntary associations with individuals or groups have the capacity to empower citizens with experience and skills to participate in public life. Fundamentally, social capital is a resource, one that can be exchanged between those who possess it and those who do not.

***Relationships.*** Keely (2007) argued that the relationships formed in society can be seen as forms of capital that make it easier for people to work together. By this definition, social capital can be viewed as shared norms, values, and understandings, with three main categories: bonds that link people to a shared identity through family, close friends, and culture; bridges that link people to those who do not share a common identity; and linkages that connect people to those up and down the social scale (Keely, 2007). In our modern society, even music and media can be viewed as a form of social

capital, as it pertains to Keely's (2007) definition of capital as bonds that link people to a shared identity through culture. Social capital is composed of: the social relationship that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates; and the amount and quality of those resources (Portes, 1998). Portes (1998) further explained how social capital is derived through a sense of community, including opportunities to socialize through informal relationships. These social relationships can include peer groups and friendships; immediate and extended family; and role models and mentors.

*Family.* In relation to families and how they operate, Coleman and Hoffer (1987) proposed that families possess social capital, including the presence of adults and the richness of their interactions. The role of the family in students' academic experience has been researched extensively (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Blackmore and Hutchison, 2010; Boatwright, 1992; Ceja, 2006; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Perna, 2002). Parental involvement has been found to positively affect children's academic success. Perna (2002) indicated that parental engagement and expectation correlate to predisposition and college enrollment. And Tierney (2002) found that next to academic skill, familial involvement is the most important factor affecting student achievement. In his (2017) study, Valle claimed that the impact families have on high school students is almost as influential as the students' academic preparedness. This influence includes the social capital a family possesses, how they can help students financially, the knowledge that they may possess regarding post-secondary experiences, and the stability they provide in the home (Valle, 2017). Coleman (1988) warned that students from families who are from lower socioeconomic households may not have those social resources that would benefit the student in an educational setting.

***Mentors.*** The literature suggests that high school students benefit from strong mentoring relationships (Kuperminc et al., 2019; Weiss, Harder, Bratiotis, & Nguyen, 2019). The results from Kuperminc et al.'s (2019) study pointed to the promise of group mentoring as an approach for increasing resilience among academically vulnerable adolescents. Another recent study (Weiss, Harder, Bratiotis, & Nguyen, 2019) on perceptions and experiences of a high school mentoring program supported previous findings: students' comments reflected the importance of the relationships built in the program, the knowledge they gained, and their experiences regarding higher education and careers; these relationships instilled hope for the future, created a pathway to college and career, and confirmed a belief that the students could accomplish their goals. These examples show how mentoring can positively influence students.

***School personnel.*** Strong adult role models and support systems are influential in helping students to persevere through their education. Williams et al. (2016) found that in order to nurture academic resilience, students from low-income households need school personnel who provide care and support, believe in them, encourage and challenge them to do their best, and serve as positive role models. Stronger student-adult relationships lead to higher levels of student engagement and more favorable academic outcomes (Gibson et al., 2004; Rodriguez, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2005). Students' experiences show that when schools commit to fostering personalized student–adult relationships, a culture manifested itself by facilitating processes and practices that promote student success (Rodriguez, 2008). Rodriguez (2008) found that personalized relationships with teachers were significant when students were faced with serious personal challenges often having nothing to do with school. Drapeau et al. (2007) reported that a significant

positive relationship with an adult allowed at-risk students to build a sense of trust and security. Williams et al. (2016) also found that marginalized students readily discussed challenges they face, and the ways school personnel can help them succeed academically despite those challenges. These studies point to the import of positive adult relationships for low-income students.

**Peers.** Positive relationships with peers can also play a role in how students perform academically. According to Stanton-Salazar (2005), peer relationships represent an important part of an adolescent's social support system. He claimed that friendships with peers "embody the potential to nurture healthy development and academic achievement in ways that adults would find hard to duplicate" (p. 380). Riegler-Crumb (2010) found that positive relationships between peers have the potential to impact students in many ways, including providing psychological encouragement, emotional support, academic assistance, and relevant information and guidance. Edman and Brazil (2009) also considered relationships with peers as a benefit to students. In their study on academic success among community college students, the authors found that social support among peers can be associated with a sense of belonging and overall academic success. Yeh (2010) examined how developing peer relationships can have a positive impact on low-income students. Peer relationships can be vital to the success of young adults.

**College access programs.** Beattie (2013) explored how a college access program on a university campus created capital for low-income, first-generation college students; this study found that the intensity and frequency of social and cultural capital increased through six program components, providing all of the elements necessary to transition

into and succeed in college. Beattie's (2013) findings demonstrated that students' perception of the program as a family was the cornerstone of the program and led to student growth in both social and cultural capital. Beattie's (2013) research pointed out that a key variable regarding reproduction of social status starts with education. Beattie's study examined how the closed off community of higher social classes "connotes a dichotomous meaning where the tangible, gated community coexists with the intangible values, and goals within the members of the community...the elite are able to close themselves off from the rest of society, through networks of education, income, and social status" (Beattie, 2013, p. 42). These constructs are used to build social frameworks so that individuals can come to understand their relative positions in the world; individuals then make life choices based on their perceptions of their relative positions within a given society (Beattie, 2013). The research related to college access programs was especially relevant to this study, because of the connection that the participants had to their participation in these types of programs.

*Conclusion to capital.* A lack of capital within the educational system can create a major barrier for students. Low-income students in particular are often expected to overcome institutional barriers, such as not having the educational background to learn effectively, when they may already be operating at a disadvantage within the system, and do not have the necessary resources to thrive (Jones, Yonezawa, Ballesteros, & Mehan, 2002). Tierney and Venegas (2009) also noted that low-income youth frequently do not have the cultural and social capital to understand what is required to acquire economic wealth. They often interpret life differently than their wealthy counterparts. However, Coleman (1988) stated that social capital is productive and obtainable, making possible

the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible. Furthermore, the social capital created through educational opportunities for low-income students could repeat itself generationally and create a cycle of success.

### **Habitus**

The second key concept within a Bourdieuan lens is habitus. Bourdieu (1977a) described habitus as “a system of dispositions which acts as a mediation between structures and practice” (p. 487). Members of a group use habitus to examine their available choices; the subconscious limiting of available options within an individual’s habitus tends to reproduce the existing social order, as people often fail to see choices outside what they see available to their social group (Bergerson, 2007). Bourdieu (1983) applied the concept of social capital to the inter-workings and relationships of the elite classes as a means to reproduce their positions in a “closed off” community. Bourdieu (1977b) pointed out how members within a given social class tend to dress alike, make similar consumer choices, and partake in similar leisure activities. This is evident, according to Bourdieu (1983) when the children of the elites are ushered into numerous Ivy League schools, trained for high paying top executive and political positions, and therefore reproduce their elite upbringing.

Habitus is framed as what Bourdieu (1987) called “social space,” relationships which constitute figurative spaces defined by their distance to one another; conception of these spaces is relational and given shape by the distribution of properties giving strength and power to their holder (Bourdieu, 1987). Individuals operating within these boundaries are sometimes missing access to resources. Schools are one “space” where habitus, according to Bourdieu (1983) plays a substantial role. Low-income students do

not always have the ascribed status and habitus that allows for the automatic inclusion of this elite standing and thus educational attainment; as a result, the social capital that would result in high school graduation and college attainment for these students is not comparable to that of their higher-income peers (Beattie, 2013). The concept of habitus is important in education because of the way that it manifests itself in opportunities for students.

### **Field**

The third key Bordieuan concept is that of field, in which each field is distinct with its own rules (Bourdieu, 1993). Within a given field, individuals compete for the available capital, or power, with the goal of safeguarding their positions in that field; therefore, those whose capital is legitimized within the field are able to define the rules of the game (Bergerson, 2007). Bourdieu and Waquant (1992) illustrated that the strategies people use to compete in a field are related to their habitus and available capital.

Tying into Bourdieu's (1987) ideas about social and cultural capital, Gamoran (2008) identified one of the main social processes used in current society to legitimize social-class superiority, in which persons in positions of privilege strive to pass on their advantages to their offspring. Gamoran (2008) offered a specific example to support this inequitable social process: "Even after controlling for high school achievement, the children of college-educated parents have an advantage of 2.5 times (any four-year college) to 4 times (elite college) compared to offspring of parents with high school educations" to gain entry into colleges (p. 172). The underlying implication is that the privileged classes are then better positioned to grasp new opportunities as they arise than are their disadvantaged counterparts (Gamoran, 2008).

Harré and Moghaddam (2003) looked at how fields of social capital are related to positioning theory, a framework that allows us to better understand individuals' relationships to events and experiences. Positioning theory is a useful conceptual tool to explore what individuals say or do in particular circumstances (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). The theory explores how, as individuals interact with each other, they engage in co-construction of a narrative in which both have a part to play. The roles that individuals assume in the narrative are known as positions (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Positions are the rights and duties to think, act, and speak in certain ways (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). Positioning is the assignment of parts or roles to individuals' construction of personal stories (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). Positioning oneself in a certain way grants one the right to be heard, and the right to be taken seriously; it also carries expectations about how one should behave and produces constraints on what one may meaningfully say or do in certain circumstances (Barnes, 2004). These rights differ from person to person, and from situation to situation. A gain in social capital can affect one's positioning in society.

### **Practice**

The fourth key Bourdieuan concept is practice, which defines individual actions (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992). Practice is not a static concept; it changes as an individual makes decisions based on experiences and circumstances. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) emphasized the convergence of social capital and human capital, defined as the skills and capabilities that make a person productive. Some example of this concept would be study skills, organizational plans, and academic work ethic for high school students. Human capital, in this study, functions as a complement to social capital, and presents itself by

way of practice. Practice also encompasses individual traits and characteristics, such as perseverance and resiliency (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992).

*Resiliency.* The concepts of resiliency and perseverance are directly related to this study in that the research question was: What elements do low-income high school seniors believe contributed to their perseverance to graduate from high school? Resiliency has no universal definition in the social sciences (Shaikh & Kauppi, 2010), but there appears to be common characteristics or attributes that scholars have used to signify this concept. These varying constructions will be examined in this section.

Resilient students are described as those who maintain high levels of achievement despite the existence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk (Williams et al., 2016). Resilient students, despite the presence of some form of significant risk or challenge in their lives, have adapted, persevered, and succeeded (Luthar, 2003). Research on resilient students is recent and limited, but findings have typically revealed multiple factors that differ between resilient and non-resilient students, such as:

social competence; problem-solving skills; internal locus of control; a sense of purpose; motivation and goal orientation; academic self-efficacy; learning environment; relationships that provide care and support; non-parental sources of support or counsel from peers, siblings, and teachers; and availability of community organizations and resources. (Williams et al., 2016, p. 156)

Rivera's (2014) statistical findings supported Williams et al.'s (2016) qualitative findings, showing that individual resilient characteristics or "hard work" were important factors in college-going potential for underserved students. As Martin and Marsh (2006)

contended, learning more about what keeps resilient students in school could lead to refined prevention efforts and more equitable education for low-income students. In their (2014) study, Lessard et al. examined resilience in an educational setting and identified it as the capacity for positive adaptation despite the presence of high risk—where positive adaptation is evidenced through graduation from high school, and high risk through the presence of personal, family, or school risk factors.

In the last decade, researchers have focused their attention on positive forms of personal development concerning people who have encountered adversity (Herrman, Stewart, Granados, Berger, Jackson, & Yuen, 2011). With the right support, adversity can build strength, purpose, and produce mastery that helps foster resilience for present and future challenges (Benard, 2004). People have the capability to bounce back and recover from adversity by using multiple internal and external resources to buffer stress and enhance personal resolve; not only do they have the ability to bounce back, but they have a conscious choice to use adversity as an opportunity to learn, grow, and increase self-awareness (Dupree, 2017). Resilient individuals have a variety of methods to deal with adversity and have found healthy ways of responding to adversity and stress.

Resilient individuals do not just avoid stress and adversity; instead, they embrace the confrontation of adversarial conditions in past and present circumstances which increases their overall confidence, competence, and responsibility (DuPree, 2017). Resilience encompasses various frameworks that include personal traits, environmental nurturing, expansion of time frames, interactional processes, and measuring multiple domains; there are multiple factors associated with resilience and there appears to be no definitive characteristics, social resources, coping skills, cognitive processes, or spiritual

rituals used in isolation to overcome personal challenges (Greef, Vansteenwegen, & Ide, 2006). Resilience is rooted in the ability to adjust under challenging circumstances (Masten 1994), and resiliency does not imply that individuals are invincible, impenetrable, or indestructible to events or stress in life (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000).

Resilience plays a crucial role in individuals' lives when they are persevering through life challenges. Bonanno (2008) defined resilient individuals as those who are able to manage their overall functioning level in life and meet their day-to-day demands despite short-term disruptions in life that consist of emotional and psychological distress. Neil (2006) referred to psychological resilience as an individual's ability to weather stress; and Rutter (2006) defined resilient individuals as having a relatively good psychological outcome despite suffering risk experiences. Researchers have examined resilience from a number of angles: the multiple processes people encounter to achieve resilience, how it is displayed, and the time in a person's life that it was developed (Brown, 2004; Ungar, 2011). To test and define resilience, researchers have used variables that consist of coping strategies and processes, protective factors, secure attachment and basic trust, relational competence, cognitive competence, self-efficacy, and empathy (McCubbin, 2001). Siebert (2006) found that resilient individuals are flexible in thoughts, feelings, and actions; they have many counterbalanced complexities that give them choices to respond. In other words, resilient individuals can present themselves in a number of ways.

For this study, resilience will be defined by coping strategies and supportive structures around individuals, which help buffer risk factors (Ungar, 2011). This

definition refers to the process of resilience and focuses on internal individual traits (such as perseverance and self-efficacy) and external characteristics (such as family and community resources). This study examined participants' perceptions of perseverance and resilience.

*Self-efficacy.* Karimshah et al.'s (2013) study examined the relationship between resilience and self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1977) as a belief in one's ability to complete a specific task. Bandura's definition has been explored in a number of studies to examine one's ability to persist in difficult situations, engage with challenges, persevere through failure and attribute success to their own aptitude (Collins, 1984; Ketelhut, 2007; Lent, Brown & Larkin, 1984). The use of good problem-solving skills, viewed as a marker of self-efficacy, has also been found to be a predictive factor of resilience in a study conducted by Martin and Marsh (2006).

The literature links self-efficacy to educational success (Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001; Gore, 2006; Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005; Zimmerman, Bandura & Martinez-Pons, 1992). The impact of resilience and self-efficacy has been studied in students who were at risk of dropping out but who persevered (Lessard et al., 2014). Drapeau et al. (2007) conducted a qualitative study of 12 such students; and reported that in terms of personal variables, resilient students showed high self-efficacy, were able to distance themselves from risks, seized new opportunities, and demonstrated numerous benefits in the different areas of their lives. In support of these results, Dumont and Provost (1999) found that resilient students reported using problem solving as a positive coping strategy more often than other students. Studies such as these have found that

self-efficacy has a strong impact not only on academic performance, but also on stress, coping strategies, health and overall satisfaction (Chemers et al., 2001).

### **Summary**

This chapter summarized research related to this study. The literature reflects that family and peer influence is paramount in students' academic experiences; role models and mentors have shown to have positive results on student achievement; and individual resilience is an important element in student success. Researchers have noted that social capital is an important indicator of academic achievement (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1988); as such, the theoretical framework that informed this study was social capital. The various Bourdieuan theories and research studies described in this section explain how individuals benefit from different types of social ties and networks. The study on low-income high school seniors featured in this dissertation intended to build on previous research to further explore how social capital affects the educational experiences of students. For the purposes of this study, social capital theory was useful as a lens by which to examine how low-income high school seniors view their roles in various circumstances. The way in which the framework will be applied to data analysis for this study will be more fully described in Chapter 3, which will detail the methodology used for the study.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

The impact of socioeconomics on student achievement has been widely acknowledged in the literature (Aronson, 2008; Choy et al., 2000; Lareau, 2015). However, despite record levels of widening economic inequality in recent years (Saez & Zucman, 2014), low-income high school students' firsthand experiences have not been addressed as prolifically in the research. The purpose of this study was to explore what high-achieving low-income high school seniors believed contributed to their ability to persevere in their educational careers. The intent of the research was to discover participants' underlying perspectives about their experiences. This chapter outlines the research methods conducted to complete this study. It is divided into seven sections: research design; researcher background; setting and participants; data collection; data analysis; limitations; and summary.

#### **Research Design**

Case study research has a long history and has been used in many disciplines; Hamel, Dufour, and Fortin (1993) trace the origin of case studies through the social sciences of sociology and anthropology. There are a variety of approaches from which to choose when considering case study research, but a key definition of case study as it applies to this dissertation is that it is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded case (or cases) through in-depth data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2014). One defining feature of case study is that it is bounded and can be defined within certain parameters such as the timeframe in which the case is studied, the specific place being studied, or the

people involved in the case; in the study featured here, the bounded parameters are the individual participants, referred to as Case #1 and Case #2. While this study considered a variety of perspectives regarding case study research, it will rely most heavily on Stake (1995, 2006) and Yin (2014) to form the distinct features of case study approach.

A case study design best suited this research because the goal was to describe the experiences and perspectives of low-income high school seniors on track to graduate and to carefully illustrate a case within a contemporary context and real-life setting (Yin, 2014). The selection of case study methodology was reinforced by the intent to understand *why* (Yin, 2014), while capturing the descriptive data to answer the question in the reality of those concerned (Chirgwin, 2015; Flyvbjerg, 2011). For this study, the cases explore the experiences of Xavier and Sarah (pseudonyms) and the research question for the study was: What elements do low-income high school seniors believe contributed to their perseverance to graduate from high school? Intrinsic case study design provided an understanding of an important case—low-income seniors who have persevered in high school despite obstacles—that has unique interest and needs to be detailed (Stake, 1995).

When the study is assessed by the criteria of Stake (1995) and Yin (2014) to identify type— since it involves two participants— it would be categorized by Yin (2014) as a multiple case study; however, Stake’s (1995) criteria would categorize it as an instrumental case study because insight is being sought about one specific issue: the perseverance of low-income high school students. Therefore, combining the two terms, the methodology can be described as instrumental multiple case study (Chirgwin, 2015).

Instrumental multiple case study design also allowed the complexities in the lives of the participants to be understood and unique features to be identified (Stake, 1995).

Specifically, this research involved engaging with two participants interviewed on multiple occasions (Yin, 2014). Qualitative methods of multiple interviews captured the perspectives of the participants and were aligned with case study research design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

This study focused on illuminating the experiences of the participants, intending to add visibility to their narratives, relying on the definition of qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the observer/researcher in the world and consists of a set of material, interpretive practices that make the world visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 1990). There was no intent to compare this case to other cases; it was designed to develop an understanding of the unique perspectives of low-income high school seniors on track to graduate high school.

### **Researcher Background**

One of the key distinguishing factors of qualitative inquiry is that the researcher is the instrument (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Mertens, 2015; Patton, 1990). I am a lifelong educator and have spent the last sixteen years working at a predominantly low-income high school. My professional experience includes teaching and mentoring students with diverse cultural and socioeconomic experiences. As a White, female, middle-class researcher, it's imperative to acknowledge how my positionality influences my work (Bergerson, 2007). My life experiences contribute to an interest in hearing the perspectives of struggling students, but they in no way parallel the experiences of the participants featured in this study, whose circumstances are not the

same as mine. Consequently, I am aware that my worldview influences the choices I make in presenting my findings, and I attempted to speak to and with students from these populations, rather than about or for them (hooks, 1990). Throughout this study, I related to Van Maanen's (2014) explanation of the complicated role of a qualitative researcher in that there is a need to balance and negotiate a tale of two cultures— that of the researcher and that of the participants. As such, I did use my complex positioning as a researcher, a high school teacher of primarily low-income students, and an advocate for equity and diversity as I collected and interpreted data.

With this in mind, I relate to Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinburg's (2011) description of teacher-researcher, as someone who studies students as living texts to be deciphered and one who approaches participants with an active imagination and a willingness to view students as socially constructed beings; therefore, during the process of conducting this research, I kept field notes of where my own experience working with low-income students merged with the experiences articulated by the participants featured in this work in order to ensure that it was their voices, rather than mine, taking precedence in the results included in the study.

### **Setting**

The setting for the study was a college campus in the United States. At the time of this research, I was a doctoral student at the university as well as a full-time public high school teacher; I was not familiar with the participants before the time of the study. Purposeful sampling—selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 1990)—was used to solicit two volunteer participants who were seniors and came from lower socioeconomic households. For the purpose of this study, only high school seniors

were considered due to the fact that the study intended to contribute to the scholarship featuring adolescents at the end of their time in secondary education, a category of the literature for which there is a paucity of research.

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment for this population was challenging because of the confidentiality issues around determining participants' low-income status. The solution to this challenge was to recruit from college-access programs for students who have been identified as low-income students. Therefore, the high school students who participated in the study were each involved in academic outreach programs with the goal of increasing the number of low-income, first-generation students graduating from high school. Specifically, one participant was part of a program that was housed on the university campus but was designed to offer a variety of services to middle school, high school, and college students; the services provided by the program included mentoring; academic support; college admissions and financial aid information; college courses for credit; and paid internships (Smith, M.J., 2012). Another participant was involved in a program that provides opportunities for high school students from low-income families and high school students from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree to help them succeed in their precollege performance and ultimately in their higher education pursuit (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The intent of the research study was not to promote these programs, but it is important to acknowledge that the participants' involvement in the college-access programs did come out in the data results. After IRB approval, I began the recruitment process. Participation was open to high school seniors who met the following criteria:

1. they attended a low-income high school;
2. they were on track to graduate with at least a 2.5 cumulative GPA; and
3. they were eighteen years old at the time of the study.

A paper research flyer (Appendix B) was distributed by program administrators for the academic outreach/college-access programs to all high school seniors. The initial flyer listed an email account that I used exclusively for this research. Once the first two candidates emailed me, they received a second electronic flyer, a password protected Google doc that allowed them to give consent to be a part of the study as well as provide demographic information. Due to difficulties in scheduling and other circumstances, I was only able to interview two students.

### **Participants**

Although this study only featured two participants, it emphasized depth versus breadth; after all, in-depth information from a small number of people can be valuable, especially if the cases are information rich (Patton, 1990). In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to describe the participants of the study: Xavier (pseudonym used throughout) was an 18-year-old male at a low-income high school. Xavier described his race/ethnicity as Hispanic. He came from a family of five, with an older brother and a younger brother. His father was a line cook and his mother worked at a local fast-food establishment. His father had some high school education; his mother had elementary school only. He stated his GPA as 3.8, and he planned to major in biology with an emphasis in medicine. Sarah (pseudonym used throughout) was an 18-year-old student in twelfth grade at a low-income high school. Sarah described her race/ethnicity as Latina. She came from a family of five and is the eldest of 3 siblings.

Her father and mother attended elementary school only; her father worked in construction and her mother worked in housekeeping. She stated her GPA as 3.5 and planned to major in journalism. Further descriptions of participants are provided in Chapter 4.

### **Data Collection**

Participants were contacted via email and an interview time was scheduled in an area on the university campus chosen by each participant. One initial interview with each participant and one follow-up interview with each participant were conducted over a six-week period. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were open-ended, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. With approval from the IRB, an incentive was provided to each research participant in the form of a gift card in the amount of \$10.00 per interview (for a total value of \$20.00). Providing the incentive at the beginning of the interview limited the likelihood that the respondent would feel pressured to answer in a specific way or feel obligated to finish the interview.

Participants were informed that the interview would cover several main questions, but follow-up questions might be asked (Appendix A). The following open-ended interview questions with potential follow-up questions were utilized in the initial interview:

1. Tell me about your experiences in school.
2. So here you are now, graduating next semester. What kept you going in high school?
3. Did you face any challenges? If so, what were they?
4. What personal traits or qualities have helped you get to where you are today?
5. What elements of your life have had the biggest impact on your growth as a person?

The following open-ended interview questions with potential follow-up questions were utilized in the second interview:

1. Tell me more about the people in your life.
2. What do you think about mentors and role models?
3. What has contributed to how you feel about yourself?

The questions for both interviews were developed to be as open-ended as possible (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) with the intent to find answers to questions that stress how experience is created, with an emphasis on the socially constructed nature of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In order to answer the research question of the study—What elements do low-income high school seniors believe contributed to their perseverance to graduate from high school? — the questions were designed to explore students' experiences and perspectives in school and in other areas of their lives.

### **Data Analysis**

Data reported in this study were generated from participants' in-depth descriptions of their experiences and perspectives about persevering in their education to their senior year of high school as they answered the interview questions. The analysis of the interview data followed the guidelines suggested by Maxwell (2005). The interview responses with participants were audio-recorded and transcribed. First, the audio recording of each interview was reviewed—the researcher listened to the audio-recordings of the interviews and transcribed into a word document. Next, the verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed with the research question and the specific interview questions in mind.

Analysis began with initial coding which entailed reading and rereading transcriptions of interviews. Using a “semi-open” coding strategy (Gaztambibe-Fernandez, 2009), the content of the interviews was closely examined. Within this examination, each interview question was scrutinized in relation to the overall research question; specifically, the researcher looked for places in the participants’ responses that referred to elements that they believed contributed to their ability to persevere to their senior year of high school. The initial themes from the data were: internal characteristics contributing to their ability to persevere in their educational journeys, and external influences or people who were impactful in their lives. Written memos were recorded for any common themes or threads that seemed to link together the categories of internal and external influences that emerged from the participants’ responses (Maxwell 2005).

Recognizing that a researcher’s level of involvement with participants impacts and filters how the researcher interprets and codes the data, I kept field notes throughout the process, keeping track of where my own experiences could influence my interpretation of the data (Howard, Stalwell, & Adler, 2018). Fieldnotes taken during the interviews and during data analysis provided a record of my thoughts: not only of events that unfolded and interactions that occurred, but also of my own understanding throughout the multifaceted experience. Throughout the process of coding, I identified additional areas to be examined (such as different categories of role models) and kept analytic memos based on reflections and thinking processes about the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The themes— importance of family, peer influence, impact of role models, and existence of individual resiliency—were identified from interviews, transcripts, and fieldnotes; then they were re-analyzed for further understanding of the

participants' unique perspectives on how the themes influenced their ability to persevere in their education to their senior year of high school (Maxwell, 2005).

After the process of initial analysis detailed above, follow up questions for additional interviews were created, focusing on the participants' relations with others and with themselves (Anyon, 1980). Analysis of the first interviews revealed that the participants identified internal characteristics and external elements that contributed to their ability to persevere to their senior year of high school. Then, with the addition of a second interview, the data was re-analyzed to examine the ways in which participants positioned themselves with meaningful words and actions (Harré, 2003) through the lens of social capital (Bourdieu, 1983), examining how connections to individuals and networks can provide access to resources and forms of support that facilitate the accomplishment of goals (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Specifically, the themes of family, peers, role models, and individual resiliency were analyzed with a Bordieuan lens to determine how they were related to the participants' development of capital. Re-examining the data once again allowed for the exploration of "whether and how different pieces of data came together and illuminated one another in the overlaps between various codes and groups and subgroups of codes," a process intended to generate "increasingly complex and more complete explanations of how individuals make meaning" (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009, p. 238). In this study, re-analyzing the data was an essential step in order to avoid the pitfall of oversimplified coding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 1990).

Numerous qualitative scholars argue that it is imperative for researchers to avoid oversimplifying the complicated and nebulous nature of qualitative research; and instead,

consider the varying—and sometimes contradictory—definitions of qualitative inquiry in order to comprehend its complexity (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 1990; Van Maanen, 2014; Wolcott, 2009). Therefore, data was continually reexamined throughout the analysis to ensure that the students' voices took precedence within the identified themes. In the results, Xavier and Sarah's stories are presented as "profiles" (Siedman, 1998) in which their experiences are shared primarily in their words, with my words serving as connectors (Bergerson, 2007). Siedman (1998) explained that this presentation of results allows the participants' consciousness to be reflected in their words. Throughout, I used the participants' own wording, including dialectical phrasings and colloquialisms. Minor edits were made in places where the phrasing impeded meaning.

### **Limitations**

One possible limitation for this study is that I, as the researcher, may have been viewed as an outsider to the participants, as we did not have a rapport before the study began. However, familiarity can sometimes limit the amount of information that someone is willing to share, or the participants may give a biased response because they want to please the researcher; therefore, my lack of familiarity to the participants may be an asset to access information that interviewees generally would not share with other people because of their connection to others inside the community. The timeline for data collection could also be considered a limitation. The data was collected and analyzed over the course of a semester; a longer time frame could potentially yield even richer data.

## Summary

This chapter described the methodology of the research study. A qualitative case study design was employed to study the experiences of low-income high school seniors on track for graduation. Social capital theory was used as a lens for this study because it served as a conceptual tool to explore the perceptions and experiences of low-income high school seniors. This dissertation examined real-life examples of social capital as an important indicator of academic success (Bourdieu 1983; Coleman 1988). Specifically, this study examined social capital in how the participants fostered connections to individuals and to networks that provided access to resources and forms of support that facilitated the accomplishment of goals (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

A case study design best suited this research because the goal was to describe the experiences and perspectives of low-income high school seniors on track to graduate and to carefully illustrate a case within a contemporary context and real-life setting (Yin, 2014). This study focused on illuminating the experiences of the participants, intending to add visibility to their narratives, relying on the definition of qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the observer/researcher in the world and consists of a set of material, interpretive practices that make the world visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 1990). This study focused on two participants in order to emphasize depth versus breadth (Patton, 1990). Data reported in this study were generated from participants' in-depth descriptions of their experiences and perspectives about persevering in their education to their senior year of high school. The analysis of the interview data followed the guidelines suggested by Maxwell (2005). The results of the study are described in Chapter Four.

## Chapter IV: Results

The study examined the experiences of low-income high school seniors on track for graduation. Information was collected from open-ended interview questions that focused on participants' beliefs about how they persevered to their senior year of high school. The participants, Xavier and Sarah (pseudonyms) were asked the following questions in initial and follow-up interviews:

- Tell me about your experiences in school.
- So here you are now, graduating next semester. What kept you going in high school?
- Did you face any challenges? If so, what were they?
- What personal traits or qualities have helped you get to where you are today?
- What elements of your life have had the biggest impact on your growth as a person?
- Tell me more about the people in your life.
- What do you think about mentors and role models?
- What has contributed to how you feel about yourself?

Xavier and Sarah's stories are presented as "profiles" (Siedman, 1998) in which their experiences are shared primarily in their words, with my words serving as connectors (Bergerson, 2007). The strength of this approach is twofold. First, Xavier's and Sarah's experiences come to the forefront. The idea behind this approach to the data was to show how their lived experiences reveal elements that contributed to their ability to persevere in their educational journeys to their senior year in high school. Second, I

have attempted to avoid over-interpreting Xavier's and Sarah's words. Because my life experiences are different from theirs, I wanted to limit the use of my own voice as much as possible. There are limitations to my ability to do this, however. In the choice of quotes included in the story, and in the fact that my descriptions of their experience fill the spaces between their words, a level of interpretation exists (Bergerson, 2007). While it is not possible to remove my voice and interpretations completely, I have attempted to present an accurate portrayal of Xavier's and Sarah's experiences.

In this chapter the results are presented as a rich, descriptive case study, first featuring each participant separately to get an in-depth understanding of each individual; followed by a comparative cross-case analysis; and concluding with a summary of the chapter. The first two sections present participant experiences with two main divisions—external influences and internal influences—to show how their responses related to the overall research question for the study: What elements do low-income high school seniors believe contributed to their perseverance to graduate from high school? In the third section of this chapter, the cross-case analysis, participant responses were viewed through the theoretical framework lens of social capital, focusing more in-depth on several themes that emerged through participant interviews: influence of family; interactions with peers; importance of role models; and power of personal resiliency and self-efficacy.

### **Case #1: Xavier's Story**

At the time of the study, Xavier (pseudonym used throughout) was an 18-year-old male at a low-income high school in the western United States. Xavier described his race/ethnicity as Hispanic. He came from a family of five, with an older brother and a

younger brother. His father was a line cook and his mother worked at a local fast-food establishment. His father had some high school education; his mother had elementary school only. Xavier discussed being on track to graduate with most of his required credits fulfilled and a 3.8 GPA. In college, plans to major in biology with an emphasis in medicine.

As a student, Xavier worked hard and looked for challenges academically. He took Advanced Placement and honors classes, and he was even enrolled in college courses as a high school senior. Xavier was also involved in many extracurricular activities, such as soccer and leadership. At the time of the interviews, Xavier was student body president and was highly involved with the social aspects of high school; his friendships were important to him and he made a concerted effort to interact with a diverse array of people. Xavier also expressed a great deal of pride for his family and culture, and he said he felt a tremendous sense of obligation to be the first member of his immediate family to graduate high school.

Xavier's interviews demonstrated an intersection between several characteristics: his love for his family despite their struggles; his appreciation of his peers; his connection with role models as well as his self-identification as a role model himself; and his qualities of self-confidence, self-efficacy, and resilience. All of these factors influenced Xavier's personal values, including a sense of obligation to influence others, and "pay it forward" to individuals who come from similar socioeconomic upbringings.

**External influences.** When asked what elements of his life have had the biggest impact on his growth as a person, Xavier spoke about a number of influential people. Xavier started with his family, emphasizing the struggles they have had as well as the

ways in which he feels obligated to succeed in order to make them proud. The family members that Xavier spoke about most prominently as being influential in his life were the four members of his immediate family: his father, his mother, his older brother, and his younger brother.

***Father's influence.*** When asked to detail the important people in his life, Xavier started with his dad who is 50 years old and came over from Mexico when he was 14. Xavier described him as an alcoholic and avid smoker of marijuana but said that he's a nice guy and that he has a lot of respect for his father even though they don't always get along. He said that his dad was "a very traditional Mexican father," and that he generally "supported him from the sidelines," not really getting involved in his life.

Xavier: You know, Mexican fathers expect their sons to be very independent. So, you know, it's kind of what I expected. There's been many times where I felt as if he could have left, but he stayed. You know, so like I would consider him very resilient, especially for some stuff he's gone through.

Xavier used the word "resilient" to describe his father, and he talked about how he derived respect for his father from the fact that he has gone through a lot in his lifetime, and that he has not left his family.

***Mother's influence.*** Xavier also chose to talk about his mom, who is 39 years old and came over from Mexico in her early twenties with her brother. Xavier draws a distinction between his father who came over to the United States at a younger age and started his own life right away; and his mother, who came over with her family. He began his description of his mother by saying that it was actually her birthday on the day of the interview. He described his mom in depth, saying that she is quiet, shy, reserved,

and sweet. Xavier said that she was “more than the mother [he] could possibly ask for” and he believed she was the hardest worker in the family. He explained that it took his mother longer than his father to become a resident of the United States, and that once she finally became a resident, the first thing she did was apply for a job. He explained, “it took her, I think, over 12 years, actually, to become a resident. That was the most inspiring thing to me. My mom was always the hardest worker in the room and has inspired me to do the same.” Again, here, Xavier indicates that he admires the resilience of his mother, particularly with her persistence to become a resident. He demonstrates that he values her work ethic and finds inspiration from her example. In his descriptions of his parents, the theme of family influence can be seen along with the theme of resilience.

*Older brother’s influence.* Throughout the interviews, Xavier kept returning to the relationship he has with his older brother. They are a year and a half apart in age and grew up together, but Xavier described them as opposites, even in their appearance, as he described his brother as taller and lighter in skin tone with different hair texture. His brother struggled with drug and alcohol addiction when he was younger, but at the time of the interviews, he was in recovery and had been gainfully employed for a year. Xavier noted more than once throughout the interviews that he and his brother were so different people often don’t even think they were related. In addition to appearance, Xavier elaborated on their differing personalities, saying that growing up, his older brother did play soccer and was really good at school and then eventually “kind of hung out with the wrong crowd” and “kind of just turned his life to not something ideal.”

Xavier: [My brother] is more like.... considering where he grew up... He's more like the hardened and kind of like "hood" type to have grown up. He's very like secluded and closed off. You know, he always kind of puts on that tough face. growing up, he was kind of involved with like gangs, kind of throughout like middle school and high school. And after that kind of like drinking and just [doing] drugs by himself.

Xavier has a complicated relationship with his brother, sometimes saying that he wasn't the role model he needed in his life, and sometimes referring to him as a role model for what not to do. Of particular note is the comparison Xavier makes to others in his culture, and the description of his brother as having a lot of untapped potential:

Xavier: Although my brother was making like decisions I wouldn't make personally, he kind of showed me what not to do and kind of taught me a lot about like how to not trust certain people and what kind of things like not to do. My brother is a very good guy when he wants to be. He has a lot of untapped potential. And I feel like that's the case with a lot of my race of people. I just feel like he's kind of stuck in the group of like he thinks the world is against him, but really the world is his oyster. And I'm just trying my best to kind of make him realize that.

Xavier views his brother as an illustrative example of his "race of people." This is one of the many places where Xavier comments on his cultural connections, later explaining that he takes it upon himself to inspire others from similar cultures in order for them to see their potential.

*Younger brother's influence.* Xavier lit up when talking about his little brother. In all instances, he spoke of his younger sibling with fondness and esteem, saying, “my little brother has to be one of the most inspiring characters in my life I would say.” His younger sibling is 9 years old and was diagnosed with Down syndrome when he was in the womb. Xavier explained that his brother’s stage one Down syndrome is light but that he still has physical disabilities. Xavier spoke at length about the resilience demonstrated by his younger brother, with his ability to overcome numerous medical obstacles—he endured significant breathing and heart problems as well as numerous surgeries—in addition to personal challenges such as being bullied by other children because of his disability. Xavier discussed how his sibling not only inspired him on an individual level, but also affected how he viewed other people, particularly those with disabilities. His family experience added to the ways in which he was able to engage with others in society.

Xavier: Having my brother be born really kind of changed my life. It changed the way I kind of view things and treat people. My little brother is going to grow up to be something great. And I know it. And I want to be there every step of the way for him, you know, because I feel like growing up, I didn't really have that. So I want to be that for him.

This is another example of Xavier’s recognition of the importance of family, but his responses also again intersect with the theme of resilience, a quality that he admires in other people and strives to cultivate in himself; and this also ties in with the theme of role models as demonstrated by Xavier’s feeling of responsibility to be a positive example to his younger brother.

In addition to his descriptions of his family members as influential parts of his life, Xavier expanded on members of his peer group—Javier, Brian, and Luis—who all provided positive attributes for Xavier to look up to. In this way, his descriptions of peers intersected with the theme of role models. The other substantial peer influence that Xavier discussed at length was that of a former girlfriend, Cristina, who also provided him with new ways to look at life.

***Javier's influence.*** Xavier started with his friend Javier [pseudonym] whom he met in kindergarten. He was Xavier's first friend in elementary school, and they grew up in the same neighborhood. Xavier and Javier's houses were within walking distance, and Xavier says that Javier introduced him to soccer and being outside and the rough and tumble part of childhood—playing in the mud and just being a kid. They remained close through elementary school and middle school, but split ways in the beginning of high school, as life got in the way, but reconnected their junior year.

Xavier: Javier is also a really big inspiration to me. He actually works two different jobs in construction and at Walmart to support his family because his dad's the only one who works in his family. So he kind of stepped up to be a provider as well.

Xavier talks about admiring the work ethic of his friend; in particular, he respects the way that he provides for his family. This is not only an example of peer influence, but also ties to the theme of self-efficacy in the traits that Javier demonstrates.

***Brian's influence.*** Xavier continues with the evaluation of his peers and his connection to them in his discussion of another friend with whom he had a lot in common. Xavier and Brian (pseudonym) also met in elementary school but had a falling

out after a physical fight in fourth grade; but then, similar to Javier, Xavier found a connection with Brian in middle school. They had a lot in common and even look so much alike that people often mistake them for brothers. Xavier said that they now spend time together consistently, and that they are connected because they grew up similarly.

Xavier: I was able to like talk to [Brian] as kind of like an older, like more mature person. Turns out we had a lot in common. You know, he comes from a tough background. His dad left when he was very young. And his mom, like, works really hard for like his family. He's kinda like similar to me because his older brothers kinda didn't choose the right path.

Xavier relates to Brian on a deeper level due to their similarities in how they grew up. This is also an example of Xavier remaining open-minded and flexible, as he explains how their relationship evolved, a trend that is seen through several of Xavier's peer bonds.

***Luis's influence.*** The third mention of a peer that influenced Xavier revolved around a friend that was part of the same college access program and a person that Xavier looked to for advice. He describes Luis (pseudonym) as "a really cool character, very nonchalant, the most interesting person ever." Xavier said that he's the friend who gets the wild side out of Luis and lets him live a little bit. Xavier and Luis also became friends in elementary school, then grew apart, but found a connection again when they were both a part of a college-access program. Xavier described Luis as a "genius" and said that he is someone that Xavier can go to for advice and help with school.

Xavier: [Luis] is very smart. He's much smarter than I am. He's been in college since his sophomore year of high school and has like passed all his classes with

flying colors. And what's so funny is he's like so humble about it. Like, he doesn't really, like, brag about the things he's doing or anything like that. Luis is just very goal-driven and just like, you know, thinks about the future a ton, you know. So like I come to him for advice.

Xavier talks about the qualities that he admires in his friend— intelligence and humility— and how he is a trusted advisor. Again, Xavier reveals how he values strong work ethic and commitment to achieving goals through his positive description of his friend's qualities of self-efficacy.

*Cristina's influence.* The final member of Xavier's peer group who was featured in his interview responses was a former significant other. Xavier and Cristina (pseudonym) started dating at the beginning of their freshmen year of high school and were together until the beginning of their junior year. And even though it didn't work out for them romantically, and they aren't as involved with one another's lives as they used to be, Xavier says that he has no ill will towards her; in fact, she is the student body vice president at their high school, and he is student body president. Xavier describes her influence on him in the time they were together, saying that she grew up differently from him and had different opportunities. Xavier explained that she was the first person to truly listen to him and validate his ideas, even when they were "crazy theories." Because she was able to expose Xavier to different elements of arts, culture, and travel, Cristina contributed to his development of cultural and social capital.

Xavier: [Cristina] taught me a lot about things I didn't know I liked. I really love like theater and dance now through her and like, it's something that you could tell you've always liked, but were just never exposed to. She really exposed me to a

lot of things. She took me on my first vacation to California, to her grandparents' house, and we were there for a whole week with her family.

Xavier spoke extensively about how his exposure to Cristina's middle-class family influenced his perception of upbringings different from his own. He talked about how he never had big family holiday celebrations because his parents always had to work, and his extended family was not able to come to the United States from Mexico. He said that Cristina brought him into her family and that was the first time he had a sense of that type of familial connection. Xavier said that the experience of feeling like he was a part of their family shaped how he wants his future family dynamic to be.

Xavier said that his ex-girlfriend, more than anyone else in his life, showed him that he should not change for anyone and should not try to fit into anyone else's expectations.

Xavier: And she [Cristina] kind of showed me that like myself is the best version of myself. Because when you come from like the background that I'm from, the neighborhood and all that kind of stuff, you're kind of like pushed to like listen to like certain types of music or dress a certain type of way. [My experience with this girlfriend] kind of taught me you know what, I don't have to sag my pants. I don't have to steal from stores. And I don't have to listen to this kind of music, I can like what I like and I could run with that.

The influence Cristina had on Xavier relates to his development of self-identity and intersects with the theme of self-efficacy—or one's belief about one's ability to find success in different situations—and showed him that he didn't have to maintain a stereotype, but instead could act and dress however he pleased.

Along with the influence of his friends and family, Xavier detailed his rapport with several adult role models and their influence on his development in relation to his growth as a person. He spoke most about the impact that Mrs. Scott had in his life. She was a counselor and mentor that Xavier met through participation in a college-access program. Xavier also mentioned one of his most influential teachers, Mr. Roberts, on multiple occasions.

*Mrs. Scott's influence.* One person that kept coming up in Xavier's responses was his counselor for his college access program, Mrs. Scott (pseudonym). Xavier explained that when he started high school, everything was going great for him, and he was ambitious and optimistic. During that time—his freshman year of high school—he said his monthly meetings with Mrs. Scott which involved her mostly checking in on his grades, asking how things were going with his friends, and talking about extracurriculars. Then, his sophomore year, Xavier said that his life “slowly started to fall apart.” His grades were slipping, he was struggling with circumstances at home, and he was having problems with friends and girlfriends. Xavier talked about how Mrs. Scott helped him through difficult times.

Xavier: I think the biggest person in my life in high school definitely has to be my college prep counselor, Mrs. Scott. She changed my life in more ways than I could count. When I thought my life was falling into pieces, she kind of took all those pieces, put them together and kind of sat me down and told me like, look, it's not that bad. You can get it all together again.

Part of the reason that Mrs. Scott was so helpful to Xavier was because she was an adult figure with similar experiences as him. He discussed how she was the person he looked to

the most for guidance, advice and support, since he didn't have that at home. He called Mrs. Scott the biggest inspiration in his life, and said that she was always there for him. He said that he appreciated her influence because she is smart and has been through a great deal in her life. Xavier was appreciative of her because she was able to give him support that he wasn't able to get from his family or friends. Xavier said that Mrs. Scott gave him something he never really had growing up because she believed in him from the start and she was the first person to tell him that he could do anything he put his mind to. He said, "here I am, student body president. I'm taking college classes and I'm a high school senior. I wouldn't be where I am today without her. I don't even think I would be on track to graduate without her, honestly." Xavier explained that she served as a significant part of his life because he showed her that it is possible to be successful in high school and even go on to college.

Xavier: having someone, you know, who's like in their early 30s, having gone through like college and kind of all this other stuff, you know, I'm a first gen student and she's also first gen and having her like knowledge of the world and the things she's been through has helped a ton because she's allowed me to make really smart decisions.

The impact of this counselor was evident in the tone that Xavier used to describe her. His voice was full of emotion as he talked about how much her presence in his life influenced his development as a person. Xavier's experiences with Mrs. Scott clearly tie to the theme of role models and mentors, but her influence on him also impacted his ability to find resilience and perseverance through difficult times, relating to that theme as well.

*Mr. Roberts' influence.* Xavier elaborated on the positive influence of an inspirational educator that he had in middle school, Mr. Roberts (pseudonym). Xavier described him as a really nice guy who loved his job and loved the kids. He was always joking around with students and showed Xavier that being goofy is okay. Mr. Roberts also served as a role model for Xavier by talking about his experience in the military before his teaching career. Xavier's discussion of Mr. Roberts led in to his larger perception of mentors and role models in general:

Xavier: I cannot stress enough how important having a role model and a mentor is. Growing up, it was hard. Because, again, like, I didn't have like an older brother to look up to or like a father. I had really influential teachers in middle school, like I would say, like my teacher, Mr. Roberts. I think having role models and mentors are perfect because having that person to kind of be like, oh, like, you should do this and you shouldn't do this because of this. So I think they're vital in like your success.

Here, Xavier is talking about the power of strong adult relationships and role modeling, especially when that connection is missing at home. Mr. Roberts influenced Xavier, not only in the classroom, but also in exploring potential careers after high school.

**Internal influences.** When asked what personal traits or qualities have most helped him in his perseverance to his senior year of high school, Xavier spoke about his sense of resilience, self-confidence, charisma, and adaptability. Though he didn't use the word self-efficacy, his descriptions of his personal characteristics fit this theme and it is revealed in many aspects of his life. He demonstrated his influential internal traits through his depiction of his experiences as a mentor, a leader, and a friend.

*Self-efficacy.* Xavier spent some time reflecting on his definition of success and explicating how he will know he's successful in his life; in this way he is demonstrating qualities of self-efficacy. He described himself as "very outgoing, charismatic, and highly optimistic." He stated: "I love life in a sense that I'm very grateful to be alive. And I feel like the world is beautiful and all those who inhabit it. And I think my personal like trait is I'm like a natural born leader." This developed sense of self-efficacy transfers into Xavier's big plans for the future. He said that he considers himself successful because he has been able to keep his grades up throughout his school experience, but he's not completely successful yet because he still wants to finish high school, go to college, and become a traveling physician. He explained that he has hurdled over many obstacles, but that his ambitions remain high. He explained, "I set myself to a high standard because I know I can do a lot of things. I don't think I should set my standards low for anyone else because I know I can do it," and then he further elaborated, "regardless of whether I [meet all my goals], the learning experience for me is the best." When asked if he considered himself successful, he responded that it is an accumulation of many goals that make true success.

Xavier: I do consider myself successful in getting over like life's beginning challenges and, you know, choosing the right path of going to school instead of going to the streets and kind of taking a different path than like my brother and my dad did, and kind of getting over the hurdles of like peer pressure and all kinds of other stuff. But I want to be even more. And that's, you know, in the future. So I think life is a series of like multiple successes

This excerpt demonstrates a combination of resiliency and self-efficacy: by overcoming obstacles in his life, Xavier has developed his sense of self. He has an understanding of how setbacks in life can contribute to one's growth and ability to persevere.

**Resilience.** Xavier demonstrated an acute awareness of his own resiliency, even using the term "resilient" without prompting. He talked about remaining "tough" through adversities in his life, including the turmoil that he and his family went through when his older brother attempted suicide. He said that over the years he's become very resilient out of need. He described difficult times when he would sit up in his room and work on his "mental toughness."

Xavier: Growing up in the environment I did, if you weren't resilient it would eat you alive and you would probably end up taking a wrong path. When times get tough, like you have to tough it out and you have to be like, 'you know what? It's tough right now, but it will get better.' And being that resilient and that tough is hard. But through practice and perseverance, I think anyone can do it. And I mean, it's a really important skill to have to know that although like bad things happen in your life, you're going to get through them all regardless of what they are. And if you're resilient and you're tough and you get through them, you're going to get out of it better than ever.

Xavier's awareness of his resiliency connects back to self-efficacy. His individual actions are influenced by his perception of himself as tough and resilient.

**Self-confidence.** The development of self-confidence came up repeatedly in Xavier's interview responses. The way in which he discussed his growth as a person and a leader revealed an awareness of self. Xavier explored this idea first through his

description of feeling like a role model and mentor to his peers, clearly demonstrating an overlap of themes. He explained that since middle school he did his best to be a mentor and role model. He said that he tried to avoid negative influences, to “stay away from all the bad stuff and hit the books and focus a ton on inspiring people.” Xavier always tried to have a positive attitude, a smile on his face, and he said he “wanted to be someone that people can look up to, whether it be my peers, whether it be someone younger than me or older than me.” He elucidated this hope even further by saying, “I just always wanted to be the person where someone could look at me and feel like they could go out and change the world. And that's like my biggest goal in life: to kind of like inspire people.”

Xavier talked about how feeling like a mentor and inspiration to others contributed to his sense of self, and that when people come up to him—after leadership conferences for instance—and ask for help with their problems, he feels a sense of self-satisfaction and empowerment. Xavier said that he even wants to write a book one day in order to inspire others with his experiences. When asked how he felt about mentors and role models, Xavier said that he considers himself both a mentor and a role model. He talked about how much he appreciated it when people would come up to him and ask for help or ask him questions and seek guidance.

Xavier: the fact that they entrust me to help them make a good decision is very empowering. And I do get a lot of comments from people saying that I do inspire them. And it kind of like keeps me going. So I want to continue being that person for everyone and help to just be even greater. Again I hope one day I can get to the point where they look at me and just know that this guy's been through it all and I can, too, you know?

Xavier used the word “empowering” to explain how he feels as he has evolved into a role model for others. In this way, he is building self-confidence within himself and sharing it with others.

Xavier was asked what has contributed to the way he feels about himself and offered a multifaceted response, entailing his journey of self-discovery. He noted that he actually used to be negative and hard on himself in his younger years. He would criticize himself about his appearance and ability to accomplish tasks; he said that he thought poorly about himself for a long time. Then, in eighth grade he started to get into literature and poetry and read a lot of information about self-care and self-love. Xavier found inspiration on social media platforms, viewing inspirational videos that helped him in his journey of self-identity. When asked what contributed to how he felt about himself, Xavier said there were many factors that led him to look at himself differently. He said that his development of self-confidence was partly attributed to his own positive self-talk, but that he was also influenced by mentors and role models, such as Mrs. Scott and his teachers.

Xavier: There would be some nights where I would kind of think about all those compliments I got from my teachers or my role models or mentors or my peers... they'd be like [Xavier] you're so awesome and stuff like that. And some nights I found myself laying down and thinking, ‘you know what? Maybe they are right. Like, maybe I am awesome, you know?’

In this case, Xavier is interweaving self-efficacy, interactions with peers, and influence of adult role models to talk about how he was able to persevere through difficult times. He further explained this journey in relation to individuals that he encountered in high

school, saying that seeing other people talk badly about themselves made him realize that if he spoke about himself negatively, that could also translate to others and that he should try to be his best self around his peers in order to positively impact their lives—demonstrating an intersection of themes again, with peer influence and role modeling.

Xavier went on to explain that high school is the time to realize “how important loving yourself is” and that he “hated seeing people be hard on themselves when [he] knew they were amazing.” He elaborated by saying that he drove himself to try to be someone his peers looked up to by appreciating his own good qualities.

Xavier: going to the high school I go to, you meet a ton of amazing people that absolutely hate themselves. And it was devastating for me to like see, because in my head, like, they were the most amazing person in the world, but in their head they were the worst person on earth. So I think definitely high school is what made me realize I should focus on my good qualities instead of my bad ones.

Through the influence of important people in his life as well as his own self-development, Xavier increased his sense of empowered self-confidence. Also of note is Xavier’s interactions with literature and inspirational films that helped him in this development and to see things from various perspectives.

***Paying it forward.*** Additionally, the concept of “paying it forward” came up repeatedly for Xavier. He said that he felt a sense of obligation to pass along his obtained life lessons to other people, especially those from similar circumstances. Xavier shared one anecdote that illuminated this idea, where he attended a week-long leadership camp. He said the most amazing thing about the camp was towards the end of it, the camp participants had a chance to build a bike and give it to a lower-income child who didn’t

have one. This experience was noteworthy in how Xavier discussed his awareness of his socioeconomic status in comparison to the other campers, and he talked about how remarkable it was to be able to give a bike to a low-income young person, when he, in fact was a recipient of a bike from the camp when he was 8 years old.

Xavier: The camp reaches out to programs and finds lower income kids who don't have a bike and offers them to come down to camp, rather, for a day. They hang out with us and get a bike. Fun fact is 10 years ago, I was one of those kids who got a bike from that same camp and I didn't realize... I didn't realize it till it was the day of. And we were walking through the whole process of how we're gonna do it. When they talk about paying it forward, you kind of assume you grow up and you like do something for someone, you know, like paying it forward to your parents or paying it forward to the people who guided you there. But sometimes paying it forward is to the people who kinda allowed you to get there. Back when I was 8 years old and I got that bike, I was able to ride around and feel free. You know, when I wanted to get away from the troubles at home, I'd get on that bike and ride around my neighborhood. And I was so happy when I got it because my family didn't have the money to afford one. So I know how it feels to get that bike. And that's what I feel like paying it forward is, because now I know exactly the way it feels and I'm able to give that feeling to some other kid. Like that means something; like there's a purpose. There's like a higher, higher, thing pushing me forward and I'm alive for like a bigger reason...

As he talked about the day he was able to “pay it forward” to another individual from similar circumstances as his own, Xavier’s eyes filled up with tears and his voice caught as he shared the details of the experience:

Xavier: So we meet up with our children. We get two sweet little kids, a boy and a girl. We're dancing with them, saying hi with them, you know, just having a good time with them. And eventually we go off and build bikes and then we like blindfold them and put them on their bikes. And they're so happy. And I can't help but just cry because at one point, I was just a little kid being blindfolded and getting a bike and hanging out around all these crazy teenagers. And the kid I was with did not know how to ride a bike. When I got a bike, I did know how to ride it. So I was like, ‘oh, you know, hop on it.’ And he was like, ‘I don't know how to ride a bike.’ And I was like, ‘huh?’ I was like, ‘well, I'm going to teach you.’ So throughout the last hour we had with our children, I rode around the camp with my child. I taught him how to ride a bike. Towards the end, he eventually got the hang of it. I was able to let him go and see him just kind of ride around that one lap around the camp. It was just so beautiful and I felt so powerful in that moment, not because I taught him how to ride a bike, but because I was able to truly pay it forward. And hopefully one day that kid grows up, and one day pays it forward as well.

In this experience that Xavier was provided—the chance to attend a leadership camp and make a difference in his community—he shows the importance of offering students from lower socioeconomic households more opportunities to engage in these kinds of empowering experiences.

*Leadership influence.* Opportunities such as this camp and Xavier’s experiences in his leadership roles informed his understanding of himself as maintaining a position of power. He summarized how his work as student body president allowed him to position himself as a leader in his school. Xavier spoke about a time at the end of his senior year where he and a fellow leadership student felt like they were being left out because they came from a lower socioeconomic household than the other students. He said that he hated that feeling and decided to do a workshop on “how to include everyone in your leadership class.” He ended up presenting it to his school’s leadership class as well as the state leadership conference to “teach those kids about inclusion and to help classes kind of keep everyone together.” He described the experience as life-changing, knowing that he was doing something with a purpose.

Xavier: My sophomore year in leadership, for a majority part of it, it was as if the lower class students like me and my friend—we both live in the same area—me and him both felt as if we were always being pushed aside or like we’re always in the background, you know, like we were never like main figures in the class.

This story is significant because it shows Xavier’s awareness of his socioeconomic status in comparison to others and demonstrates how he wanted to use his positioning as a leader to create a more cohesive and less divisive environment in his school.

Another anecdote that demonstrated Xavier’s feelings of empowerment as a leader involved his experience traveling to Washington D.C. with the chance to have his voice heard regarding college access programs during a week-long policy-based leadership camp. That experience entailed going to Capitol Hill and talking with policy makers about the impact of first-generation low-income college programs. Xavier

explained that they were there “to brag about our programs and to give them reasons to why they should keep funding them.” He said it was an “awesome” experience because it was the first time he ever went somewhere to bring a case to someone, to plead for support for a cause. He talked about how he felt like a “powerful politician in professional clothing” and described it as an eye-opener to his ability to connect with anyone.

Xavier: Now that I did it at a bigger scale, like I was still able to transform my personality and my motivation to somewhere outside of [my own state]. I learned that I could be friends with literally anyone if you try hard enough. And I should definitely not judge someone by their outward appearance because they can be so much different on the inside. [Now] I've created like I would like to say an empire in high school. From the connections I made and from the people I met, the friends I've had, and the decisions I decided to make.

This description is an example of Xavier’s experiences that contributed to his attainment of social capital as indicated by his use of words “empowerment” and “connections” to describe the impact of this opportunity.

**Summary of Xavier’s Story.** Throughout his interview responses, Xavier talked about the difficulties of having parents who did not complete high school or college; his complicated sibling relationships; the connections that he had with peers; the influence of role models and mentors in his life; and his own qualities of self-efficacy, perseverance, leadership, and resiliency.

**Case #2: Sarah's Story**

At the time of the study, Sarah (pseudonym used throughout) was an 18-year-old student in twelfth grade at a low-income high school in the western part of the United States. Sarah described her race/ethnicity as Latina. She came from a family of five and is the eldest of 3 siblings. Her father and mother attended elementary school only; her father worked in construction and her mother worked in housekeeping. She stated her GPA as 3.5 and planned to major in journalism.

Sarah put a great deal of effort into her studies and placed high value on the power of education. She challenged herself with honors classes and felt a particular affinity for language courses and classes that had real-world relevance. Sarah described herself as shy but said that she had some close friends in school. She attributed her success in school to a combination of personal attributes and supportive individuals in her life. Sarah was looking forward to high school graduation and was on track to do so at the time of the study.

When examining Sarah's interview responses, it is difficult to separate her perceptions of her influential relationships and her conception of her own personal attributes, as they interacted to shape her overall perspective. Though clear themes emerged in the data from Sarah's interviews, those themes intersected throughout her responses. Despite these intersections of ideas, for ease of understanding, subheadings have been provided below to distinguish between external influences and internal influences that played a role in Sarah's perception of how she was able to persevere to her senior year of high school.

**External influences.** Regarding individuals who have been important in her life, Sarah mentioned the influence of her parents, but she spoke primarily about two members of her extended family: her cousin, who showed her an example of persevering academically, and her aunt, who demonstrated resilience personally.

**Cousin's influence.** Sarah began her discussion of influential family members by talking about her cousin, who is 23 and one of the only people in Sarah's extended family who had graduated from high school. At the time of the interviews, her cousin was in college studying to be a psychology major. She said that her cousin came immediately to mind as a person who influenced her because they have always had a connection through mutual hobbies and that she's always been a role model for Sarah. Sarah explained that she looked to her cousin for the support that her mom wasn't able to give her because her mother "hadn't made it as far in the educational field." Sarah described her frustrations with her parents not understanding if she had a club meeting or if she was stressed out because of school. She said she would try to talk to her parents, but it "was different where they came from" and they often couldn't relate. This is where her cousin came in, as a support when Sarah needed it because her cousin had similar experiences with her own parents. Sarah's cousin contributed to her life by providing an example of someone who was able to make it through high school and into college. Even though her immediate family was not necessarily able to provide the support Sarah needed regarding academics and school activities, she found that relationship in a member of her extended family.

**Parents' influence.** Regarding her parents, Sarah spoke about their financial struggles and limited occupational opportunities, but that they worked hard to provide a

stable home. She said that her father lacked educational experience, but still was able to impart knowledge based on life lessons.

Sarah: My dad, for example. He only made it to elementary school, but that doesn't mean he's, you know, any less smart or any less capable. He's a construction worker. He tells me: "You know, I was able to teach myself different things and I know different things than you, but it doesn't mean one is smarter than the other. We just know different things."

Sarah said that her dad gave her advice based not on formal education, but on life experiences. The fact that Sarah chose to include this in her interview responses shows that she values the knowledge he imparts, even though he wasn't able to attend school past his elementary years.

*Aunt's influence.* Sarah also spoke about her aunt who served as a role model for how to be a person with connections to those around them. Her aunt lived out of the country at the time of the interviews, but Sarah still felt close to her and described how she was a kindhearted person and made Sarah want to follow her lead by having strong relationships with her family and faith. She said that she admired how her aunt is a person that others come to for advice.

Sarah: [My aunt] has had really tough things to go through, but she's also really religious and like just like, you know, the faith she has and like some of the stories she tells me, it's like crazy that, you know, she has all this faith and like religion and like how she says she was able to overcome anything through that. It like kind of makes you want to believe it because of the remarkable things she tells you... And she may not have a lot, but she's content where she is.

In this case, Sarah's aunt worked as a positive influence in her life by showing her that even if someone doesn't have a lot, they can still be content. She also admired her aunt's religious faith and its ability to help her overcome adversity. In this case, the themes of family, role modeling, and resilience are all visible.

To summarize, in addition to her parents' influence on her perspectives, Sarah spoke at length about two members of her extended family: her cousin, who showed her an example of persevering academically; and her aunt, who demonstrated personal resilience. This shows how influential family members are not always immediate family; and in Sarah's case, members of her extended family were important mentors to her, demonstrating an additional connection to the theme of role models.

Continuing her response to the question of what elements in her life had the biggest impact on her growth as a person, Sarah had a unique perspective on peer influence. First, she talked about how she was actually more of the influential element in her peer relations, relating to the theme of self-efficacy. She also used singers and musicians as an example of peer influence, demonstrating that role models from similar age groups can have an impact on individuals.

***Influence of friends.*** In Sarah's examination of her interactions with peers, she spoke more about her influence on her friends rather than their influence on her. This demonstrates the complex interactions at play within the theme of peers. She talked about trying to be a positive influence for her friends who "give up and don't really try." She talked about her friends who are not honors students and how she's encouraged them to "take like a certain honor class or dual credit classes in college."

Sarah: I've actually encouraged some of [my friends] to [challenge themselves academically]. I'm like, 'you can trust me. Like, it's totally not that hard.' And I would totally explain, like, you know, everything that it was about. I was like, you just gotta do the work. It's doable, you know? And just like encouraging them to do it, they would see like, oh, she can do it, she says it's not bad. I'll give it a try. So like that will really make me feel good when they give it a chance. They'd be like, Oh, hey, I'll take this class. She says it's fine. She says it's like easy. I can do it.

In this instance, Sarah's relation to the theme of peer influence came from herself, from her ability to influence her peers. While this ties to the peer theme, it also ties in to Sarah's characteristics of self-efficacy.

*Influence of age-group musicians.* When asked how she feels about her peers, Sarah included artists who have impacted her, saying that even though it may sound silly, she is inspired by the musicians she listens to who are in her age group; partly because of a childhood dream, but also because they show how individuals can overcome adversity:

Sarah: I still think it's really cool, like, you know, thinking that these people...if you hear some of their stories, you're like, 'oh, wow, you know, they came from like really bad backgrounds and all this stuff.' And now, like, look at them, they're like successful and they're, you know, able to share all this, like, cool stuff with everyone and, you know, make people feel better, make them happy.

Sarah's interpretation of "peers" didn't just encompass friends she has locally; she also considered people that she interacts with online to be peers, including famous musicians that she's never met personally. Her description of her celebrity idols also intersects the

themes of role models and resilience, as she reflects how one quality of effective role models is their ability to overcome adversity.

Sarah's perception of peer influence encourages a need to broaden the definition of "peer" past the traditional concept of friendship, to encompass the interactions of teenagers in the twenty-first century which often occur online. Dolby and Rizvi (2008) stated that as youth spend more and more of their time in on-line environments, technology blurs the lines between "on" and "off" worlds. Because of the influence of social media, artists, musicians, and other celebrities can fit into the interpretation of peer influence as well as the conception of positive role models and mentors.

As a follow-up question to the elements of her life that had the biggest impact on her growth as a person, Sarah was asked what she thinks about mentors and role models. For Sarah, her discussion of role models and mentors was threefold. First, she talked about the substantial impact that her mentor from her college-access program had on her life. She also spoke generally about the influence of her teachers. And finally, she explored her own identity as a role model and mentor, an exploration that encompassed the themes of not only role-modeling and mentoring, but also that of self-efficacy and personal resilience.

***Influence of college-access program mentors.*** Sarah talked extensively about the mentors she had in her college access program. She explained how they encouraged her to try new things and helped her come out of her shell. Sarah said that she was a little scared when she first met her mentors because they were a lot older than she was, and she was apprehensive about what they were going to tell her to do, but once she got to know them, she realized that they were just like everyone else and they were there to be her

friends and support her. She said that they “open a lot of opportunities and, you know, even within your mind, just like they give you a whole new perspective to look at things.”

Sarah: they're older than you and, you know, they're more experienced and they're able to share that knowledge with you and help you grow as a person. I used to be a really reserved person. I was really shy and like it was kind of tough for me to open up to people. So they helped me kind of come out of my shell slowly exposing me again to like this whole new world kind of just like leading me, you know, being that role model, and I mean, in particular, my mentor, who is really social, so, you know, kind of slowly pulled me out of that world. So I think just like them being able to help me grow and be more social and open and just able to share my thoughts and problems with other people.

Her interactions with her mentor in the college access program helped Sarah increase her self-confidence. Sarah talked about how this role model helped her develop her belief in her own abilities, which relates to the theme of self-efficacy.

*Influence of teachers.* When considering the influence of school personnel on her ability to persevere through her senior year, Sarah spoke briefly about specific teachers in her life, but even more important were her references to general qualities of educators that form connections with students. Sarah alluded to the necessity to have a teaching staff representative of the students in the school, and the need for classwork to have relevance to teenagers.

Sarah: [On] campus, language teachers [helped me] ‘cause they spoke the first language that I speak. So again, I guess it's what I find myself drawn towards... people that have that ability to relate to them. I had a history teacher, for example.

She went out of her way to teach us beyond what was in the history books. She would teach us, you know, stuff that was relevant to the real world today. Stuff that we could relate to and actually use. She wouldn't just teach us, you know, memorization of facts, just to spit out on tests later. She taught us essentially to think for ourselves and think beyond. I really appreciated that. That gift she gave us.

What is particularly noteworthy in this response is Sarah's connection to the educators she mentions. This demonstrates how imperative it is for students to have role models that they can relate to; in Sarah's case, teachers who spoke Spanish and teachers who made the curriculum relevant for her.

*Self-identification as mentor.* This appreciation of the mentor relationship seemed to transfer into Sarah's identifying as a mentor herself. She said that she feels like she definitely identifies as a mentor, especially for her siblings because she's the oldest child in her family, and for her extended family because she is one of the only ones who made it through high school:

Sarah: You know, I'm about to graduate high school. I'm one of the few who's made it this far. And just like showing [younger siblings] that it can be done with hard work and effort. My mom definitely tells me, you know, to set the example for them.

In this case, Sarah is interweaving the themes of family and role models, in that she wants to make her mom proud and serve as a positive example to her younger siblings by being the first in their immediate family to graduate high school and attend college.

**Internal influences.** The idea of overcoming obstacles to find success presented itself in Sarah's responses many times, not only in her discussion of other people as detailed above, but also in her own sense of self. Her responses in this area were concise, but relevant to the research question of what elements contributed to her ability to persevere to her senior year in high school.

**Self-efficacy.** In her interview, Sarah explored the complicated nature of success and achieving goals. For her, success would mean making it through college, studying journalism, and being able to support herself, showing the concept of self-efficacy. She also talked about her dream of studying abroad:

Sarah: I've always really wanted to study abroad in Japan in particular. It's like my biggest dream to study there and I have always been fascinated by the culture.

Ever since I was little. So just like keeping that hope there. That's like the biggest hope I see into the future that kind of keeps me going is that, you know, if I work hard and do all of these steps, I might be able to attain that goal. [And for long term success], I think just being able to support myself and being stable, being able to pay the bills, you know, not having to depend on my parents as much.

That would definitely be something to be proud of. I would consider myself successful if I'm able to do that.

When asked what influenced her to consider studying abroad, Sarah explained that her college-access mentors and teachers had introduced the idea to her; this demonstrates how role models can contribute to one's development of self-efficacy.

**Resilience.** Sarah detailed, throughout her interview responses, times when she had to overcome adversity and stress in her life, particularly in her household struggles

with finances and difficult family dynamics. She said that she attributed her ability to persevere not because of her intelligence, but through her work ethic and grit.

Sarah: I don't feel like I'm the smartest person in the world. There's definitely, like, you know, people that are smarter than me. And it really doesn't matter about that. It's just about finding your own, you know, strength, you know, kind of like embracing that and putting that out there, kind of just like balancing yourself out. It's really just all about, you know, your morals and the effort you're willing to put into things; like you can definitely do it.

Sarah had a multitude of experiences that she believed contributed to her ability to persevere through high school and she had clear plans for the future. Through her tenacity and growth as an individual, Sarah cultivated skills that demonstrate self-efficacy.

*Self-confidence.* In a follow-up interview question, Sarah was asked how she feels about herself and what contributed to that perspective. She replied that she is fairly satisfied and content with the way she is, but there are times when she gets sad and insecure, especially when perseverating on some of the superficial things that people have attacked her for.

Sarah: I remember getting bullied in like elementary school and stuff because I wore glasses. They'd be like 'four eyes' and whatever and I'd be like that doesn't you know, that's really stupid. Like it doesn't mean anything. You know, just getting over that superficial stuff. Actually, even like mentally I would say, because recently I've gotten over like a really bad depression and it like stemmed from this belief that, you know, I wasn't good enough. That I'm not in a good

place. But really, it just takes, you know, a good mind to be able to find the good things in your life and not necessarily pick out all of the negative things. And sometimes I am like that. I do see like, you know, the glass half empty instead of half full. But you just have to keep reminding yourself that, you know, it's still there. There's still stuff in it. And. You may not have what everybody else has, but you have something, and there are people far worse off than you. And, you know, one day you may be at that level, you will be successful. You'll look back and be proud of yourself. So I definitely look at myself like that. I think, you know, one day I'm going to be there. I can definitely do it. If I keep on the same track that I am.

Sarah demonstrated her ability to persevere through challenging circumstances and found resilience through a focus on gratitude.

**Summary of Sarah's Story.** In Sarah's story, the themes of family, role models, peer influence, and resilience all intersect as she explored her various relationships and the ways in which she positions herself in various circumstances. Sarah's perspective is unique in that she often overlaps her perception of herself with her perception of others, demonstrating the reciprocal nature of relationships.

### **Cross-case Analysis**

The participants in this study were both from low-income households; both had above a 3.0 GPA; both had parents who were immigrants; and both were part of college access programs. Though each student had their own unique experiences, there were commonalities that emerged from the qualitative data. Through extensive analysis of the individual cases, several overriding themes emerged: relationships with family and peers,

the impact of role models, and the importance of resiliency and self-efficacy. The following section will apply a cross case analysis to the individual cases (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014), including examination of these themes through a social capital lens.

**Family.** The theme of relationships with family was explored by the participants in this study in two main ways: struggles in school because of a perceived lack of family support in relation to some of the students with whom the participants attended school; and a sense of obligation to make their families proud. The experiences of the participants in this study relate to the Bourdieuan concept of capital and habitus in that the participants reflected on dispositions which act as mediation between familial structures and individual practice.

Both participants felt that their families tried to provide support for their success, but primarily created obstacles due to their lack of knowledge and experience about secondary schooling. Xavier and Sarah each explained how their families were not always able to help them navigate the school system.

Sarah said that because her parents had only made it as far as elementary school, they had a hard time helping her in middle school and high school. She also talked about the difficulties they experienced due to growing up in a different country and being taught differently than the U.S. school system. She gave examples of the areas of school that they had difficulties helping with, due to language barriers and their work schedules. She said it was difficult for them to help her with homework and trying to understand grading practices. Because they couldn't understand and communicate the way they wanted to, it was especially difficult for them to understand aspects of high school such as extracurricular activities and field trips, and Sarah felt that they had a difficult time

understanding how school-related events were relevant. She said, “my parents, you know, they try to get involved. But there is also the language barrier. They couldn't really understand and communicate, you know, the way they wanted to.” In this quote, Sarah is explicating the difficulties she faced due to her family’s struggles. She comments on many of the barriers that are mentioned by Bourdieu as contributing to one’s habitus: education level, understanding of school system, and language acquisition.

Xavier had similar experiences to Sarah, in that he wasn’t able to always have support from his parents, not because they didn’t want to be supportive, but because they were not sure how to do so. Xavier also noted the difficulties that arise from being the first in his family to earn a high school diploma. He said that coming from immigrant parents, they were usually busy working and taking care of the family. Xavier was involved with soccer, band, leadership, and honors classes, but he said it was rough for them because they were not around much.

Xavier: As I was getting ready for high school, I really didn’t know what to expect because I do have an older brother, but he ended up dropping out of high school. So I’ll be the first in my family to graduate.

Xavier and Sarah use similar phrases to describe their parents’ struggles to help them in their education; both participants said that when their parents attempted to help them navigate aspects of school, it was “hard for them.”

To add on, the participants felt that often times, their homelife was a hindrance to their academics due to socioeconomic challenges and domestic concerns. This ties to Coleman’s (1988) findings that students from families who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be missing those social resources that would benefit the

student in an educational setting. Sarah said that her parents were not able to support her financially or emotionally. She also discussed the difficulties that arose in her family due to divorce. She said that it was difficult to get support from her parents, and that it was even more difficult with the fighting that would occur. She said it was challenging to try to focus on school and get what she needed to get done in an environment that wasn't conducive to studying. She also indicated that it was hard to focus on school when she had family difficulties on her mind. Sarah said, "when I would go home, sometimes the environment wasn't the best to study in or. Also, sometimes transportation, stuff like that. Food. Bills. There's a lot more than what school sometimes sees..." Sarah is explaining some of the obstacles that can be barriers for low-income students, making the argument that the education system is not always aware of these challenges.

Xavier also explained how struggles at home affected his mental state. He said that financial and domestic troubles at home started to stress him out in school. His family had an especially hard time during the winter of his junior year when his older brother attempted suicide. He said that was a difficult time emotionally, and that his heart and mind were not prepared for it. Xavier said, at this time, he felt emotionally "numb" and he "woke up every day feeling like a zombie." Xavier and his family did not have the resources to help them during this difficult time, but through his own resiliency, he was able to push on, relating to the Bordieuan concept of practice.

Despite the challenges they faced at home, Xavier and Sarah both spoke about their parents pushing them to be their best selves and wanting to make their parents proud. In this way, they were utilizing their own qualities of self-efficacy within their family dynamic. Sarah stated, "my parents would tell me all the time, you know, don't do

it for us, do it for yourself, because the benefits in the end are going to be for yourself, not for us.” Xavier had a similar response, saying that his parents sacrificed a lot, and he was driven to get his parents out of the situation they were in financially. He said that it was his mom’s dream to see one of her kids graduate from high school, and the desire to make his family proud was what kept him going in school. Throughout his interview responses, Xavier mentioned the importance of being the first in his immediate family to graduate from high school. In this way, the results tie to the import of relationships, which through a Bordieuan lens, demonstrates that their families may not have been able to offer the social capital to help their children navigate the school system, but the participants were driven to find the resilience to continue through their obligation to make their families proud.

In addition to the impact of their parental relationships, Sarah and Xavier each spoke about their siblings and others that they felt a familial or cultural connection with. Sarah reflected how she felt that it was her obligation to be a positive role model for her sister, but that she also felt an obligation to be a positive representation of her culture and of her community. She spoke about the importance of having a strong attachment to a certain community and being able to get support from “these people who understand you and are trying to do the same things that you are and have the same or similar problems to what you have.” For Sarah, she derived social capital from her community connections and the development of characteristics of self-efficacy that resulted from these connections. She said that she felt like society had a certain image of her based on the area of town that she grew up in, but she had a strong sense of urgency to prove the assumptions wrong.

Sarah: It was just kind of like sort of my job to set this example for not only my family, but for people from my country. And, you know, just the area I live in too, 'cause, you know, there they have a certain image about, you know, the type of people that come from our area. And I was able to sort of break that stereotype, you know, show them that where you can go anywhere, be proud of, you know, where I come from and who I am. Just having, you know, a strong attachment to a certain community

Xavier reflected less on his community ties, and more on his experience as a brother and its impact on his development. This differed from Sarah's explanation, in that Xavier referred to the negative choices that his older brother made and how he wanted to be different. He said he didn't really know what to expect in school because his brother ended up dropping out of high school. This created turmoil in his family because his older brother wasn't working, and this caused more stress on his family. Xavier spoke often about how his brother took a wrong path and was involved in drugs and gang affiliations. He repeated several times that people in school were shocked that they were even related and would ask him how he managed to not get involved with the negative influences that his brother did. He said that he saw where his brother's choices had gotten him and decided to take a different path. Here, the themes of family and importance of role models—or in the case of Xavier's older brother, non-role models—intersect.

This intersection also occurs in Xavier's discussion of how he feels compelled to serve as a role model for his younger brother, who is nine years old and has Down syndrome. When asked to tell the researcher more about the people in his life, Xavier

immediately brought up his younger brother, explaining how he wanted to set a good example for him.

Xavier: I want to be a really good role model for my little brother. So I always thought about him whenever I kind of like thought about like giving up. I wish I had someone consistently there for me, you know, so I definitely [want to be someone] for him to look up to.

Ultimately, his interactions with this older brother as a non-role model as well as the obligation to be someone for his younger brother to look up to taught Xavier about himself and helped him to develop his own characteristics of self-efficacy, in that he believes he has the ability to be more successful than the models he was provided growing up. These explorations about family also overlap with another theme that emerged in the data: role models.

In conclusion, through their discussions of influential family members, Xavier and Sarah explored elements of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Their families, while important in Xavier's and Sarah's lives, were not significant sources of social capital. In this sense, participants see it as part of their habitus and practice to be a positive representation of their families and culture and to encourage others to follow suit. Furthermore, though they may have been missing social capital from their family, the students found success through their own qualities of self-efficacy.

**Peers.** The second theme was interactions with peers, which manifested in different ways for each participant, as their experiences with peers and their definition of peers differed. Sarah did not discuss her interactions with peers at length the way that Xavier did, nor did she have the types of experiences that Xavier discussed regarding

social interactions and peer relationships. Thus, it can be concluded that Xavier's experiences in positions that gave him a sense of social status contributed to his development of social capital in ways that Sarah was not privy to.

The peer relationship most representative of Xavier's attainment of capital was with Cristina, his former significant other who came from a different family structure and was able to contribute to Xavier's cultural and social capital through exposure to art and connections to resources and people. Xavier described her influence on him in the time they were together, saying that she was the first person who grew up differently from him that seemed to enjoy his presence. Because she was able to expose Xavier to different elements of arts, culture, and travel, and networks of people, Cristina contributed to his development of cultural and social capital.

Sarah had a different perspective on peer influence than Xavier. First, she talked about how she was actually more of the influential element in her peer relations, relating to the theme of self-efficacy and the Bordieuan concept of practice. She also used singers and musicians as an example of peer influence, demonstrating that role models from similar age groups can have an impact on individuals. Music and media can be viewed as a form of social capital, as it pertains to Keely's (2007) definition of capital as bonds that link people to a shared identity through culture. Her description of her celebrity idols also intersects the themes of role models and resilience, as she reflects how one quality of effective role models is their ability to overcome adversity; in this way, Sarah's interpretation is an overlap of the Bordieuan concepts of capital and practice.

**Role models and mentors.** The third theme that emerged from the data was the importance of role models, where the participants had clear connections with teachers

and mentors in their college access programs that contributed to their attainment of social capital. Having a strong support system—including role models and mentors—is vital to students' ability to persevere. Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2005) presented a critical assessment of existing characterizations of resiliency and help-seeking behavior amongst high school students. The authors note that in successful developmental transitions there are opportunities for the development of relationships with various social agents; and these relationships are tied to social and institutional support. The high school seniors in this study noted the positive impact of role models in their lives. The theme was articulated through the subthemes of being a mentor and being a mentee.

One shared experience demonstrating the effect of positioning themselves as both mentees and mentors was discussed by Sarah and Xavier. Xavier said that he loves leadership and guiding other students and that he considers himself a born leader. He also stated that he is inspired by other people who have gone the extra mile.

Xavier: It drives me when I meet successful people. It is never a competition. It's just like, wow, like you're doing all those amazing things, like, why can't I do those amazing things? It gives me passion to go that extra mile in my own journey. I just felt I was like I was just born to, like, lead people and kind of help them and just be like that big brother figure that like everybody needs because I felt like I never had that in my life.

One of the ways that Xavier developed his social capital in high school was through his experiences with leadership and as student body president; these experiences connected him with networks of people that gave him support, and moreover, the opportunities to be

viewed as a strong leader contributed to his own sense of self-efficacy and belief in his capacity for success.

Contrastingly, Sarah did not describe herself as a natural leader, but she did discuss her own qualities of self-efficacy, saying that she thought about the future a lot, and that she knew that even if it takes her longer than other people to figure out how she is going to do it, she knows that she is going to push through to high school graduation, go to college, and have a career. Though her involvement in high school differed from Xavier's, she also talked about the reciprocal relationship of being both a mentor and mentee to other students she interacted with.

Sarah: It was sort of a competition for me. You know, you see all these other kids from better backgrounds than you and you think, you know, just because you come from a better background than me doesn't mean I can't do what you're doing, too. They got better grades and whatever, but I feel like I can do that, too. And maybe even be better than them. And again, just set an example to other people.

Both participants use the word "competition," but in different ways. Xavier stated that his work in leadership created a sense of camaraderie free of competitiveness and that he is inspired by others and motivated to be a strong leader due to their example. On the other hand, Sarah was driven by the need to show that she could compete with students from "better backgrounds." In this way, they are demonstrating their own unique individual forms of Bordieuan practice.

Xavier and Sarah also both shared their experiences within a college access program that overlapped their roles as mentee and as mentor. Sarah discussed how her

mentors helped her by pushing her to be her best in school and providing multilayered levels of support. Sarah stated, “the mentors here in [college access program] also come from, you know, the same backgrounds. They just bring a whole new perspective and I want to do the same for my mentees.” Sarah’s experience in this program contributed to her social capital by connecting her with resources and people; it also affected her sense of self-efficacy by making her feel like she had the qualities to be a mentor herself.

Xavier talked about the counselor/mentor that he worked with in his college-access program, Mrs. Scott, whom he met with often and described as a “second mother.” He said that without her, he would not have been able to get out of a “rut he was in” in the first part of his high school experience. Xavier said that when he felt really lost, Mrs. Scott was someone whom he could talk to and helped him “rearrange [his] thinking processes and reconstruct the way [he] wanted to live his life,” helping him feel like he was getting “his grip back on life.”

Xavier: When your life is falling into pieces, [Mrs. Scott] is really good at grabbing them, putting them back together and helping guide you through that kind of stuff. And I just feel like every high school student needs that one person that can kind of like guide them through what they do, especially when like you're first generation and it's like your first time and nobody else has graduated and you come from a low-income family, and usually don't have those kind of resources. Part of the reason that Mrs. Scott was so helpful to Xavier and contributed to his sense of social capital was because she was an adult figure from a similar upbringing as him. He discussed how she was the person he looked to the most for guidance, advice and support, since he didn't have that capital at home. He called Mrs. Scott the biggest

inspiration in his life and said that she was always there for him. In this case, Xavier is explaining the influence of being mentored, but he also elaborated on his experiences as a mentor himself.

He explained that he wanted to be a mentor for the kids in his college prep program and started to take a big leadership role in that program his senior year in high school in order to help lead younger students in the right direction and show them that he believed in them.

Xavier: But just being able to give them that motivation, that support and give them advice felt really powerful to me and kind of gave me the perspective of like now, I mean, I'm in a position of power and I start acting like it, you know. So I think it matured me a lot and gave me a sense of like, I really have the power to, like, change some kids' lives.

This quote relates to the positioning theory aspect of social capital, in that as individuals interact with each other, they engage in co-construction of a narrative in which both have a part to play (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

For the participants, the act of role modeling was fluid, cyclical, and reciprocal, relating to the idea of social capital as an exchange of resources. Furthermore, the idea of community relationships and the Bordieuan concept of field is prominent for both students. Sarah felt a sense of this connection through her interactions with what she referred to as “her people.”

Sarah: It's important to connect with people of your same social status. Like, for example, food stamps, you know, people who get that same kind of help, like for low resources, people like that, they understand, you know, what you're going

through. It could also be like people who share the same hobbies as you.

Especially the whole LGBT community, that certainly is a really big empowerment. Those people really help you out. It's like one of the strongest there. They're like family to you.

Sarah's description, here, directly connects with social capital as shared norms, values, understandings, and bonds that link people to a shared identity through family, close friends, and culture (Keely, 2007). It should be noted that the researcher asked Sarah if she would like to expand on her reference to the LGBT community, but she declined to elaborate.

Xavier also connected to his identification of community, but for him, the way that social capital played a role was in his sense of responsibility to pass his knowledge and connections on to others, specifically other young people who came from similar socioeconomic households as he did.

Xavier: Whenever something good happens to you, like you shouldn't be greedy and kind of save it for yourself, like there's kids out there who need it just as much as you did and would love to get it back from you. So paying it forward and just giving back to your community is a really big one.

Xavier's repetition of the phrase "pay it forward" throughout his interview responses demonstrated the import of this aspect of his life. In this way, he is demonstrating how he wants to be an agent of social capital, positioning himself as a leader in his community and serving as a connection for other young people.

Additionally, the students discussed how teachers influenced them. When asked what they think about mentors and role models, both participants talked about educators

who were instrumental in their lives. Sarah said she felt drawn to her English teachers because they shared the hobby of literature; she also said she felt strong connections to teachers who would “teach more than just textbooks,” providing her with resources to be successful in school and life.

Xavier spoke more specifically about a history teacher, Mr. Roberts, that he had in middle school, whom he described as his first real role model, and said that he was one person who really shaped him into being the leader he was becoming in his senior year of high school.

Xavier: [Mr. Roberts] taught me that even though the strongest men can break, they can always rebuild. When my grades start to slip, my teacher told me no matter how smart you are, no matter how gifted you are, you can never expect for work to come, like for your results to come if you don't put in the work, you know, like they taught me that you have to work hard to get what you want and you can't just sit there and just kind of expect things to happen no matter whether you're smart, whether you're rich or whatever. Like you have to work for it if you want it.

These teachers—generally for Sarah and specifically for Xavier—related to the theme of role models for the participants and they also were sources of social capital, as connections to individuals who helped them succeed.

Another way that individuals in both participants' lives were able to contribute to their development of social capital was in their exposure to travel or encouragement to pursue opportunities to travel. Sarah talked about a mentor she had in her college-access program who would always talk to her about traveling and how they were able to study

abroad. This led Sarah to start asking questions about how she could travel abroad when she gets to college. She also talked about a teacher who told her about being on an exchange program. These individuals are functioning as bridges to networks and experiences Sarah may not have been exposed to at home, thereby contributing to her social capital.

Xavier also was influenced by the idea of travel as social capital, but his influencer was a former significant other. Xavier talked about how she helped him “break his limits” and “reach for the stars.”

Xavier: my girlfriend and I traveled a lot. She kind of just showed me that there's more to the world than just [where I grew up]. And I could kind of like go everywhere. I've always wanted to travel, but I think by telling me about the places she wanted to go to and how well her research was on all the places she wanted to go to just inspired me to be like, oh, I want to go to like this country, like I want to go to Greece but like it's for this purpose, you know, and I want to go to Europe, but it's for this purpose and that kind of stuff.

The seniors interviewed noted the substantial positive impact that role modeling had on their lives; not only in the way that role models influenced them, but also in ways that they were role models for others.

To summarize, Xavier spoke explicitly about the influence that role models and mentors had in his life, especially in regard to Mrs. Scott, his counselor and mentor in his college access program; and Mr. Roberts, his influential middle school educator. This transitioned to the ways in which he views himself as a positive example for others. Sarah's explication of her interactions with teachers and her college-access program

mentor contributed to her development of social capital by providing her connections to resources and people. Her exploration of her self-identification as a mentor and role model reflects the Bordieuan concept of practice.

**Resilience and self-efficacy.** The fourth theme was the importance of resiliency and self-efficacy, a thread that weaved itself throughout both participants' responses. The students were asked about the personal qualities that helped them persevere to their senior year.

Xavier said that middle school was the time that he started to “burst out of his shell” and become the person he was in his senior year. He said that he faced some challenges during that time, but that they served as a “catalyst for his growth.” When asked about specific challenges he faced, Xavier spoke about peer pressure and trying to avoid things like drugs and gangs that led his brother down a wrong path. Xavier indicated that a constant emphasis on his grades and future goals helped him stay focused throughout school. He said that education always came first because he knew that it would benefit him and his family in the end; this is what drove him. When asked what personal traits contributed to his ability to persevere in school, Xavier said that despite family and financial problems, “what helped [him] out through high school a ton was that [he] never let [his] grades slip.” No matter what happened, he focused on school because, as he stated, “I know my education is what is going to carry me through.” This resiliency was an individual trait that was substantial in Xavier’s ability to persevere through difficulties.

In addition to developing the social capital concept of practice through resilience, Xavier demonstrated traits of self-efficacy in his awareness of his ability to be successful

in his future. He said that he has always been driven to succeed and that he sees himself capable of supporting his mom and dad someday, as well as obtaining economic capital; he specifically talked about wanting to have his own car and house. He explained that he has always “just been driven to succeed” and knows that he has the personal qualities (the self-efficacy) to do so.

Xavier: Since a young boy I knew I wanted to change the world just because I felt like having the parents that I had, having to, like, sacrifice everything to come over here and to give me a life, I feel like I had a bigger purpose to do so. And I've constantly heard that growing up, from whether it be teachers or counselors that I will grow up and change the world. And that kind of always drove me to believing that I would, but believing that I would always do so much more just because I want to make all those who believe in me so proud.

Again, here we see an intersection of themes in that obligation to family, desire to be a strong role model, and personal resilience all play a role.

Similarly, Sarah summarized the traits she thinks are important in her success, but her responses revolved around having a plan and time management. Sarah stated that she always has a path and a plan because it is essential for one to know where they're headed in the future and to avoid poor decisions that could derail that plan. Sarah also talked about the need to be flexible and to prioritize when times get tough.

Sarah: [I had to have] a lot of time management, a lot of time management.

Sometimes, you know, you have to choose, for example, go into tutoring to bring up, you know, a certain grade in class rather than go into the movies with the rest

of your friends. You just, you got to think about it. Think this is going to help me in the future. I can go to the movie some other time.

In Sarah's case, she developed her own qualities of organization, and similar to Xavier, she placed her education first, saying that this would be her opportunity to improve her circumstances and make her family proud.

In response to the question of challenges she had faced in her life, she said she had a hard time with her parents' divorce, especially when she had to decide which parent to stay with. She said that it is important to just "go with the flow" when faced with difficulties in life, and that she would sometimes have to put herself first when faced with problems between her mom and dad.

Sarah: There's been a lot of problems between my mom and dad. Sometimes it's kind of hard to choose one over the other. So, you know, you have to think for yourself and think. Where am I better off? Where am I going to succeed more? No, you may, you know, be like, oh, I'm closer with my mom or my dad, but it might cause more trouble for you in the end. If you can't get to school, if you don't have all the resources you need and just being able to, you know.

In this response, Sarah is navigating her socioeconomic circumstances to the best of her ability, demonstrating her development of individual practice.

When asked about the biggest challenges he faced, Xavier talked about not falling into bad influences as he saw with some of his family and peers. He said, "the biggest challenge was avoiding all the bad influences that I saw; many of my peers were kind of influenced by peer pressure," and he focused on "kind of avoiding all the bad decisions my brother made and not letting it affect me with like his whole suicide attempt and stuff

like that.” He also talked about a circumstance where he was in a class with younger peers who seemed apathetic and uninterested in school, and he mentioned his frustrations with their lack of motivation: “I was disappointed, because I know where their parents come from, the same place my parents come from. And it's interesting to see how they're not trying hard, because I feel like I completely understand what's on the line.” These high school seniors recognized the importance of resilience and perseverance in their ability to overcome adversity.

Resilience and perseverance came up recurrently in the participants' interviews without the mention of the words by the researcher. They each reflected on challenges they faced in their lives, and how they were able to find the resilience to persevere. Xavier and Sarah also spoke about experiences contributing to their sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy. These are themes that manifest themselves in many aspects of their lives, and tie into the Bordieuan concept of practice. Xavier demonstrated these ideas through his depiction of his experiences as a mentor, a leader, and a friend; Sarah depicted these concepts most prominently through her experiences as a sibling and mentor/mentee. The description of the various opportunities Xavier was privy to not only helped him with his ability to persevere through difficult times and develop characteristics of self-efficacy, but they also contributed to Xavier's cultivation of social capital by giving him networks of support and connecting him to a feeling of personal empowerment. The cases differed in this aspect, as Sarah did not have the leadership opportunities that Xavier had.

**Conclusion to cross-case analysis.** In summation, a cross-case analysis revealed clear similarities in the participants' experiences, though there were areas where their

perspectives diverged. Xavier talked about the difficulties of having parents who did not attend high school or college; his complicated sibling relationships; the connections that he had with peers; the influence of role models and mentors in his life; and his own qualities of self-efficacy, perseverance, and resiliency. Sarah focused on the same ideas, only with less emphasis on peer influence. In addition to a clear connection to Bourdieuan key concepts, the participants' experiences also tied in to the concepts of positioning theory, as they positioned themselves differently in various circumstances.

### **Summary**

This chapter described the results of the research study. Experiences contributing to low-income scholars' educational success were revealed through multiple interviews with two participants. This case study focused on the importance of the lived experience of individuals to illuminate larger ideas. As such, Xavier's and Sarah's stories are presented first, which keeps their words at the forefront of the discussion. The students' experiences are then framed in a cross-case analysis under a Bourdieuan lens. Although overriding themes emerged: relationships with family and role models, and the importance of resiliency and self-efficacy, the themes overlap in many ways. Further discussion of the study is described in Chapter Five.

## Chapter V: Discussion

The intent of this research was to garner an understanding of the perspective of high school seniors who, despite socioeconomic adversity, have continued to progress in their educational pursuits. For this study, the research question was: What elements do low-income high school seniors believe contributed to their perseverance to graduate from high school?

Specifically, seniors on track for graduation at a low-income high school were asked to describe their experiences and perspectives. Because of the exploratory and open-ended nature of the research question, a qualitative case study design was used, and the data was generated from multiple in-depth interviews conducted with participants. The study was viewed through the theoretical framework lens of social capital (Bourdieu, 1983). A case study design best suited this research because the goal was to describe the experiences and perspectives of low-income high school seniors on track to graduate and to carefully illustrate a case within a contemporary context and real-life setting (Yin, 2014). This study focused on two participants in order to emphasize depth versus breadth; as in-depth information from a small number of people can be valuable, especially if the cases are information rich (Patton, 1990). The analysis of the interview data followed the guidelines suggested by Maxwell (2005).

The discussion of the research findings in this chapter is divided into four sections. The first section summarizes key findings based on the results of the data analysis and the potential meanings as constructed by the researcher. The second section outlines implications for practitioners involved in working with low-income, high-

achieving high school students. Recommendations for future research are found in the third section, and the chapter concludes with a summary of the research study.

### **Key Findings**

In the existing literature of students from lower socioeconomic households (Anyon, 1980; Calarco, 2011; Lareau, 2015), there is a paucity of research on the firsthand experiences of high school students; therefore, this study intended to contribute to this area of scholarship. The findings in this study mirrored some of the results from studies looking at the experiences of low-income and first-generation college students (Aronson, 2008; Beattie, 2013; Choy et al., 2000; Hudley, et al., 2009; Smith, M.J., 2012; Valle, 2017).

Four key points were derived from examining the individual stories from the two individual case studies and cross-case analysis (Yin, 2014). Although the data revealed these overarching themes, the themes were fluid and intersected in many ways throughout the participants' responses. However, for the purpose of presentation of results and discussion, the themes were divided into separate subheadings. The first theme of relationships with family was explored by the participants in this study in two main ways: struggles in school because of a perceived absence of family support; and a sense of obligation to make their families proud. The second theme was interactions with peers, which manifested in different ways for each participant, as their experiences with peers and their definition of peers differed. The third theme was the importance of role models, where the participants had clear connections with mentors in their college access programs and teachers in middle school and high school that contributed to their

attainment of social capital. The fourth theme was the importance of resiliency and self-efficacy, a thread that weaved itself throughout both participants' responses.

**Social capital.** In the review of the literature, the impact of social capital on low-income students was addressed. Of particular relevance to the results of this study was the point made by Coleman (1988): that social capital is productive and obtainable, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible.

The participants provided insight on how forms of social capital affected their academic success. In the course of their responses, they spoke of the relationships they had with family, peers, adult role models, mentors, and themselves, tying into the literature on the importance of relationships in developing capital. Keely (2007) argued that the relationships formed in society can be seen as forms of capital that make it easier for people to work together. By this definition, social capital can be viewed as shared norms, values, and understandings: bonds that link people to a shared identity through family, close friends, and culture; bridges that link people to those who do not share a common identity; and linkages that connect people to those up and down the social scale (Keely, 2007).

Social capital can be further divided into two distinct elements: the social relationship that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates; and the amount and quality of those resources (Portes, 1998). Portes (1998) explained how social capital is derived through a sense of community, including opportunities to socialize through informal relationships. These social relationships can include peer groups and friendships; immediate and extended family; and role models

and mentors. In this study, both participants discussed the influence of peers and community ties. Though the students had multifaceted social relationships, the experiences gained through their college access programs appeared to have helped students most prominently in their development of capital (Smith, B., 2009).

The development of social capital appeared to manifest itself in a variety of experiences described by the participants. The data presented in Xavier's and Sarah's stories viewed through a Bourdieuan (1977, 1987, 1993) lens provide insight into the firsthand experiences of low-income, high-achieving high school students in order for scholars and practitioners to learn more about this unique population.

**Family influence.** In relation to families and how they operate, Coleman and Hoffer (1987) proposed that families possess social capital, including the presence of adults and the richness of their interactions. Coleman (1988) noted that students from families who are from lower socioeconomic households may be missing those social resources that would benefit the student in an educational setting; the findings of the present study related to Coleman's findings as the participants commented on the difficulties of having parents who were not able to help them with the academic or social aspects of high school due to missing capital. Both participants acknowledged their perception of a lack of support they received from their families, as well as some of the challenges they faced at home due to their parents not having the experience of high school. The findings also addressed the high academic expectations families had, and the participants discussed the obligations they felt to make their families proud and to serve as a positive representation of their respective cultures. Sarah said, "my parents would tell me all the time, you know, don't do it for us, do it for yourself, because the benefits in

the end are going to be for yourself, not for us,” and Xavier stated, “my family definitely kept me going, and I want to make them proud.” The importance of family to these participants matched Valle’s (2017) claim that the impact families have on students is almost as influential as the academic preparedness they possess.

**Peer influence.** Portes (1998) explained how social capital is derived through a sense of community, including opportunities to socialize through informal relationships. This theme—although present for both participants—manifested itself differently. Xavier’s perception of peer influence revolved primarily around his interactions with schoolmates and friends and how they influenced one another, whereas Sarah spoke about her own influence on her friends, and how the peers that influenced her were instead famous musicians and artists from her age-group that she interacted with on social media platforms. Though their experiences differed, the importance of peers was clear for both participants. This finding aligns with Bourdieu’s (1983) argument that group membership, knowledge, and feelings of kinship are necessary to reproduce the social and cultural capital that allow students to successfully enter, navigate, and succeed in educational systems.

**Role models and mentors.** The findings revealed that relationships participants had—with role models, in particular— contributed to their ability to access resources and support. This relates to Stanton-Salazar’s (2005) definition of social capital as connections to individuals and to networks that provide access to resources and forms of support that facilitate the accomplishment of goals.

In their college access programs, the participants discussed how successful mentoring relationships were built through their mentors’ genuine care and investment in

their success— both personally and academically. Sarah said, “the mentors here in [college access program] also come from, you know, the same backgrounds. They push you to be your best in school. They provide all the support for you. They play a big part in people's lives.” Xavier echoed this sentiment in his description of his mentor:

I just feel like every high school student needs that one person that can kind of like guide them through what they do, especially when you're first generation and it's like your first time and nobody else has graduated and you come from a low income family, and usually don't have those kind of resources.

This matches up with Beattie's (2013) findings on how a college access program on a university campus created capital for low-income, first-generation students; as well as Smith's (2012) findings that a shared vision was realized through practices that built social capital for the students involved with the college-access program.

The emphasis participants placed on the importance of positive role models was reflected in the literature suggesting that high school students benefit from strong mentoring relationships (Kuperminc et al, 2019; Weiss, Harder, Bratiotis, & Nguyen, 2019) and positive student-adult relationships (Gibson et al., 2004; Rodriguez, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2005). Both Xavier and Sarah noted how critical it was to have role models to look up to along their educational journeys. Sarah mentioned how an adult cousin was able to “provide advice and be a support for whenever [she] needed it.” Xavier spoke about many role models in his life and stated explicitly: “I cannot stress enough how important having a role model and a mentor is.” Participants in this study shared passionate reflections on their relationships with mentors and role models.

**Resilience and self-efficacy.** The concept of resilience and self-efficacy weaved itself throughout the participant interviews. Sarah explained how she persevered through adversity: “really, it just takes, you know, a good mind to be able to find the good things in your life and not necessarily pick out all of the negative things.” In his responses, Xavier even used the term resilient, stating, “throughout the years, I have become very resilient. Growing up in the environment I did, if you weren't [resilient] it would eat you alive and you would probably end up taking a wrong path.”

The idea of self-efficacy was also present in the data, connecting to the description in the literature examining the relationship between resilience and self-efficacy, or a belief in one's ability to complete a specific task (Karimshah et al., 2013). Although the participants did not use the term self-efficacy, they both articulated qualities in themselves that demonstrated development of this characteristic, such as Xavier and Sarah indicating their belief that they have the ability to be successful in college and in their future careers. Further, participants described obstacles they faced as individuals and within their families and communities, yet they were quick to explain how these challenges served them positively in the end and contributed to their development of self-efficacy. This concept of self-efficacy relates to Bourdieu's key concept of practice in individual cultivation of capital. This also relates to Harré and Moghaddam's (2003) explanation of how fields of social capital are related to positioning theory, a framework that allows us to better understand individuals' relationships to events and experiences.

### **Implications for Practice**

Findings from this study encourage educational professionals to be mindful of the unique experiences of low-income high school students. Tying in to the literature

demonstrating that low-income students often struggle due to a lack of resources—specifically pre-college training, parental support, and role models (Haycock, 2001; McGee, 2004; Rothstein, 2004; Simpson & Schnitzer, 2005)—recommendations from this study include finding ways to make mentoring programs and college access programs more prevalent on high school campuses, as well as increasing the levels of rapport that students have with teachers and school personnel.

One recommendation from the findings in this study is for practitioners to provide students with more support through mentoring and positive student-adult relationships. The findings of this study agree with Smith's (2009) recommendation that academic mentoring programs should focus on building academic cultural capital for their students, broadly defined as a base of institutional knowledge. This knowledge could include information about how to get academic or personal support on campus, and how to develop time management and study skills (Smith, B., 2009). Both participants in this study extolled the power of having mentors who were from similar upbringings as their own; therefore, it can be recommended that, whenever possible, mentors with similar life experiences should be recruited in order to build successful mentoring relationships.

Furthermore, the results from this study showed the influence that teacher role models had on the participants. This connects with Williams et al.'s (2016) findings that in order to nurture academic resilience, students from low-income households need school personnel who provide care and support, believe in them, encourage and challenge them to do their best, and serve as positive role models. The literature shows that stronger student-adult relationships lead to higher levels of student engagement and more favorable academic outcomes (Gibson et al., 2004; Rodriguez, 2008; Stanton-Salazar,

2005); therefore, educators should be aware of the importance of forming strong relationships with all students, but particularly those who may come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Rodriguez (2008) found that personalized relationships with teachers, counselors, and adult mentors were significant when students were faced with serious personal challenges often having nothing to do with school, and this was reflected in the stories of Xavier and Sarah.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to identify the perspectives of low-income high school students. While significant findings emerged, there are several areas of research which deserve further consideration.

From the review of literature, the number of studies on low-income/high-achieving students is limited (Rivera, 2014). Correspondingly, few studies have examined the topic of academic resilience from the perspective of resilient students, and even fewer studies have focused on resilient students' perceptions of what they need to succeed academically despite exposure to adversity (Williams, et al., 2016). As Lessard et al. (2014) pointed out, researchers have studied students who succeed and youth who drop out, but students who are at risk and graduate from high school have not received as much attention. And while there have been numerous studies conducted on perceptions of low-income college students (Aronson, 2008; Choy et al., 2000; Hudley, et al., 2009), little previous research exists on the experiences of low-income high-achieving high school students. Of particular import, then, is the need for more studies that prioritize the experiences of students from lower socioeconomic households while they are in high school.

The first recommendation is to expand on this study with research involving a larger sample of low-income high school students. This could provide richer data in an expanded study. This recommended research could also be a comparative study comparing the target population with students who are not considered low-income students. This recommendation mirrors the future research suggested by Valle (2017) based on his examination of low-income, first-generation Latino male college students. The second recommendation is a comprehensive study on current mentoring programs on high school campuses. Similar to the research of Beattie (2013) and Smith, M. J. (2012), findings from this study suggested that low-income students benefited from their relationships with mentors in their college access programs; therefore, further research into the efficacy of these programs is recommended. Finally, while this study only focused on the experiences and perspectives of the students, future research could include participation from members of the students' families, peers, relevant school personnel, or individuals involved with college access programs.

### **Summary**

The intent of this research was to garner an understanding of the perspectives of two high school seniors who, despite socioeconomic adversity, have continued to progress in their educational pursuits. The voices of the students were explored using qualitative case study methods (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The theoretical framework that informed this study was social capital. Pierre Bourdieu (1983) defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 248). Bourdieu (1983) and Coleman (1988) connected the idea of social

capital to educational attainment and showed direct correlations between social capital and educational success. This research study was conducted over the course of one semester. Data analysis consisted of investigating initial, ongoing, and final data sources for emerging themes and patterns. Specific attention was focused on maintaining the integrity of the participants' voices throughout the presentation of data. Study findings suggest that relationships with role models and mentors contributed to students' development of social capital, and these relationships, along with their own qualities of resilience, contributed to their ability to persevere in their educational endeavors.

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## Appendix A

### Interview #1

Open-ended interview questions with potential follow-up questions:

1. Tell me about your experiences in school.
2. So here you are now, graduating next semester...what kept you going in high school?
3. Did you face any challenges? If so, what were they?
4. What personal traits or qualities have helped you get to where you are today?
5. What elements of your life have had the biggest impact on your growth as a person?

## **Appendix B**

### Interview #2

Open-ended interview questions with potential follow-up questions:

1. Tell me more about the people in your life.
2. What do you think about mentors and role models?
3. What has contributed to how you feel about yourself?

## Appendix C

Information for the research flyer:

Hello, my name is Debby Shaw and I am a doctoral student in the Equity and Diversity in Education program at the University of Nevada, Reno. I am seeking participants for a research study about the experiences of high school seniors.

To participate, you must meet 3 requirements:

- 1) 18 years or older
- 2) Currently in 12<sup>th</sup> grade at a low-income high school
- 3) GPA of 2.5 or higher

If you volunteer for this study, your identity will remain anonymous. The total time commitment is approximately 90 minutes.

As an incentive for participating, I will provide you two \$10 amazon.com Gift cards for a total value of \$20.00.

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact me at the email listed below so that I can contact you with more details. This gmail account is password protected and your information will not be shared. Thank you for your consideration.

Best,

Debby Shaw

[email]

## Appendix D

I sent this follow-up flyer to everyone who provided their email address:

Thank you for your interest. Below you will find detailed information about the research study.

**Purpose:** I am conducting a study about the experiences of low-income high school students and what they perceived to have contributed to their persistence to their senior year. The intent of this research is to garner an understanding of the unique and diverse perspective of high school seniors who, despite socioeconomic adversity, have continued to progress in their educational pursuits and are expected to earn a high school diploma.

**Interviews:** You will be asked to participate in two in-person interviews. The first interview will have 5 questions and will take approximately 30 minutes. The second interview will have follow-up questions and will take approximately 30 minutes. Each interview will be audio recorded.

**Risk:** This study is considered to be minimal risk of harm. This means the risks of your participation in the research are similar in type or intensity to what you encounter during your daily activities.

**Benefits:** Benefits of doing research are not definite; but I hope this research will inform educators and professionals who work with high school seniors. There are no direct benefits to you in this study activity.

**Confidentiality:** As the researcher, I will treat your identity and the information collected about you with professional standards of confidentiality and protect it to the extent allowed by law. You will not be personally identified in any reports or publications that may result from this study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may stop at any time.

**Incentive:** As an incentive for your participation, I will be providing you two \$10.00 gift cards to Amazon.com. The first gift card will be given to you at beginning of the first interview and the second gift card will be given to you at the beginning of the second interview. The total incentive for participating in this research is \$20.00.

If you would like to volunteer for this study please fill in your information below so that we can schedule our first interview. This gmail account is password protected and your information will not be shared.

Best,

Debby Shaw [email]

*(Fillable portion of the Google Sheet)*

Email Address

I give my formal consent to participate in the study (Yes or No)

Demographics:

- Age
- Gender
- Race/Ethnicity
- GPA
- Family size
- Employment of parents
- Total family yearly gross income (if comfortable sharing)
- Parents' educational attainment
- Planned major

## Appendix E

The researcher read the following script at the beginning of each interview:

Hello. I wanted to remind you that this interview will be audio recorded, so I am going to go ahead and push record right now (researcher begins recording).

As you already saw in the email that you gave consent to, I am conducting a study about the perspectives of high school seniors on track to graduate.

This interview will have 5 questions and will take approximately 30-60 minutes.

As you know, your legal name or personal identity will not be identified at any point throughout the research process. What pseudonym do you want me to use instead of your legal name throughout this interview?

As an incentive for your participation, I am providing you with a \$10.00 gift card to Amazon.com before we start.

Do you have any comments or questions before we begin?