The Impact of Interscholastic Athletic Participation on Academic Success

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The Impact of Interscholastic Athletic Participation on Academic Success

Abstract
The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that impacted young urban African American and Latino males who chose to participate in interscholastic athletic programs and who also achieved academic success. This qualitative study employed a descriptive research design. The study captured the perceptions and lived experiences of urban males who participated in high school interscholastic athletics, successfully graduated from high school, and at the time of the study, were attending 2- or 4-year college institutions. Data were collected during individual interviews with the college-attending male athletes that focused on what motivated the participants to overcome challenges and achieve academic success. The study also collected data through individual interviews with the student participants’ parent(s) or mentor(s). The results of this study indicate that interscholastic athletic participation had a significant impact on the academic success of the African American and Latino males in the study. As a result of the support from multiple stakeholders across all aspects of their lives, the participating athletes maintained their commitment and focus to achieve. The positive impact of interscholastic athletics, family relationships, and a connection to their education helped to bridge the gap between community and school. The positive impact of family, school and others ultimately afforded participants the opportunity to achieve academic success. Recommendations include establishing a “web of support” for students in challenging circumstances and pursuing continued research in the area of family and community dynamics as they relate to students’ academic success.

Document Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department
Executive Leadership

First Supervisor
Marie Cianca

Subject Categories
Education

This dissertation is available at Fisher Digital Publications: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/295
The Impact of Interscholastic Athletic Participation on Academic Success

By

Carlos M. Cotto, Jr.

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Dr. Marie Cianca

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St. John Fisher College

August 2016
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, children, mother, and my mother in law. From the beginning of the dissertation process, I have not been alone. Beginning with the initial application, the decision to join Cohort 8, writing, researching, and the persistence, I have had the company of my family and close friends. This journey was not an easy one but one that was well worth it. Throughout this journey, I have not only learned new things about myself, but I have found out how strong, caring, selfless, and supportive my wife and kids are.

My wife, Shane, has been supportive of my decision since day one. It has not been easy for her, but she did not complain once. My children Ariyana, Xavier, and Naomi, have also played an integral part in my completing this dissertation. Without their support and understanding, my dream would not have become a reality. I missed many events and important dates so that I could write and research my topic, but not once did my children complain or get upset with me for not being around. For this, I will forever be grateful. I want to thank my mother for creating and shaping me into the man that I am today. Without her love and guidance, I am not sure where I would be today. In addition, I would like to thank my mother-in-law for making sure I put my research first.

I truly believe that my doctoral journey and personal development were greatly influenced by my committee chairs, Dr. Marie Cianca and Dr. Alisa James. Throughout this journey, they have both seen something in me that I did not see in myself. They
pushed me to the limit and expected more from me than I was willing to give. At the
time, I thought that they were just being hard on me, but now I realize that they truly saw
the potential that I have. At some points in this journey, I wanted to give up, but because
of my chairs, family, and friends, giving up was never an option.

I also want to send special gratitude to all of the professors that I have had the
opportunity to work with during this process. Finally, thanks to my dissertation team, the
Pact. We will ring that bell once I complete my dissertation journey and cross the finish
line.
Biographical Sketch

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that impacted young urban African American and Latino males who chose to participate in interscholastic athletic programs and who also achieved academic success. This qualitative study employed a descriptive research design. The study captured the perceptions and lived experiences of urban males who participated in high school interscholastic athletics, successfully graduated from high school, and at the time of the study, were attending 2- or 4-year college institutions. Data were collected during individual interviews with the college-attending male athletes that focused on what motivated the participants to overcome challenges and achieve academic success. The study also collected data through individual interviews with the student participants’ parent(s) or mentor(s).

The results of this study indicate that interscholastic athletic participation had a significant impact on the academic success of the African American and Latino males in the study. As a result of the support from multiple stakeholders across all aspects of their lives, the participating athletes maintained their commitment and focus to achieve. The positive impact of interscholastic athletics, family relationships, and a connection to their education helped to bridge the gap between community and school. The positive impact of family, school and others ultimately afforded participants the opportunity to achieve academic success.
Recommendations include establishing a “web of support” for students in challenging circumstances and pursuing continued research in the area of family and community dynamics as they relate to students’ academic success.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Research results indicate that there are significant and alarming disparities in the education of African American and Latino males when compared to White males (Johnson & Kritsonis, 2006). Accordingly, and not surprisingly, young urban males continue to experience educational inequalities in school systems across the country (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). For example, many young urban males bear the weight of judgments made about them, specifically implying that they are less than others, or that they possess a diminished capacity to learn (Graves, 2008). Such a barrage of stereotypes and perceptions misinform and degrade their pursuit of success in the high school classroom and in their desire to pursue higher education. Such stark realities are unpleasant, inconvenient, and difficult to reconcile within the context of a moral society. However, when children are confronted with educational inequalities based on their socioeconomic or cultural situation, clear and decisive steps must be taken to bridge the resulting achievement gap. Boykin, Noguera, and ASCD (2011) defined this achievement gap as “the gap between the average performance of African-American students and the average performance of European students” (p. 335). Student test scores, grade-point averages, and graduation and dropout rates serve to assist in the measurement of this phenomenon known as the achievement gap (Boykin et al., 2011).

Typically, when analyzing the achievement gap in education, a comparison is characteristically made between African American and White students. When
considering the implications of such a gap, many people exclude other minority groups, such as Latinos, from the conversation (Boykin et al., 2011). Results from a National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (2009) study indicated that White students outperform their African American and Latino counterparts in all areas of standardized assessments. According to the NAEP (2009), “achievement gaps occur when one group of students . . . outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant” (para. 1).

The NAEP (2009) identified gaps and reports on trends over time. However, it failed to explain why gaps exist between different groups. The United States Census Bureau (2010) identified Hispanics as the fastest-growing segment of the United States population, with their numbers estimated to be around 50 million, or about 16% of the U.S. population. This figure rose 43% from the 2000 census. Unfortunately, the achievement gap continues to grow right along with the Hispanic population. Given that the NAEP is an organization designed to measure student performance, a population of such proportion has earned a place at the table and should not be left out of the discussion regarding gaps in academic achievement. Furthermore, even though respected groups have been reporting on these significant educational discrepancies for some time now, the disparate nature of academic performance of African American and Latino males and White males begs further investigation.

All too often, urban males who live in impoverished communities face low social expectations, discrimination, and as a result, they are prevented from reaching their true potential. McKinsey & Company (2009) suggested that inequalities in education cost the United States $500 billion dollars per year. The study also indicated that without
education reform, the “magnitude of this impact will become even greater due to changes in America’s demographic, since the population of African American and Latinos continues to increase” (p. 6).

In order to bridge this achievement gap, the educational disadvantages experienced by urban males and the full scope of their social, personal, and emotional experiences must be addressed (Dorim & Toldson, 2008). When trying to find ways to address the achievement gap, it helps to develop a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the populations that are affected. Even if socioeconomic status is similar, cultural differences still exist between African Americans and Latinos. Research results from Strayhorn (2010) suggest that African American and Latino males differ significantly socially and culturally, thereby challenging the common presumption that all racial/ethnic minorities are similar. Strayhorn’s research (2010) opened the door to a rationalization of the unique adversity that negatively impacts the overall academic success and graduation rates of urban males.

According to *The Urgency of Now* (Jackson & Beaudry, 2012), only 52% of African American males and 58% of Latino males graduate from high school in 4 years. Conversely, 78% of White, non-Latino males graduate in 4 years. In addition, information gathered from The National Center of Education Statistics (2007) revealed that African American males had the lowest performance on any standardized assessment of academic achievement. This lack of academic achievement often leads to greater challenges at home, in school, and in the community. Some of these challenges include racism, unemployment, dropping out of school, incarceration, and death (Holzer, 2006). Being forced to encounter such challenges at an early age, young urban males often adopt
a grim outlook on life. These young people often become despondent and risk
disconnecting with the world around them and with their education (Holzer, 2006).
Confirming the negative mindset so common among these young men, Sum, Khatiwada,
and McLaughlin (2009) indicated that the incidence of being institutionalized is 63 times
higher among high school dropouts than 4-year college graduates.

Closing the achievement gap is one important step in addressing the challenges
faced by young urban males. For example, closing the achievement gap could decrease
the dropout rate. Information gathered from the document *Left Behind in America: The
Nation’s Dropout Crisis* (Center of Labor Market Studies, 2009) revealed that, while the
dropout crisis impacts all of America, it affects Black and Hispanic students
disproportionately. This document indicated that in 2007, 16% of people between 16 and
24 years of age (nearly 6.2 million people) were high school dropouts. Among these
dropouts, 60.1% were men, where 18.8% were Black, and 30.1% were Hispanic.
Furthermore, additional results reveal that a large number of incarcerated individuals
possessed extremely poor literacy skills (Sum et al., 2009). According to
BegintoRead.com (2014), failure, delinquency, violence, and crime are inextricably
linked. In addition, over 70% of inmates in America’s prisons cannot read above a
fourth-grade level. These findings suggest that urban youth are placed at a disadvantage
with regard to their likelihood of achieving success in school, in the workplace, and in
life. Additionally, inferior educational resources have inadequately prepared urban youth
for a productive role in society while, instead, pushing them toward prison as an
inescapable destination (Sum et al., 2009).
However, incarceration is not the only issue that plagues high school dropouts. They can also have a difficult time finding employment. Results from Sum et al. (2009) indicate that African Americans are the least likely to be employed, when compared to Asians, Whites, and Hispanics. America’s urban youth often lack the fundamental necessities vital to succeed in all aspects of life. Due to their life circumstances, the choices they are forced to make, and the daily pressures imposed on them, urban youth are equipped with a very limited range of educational experiences. The employment rates of high school dropouts also vary with the annual incomes of their families. Young urban youth in low-income families are least likely to be employed, but as family incomes increase, so do their employment opportunities. Employment rates ranged from under 80% among high school graduates, to 88-89% among urban youths for completing at least post-secondary schooling (Sum et al., 2009).

While examining ways to mitigate the challenges that many young urban males face, school leaders look for imaginative programs and interventions that might motivate urban males to stay in school and to succeed in the academic realm. One program that has been investigated is interscholastic athletics with the hope that with success, there will be inspiration and a facilitation of some degree of academic success. Research results are encouraging and suggest that participation in interscholastic athletics may impact academic performance. Davis and Cooper (1934) were the first to report a positive correlation between interscholastic athletics and academic achievement. Many years later, Rasmussen (2000) argued that high school interscholastic athletics improved student motivation, grades, and educational aspirations. As a result, one might infer that
participation in interscholastic athletics could motivate young urban males to be successful in school.

Limited research suggests that high school interscholastic athletic participation may positively influence the direction that young urban males choose to take as a result of the impact of athletic participation on their motivation, work ethic, and self-reliance. Despite positive findings regarding the link between interscholastic athletics and academics, there are clear limitations, such as the disparagingly low number of studies that focus exclusively on young urban males and interscholastic athletics (Agans & Geldhof, 2012).

**Problem Statement**

School systems that educate large populations of urban males have an alarmingly high dropout rate (Greene & Winters, 2006; Ross, 2006). In addition, it is not clear which factors most directly contribute to the academic success of young urban males who have participated in interscholastic athletic programs. In order to better understand what motivates young urban males to stay in school and what factors keep them on track for success, additional investigation into incidents of such success must be completed.

Few studies have investigated the perceptions of young urban males regarding what motivated them to be successful academically. Although research has explored the relationship between athletics and academics by examining variables, such as citizenship, attendance, and grade point average (GPA), little research exists that has investigated what motivates young urban males to succeed academically. Additionally, there are few studies documenting the voice of African American or Latino males who have successfully navigated high school and college. The life experience of the urban male
youth has not been adequately captured in research and, accordingly, is the focus of this study.

**Theoretical Rationale**

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a macro framework of human motivation and personality concerning people’s inherent growth tendencies and their innate psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2008). SDT involves identifying the motivation behind the choices that people make free from any external influences and interference. According to SDT, people have the natural basic needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence is defined as “feeling effective in one’s ongoing interactions with the social environment and experiencing opportunities to exercise and express one’s capacities” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 28).

The psychological need of autonomy refers to “being the perceived origin or source of one’s own behavior” and having a feeling of full willingness and choice (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 1). Deci (1971) reported that when extrinsic rewards were given for behavior that was intrinsically motivated, the intrinsic motivation was undermined and the subjects became less interested in it. Initially, intrinsically motivated behavior becomes controlled by external rewards, which undermines subjects’ autonomy. Situations that give autonomy, as opposed to taking it away, also have a similar link to motivation.

Relatedness can be described as the desire to feel connected to others within the context of physical activity (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The psychological need of relatedness is the desire to feel connected to other people. The desire to love and be loved, to care for and be cared for, to want to belong to a group, to seek relationships of mutual trust,
and share mutual conversations are all examples of relatedness. Deci and Ryan (2000) suggested that the attainment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness would lead to greater levels of self-determined motivation. Although autonomy, competence, and relatedness are factors of self-determined motivation, the pursuit of goals also plays a role in motivation. According to SDT, the degree to which people are able to satisfy their basic psychological needs as they pursue and attain their goals is a critical factor in the effectiveness of their goal pursuit and attainment.

Motivation and self-determination theory. Intrinsically motivated behavior is what drives people to engage in optimally stimulating pursuits. When individuals do not feel competent, or if they are overly influenced by external rewards, they are not likely to experience intrinsic motivation, which stems from an innate drive to interact and explore the environment with intense curiosity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation can be diminished when an individual’s basic needs for competence are not met.

Ryan and Deci (2000) indicated that when individuals are influenced by rewards that are tangible and external, they are more likely to lose this intrinsic drive. In addition, Deci and Ryan (1980) claimed that rewards may be perceived as a mechanism meant to control individuals’ behavior, which indirectly undermines their sense of intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, when individuals believe that a situation is not within their control, when they sense a lack of autonomy, or if they don’t enjoy adequate support from others, their intrinsic motivation can be undermined and diminished (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Extrinsic motivation refers to activities performed in order to attain some different outcome, contrasting with intrinsic motivation, which refers to participating in an activity
for the satisfaction that is inherent in the completion of the activity. Generally speaking, extrinsic motivation is a behavior that aims toward outcomes that are separate from the behavior itself. Unlike some perspectives that view extrinsically motivated behavior as invariably non-autonomous, SDT proposes that extrinsic motivation can vary greatly in its relative autonomy (Ryan & Connell, 1989; Vallerand, 1997).

Deci and Ryan (1985) also proposed the idea of amotivation, which results from the lack of fulfillment of the three innate psychological needs for psychological growth and well-being. The two researchers also suggested that environments that undermine the need for autonomy induce extrinsic motivation, but that when the need for competence and relatedness are also not satisfied, individuals become amotivated. More recent theories have proposed that amotivation develops when an individual’s needs are not met. In addition, amotivation is mediated by the individual’s values, efforts, and beliefs about their ability regarding performing tasks (Shen, Wingert, Li, Sun, & Rukavina, 2010).

Moreover, SDT differentiates between the various types of motivation (autonomous or controlled). Autonomous motivation is defined as a level of participation that is characterized by a full sense of willingness, volition, choice, and endorsement. Controlled motivation occurs when a participant completes an activity with a sense of pressure, tension, and obligation because of some kind of external or internal contingency. Self-determination theory examines human motivation while focusing on the degree to which behaviors are volitional, or self-determined, as well as the processes involved (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Lastly, Deci and Ryan (2008) reported that the satisfaction of one’s basic psychological needs, along with the application of autonomous
motivation, exhibit a positive outcome that contributes to an enhanced overall sense of well-being.

Self-determination theory comprises six tenets:

1. cognitive evaluation theory (CET)
2. organismic integration theory (OIT)
3. causality orientations theory (COT)
4. basic psychological needs theory (BPNT)
5. goal contents theory (GCT)
6. relationship motivation theory (RMT)

Each of these tenets was developed in order to explain a set of motivationally based phenomena that emerged from laboratory and field research.

The first tenet, CET, specifically addresses the effects of social contexts on intrinsic motivation; or, in other words, how factors, such as rewards, interpersonal controls, and ego-involvements, impact intrinsic motivation and interest (Deci & Ryan, 1985). CET highlights the critical roles played by competence and autonomy in supporting and fostering intrinsic motivation, which is critical in education, the arts, athletics, and many other domains.

The second tenet, OIT, addresses the topic of extrinsic motivation and the different forms of extrinsic motivation that promote or hinder internalization. Different forms of extrinsic motivation include external regulation, introjection, identification, and integration (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The more internalized the extrinsic motivation, the more autonomous the person is when enacting the behaviors.
The third tenet, COT, describes differences in an individual’s tendency to orient toward targeted environments and to regulate behavior in various ways. In 1985, Deci & Ryan investigated how autonomy was significantly and positively related to measures of ego development, self-esteem, and self-actualization. COT describes and assesses three types of causality orientations: autonomy (a person acts out of interest in, and valuing of, what is occurring), control (the focus is on rewards, gains, and approval) and impersonal or amotivation (a person has anxiety concerning competence).

The fourth tenet, BPNT, describes the concept of psychological needs and how those needs relate to mental health and well-being. BPNT argues that optimal well-being is predicated on autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Therefore, contexts that support these needs should invariably impact a person’s health and wellness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This particular theory argues that all three needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) are independent and, as such, essential and the absence of any of them translates to distinct functional costs.

The fifth tenet, GCT, stems from the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic goals and their impact on motivation and wellness. Research results indicate that when people rated extrinsic goals as being strong relative to intrinsic goals, they demonstrated less self-actualization and vitality (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The achievement of goals is seen as a means of satisfying basic needs and is differentially associated with well-being. Extrinsic goals, such as financial success, appearance, and popularity/fame, have been specifically contrasted with intrinsic goals, such as community, close relationships, and personal growth, with the former being more likely associated with less wellness and less well-being.
Finally, the sixth tenet, relationship motivation theory (RMT), is rooted in relatedness, which has to do with the development and maintenance of close personal relationships, such as best friends and romantic partners, as well as belonging to groups. This type of relatedness is one of the three basic psychological needs. RMT posits that these close personal interactions are not only desirable for most people but are, in fact, essential for their well-being in order to satisfy their need of relatedness.

Of the six tenets of self-determination theory, four tenets: BPNT, RMT, GCT, and CET, are the best aligned with interscholastic athletic participation and academic performance. For example, BPNT purports the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. If one or more of these needs are not fulfilled, individuals lose motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). RMT is embedded in relatedness, which has to do with the development and maintenance of personal relationships, such as friends and group affiliations. GCT, with its focus on goals and the impact of goals on motivation, is important in relation to interscholastic athletic participation because setting and achieving goals leads to a greater sense of well-being and helps to meet an individual’s basic needs. CET highlights the critical roles played by competence and autonomy in supporting and fostering intrinsic motivation, which is critical in education, the arts, athletics, and many other domains. When considering self-determination theory, the tenets of BPNT, RMT, GCT, and CET aid in the examination of how participation in interscholastic athletics plays a role in the academic success of urban males.

Statement of Purpose

Discovering and understanding the motivation of young urban males with regarding their academic pursuits is a vital part of improving the quality of their
education as well as their graduation rates. There are cases in which interscholastic athletics participation appears to possess the potential to uniquely contribute to academic success (DeMeulenaere, 2010). However, clear support is lacking. In light of such insufficient support, the purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that have impacted the selected young urban males who chose to participate in interscholastic athletic programs and who also achieved academic success. Additionally, this study focused on the motivational factors that played a role in supporting positive academic achievement in young urban males—regardless of the challenges they face in life.

**Research Questions**

To better understand the obstacles that young urban males face across the context of school, home, and life, this study examined the following questions:

1. What has motivated and inspired young urban males to achieve academic success?
2. What role can interscholastic athletic participation play in young urban males’ academic success?

Young urban males’ voices are missing in the research, and they are crucial because their voice provides a better understanding of the urban male student/athletes’ perspectives and motivation to succeed academically.

**Potential Significance of the Study**

Interscholastic athletics are among the most popular extracurricular activities in high schools, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eide & Ronan, 2001). This study sought to determine whether participating in interscholastic athletics had an impact on academic success for young urban African American and
Latino males. The results will help to guide those involved in the educational community to make sound decisions based on research findings in order to improve student success.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Academic Achievement* – the accomplishment of education through higher learning principle (Lee, 2005).

*Achievement Gap* – the observed disparity on a number of educational measures between the academic achievement and performance of groups of students, especially for groups defined by gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and socioeconomic status (NAEP, 2009).

*Competence* – “feeling effective in one’s ongoing interactions with the social environment and experiencing opportunities to exercise and express one’s capacities” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 28).

*Autonomy* – “being the perceived origin or source of one’s own behavior” and having a feeling of full willingness and choice (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 1).

*Relatedness* – the desire to feel connected to others within the context of physical activity (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

*Grade Point Average (GPA)* – calculated by dividing the total amount of grade points earned by a student by the total amount of credit hours in a course of study, and it is based on a 4.0 maximum scale (English, 2006).

*Interscholastic Athletics* – competitive sports activities in which there exists a team with an approved, trained coach as the leader in high school setting (Mitten, 2005).
Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the investigation of how interscholastic athletic participation impacts the academic performance of urban males. The introduction highlighted the struggles of young urban males and the challenges they face. In order to address dropout rates and the academic achievement gaps inherent within the educational system, a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the voices of young urban males, specifically, must be investigated. Achieving such an understanding requires an investigation of the full scope of their social, personal, and emotional experiences. Through the theoretical frame of self-determination theory, the researcher investigated the role that interscholastic athletic participation plays in academic success. It is currently not clear which factors motivate young urban males to be successful academically, nor is it clear what role interscholastic athletic participation plays in their academic success.

The purpose of this study was to investigate what factors positively influenced young urban males who participated in interscholastic athletic programs and succeeded academically. Investigating what motivates these young men will provide educational stakeholders with several strategies to better prepare young urban males for college and career success.

Chapter 2, the review of the literature, discusses the research findings regarding young urban males, athletic participation, academic achievement, and motivation. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology, data collection, and data analysis that was undertaken for the study. Chapter 4 presents and offers an analysis of the narrative data collected from the study’s participants, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings and their
implications, it identifies the limitations of the study, and makes recommendations for future research.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

The relationship between students’ academic performance and their involvement in athletics is a connection that has benefitted from extensive research. One product of this research is the assertion that athletic involvement is related to higher grades, motivation, and graduation rates (Bohnert, Fredricks, & Randall, 2010). Discovering and investigating what motivates urban youth to succeed academically is essential to the improvement of both the education and graduation rates of urban male students. Perhaps the correlation between interscholastic athletic participation and academic success can provide valuable insight into whether interscholastic athletics is a gateway to academic success for young urban males.

Several empirical studies have examined the rate of graduation and academic outcomes of students that participate in interscholastic athletics. While studies that examined factors related to level of involvement, gender, motivation, attendance, grade point average, social contexts, and academic outcomes are included in the literature review, those studies that measured academic achievement without connecting to interscholastic athletic participation, gender, attendance, GPA, or social context were excluded.

To better understand the obstacles that young urban males face across the context of school, home, and life, this study examined the following questions:

1. What motivated and inspired young urban males to achieve academic success?
2. What role can interscholastic athletic participation play in the academic success of the young urban male?

In posing these questions, the researcher sought to better understand self-determination in urban males who overcame challenges and successfully graduated. The student voice is all too often missing in research, even though it is rich with important data. It provides a rare and direct link to the perspective of the urban male student/athlete, potentially exposing that which motivates these youths to achieve academic success.

Literature Review

The literature review presents the possible influences, factors, and obstacles encountered by urban male youth in their pursuit of academic success. It also identifies and discusses the literature on interscholastic athletic participation and its impact on urban youths’ academic success. Finally, the research explores the idea of self-determination and the internal and external motivational factors of urban youth and their high school experience. This research helps to frame and support the value of interscholastic athletic participation and its positive impact on academic success.

Interscholastic athletic participation and academic achievement.

Participation in interscholastic athletics can instill in youth a sense of character, self-esteem, and discipline. Such activity can help children set goals, organize and prioritize their time, and develop self-confidence (Stephens & Schaben, 2002). If athletes are encouraged to transfer these skills to their academics, they may have greater success in the classroom and community, allowing their efforts and their dedication to transcend the
confines of the classroom walls, the sports fields, and the gymnasium floors (Stephens & Schaben, 2002).

Stephens and Schaben’s (2002) investigation into the relationship between academic achievement and participation in interscholastic sports occurred at the middle school level. Eighth-grade student participants at an urban middle school were grouped as athletes and non-athletes. Data in Stephens and Schaben’s study consisted of a questionnaire on athletic involvement, school records, and reports, including math grades, cumulative GPA, national percentile on the math portion of the California Achievement Test (CAT), and the sex of each participant (Stephens & Schaben, 2002).

Stephen and Schaben’s (2002) findings indicated athletes had significantly higher GPAs and CAT scores than non-athletes for both male and females. Furthermore, female athletes had significantly higher GPAs than male athletes. Also, as interscholastic sports participation increased, GPAs and CAT scores improved considerably. In fact, participation in interscholastic sports seemed to enhance the academic performance of students (Stephens & Schaben, 2002).

Lumpkin and Favor (2012) conducted a similar study to examine the academic performance of students in Grades 9-12 who did or did not participate in high school interscholastic athletic programs. The study sought to identify differences between athletes and non-athletes as a group as well as by gender and ethnicity. Data collection was accomplished through self-reported GPAs, graduation rates, ACT scores, state assessment scores, and the number of student dropouts, as reported by over 139,000 athletes and non-athletes.
According to the findings of the Lumpkin and Favor (2012) study, 81% of the athletes reported a GPA of 3.0 or higher compared to 70.9% of the non-athletes. Of the athletes, 51.8% reported a GPA of 3.5 or higher compared to 39.8% of the non-athletes. The graduation rate of athletes was 97.6%, and it was 88.1% for non-athletes. Results from Lumpkin and Favor (2012) demonstrated a clear distinction between the academic success of athletes and non-athletes in the areas of GPA, graduation rate, dropout rate, and ACT scores.

Tower (2008) conducted a qualitative study at a public high school in a middle-class community in Massachusetts. His study sought to provide evidence that student athletes acknowledged the link between their competitiveness in sports and their level of motivation toward academic endeavors. The population at the school was 2,105 students, with only 10% of the population from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Participants in the study included four athletes: two female and two male varsity athletes.

Tower (2008) found that the competitive nature of these students motivated them to also do well in school. Participants in Tower’s study revealed that they competed with students and siblings over grades just as they competed in sports. Tower suggested that in determining the factors related to motivation and sports participation, an argument could be made that student athletes did well in school primarily because eligibility to play their sport was predicated upon a modicum of success within the classroom. Tower argued that since schools have eligibility and grade requirements, the success a student athlete achieved could be for the sake of playing and not for learning. This argument does little to detract from the perceived effectiveness of athletics as a motivating factor for academic success. Results were mixed regarding this point, as some participants
mentioned eligibility as a means of motivation academically, while others mentioned wanting to succeed in life as a means of motivation in academics. Lastly, some participants self-identified as competitive people (Tower, 2008), which further minimized the role of athletics in their specific academic success.

DeMeulenaere (2010) employed direct observation and interviews to gather data from eight students who attended three different public schools in California. His study tried to determine to what extent student involvement in athletics impacted academic performance. Over 2 years, after multiple observations and interviews, four students were selected to participate in the study (DeMeulenaere, 2010). Data were collected through multiple interviews with each student, as well as with their peers and families, and the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Results revealed that other factors, not just involvement in sports, were crucial to increased academic achievement. These factors included: structured schedules, availability of effective incentives, use of strategies to build confidence, development of positive adult and peer role models, and encouragement to develop future aspirations (DeMeulenaere, 2010). DeMeulenaere suggested that forces were at work within and beyond the school context that promoted failure and inhibited academic success.

The participants in DeMeulenaere’s (2010) study represented the exception to the prevalent norm in that they excelled despite the pervasive failure of so many of their peers. Maintaining an athletic eligibility requirement not only provided motivation for struggling student athletes, it also offered a justification for the academic effort (DeMeulenaere, 2010).
Despite studies that purport a strong correlation between involvement in high school sports and successful academic achievement, Hartman (2008) suggested that the relationship is not a direct, causal relationship. He contended, rather, that the success is contingent upon a variety of factors including, but not limited to, social background, parents, peers, and school. In his study, Hartman examined the cause-and-effect relationship between academics and sports participation and admitted to perceiving a strong relationship, reiterating that a correlation does not necessarily indicate causation.

While students who play sports sometimes attain higher grades than their non-sports participating classmates, their performance could be attributed to their inclination to be better students in the first place (Hartman, 2008). Hartman also examined the psychological and social impacts that sports participation revealed on academic achievement. Notably, Hartman found that where White students were more prevalent than African American students in sports, the positive correlation between sports and academic achievement was most pronounced (Hartman, 2008). This finding is useful in acknowledging that playing in a sport is not a cure-all for every struggling student, which should encourage educators to continually create more effective programs in order to provide the attention, encouragement, and social bonding that many adolescent youths require to be college and career ready (Hartman, 2008).

Din (2005) examined whether participating in sport activities had any impact on student academic achievement within the specific setting of a rural high school. The participating students were selected from four rural high schools and data were collected using students’ pre-season grades in English, math, science, and social studies. These grades were compared to the corresponding student’s post-season grades (Din, 2005).
With no significant differences found between students’ pre-season and post-season grades, the results indicated that interscholastic sports participation had no effect on academic achievement in this particular study. Physical education teachers in the study offered a few explanations, stating that they believed that student athletes organized and utilized their time more effectively. In this study, the teachers also posited that the demand placed on students to stay eligible for their sports teams through academic success provided and encouraged a strong level of accountability (Din, 2005).

Beamon and Bell (2006) conducted a case study that focused on college football players. In their investigation, Beamon and Bell paid special attention to factors of academic achievement and social adjustment, specifically that of African American males. They also explored the widely held perception of a negative relationship between sports, social adjustment, and academic achievement, particularly for African American males and the influence of popular culture. The study investigated the validity of African American socialization into sports as a separate phenomenon, while identifying differences in the degree of emphasis that parents placed on academics and on sports.

Issues that prompted Beamon and Bell’s (2006) research were studies that portrayed African American college football players and basketball players as having lower graduation rates than White college students in these same sports. In addition, Division 1 African American athletes seemed to make frequent newspaper headlines for social and behavioral incidents (Beamon & Bell, 2006). Beamon and Bell’s study investigated parental influence on student athletes through their emphasis on the importance of education in the lives of their children, the levels of student performance, and levels of social and behavioral adjustments to college. Demographic data were
collected on the football players through a questionnaire that was administered to an entire Division 1 football team with the ethnic makeup of the team being 51% African American, 44% Caucasian, 2% Native American, 2% Asian American, and 1% Hispanic.

Findings from Beamon and Bell (2006) indicated African American athletes were found to place less emphasis than White athletes on their academic and educational success during their socialization process. The study explored aspects of the socialization process that encouraged participation in sports and examined the degree of emphasis placed on athletics compared to academics (Beamon & Bell, 2006). As the emphasis on athletics during their socialization process increased, both poor academic and behavioral problems increased as well. However, parents who supported academics through educational social activities had a positive effect on the academic performance of African American males. Also, the more parents of African American athletes encouraged academic achievement over athletics, the better the athletes performed in the classroom. The opposite results occurred when athletics was the focus (Beamon & Bell, 2006).

Fox, Barr-Anderson, Neumark-Sztainer, and Wall (2010) conducted a study to examine the association between sports-team participation, physical activity, and academic outcomes in middle and high school students. Data were collected from 4,746 middle and high school students enrolled in 31 schools in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area, as well as from a secondary data analysis during the 1998-1999 academic school year. The instrument used to collect data was the Project Eating Among Teens (EAT) survey, which measured sociodemographic variables, sports team participation, physical activity, and student grades (Fox et al., 2010).
Results from Fox et al. (2010) indicated that middle and high school boys and girls who participated in sports often attained a higher GPA than those students who did not participate in sports. In addition, middle school and high school girls who performed more hours of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) had higher GPAs relative to their less-active counterparts. For boys, sports-team participation was independently associated with a higher GPA. However, in the middle school realm, boys had a positive association between physical activity and GPA, which could further underscore the relationship between sports team participation and a higher GPA (Fox et al., 2010).

In another related study, Fredricks (2012) expanded the prior literature base by using a nationally representative longitudinal data set to examine the association between the number of activities and time spent in extracurricular activities for participants in the 10th grade. Fredricks also examined the relationship between athletic involvement, over time, and the outcomes for 12th grade students and the 2 years after high school, accounting for demographic factors, prior achievement, and school size. The participants in the study included students who completed surveys in Grades 10 and 12 and had data on mathematics test scores at both time points. Data were collected from surveys in 2002 (10th grade), 2004 (12th grade), 2 years post high school, school transcripts, and math cognitive assessments. In addition, four academic outcomes were included in the analysis: mathematics scores, grade point average, educational expectations, and educational status.

Among the most striking findings in this study was the percentage of 10th grade students that did not participate in any extracurricular activities (Fredricks, 2012). The number of activities a student was involved in and the amount of time spent in those
activities was positively correlated with math achievement test scores, grades, and educational expectations in 12th grade. Some of the findings were cause for concern, as prior evidence showed that the academic adjustment and psychological well-being of youth who did not participate in organized activities was less favorable than those who succeeded academically and participated in extracurricular activities (Bohnert al., 2010; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Fredrick’s research contributed to the debate on whether youth are being overscheduled in extracurricular contexts, and it provided further evidence that increased participation in extracurricular activities maintains academics performance in the educational process.

Providing their own research on this topic, Agans and Geldhof (2012) examined the patterns of athletic participation across 3 years of high school through a cluster analysis of participation in activities with different types of team structure. They explored the developmental outcomes associated with participation in team, individual, and dance-type sports and considered six identified patterns of participation: no participation, joining sports, constant participation, changing participation, dropping out, and inconsistent participation. Data from Grades 10, 11, and 12 of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development, were obtained from 7,071 youths along with 3,173 parents in 42 states (Agans & Geldhof, 2012).

The results indicated that female participants had higher positive youth development (PYD) in Grade 10, with higher involvement in Grade 12, than youths in the no participation group of the study. In addition, female participants in the changed participation trajectory also had higher PYD in Grade 10 than non-participants. Findings also indicate that female youths who participated in athletics across all 3 years had
favorable outcomes when compared to youth who had not participated in athletics. The biggest difference in males occurred in Grade 10. Males who participated in team and individual sports reported higher PYD and involvement and lower depression than males in the no participation group in Grades 10 and 11 (Agans & Geldhof, 2012).

Agans and Geldhof (2012) presented an important first step in understanding the lived experience of individual participation in interscholastic athletics. However, additional qualitative studies must be incorporated in order to gain a clearer understanding of these important issues. Aligning individual characteristics (e.g., motives, interests, skills) to sports and optimizing the experience of athletic participation may increase the connection between interscholastic athletic participation and academic success.

**Urban males’ interscholastic athletic participation and academic achievement.** Wright (2011) conducted a mixed methods study in order to explore the racial-ethnic identity and academic achievement of five young African American males in Grades 11 and 12 in an urban high school. Data collection methods included individual and group interviews as well as a questionnaire that examined how African American males interpreted their social and academic success while maintaining a healthy racial-ethnic identity (HREI). Wright (2011) suggested that an HREI might explain why some African American males succeeded in and out of the classroom. Wright (2011) indicated that young urban males must conceptualize their academic achievement as a direct connection to their HREI if they are to overcome the challenges and obstacles they face in today’s society.
The participants in Wright’s (2011) study were confident in their intellectual abilities, and they valued the educational achievements of their fellow African American students. Additionally, they maintained a strong sense of awareness of their HREI and clearly prepared to overcome all of the barriers and obstacles in their way. As these results indicate, an HREI can help explain why some urban young males succeed in navigating the societal barriers of home, community, and school (Wright, 2011). It is imperative for young urban males to conceptualize who they are and their achievements in relation to their HREI if they are to succeed both academically and athletically (Wright, 2011).

Reynolds, Fisher, and Cavil (2012) conducted a study to examine the relationship of demographic variables and academic performance of NCAA Division I basketball players. They examined data relative to basketball players’ views of their family structure, socioeconomic status, and gender, which framed the guided research questions. The results indicate a significant linear relationship among NCAA Division I basketball players’ gender, family structure, socioeconomic status, and their academic performance.

In the study by Reynolds et al. (2012), gender and socioeconomic status were found to have significant linear relationships with academic performance. Results indicate a significant positive correlation between gender and socioeconomic status. Overall, female basketball players achieved more success academically than males. Even so, there was a discrepancy between African American female student athlete graduation rates (47%) and White female student athlete graduation rates (72%). The same difference in graduation rates was evident for African American males and White males, at 42% and 57% respectfully (Reynolds et al., 2012).
If urban males can enter college with a positive frame of mind and confident HREIs, along with a strong support system from family, coaches, and faculty, it is likely that success will be the ultimate outcome. Although, for this to occur, family, coaches, and faculty must help foster a nurturing and caring atmosphere in which leadership skills are fostered and academic success has the ability to grow.

**Self-determination/motivation and interscholastic athletic participation.**

Self-determination theory is a macro framework of human motivation and personality that concerns individuals’ inherent growth tendencies and their innate psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Self-determination theory addresses the motivation behind the choices that individuals make without any external influences and interference. According to SDT, all individuals possess the same natural basic needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Intrinsically motivated behavior is what drives people to engage in optimally stimulating pursuits. When individuals do not feel competent, or if they are overly influenced by external stimuli, they are not likely to experience intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Spray, Wang, Biddle, and Chatzisarantis (2006) conducted a study that sought to relate the importance of achievement goal involvement to autonomous and controlled communication styles. They examined SDT to determine youth enjoyment, free-choice behaviors, and performance in relation to a golf task with secondary school students. The researchers hoped to test the motivational impact of communicating achievement goals in autonomy-supportive or controlling ways among young people engaged in a sport task (Spray et al., 2006).
Results show that those in the autonomous situation, regardless of their goal, reported greater enjoyment, persisted longer at the task, and performed better than those in the controlling communication situation (Spray et al., 2006). Although all participants, regardless of their goal orientation, reported greater enjoyment, participants in the task-involved situation performed better than those in the goal-involved situation. Spray et al. (2006) suggested that an environment that supports autonomy could enhance intrinsic motivation when compared to a controlled environment, regardless of goal involvement. This study provided support for designing tasks that promote autonomy and a task-involved goal orientation that might enhance positive behaviors in sports among young athletes (Spray et al., 2006).

Turkmen (2013) investigated the relationship between academic and sport motivation through physical education and sports as well as the impact of gender in this relationship. The Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) and Sport Motivation Scale (SMS) served as the means for determining participant academic and athletic alignment. In this study, female student athletes demonstrated higher averages in intrinsic motivation (IM) and lower amotivation averages than male participants in both tests. While male student athletes demonstrated significantly higher extrinsic motivation (EM), external regulation, and amotivation in both tests, female students achieved higher averages in IM in the AMS. Turkmen (2013) found significant relationships between EM and academic motivation (AM) and sports motivation (SM) of male students. These findings suggested that male student athletes were more affected by external values and rewards than were females (Turkmen, 2013).
Beiswenger and Grolnick (2009) examined the interpersonal and intrapersonal factors associated with adolescent autonomous motivation in after-school activities. Data were collected using a variety of scales and questionnaires. Accordingly, participants completed measures of peer relatedness, autonomy within friendships, mother and father autonomy support, perceived activity competence, autonomous motivation for after-school activities, and subject well-being.

The findings suggested that peer relatedness and perceived active competence played a positive role with autonomous motivation in after-school activities while having a negative association with non-autonomous motivation. There were no significant relationships between perceived activity competence and mother or father autonomy support. The level of autonomous motivation for after-school activities was positively associated with subjects’ well-being, further indicating that adolescents who experienced a sense of security and support in their peer relationships were more likely to pursue activities that they genuinely valued and enjoyed, and they were less likely to engage in activities that were forced through pressure or control.

In addition, results indicate that peer relationships and perceived competence may have an important role in fostering experiences of autonomy and well-being in adolescents (Beiswenger & Grolnick, 2009). Furthermore, mother and father autonomy support was linked to general subjective well-being but not to autonomous motivation for after-school activities. According to the study, parental autonomy support was more relevant to younger children’s activity motivation, because adolescents can seek additional support from peers.
Edoh (2012) conducted a case study in West Africa with the purpose of assessing how students performed in Benin secondary schools when they were involved in academic pursuits and/or in school sports competitions (SSC). Two questionnaires were administered. The first questionnaire examined school academic achievement that focused on motivation in education, and it was given to students who did not participate in sports. The second questionnaire, the sports motivation scale, was related to SSC and was given to students who participated in sports. The results indicate that students in Benin went to school with the intention of preparing for the future, rather than for the simple desire to learn (Edoh, 2012). Participants were mostly under the control of extrinsic motivation, but their involvement in sports was primarily employed to improve their practice and, therefore, under the control of intrinsic motivation.

The average score of extrinsically motivated, non-sports students in their academic pursuits was significantly higher than the intrinsically motivated in SSC, even though the average EM score of the SSC students was significantly lower than that of the IM, non-sports students. Furthermore, the non-sports students appeared more persistent within academic work in which they had to work to overcome any initial failures. However, the student athletes tended to withdraw from the SSC in cases in which they repeatedly encountered academic difficulties, with their rate of amotivation being significantly different. Although results from the study do not support the correlation between interscholastic athletic participation and academic achievement, they do shed light on the cultural and environmental values of the subjects who participated in the study. Such correlation may lead to another body of research as it relates to urban young
males (Edoh, 2012). Results show that students in Benin applied different types of motivation to academic work and sports activities (Edoh, 2012).

Niehaus, Rudasill, and Adelson (2011) conducted a longitudinal study to examine how academic self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and participation in after-school programs contributed to the academic achievement of Latino middle school students. The participants consisted of 47 Latino students in Grades 6 through 8 from two public middle schools that offered after-school programs that were designed specifically for Latino students. The study addressed a gap in the current literature as it related to Latino students’ self-efficacy, motivation orientation, and a possible correlation between after-school programs and academic achievement (Niehaus et al., 2011).

Niehaus et al. (2011) examined higher levels of academic self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and after-school program participation in order to determine predictions for more positive academic outcomes for Latino students. Niehaus et al. (2011) also investigated whether Latino students experienced changes in academic self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation while participating in the after-school program. Results pointed to the importance of fostering self-efficacy for Latino students during the middle school years by empowering them to believe they were capable of completing academic tasks and reaching desired goals at school. Findings revealed, additionally, that intrinsic motivation was positively associated with student GPAs, self-efficacy, and the establishment of a positive association with school attendance, standardized math achievement scores, and after-school program attendance.

**Family, community, and educational links to academic achievement.** Yull, Blitz, Thompson, and Murray (2014) presented a study that collected data using a series
of focus group interviews with middle-class parents of color whose children attended a small urban school district in the northeast United States. The focus groups were conducted in the context of a family-engagement project using a family-school-community-university partnership model that combined university leadership and community coalition. The goals of the project included: (a) increasing parent engagement amongst parents of color and school personnel, (b) the school districts would initiate to increase cultural responsiveness, and (c) foster the positive racial identification development of students of color (Yull et al., 2014).

Yull et al. (2014) focused on critical race theory (CRT) as the conceptual framework. A total of 19 parents participated, including 14 mothers and five fathers. Of the 19 parents, 16 identified as African American, two as biracial, and one as Black Latina. Of the student participants, 15 were in two-parent families who were raising children together. The study used the community-based participatory action research approach. Five focus groups were conducted with different parents who had children in the school district.

The results were grouped into two themes. The first group of themes focused on the community experiences of families of color that created the context for their experiences with the schools. Within this area, three themes emerged: (a) lack of cultural enrichment for families of color, (b) isolation in the community, and (c) experiences of colorblind racism and cultural ignorance.

The second area focused specifically on school and how parents perceived race as a barrier to effective school engagement. Within this area, three themes emerged: (a)
lack of cultural competency in schools, (b) stereotyping, and (c) racial disproportionality in suspension and school discipline (Yull et al., 2014).

Flowers’ (2015) study represented a unique examination of the impact of family and positive academic identity formation and achievement for Black male engineering majors. The research examined the perceptions of eight Black males from two highly selective higher education institutions. Data were collected in the form of interviews, demographic characteristics of participants, and journals kept by the researcher. The research findings emerged with one main theme concerning family: all participants noted that family mattered. The involvement, support, and encouragement from family was a significant link to academic identity formation. Many participants indicated that their academic success was due to the continued love and support of their families.

Harris, Hines, Kelly, Williams, and Bagley (2014) conducted a qualitative study that looked at factors associated with academic engagement and success of Black male student athletes in high school. A thematic analysis was used to examine semi-structured interviews conducted on two successful Black male student athletes, along with their principals, teachers, parents, and coaches. The research was viewed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Harris et al., 2014).

The results of Harris et al. (2014) pointed out that a consistent, collaborative approach overloaded with cultural competency was necessary to facilitate such successful outcomes. Harris et al. (2014) focused on two of Bronfenbrenner’s theory layers: microsystems (a layer closest to the student that comprises family, school, and neighborhood) and mesosystems (a layer that provides the connection between structures
in the microsystems). Layers were applied to engagement in behavior, academics, cognition, parents, and education (Harris et al., 2014).

The Harris et al. (2014) findings were identified through thematic analysis with: (a) a team approach, and (b) by cultural competence. The findings around a team approach highlighted the importance of all stakeholders working together, communicating expectations, and executing a shared vision for the success of all students. The cultural competence theme emphasized the ability to effectively interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds and dismantle stereotypes regarding Black male student athletes with a focus on education before sports to prepare student athletes for college and life (Harris et al., 2014). The results recommended a collective vision through collaborative efforts that were considered to be the unique cultural and educational experiences of Black male student athletes (Harris et al., 2014).

**Research Gaps and Recommendations**

The literature provides mixed support for the importance of student achievement and the correlation that exists between athletic participation and academic success. More research is needed to address the nature of the academic culture of students who participate in sports teams and how their athletic participation contributes to academic success. The student voice is all too often missing in the research, even though it is rich with important information. The student voice provides a rare and direct link to the perspective of the urban male student/athlete, potentially exposing what motivates these youths to achieve academic success.
Summary

The review of the literature uncovered many factors that could influence whether interscholastic athletic participation impacts academic achievement in urban males; however, the level of impact remains unclear, as does whether the impact is negative or positive. The research results provided evidence that most urban males view interscholastic athletics participation as an escape from the obstacles they encounter within their neighborhoods/communities and schools as well as a way to remain focused, successful, and accountable.

The current research study focused on the involvement of urban males in interscholastic athletics and their perceptions of how athletic participation influenced their academic success. Students who participate in team and individual sports often develop intrapersonal skills, such as self-reflection and self-monitoring, as well as interpersonal skills including communication and the ability to build relationships (Beiswenger & Grolnick, 2009). In addition, character-building traits are often formed, including respect for others and themselves, leadership, work ethic, teamwork, resiliency, humility, self-discipline, and sporting behavior (Stephens & Schaben, 2002).

This chapter provided a review of the literature on self-determination theory and the correlation between interscholastic athletics/extracurricular activities and academic achievement as evidenced through secondary and post-secondary success. The chapter highlighted empirical literature and findings related to secondary school and post-secondary youth who participated in interscholastic/extracurricular activities, as well as factors that impacted academic achievement through examined questions, settings, populations, and findings. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology, data collection
methods, and data analysis regarding the impact interscholastic athletic participation had on the academic success of former urban high school male athletes.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the methodology, data collection, and data analysis of this research study that examined urban males who participated in high school interscholastic athletics, graduated from high school, and who, at the time of the study, had enrolled in 2- or 4-year college institutions. A phenomenological approach was used to gain insight into what motivates urban males to achieve academically. This approach is fitting because phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual (Creswell, 2013).

The current investigation examined factors that allowed study participants to overcome the challenges of urban males, graduate from high school, and pursue a college education. Young urban males face several challenging obstacles including, but not limited to, poverty, gangs, and drugs. There exists a well-documented achievement gap between African American/Latino males and White males, creating an urgent need for the examination of the factors that have enabled some urban males to be academically successful (McKinsey & Company, 2009). The purpose of this study was to identify what factors have positively impacted young urban males who participated in interscholastic athletics and have achieved academic success. The study focused on the motivational factors that support positive achievement, regardless of challenging life circumstances.
Research Methodology

This qualitative study employed a descriptive research design. Data were collected during individual interviews that focused on what motivated participants to overcome challenges and achieve academic success. During the interviews, individual participants were asked to react to a vignette about an eighth-grade male who was challenged with societal obstacles and who was heading to high school with a goal of playing interscholastic sports. The parents or adult mentors of individual student participants were also interviewed with a specific focus on the influence of high school interscholastic athletics, but the adults were not asked to respond to the vignette.

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher seeks to understand or describe a phenomena of interest from the views of the participants who are directly involved (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research assumes a naturalistic paradigm where the research is conducted in a natural setting and typically involves a detailed and rich description of human opinions, perceptions, or behaviors (Creswell, 2013). Through multiple methods of data collection, this study answered the following research questions:

1. What motivates and inspires young urban males to achieve academic success?
2. What role can interscholastic athletic participation play in the academic success of the young urban male?

In posing these questions, the researcher sought to better understand self-determination in urban males who overcame challenges and successfully graduated. The qualitative approach was an appropriate method of inquiry for this study because it allowed the researcher to capture the essence of the human experience (Creswell, 2013). To research a topic is to discover its full breadth and depth, to understand a cognitive
subjective perspective, and to identify the effect of the lived experience on the individual. Such an endeavor also assists in uncovering insight into human experiences (Creswell, 2013). The researcher must decide, however, how personal experiences are introduced into a study. In using phenomenological methods, the researcher looked to determine what motivates young urban males who participate in interscholastic sports.

Phenomenological methods are effective at bringing to light the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Investigating the association between participating in interscholastic athletics and academic success among young urban males provided insight into interscholastic athletic participation and its correlation with academic success. As such, this study investigated the extent to which the current educational and high school interscholastic systems contributed to the academic achievement of students who participate in interscholastic athletics. The study explored these understandings through the experiences of former high school student athletes.

**Research Context**

The research was conducted in an urban area in Western New York. At the time of the study, the city had a population of approximately 210,565 with 43.7% of the population being White, 41.7% Black, 16.4% Hispanic, 4.4% mixed races, and 3.1% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Between the years 2009-2013, 39.3% of the population owned their homes. The median income per household was reported as $30,875, per capita, and 32.9% of the population lived below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The Western New York Region (WNYR) is home to over 21
colleges and universities, which offer over 200 different degree programs and serve over 110,500 students.

Among the urban school districts in Upstate New York, at the time of the study, the district identified in this region had the largest percentage of minority students with 60.1% African American, 25.6% Hispanic, 10.2% White, and 4.1% Asian, Native American, East Indian, and other (Dunsmoor, 2014). The Western New York Central School District (WNYCSD) has a 51% graduation rate. During 2010, 29% of the 25 and older population reported that they received their high school diploma, and 25.1% reported completing their bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The school district has the highest poverty rate among New York State’s largest districts with 22% of the district’s schools at 90% poverty rate or higher (Dunsmoor, 2014).

The WNYCSD was used as the district’s pseudonym in order to protect the identity of the school district and the participants. At the time of this study, the WNYCSD had over 30,000 students and approximately 15,000 adult students. Of the 30,000 students, over 9,000 were high school students. These high school students attended one of the district’s 15 secondary schools or one of three alternative programs. Students in this district are impacted by the challenges of concentrated poverty, which adversely affects academic achievement. At the time of this study, in this district, 87 different languages were spoken, 84% of the students qualified for the free or reduced-price lunch program, 16.5% of students had special needs, 10% had limited English proficiency, and 43% of the students entering kindergarten had parents who did not finish high school (Dunsmoor, 2014).
**Research Participants**

Using high school historical data, the researcher selected nine urban males, all over 18 years of age, who were former WNYCSD student athletes and who, at the time of the study, were enrolled in 2-two or 4-year institution of higher learning in Western New York. The initial criteria included urban African American and Latino males, a minimum of 2 years’ participation on a varsity high school athletic team, graduation from high school, and enrollment as a full-time student in a local 2- or 4-year college. The researcher conducted individual interviews with demographic questions for the participants and their identified parent or mentor. The researcher also collected responses to a vignette in which the college student participants provided advice to urban youth regarding academic success. The researcher referred to and used notes taken in his researcher’s journal during the interviews and vignette exercise.

**Research Procedures**

Initial approval to access student selection information was submitted to the WNYCSD administrative offices (Appendix A). Approval from the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB) was also requested. Once IRB approved the dissertation proposal, and access to the database was approved by the WYNCSND (Appendix B), the researcher used a purposeful sampling to identify the participants who embodied the phenomenon of academic success inclusion criteria:

1. The researcher discussed the details of the study with WNYCSD through emails and letters to access information from the district office.
2. The researcher looked to work with the WNYCSD technology department to select all previous graduating students who participated in interscholastic athletic programs.
   
a. Students selected met the initial criteria of a minimum of 2 years of varsity high school athletic participation, graduation from high school, and enrollment as a full-time student in a 2- or 4-year college at the time of the study (Appendix C).

b. The sampling allowed the researcher to select participants who would best help the researcher explore the research problem and answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013). From the district database, the researcher obtained a list of former WNYCSD student athletes from which he compiled a purposeful sample of 8 to 10 potential candidates who were all over 18 years of age.

c. Upon compiling the roster of potential participants, the researcher narrowed the list using inclusion criteria by identifying only students who were African American or Latino males, who graduated from high school, participated in 2 years of varsity interscholastic athletics, and were attending in a 2- to 4-year college institution at the time of the study (Appendix C). The researcher also used professional networking contacts, including access to administrative building leadership teams, in order to connect with the best potential candidates. The researcher contacted athletic directors, coaches, and
administrators via telephone and email to assist in identifying prospective participants for the study from the district database.

d. The identified potential participants received a letter from the researcher explaining the study (Appendix D) and the enclosed consent form (Appendix E), along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope for them to return the signed consent form.

Once the consent form was signed and returned, the researcher connected with participants via telephone, email, to confirm an interview and to determine the date, place, and time for such interview. The participants in the study were asked during the interview process to identify the parent or mentor who was the most supportive during their high school career. The identified parent or mentor also received a letter (Appendix F) from the researcher explaining the study, which also included a consent form (Appendix E) and a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Once the consent form was signed and returned, the researcher connected with the participants’ parent or mentor via telephone or email to confirm an interview and to determine the date, place, and time for such interview.

All of the participants received a personal thank you card after their meetings with the researcher, and they were given a $10.00 gift card at the end of the interview as a token of thanks for their participation in the study. The signed consent forms gave full assurance of confidentiality to the participants, and they were submitted to the researcher before data collection. The consent forms, as well as all of the information collected for the study, are retained and will be in a secure file for a maximum of 3 years after the publication of the research. After 3 years have elapsed from the date of publication of
this research, all of the information will be shredded and disposed of to protect the participants’ identities. The process of participant selection yielded a sample size for the study based on the criteria and consent process. The researcher sought a sample size of nine urban males who, at the time of the study, were attending college and were all over 18 years of age.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

Just as Creswell (2013) noted that qualitative data collection instruments most often used by researchers are observations, interviews, and audio-visual data, this researcher applied a phenomenological approach in order to understand the perceptions of former high school interscholastic athletes and their parents/mentors as they relate to academic success. The study employed three methods of data gathering: (a) semi-structured individual interviews with demographic questions for participants and their identified parent or mentor, (b) responses to a vignette in which student participants provided advice to urban youth regarding academic success, and (c) notes from the researcher’s journal, which were taken during the interviews and vignette exercise. The participants’ identified parent or mentor did not participate in the vignette. All interviews, as well as responses to the vignette, were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were uploaded to ATLAS.ti.

**Student and parent or mentor interviews.** The researcher interviewed all participants. The participants were asked demographic questions, which provided background information that gave a better picture of who the participants were and how their experiences shaped their personal accomplishments. Demographic questions included the participants’ names (a pseudonym was used) age, grade, race/ethnicity,
number of sports played, parent/mentor, socioeconomic status, college experience, and future plans (Appendix G).

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format using open-ended questions that allowed the interview to be conversational. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of the participants’ personal journeys and experiences. The researcher asked questions relating to self-determination and the role that interscholastic athletics may or may not have played in the student participants’ academic success, as well as the types of support that facilitated their academic success while in high school. The participants were asked to discuss how participation in athletics impacted their lives, what motivated them to achieve academic success, what their future goals were, what specific challenges they had to overcome, and what support they received from others who helped to foster their self-determination and success (Appendix H).

In addition to the student-participant interviews, the researcher conducted parent- or mentor-participant interviews with the adults identified by the student participants as being influential in their lives. The parent- or mentor-participant interviews (Appendix I) strengthened the study and allowed the researcher to explore the parents’ or mentors’ feelings and perspectives for additional background information that showed support or hindrances to the success of the young urban male student athletes.

The interview responses were recorded with an audio recorder, and they were transcribed and uploaded to ATLAS.ti. Both student and parent participants were interviewed once over a period of 2 months, with one interview per participant, and each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. The interview questions assisted the researcher in
identifying and understanding the effectiveness of the student participants’ challenges, at
the time of the interview, in attaining academic achievement through their personal
experiences as interscholastic athletes, as well as their parents’ or mentors’ level of
support and involvement.

**Vignette.** The researcher used a vignette (Appendix J) of the journey of a young
urban male in the eighth grade who was struggling academically and having difficulty
overcoming challenges in his daily life. The vignette was a short paragraph based on a
scenario in which the student participants were asked to draw upon their own experience
and speak of their personal beliefs, values, and norms (Mah, Taylor, Hoang, & Cook,
2014). Allowing the student participants to explain a situation, which was presented on
their own terms during the interview, supported a more transparent and honest response.
The researcher linked the vignette to the research questions to determine if the answers
from the student participants aligned and spoke of the motivation and self-determination
of the student participants and their connection to interscholastic athletic participation
and academic success.

**Researcher’s journal.** The researcher maintained an ongoing reflective account
of participants’ perspectives, construction of knowledge, emotional reactions, hunches,
and any other information that the researcher believed was relevant in understanding the
information that was shared (Lamb, 2013). The journal provided a means for the
researcher to reflect on the research experience and enhance the transcribed, collected
data. It helped to clarify ideas and to develop linkages between the different categories
within the research process, which assisted in bridging the gap between theory and
practice. The researcher’s journal provided an opportunity for the researcher to gather
information within the interviews that were not recorded elsewhere and helped to encourage critical analysis and thinking. The journal also provided further evidence to substantiate the key categories that became part of the study, which contributes to the trustworthiness of the research study. The researcher used the journal as a method in the phenomenological study to diminish the effects of the researcher’s identification of invested interest, personal experience, cultural factors, assumptions, and hunches that might influence how the data was viewed (Fischer, 2009).

**Trustworthiness.** According to Creswell (2013), credibility is a powerful source for determining the accuracy of a study’s findings, and, as such, it plays a significant role in a qualitative study. The researcher ensured trustworthiness by triangulating the data, reviewing the data with a critical colleague, and engaging in member checks. Triangulation uses multiple methods to draw conclusions (Casey & Murphy, 2009). The methods used in this study were interviews, vignettes, and the researcher’s journal.

Using multiple methods to gather data on the lived experiences of the participants, parents, and mentors provided a means for triangulating the data. Interviews, responses from the vignette during each student’s interview, and the researcher journal were all sources of information that led to the findings. The individual interviews, along with the researcher journal allowed the researcher to develop a reflective account of the participants’ perspectives, emotional reactions, and other relevant information to help the researcher understand the information that was shared.

The researcher journal enhanced the transcriptions and collected data. It helped to clarify ideas and to develop linkages between the different categories within the research process, which assisted in linking theory and practice. The researcher journal allowed the
researcher to gather information not recorded elsewhere and helped with analysis and knowledge construction. The journal also helped to substantiate the key categories that emerged from the study.

During the interviews of the student athletes, the researcher used a vignette that described the journey of a young urban male in the eighth grade who was struggling academically and having difficulty overcoming challenges in his daily life. The vignette drew upon the research participants’ own experience and their personal beliefs, value, and norms. Allowing the student participants to comment on this situation during the interview allowed for an additional response that was transparent and honest. The researcher used the vignette responses to help solidify the alignment of the findings with motivation and self-determination in connection to interscholastic athletic participation and academic success.

To increase the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher reviewed open-ended codes, axial coding, and the selective coding of the categories with a critical colleague. The selected critical colleague had previous knowledge in the qualitative field and assisted in the review of the preliminary findings. Having this critical colleague review the data helped to support the credibility of the findings.

After reviewing the data with the critical colleague, the researcher conducted a member check. The researcher carefully picked phrases, excerpts, and words that were gathered in the data and verified the accuracy of the translations with the participants. The researcher connected with the participants via telephone and/or email to confirm that meanings were translated and understood correctly (Glesne, 1999). Reviewing the data
with a critical colleague and conducting a member check strengthened the validity and reliability of the data analysis.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Upon approval of the dissertation defense proposal, the researcher obtained permission from St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board in order to take the following steps:

1. The participants were informed of the data collection procedures. Once an informed consent form was signed, it gave full assurance of confidentiality to the participants.

2. The participants understood that the informed consent form and all information collected during the research interviews would be retained for maximum of 3 years. All recorded and written materials were secured in a locked cabinet for the duration of the research study. After 3 years have elapsed after the completion of the research study, all of the information will be shredded and disposed of to protect the identity of all of the participants.

3. The researcher conducted individual interviews with nine participants, all were over 18 years of age. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. In addition to the interview, the student participants responded to demographic questions and a vignette.

4. The researcher conducted parent/mentor interviews, which lasted approximately one hour, to gain insight and perspective on their involvement, support, challenges they faced being a parent, and their experience as it related to their child’s academic success.
5. All of the participants received a personal thank you card and were given a $10.00 gift card at the end of the interview as a token of thanks for their participation in the study.

6. The data were transcribed, verbatim, by an external transcriptionist and loaded into ATLAS.ti. ATLAS.ti is a software tool that is used to organize data to aid researchers with transcribed text and audio.

7. The data were reviewed and coded into discrete categories with the aid of ATLAS.ti

**Ethics and confidentiality considerations.** All of the ethical guidelines of the St. John Fisher College IRB were followed. The informed consent form provided the specific measures needed to protect the confidentiality of each participant selected for the study. Once the participants signed the informed consent form prior to the interview process, they received a copy of the document for their own record keeping. The audio-taping of the interviews remained confidential by using pseudonyms as identifiers during the interview recordings. All transcriptions were produced from the audio recordings. Also, to ensure confidentiality for the research study, the researcher submitted documentation and received approval from the IRB at St. John Fisher College, further ensuring that the study would protect all involved parties and would abide by the requirements of confidentiality for all participants.

**Procedures for Data Analysis**

The study employed three methods of data gathering: (a) semi-structured individual interviews with demographic questions for the participants and their identified parent or mentor, (b) responses to a vignette in which the student participants provided
advice to urban youth regarding academic success, and (c) notes from the researcher’s journal, which were taken during the interviews and vignette exercise. Following transcription, the researcher conducted a thorough review of all of the transcripts, made initial observations of the data, and established preliminary categories in order to identify any patterns of concepts the participants represented during the data-collection phase. The data were organized into logical categories to bring meaning to each participant’s story as it was shared through the interview.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative analysis includes three streams of activity, each deserving sharp application to assess credibility: data reduction, data display, and conclusion. For this study, four types of coding were employed: a priori coding, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The process of coding allowed the researcher to combine data for ideas and categories, and then mark similar passage of text within coded categories. This approach allowed codes to be easily retrieved at a later stage for further comparison and analysis. The codes were identified for all participants, in all types of data in this study, including transcripts and notes from the researcher’s journal. Through the process of reviewing the transcripts, the researcher had the opportunity to work within these codes.

1. A priori codes – identifications that were developed before examining the current data, which were aligned with the research theory of self-determination. The codes were: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

2. Open coding – also known as inductive coding, the first review of the collected data focused on identifying, labeling, and classifying compiled
transcriptions. The researcher allowed categories to emerge without the constraints of preconceived categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The researcher created categories and then determined how the categories differed dimensionally, while breaking down the data into separate parts, examining it, and then comparing it (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

3. Axial coding – the grouping of open codes so that their categories and properties relate to one another in an analytical way (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher investigated relationships across categories. This type of coding allowed for the connections to be made among different conditions, contexts, and interactions through the exploration of the different influences that may affect the phenomenon between interscholastic athletic participation and academic success (Creswell, 2013).

4. Selective coding – the process of integrating and refining categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher interpreted all categories and classified patterns into single themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The process involved taking categories and developing categories/themes/hypotheses that were interrelated for the purpose of assembling a story that described the interrelationship of the categories in a theme (Creswell, 2013).

As the codes were discovered, the researcher entered information into ATLAS.ti software and used comparative methods to discover relationships and patterns. The data were also compared across the discovered categories, allowing the researcher to discern relationships amongst the categories. Using this method, the researcher categorized and
coded within themes of meaning to form new categories when no similarities in categories were found.

Summary

After St. John Fisher IRB approval and approval from the WNYCSD, the researcher sought to investigate the role and impact that interscholastic athletics plays on the academic achievement of young African American and Latino urban males who participated in high school sports. The study used a qualitative approach as the strategy of inquiry design to gain insight into what motivates urban males. The research was conducted in an urban city located in Western New York. Using high school historical data, the researcher selected nine urban males, all over 18 years of age, from local area colleges, who were former WNYCSD student athletes and who, at the time of the study, were enrolled in a 2- or 4-year institution of higher learning in Western New York. The qualitative study employed a descriptive research design based on data collected during individual interviews, athletes’ responses collected from their reading of the vignette, and notes from the researcher’s journal.

The researcher ensured trustworthiness through the triangulation of data by reviewing individual transcriptions of the interviews, the responses to the vignette, and the researcher journal, along with analyzing the data with a critical colleague and engaging in member checks. All of the ethical and confidential guidelines required by SJFC IRB were followed. Once approved, the researcher began the three methods of data collection with audio recordings, transcriptions, and the research journal. The data analysis included four types of coding: a priori, open coding, axial coding, and selective
coding. The process of coding allowed the researcher to combine data for ideas, categories, and themes.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to capture the perceptions and lived experiences of urban males who participated in high school interscholastic athletics, successfully graduated from high school, and attended a 2- or 4-year college institution. Discovering and understanding the motivation of young urban males with regard to their academic pursuits is a vital part of improving the quality of other young urban males’ educational experiences, and increasing graduation rates. The literature suggests that interscholastic athletics appear to possess the ability to uniquely contribute to academic success (DeMeulenaere, 2010); however, clear support is lacking. In light of such insufficient support, this study investigated the factors that impacted young urban males who participated in interscholastic athletic programs and were successful academically. Additionally, the study focused on the motivational factors that played a role in supporting positive achievement in young urban males—regardless of the challenges they faced in life.

Study Focus and Design

The study was structured using four tenets from self-determination theory, and it was designed to investigate the impact of interscholastic athletic participation on the academic success of young urban males. Applying a narrative strategy of inquiry, the researcher gathered qualitative evidence pertaining to the lived experiences of young urban males to better understand their perspectives and motivation to succeed.
academically. While examining the findings of the research study, the four selected tenets of self-determination theory helped to interpret the responses and validate themes in the analysis. The four tenets were: basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), relationship motivation theory (RMT), goal content theory (GCT), and cognitive evaluation theory (CET).

Research Questions

To better understand the obstacles that young urban males face across the context of school, home, and life, this study was guided by the following questions:

1. What motivates and inspires young urban males to achieve academic success?
2. What role can interscholastic athletic participation play in the academic success of the young urban male?

In posing these questions, the researcher sought to better understand self-determination in urban males who overcame their challenges and successfully graduated high school and went on to college. A qualitative approach was an appropriate method of inquiry for this study because it allowed the researcher to capture the essence of the human experience (Creswell, 2013). In using phenomenological methods, the researcher looked to determine what motivated young urban males who participated in interscholastic athletics, graduated successfully from high school, and continued on to college. The study employed three methods of data collection: (a) semi-structured individual interviews with demographic questions, (b) responses of the participants to a vignette, and (c) notes from the researcher’s journal.
Analysis Procedures

Following transcription of the audio-recorded interviews, the researcher conducted a thorough review of all of the transcripts, made initial observations of the data, and established preliminary categories in order to identify any patterns or concepts the participants represented during the data-collection phase. The data were organized into logical categories to bring meaning to each participant’s story as it was shared through the interviews.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative analysis includes three streams of activity, each deserving sharp application to assess credibility: data reduction, data display, and conclusion. For this study, four types of coding were employed: a priori coding, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The process of coding allowed the researcher to combine data for ideas and categories, and then mark similar passages of text within coded categories. This approach allowed the codes to be easily retrieved at a later stage for further comparison and analysis. The codes were identified for all of the participants, in all types of data in this study, including transcripts and notes from the researcher’s journal.

Demographic profile of participants. For the interviews, demographic questions included the participant’s name (a pseudonym was assigned) age, grade level in college, race/ethnicity, number of sports played, parent/guardian, socioeconomic status, college experience, and future plans (Appendix G).

The participants identified in Table 4.1 were all former Western New York Central School District African American and Latino male students with a minimum of 2 years of varsity high school athletic participation. They graduated from high school and
attended a 2- or 4-year college. As a cohort, the participants had similarities in their demographic identities including age, race/ethnicity, number of sports played, parent/guardian, socioeconomic status, college experience, and future plans:

- **Age:** The nine participants varied in age. Four participants were in their teens, and five were in their 20s.
- **Race/Ethnicity:** The participants identified as African American, Latino, or Latino/African American. Five of the nine identified as African American, three Latino, and one Latino/African American.
- **Sports:** The participants participated in a variety of sports programs including: football, soccer, volleyball, basketball, baseball, and track and field.
- **Parent/Guardian:** Of the nine participants, four had both parents in the household, four had just a mother in the household, and one lived with his grandmother.
- **Parents were High School Graduates:** Of the nine participants, four had both parents graduate from high school, two of the participants’ mothers graduated from high school, and three of the participants had neither parent graduate from high school.
- **Parents were College Graduates:** Only one of the nine participants’ parents graduated from college.
- **SEC/Socioeconomic Class:** Two participants identified themselves as poor, two identified as lower middle class, and five identified as middle class.
• College: All nine participants planned to graduate from college as well as to pursue a career in their field of study and/or continue participation in athletics.

An interesting finding arose while interviewing the student athletes and their parents and mentors. When asked about their socioeconomic status, only two participants identified themselves as poor or in need. They believed that they had enough food, shelter, and clothing to navigate their communities.

Table 4.1

*Pseudonyms, Race/Ethnicity, and Influential Adult*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Parent or Mentor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dano</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elon</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mattman</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mogo</td>
<td>Latino/African American</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qwan</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tay</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Coach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research results from this study provide evidence that most of the urban male participants viewed interscholastic athletics as an escape from the obstacles they encountered within their neighborhoods, communities, and schools, as well as a way to remain focused, successful, and accountable.
The researcher ensured trustworthiness through triangulation using multiple methods of data collection. Member checks and the use of a critical friend were two additional ways the researcher ensured trustworthiness. All of the ethical and confidential guidelines required by SJFC IRB were followed. Once approved, the researcher began the three methods of data collection with audio recordings, transcriptions, and the researcher’s journal. The process of coding allowed the researcher to combine data for ideas and categories, and then mark similar passages of text within coded categories. The codes were identified for all participants, in all types of data in this study, including the transcripts and notes from the researcher’s journal.

**Self-determination theory.** Self-determination theory is a macro framework of human motivation and personality concerning the inherent growth tendencies of individuals and their innate psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The theory involves identifying the motivation behind the choices that people make free from any external influences and interference. According to SDT, people have the natural basic need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Four tenets of self-determination theory—basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), relationship motivation theory (RMT), goal content theory (GCT), and cognitive evaluation theory (CET)—all inform the findings related to interscholastic athletic participation and academic performance.

BPNT describes the concept of psychological needs and how those needs relate to mental health and well-being. BPNT argues that optimal well-being is predicated on autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Therefore, contexts that support these needs should invariably impact an individual’s health and wellness (Deci & Ryan, 1985).
particular tenet argues that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are independent and, as such, essential; and the absence of any of them translates to distinct functional costs.

RMT is rooted in relatedness, which has to do with the development and maintenance of close personal relationships, such as best friends and romantic partners, as well as belonging to groups. This type of relatedness is one of the three basic psychological needs. RMT posits that these close personal interactions are not only desirable for most people but are essential for their well-being and need to relate.

GCT stems from the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic goals and their impact on motivation and wellness. Research results indicate that when people rated extrinsic goals as being strong relative to intrinsic goals, they demonstrated less self-actualization and vitality (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The achievement of goals is seen as a means of satisfying basic needs and is differentially associated with well-being. Extrinsic goals, such as financial success, appearance, and popularity/fame, have been specifically contrasted with intrinsic goals, such as community, close relationships, and personal growth, with the former being more likely associated with less wellness and well-being.

CET specifically addresses the effects of social contexts on intrinsic motivation, or in other words, how factors, such as rewards, interpersonal controls, and ego-involvements, impact intrinsic motivation and interest (Deci & Ryan, 1985). CET highlights the critical roles played by competence and autonomy in supporting and fostering intrinsic motivation, which is critical in education, the arts, athletics, and many other domains. External influences impact intrinsic motivation for optimally challenging accomplishments, such as family, community, and peers who have made life-altering choices and decisions resulting in unfortunate circumstances like incarceration, death,
and/or societal struggles. Events that promote greater perceived competence enhanced intrinsic motivation, such as interscholastic athletic participation practices, games, and competition, along with events like musical, art shows, chess clubs, step teams, and many other extracurricular activities, which allowed the youths to lead and display their individual skills and abilities independently.

BPNT, RMT, CET, and GCT are the tenets of SDT that align best with interscholastic athletic participation and academic performance. For example, BPNT purports the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. If one or more of these needs are not fulfilled, individuals lose motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). RMT is embedded in relatedness, which has to do with the development and maintenance of personal relationships, such as friends and group affiliations.

GCT, with its focus on goals and the impact of goals on motivation, is important in relation to interscholastic athletic participation because setting and achieving goals leads to a greater sense of well-being and helps to meet an individual’s basic needs. CET highlights the critical roles played by competence and autonomy in supporting and fostering intrinsic motivation, which is critical in education, the arts, athletics, and many other domains. BPNT, RMT, GCT, and CET, as theoretical lenses, aid in the examination of how participation in interscholastic athletics played a role in the academic success of the urban males in this study during their secondary education and postsecondary years.
Participants

The researcher interviewed nine former WNYCSD students who graduated from high school and went on to 2- and/or 4-year college institutions. Using their pseudonyms, a brief description of each follows.

Dano was a 19-year-old Latino attending a local community college. He grew up living with both parents and three older brothers in a lower middle class household. He was the last of his siblings to graduate from high school, and both of his parents received their high school general equivalency diploma (GED). Dano was the third sibling in the family to go to college.

Elon was a 24-year-old Latino attending a 4-year college. He moved to the area from Cuba in 2007. He grew up living with his mother in a lower-class household, but his father was always around. He was the first in his family to graduate from high school and go to college.

Mattman was a 23-year-old Latino and a graduate of a local 4-year college. He grew up living with both parents and five brothers in a lower-class household. He was the first to graduate from high school and college in his family.

Mogo was an 18-year-old African America/Latino attending a 4-year college. His mother was Puerto Rican, and father was African American. He grew up living with both parents in a middle-class household. Both parents graduated from high school, but they did not attend college. Mogo was the first in his family to attend college.

Kevin was a 22-year-old African American attending a 4-year college. He grew up living with his mother, but she passed away when Kevin was just 12. He moved in with his father and his father’s mother in a lower middle-class household. His father
earned a GED, but he did not attend college. Kevin was the first in his family to attend a 4-year college.

Qwan was a 19-year-old African American attending a local community college. He grew up living with his mother and siblings in a middle-class household. He thought his mother and father might have received GEDs; however, he was unsure. He is the second in the family to go on to college.

Greg was a 19-year-old African American attending a 4-year college. He grew up living with his mother, two brothers, and sister in a lower middle-class household. His sister and mother graduated from high school, but his father did not. He was the first in the family to go to college.

Tay was a 20-year-old African American attending a community college. He grew up living with his mother and four brothers in a lower middle-class household. Both of his parents graduated from high school. His mother, sister, and one brother also graduated from college.

Robert was a 26-year-old African American attending a local 4-year college. He grew up living with both parents, two brothers, and two sisters in a middle-class household. Both parents graduated from high school, but Robert was the first to go to college.

Interview data were examined with self-determination theory in mind and with a focus on basic psychological needs (BPNT), relationship motivation (RMT), goal content (GCT) and cognitive evaluation (CET). A priori codes related to self-determination theory helped with initial theme development. A priori codes used under SDT tenets were; BPNT with relatedness, autonomy, and competence, RMT and relatedness, GCT
with extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and CET with intrinsic motivation. In addition to a priori codes, open and axial codes were used to lead themes.

Data Analysis and Findings

The research was looking to answer the following two questions:

1. What has motivated and inspired young urban males to achieve academic success?

2. What role can interscholastic athletic participation play in young urban males’ academic success?

Each question resulted in its own set of themes, showing the difference and similarities of the study participants. The three themes that emerged from the answers to Research Question 1 were: one, two, ready, set, go – early experiences; training to break the cycle; and setting the course (Table 4.2).
Table 4.2

Research Question One – Theory, Acronyms, Theme Number, Themes, and Findings

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**Research question 1.** What has motivated and inspired young urban males to achieve academic success?

**Theme 1: one, two, ready, set, go – early experiences.** One, two, ready, set, go – *early experiences*, centered on student athletes’ family, community, and church. The theme also represented how the participants’ early experiences shaped the skills and dispositions they used to get a good start on their academic and athletic success. These early experiences prepared participants to meet and overcome challenges in a manner that motivated them to achieve ongoing success.
There were two key findings within this theme. The first finding was the importance of family. The student participants relied on a constant level of family support to facilitate their success. Elon stated, “Many students don’t have the support of their parents, so they feel like it doesn’t matter; but I had the support, and I couldn’t just quit.” Mattman added,

My family is a huge support. They gave me confidence, especially on tough days or when I felt overwhelmed, just by telling me, you’re going to get through it, you know you can do the work, you’re smart enough to do it, and don’t let anybody get you down.

One of the student athletes, Qwan, relied on his family to fuel his motivation. Qwan commented, “My family support, influence, and faith is what guided me academically and athletically.” His mother was always at games and always advocated for him. Qwan revealed, “My mother would call teachers, e-mail staff, and keep relationships with all school staff, because she knew it would ultimately push me to be the best I could be.”

Greg’s responses supported Qwan’s focus on family. Greg acknowledged, “My mother and sister have been my anchors of support and the reason I continue to succeed academically and athletically.” His sister was a straight-A student who graduated at the top of her class. Greg shared, “I tried my hardest to get As; coming home with Bs was not a good feeling.” Greg’s mother explained why Greg tried so hard to be successful when she commented, “It wasn’t out of fear that Greg did what I told him to do, it was out of respect.”
Another participant, Robert, remembered a situation that highlighted the *importance of family* when he was in the fifth grade and his father spent his last $100 to buy him sneakers for a championship game. The sacrifice from his parents to support him financially during such an important time of the year left a strong impression on Robert as he explained the decision and impact it had on the family. “I felt it was just something about basketball that made me go harder, being the middle child, and seeing my siblings go without Christmas.”

Many of the participants’ family members also acknowledged the role that the support of family played in the participants’ success. For example, Elon’s mother stated, “We are Elon’s best friends and are here to support him as he looks to accomplish his dreams.” Mogo’s mother echoed the comment made by Elon’s mother when she remarked, “It’s the parent’s responsibility; you need to be able to influence your child enough that when things happen in the street, he thinks twice, like, ‘What would my mother say if I get caught up in this?’” Moreover, Tay’s brother said it best when he stated, “It all starts with parenting.”

Dano’s father provided further evidence of the importance of family when he remarked,

“It’s my job to be a part of my kids’ lives, and my wife, as well. As parents, we ask a lot of questions. We want to know where he is, where he’s going, and who he is hanging out with. When my kids hang out with the wrong crowd, I let them know they’re not your type of friend that you should be hanging with.

The level of accountability each family accepted for their child’s academic and athletic success was evident in the comments of family members of all nine of the
participants. In summary, the participants’ early experiences helped to develop an internal drive to succeed and overcome obstacles. The support of significant adults and family provided unconditional love that facilitated meeting the basic psychological needs of the participants that helped them to remain focused and determined to accomplish their individual and personal goals.

The second finding under the theme of *one, two, ready, set, go – early experiences*, was the *community connection*. All of the participants identified a supportive connection with their community. Although participants’ families played a central role in their success, the support of the community was just as significant. When speaking about his church, Dano shared, “The church community were always praying for me, and it’s always a support group that I go to if I need help.” He continued, “I think all-in-all, there’s my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; without God, I don’t know where I would be today, and I think all my success comes from him.” Mattman echoed the sentiments of most of the participants when he described how “many people in my community supported, encouraged, and protected me from the street, allowing me to stay focused on my future.”

Several other participants commented on the support they received from the community. Mattman also commented, “They are always asking me how is school and letting me know how happy they are for me.” Mogo echoed, “my community encouraged, supported, and protected me because they knew I was doing positive things and they wanted to see me succeed.” Kevin shared and reflected on his family’s struggle within the community by admitting, “I don’t want the same for myself.” He acknowledged the sacrifice of others “working 16 hours, 8 days a week, just to provide.”
The mentors in the participants’ lives and family members acknowledged the role that the support of the community played in the participants’ success. Kevin’s mentor stated, “Kevin didn’t have his mom in his life, so the church and his grandmother were his biggest supporters.”

Tay, on the other hand, grew up in the recreation center. The center helped to motivate him and keep him on track academically and athletically. Tay’s brother shared, The community had contributed to Tay’s success by motivating and supporting him throughout high school; they knew his potential and the opportunities that might come before him, so they made sure to protect him and keep him away from doing the things others were doing, like drinking, smoking, and getting into trouble.

The community made it very easy for Tay to stay in his lane. As his brother described, “Everybody supported Tay, and they backed him up to where he knew his lane and just stayed in it.”

Robert’s mentor spoke for many of the other parents and coaches when he highlighted the impact interscholastic athletic participation has on our youth, “Once Robert began to succeed on the court, he had people asking about how the game went, or they even attended the games.” Robert had a name for himself, and the people in the community recognized that. It kept him out of some situations, when people who were not ideal role models would tell him that he shouldn’t be around them, or they would encourage him to do other things, so he would be able to be safe and do things above board.
Mogo’s mother recognized how the support of the community was crucial. She commented, “It truly takes a village when it comes to the relationship established within our tough community and overall support and commitment to Mogo’s future and his dreams.” Elon’s mother recognized the role of the community by sharing, “The community has always been noticing Elon’s accomplishments and encouraging him to continue his success.”

The support, guidance, protection, and encouragement that was provided by the community through church, recreation centers, and the neighborhood was unique in that members of the community encouraged and supported these young men to do well academically and athletically. Even questionable members of the neighborhoods encouraged these students to stay away from suspect activities and focus on better opportunities. Their family and community experiences contributed to a solid foundation and understanding of the impact of support, love, commitment, respect, hard work, and sacrifice.

The participants were also exposed to a sense of relatedness through community dynamics and expectations based on many positive and negative experiences. Those experiences led them to making choices and decisions that would lead them to make positive choices about their futures. The finding related to community indicates that the participants had a strong attachment to their communities and desired to make their communities proud. The close personal interactions and relationships with family and community were essential for participants’ well-being and contributed to their need for relatedness.


**Theme 2: training to break the cycle.** Training to break the cycle, revolved around the preparation and decision making that the student athletes applied to situations as a result of the support that was afforded to them by their families and community. As a result of good decision making and life choices, the student athlete participants in this study were able to continue on their journey to train for academic and athletic success.

There were two key findings within this theme. The first finding was that the students’ lived experiences contributed to their drive and motivation. Dano expressed, “My inspiration and motivation to succeed came from my parents.” As a child, “I watched both of my parents work hard to provide for the family; this gave me an internal drive to be successful and give back.” Like Dano, Elon understood his family’s struggle, as well as their commitment to him and his future, which motivated him to overcome all the odds. Mattman also had an appreciation for his family, seeing that they never went without and he loved them for that. He stated, Like Elon, “Watching my parents work so hard to provide for my family motivated me to work harder so that I could pay it back and live a much better life.”

Mattman was optimistic about the opportunities that were ahead of him. He remarked, “I want to enjoy all of what life has to offer, and I understand that continuing my education will allow for those opportunities.” Mogo, like Mattman, wanted to improve his life choices. Mogo remarked, “Living in the city, you know, it’s totally different; bad influences and lots of violence; I just want to be better than that; I want to be different.” Mogo continued, “I stay positive; I don’t let anything distract me, and I don’t fall under pressure. I want to be another Donald Trump or Bill Gates; I want to have a lot of money; I want to be well educated.”
Kevin’s situation was very different from all of the other participants. When he was 8 years old, his mother fell ill and passed away. Despite being sick, Kevin’s mother still provided for her family. Kevin revealed,

If my mother did it while she was sick, I have no excuses. I have to get it done.

It’s like the devil and the angel, somebody has to be that angel in your life and somebody has to be that devil in your life for you to focus.

His example of the devil and the angel was the comparison of his mother and father. In his eyes, his mother was the angel. His mother was paralyzed, but no matter what, she made sure that he and his brother had everything they needed. Then, there was his father, the devil, who made all the poor choices and continued to go in the wrong direction.

Kevin, like many others, commented, “I’m not just trying to change my life, but everybody else’s as well. I’m also trying to change the young kids and mentor them, and let them know there’s a world way bigger than where we are at now.” Kevin also disclosed that his early years were a source of motivation. “I grew up with very little, and that is what has really motivated me. I am where I am today because of my mother and her guidance, support, and leadership.” Kevin continued, “There’s no point in me quitting. I still have my family; we still stay in the same neighborhood. I still don’t have anything, and I’m still in college, so I have to succeed.” Kevin learned that life is hard but not insurmountable. This was clear when Kevin commented, “I know that there will be hurdles in my life, but they won’t stop me from achieving my goals.”

Qwan’s motivation, like Elon, Mattman, and Kevin, came from seeing his mom work so hard. He was firm about his devotion to his mother when he stated, “I would go
broke if I knew that meant my mother could have whatever she wanted for the rest of her life.” The motivational drive of another participant, Greg, was clear when he spoke of his family and neighborhood:

I have watched my father, brothers, and friends go to jail and not graduate from high school. My father is serving a 12-year sentence in a federal prison, and my mother has raised me by herself since I was 2 months old.

However, Greg proudly shared,

I was the first person to graduate. Through my family and community experience, I have learned to surround myself with the right people, who want what’s best for me, and I stick with those people and find activities like sports, to keep me off the street.

Tay also revealed that his discipline to do better for himself and others was because of his experiences. Growing up, Tay saw his mother struggle. Tay also had the unfortunate experience of watching his grandmother and countless friends pass away at a very young age. He expressed his commitment to change when he said,

I don’t want to end up like that or see any other family members struggle, so I continue to push myself and try to give back to my community and district. . . . I don’t want to be like a typical city school kid who didn’t graduate from high school, who smoked drugs and stuff.

Robert’s sentiments were similar. He lost one close friend to violence and another to jail. At that point in his life, he realized that he couldn’t keep doing what he was doing. “I knew I had to do something different so I wouldn’t get caught up like
them.” Participating in interscholastic athletics provided Robert with a new group of peers who helped him stay focused and finish high school successfully.

The findings, as they relate to lived experiences, provide evidence of the personal drive that motivated each participant to attain and continue his academic and athletic success. Through self-determination, each individual was both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to defy the odds with the support of his family and community. Extrinsically, they wanted to benefit from what life had to offer. Intrinsically, they were motivated to provide for themselves, their family, and their community.

The second finding under the theme of training to break the cycle was the importance of students’ personal choices and decisions. Dano shared that growing up, his mother would tell him, “Try and be a leader and not a follower and to find good friends that are doing the right things and have similar goals.”

Elon, unlike Dano, made some poor choices and decisions when he moved from Cuba to America. He was one of the guys that got lost for a couple years and, unfortunately, was hanging out with the wrong people. He eventually got it right. He said, “Bad influence is the main factor in high school.” Elon had to learn the hard way, as his personal choices resulted in many mistakes throughout his high school career, due to the pressures of his surroundings.

Mattman had support and advice as he made personal decisions. He revealed that, “My parents evaluated my friends; they would judge their character and would say they liked the kid, or ‘Just watch out, or you be careful, as they’re really not on the same path as you.’” Elon shared similar parental advice. “My parents never told me who couldn’t be my friend; they just let me know which friends to watch out for.” Mattman, like all of
the participants, had opportunities to make poor choices. He had friends involved in drug activities who had money and nice cars; however, if given the chance, Mattman would have provided his friends with this advice,

   Listen, you’re living this, but I can’t live like that. I can’t do what you’re doing. I want to do right. I want to be a good example for the kids in the neighborhood and for my brothers. I want to make my parents proud.

Mogo, like Mattman, advised,

   No, just say the simple word no. People tell you to do this, just say, no I’m alright. I mean, peer pressure can be very hard to not fall into, but I think with the right mind, you’re not drawn to it.

Mogo stated, “If you know what you want to do, you know where you want to go, what road you want to go down, you don’t let anyone get you off track. Be your own person, do your own thing.”

The findings also revealed that the significant family member in each participant’s life also influenced his personal choices and decisions. Dano’s father stated,

   It is important to find the right people to surround yourself with because, sometimes in life, you know, when life throws you a curveball, sometimes it goes to your friends, and you need to have the right friends to make sure they’re there to help and support [through] those tough time[s].

Elon’s mother discussed the importance of her son’s personal choices, also. She acknowledged,

   As his parents, we couldn’t select his friends. Elon selected his own friends. He needed to identify and determine which friends were right and not right for him.
As parents, when we see/observe a few of his friends making poor choices, we addressed it with Elon; but at the end of the day, Elon had to decide, not his parents. We guide and provide support, but he must make those decisions.

Mattman’s father shared that Mattman had friends who did drugs, “He had friends that smoked pot, but every time they would try to influence him or try to invite him to get high, he would say, ‘No thank you, I don’t want that.” Mogo’s mother brought up discussions she and her son had. “We talk about and we see what’s going on with his friends that he grew up with. We talk about how we don’t want him to be influenced by them or be around them.” Unlike Mattman and Elon’s parents, Mogo’s mother made decisions and choices for him:

I’m checking in—where he’s at, where he’s going—so I can observe and be careful of whom he is with. If he’s with somebody I don’t care for, I will let him know why. You need to tell them why. You can’t just say, you know, why is it good that you can’t do this? Because the first question they’re going to ask is why.

Greg’s mother provided further advice:

It takes a lot; it is hard work; don’t give up because your child is not doing what you want them to do. You have to let your child follow their own path, but make sure that’s the right path. You have got to get to know your kids’ friends. You have to know who your children are with, introduce yourself to their parents. Every child my son hung out with as a young man, I knew their mother. I went to their house and introduced myself. If they didn’t make the effort to come meet me, I went and met them.
The decisions and actions of the participants in this study and their family members intersected and provided direction and boundaries that helped to break the cycle of Latino and African American males not graduating from high school that has plagued urban communities for decades. The motivation and drive to want better lives for themselves and others cultivated not only an internal, but also an external motivational drive to do better. Their early experiences, along with *lived experiences*, set a solid foundation of understanding and support. As a result, the participants were prepared to make sound personal choices and decisions that led them to academic and athletic success.

**Theme 3: setting the course.** The last theme that emerged for Research Question 1 was *setting the course*. There were two key findings within this theme. The first finding was that a key factor in the participants’ success was the *support from their parents* regarding their athletic participation. Tay stated, “When my mother would come to the game, it was the best thing ever.” Dano’s father recognized the importance of his support when he commented, “Showing up for baseball games, soccer games, and being a part of it really instilled something in Dano, which I didn’t have when I was a kid.”

Mogo’s mother underscored the importance of athletics in her son’s life. She stated, “Participating in sports gave him no time to get into trouble; he was too tired. He would come straight home to eat, do homework, and go to sleep; I loved it.” Mogo’s mother also acknowledged the time commitment that athletics required, “Without sports, he would have definitely had more time on his hands.” She also shared, “Idle time on his hands is not good.” Mogo’s mother commented further, “Mogo would have not been as
accomplished as he was without high school sports. The sports aspect really kept him in check; he understood he had to do well in class and get good grades in order to play. Mogo’s mother’s philosophy about parenting beyond the home was noteworthy. She shared her philosophy, “I have a co-parenting model that I used with all key adults in Mogo’s life, and I identified them as co-parents/mentors to support, encourage, and guide Mogo throughout his high school journey.” Mogo’s mother went on to say, “The co-parent model means that when something goes down in school or Mogo is slipping and going in the wrong direction, the co-parent tries to guide him, and if they can’t, then I get involved.”

Greg’s mother supported his participation in athletics because she credited sports with his success and his ability to exercise. She believed,

Sports made him a stronger leader, he has always been a leader. I think it helped him socially; he’s never been really a shy, timid child, but I think, socially, it helped him to come out more and interact with large groups of his peers as a role model.

Tay’s brother acknowledged that the personal support provided by adults was priceless, “The most important part of parenting is the unconditional love for your kids; it’s so important. Money is not everything, but support goes a long way.”

Participating in sports played a major role in all of the participants’ general academic success. As noted, extrinsic motivation kept all of the participants looking forward to the end of the day. The motivation athletics provided also played a major role in keeping the students focused academically. The connection between sports participation and academics worked seamlessly with all of the participants. The
attraction of athletics was a resource for all of the students as they developed relatedness and autonomy, which aligned with their overall success. The participants also expressed that they found support from other sources as a result of their interscholastic athletic participation.

The second finding under the major theme of setting the course was support for athletics from significant adults. Coaches, mentors, and teachers all played a part in setting the course according to the student athletes. Greg stated, “I think I would have graduated, regardless, because of my family. Some people don’t have the family support, like I had, so without sports, they probably would never have finished school at all.” Greg talked specifically about the impact of his teachers. “I believe my teachers played a major role in my success. The majority of my teachers were also my coaches. If I wanted to play, then I couldn’t screw up in classroom.” Greg also recognized,

My counselor was like my second mom, and she was on my back every day about getting good grades and always giving me anything I needed. I could go to her for anything; so there wasn’t any excuses if I messed up in school.

Kevin’s mentor mentioned Kevin’s school experiences as transformative. “Kevin, he had a good high school experience, and he established many positive relationships with his teachers, who were also his coaches.” His mentor also acknowledged, “If he wasn’t doing sports, he might have been one of those students who fell through the cracks, but he did receive the support he needed through sports.”

Qwan’s mentor questioned the level of motivation Qwan would have had without athletics. “I don’t think Qwan would have had the same work ethic or drive that he had if he didn’t play sports. I think playing sports at an early age gave him that early natural
work ethic that he required.” Qwan’s mentor elaborated, “I don’t know if he’d be as
motivated to go to college if he didn’t play sports. Many of the reasons why students
come to school is to play sports.”

Qwan’s mentor also acknowledged that positive peer role models had an
influence. “What motivated Qwan and other students in the city is seeing others make it.
Through sports, Qwan got to know many former athletes, and he wanted to follow in
their footsteps athletically, as they paved the way for him.” Robert’s mentor shared,
“Sports provided Robert with a sense of belonging in the connections he made.” His
mentor recognized the difference in the confidence Robert possessed when competing
athletically versus when he was in the classroom.

He was always a pretty good athlete; that came easy to him, but he struggled a bit
with the social/emotional piece. At times, he did struggle academically and,
again, I think a lot of it was based on him not being confident. When he was on
the court, he was a confident person, but in the class, he wasn’t; sports and overall
accomplishments athletically helped him come out of his shell a little bit.

Robert’s mentor reflected on school connections.

I have seen the educational support work both ways. I know that in Robert’s
situation, teachers were willing to help him and willing to do some extra things
for him, so that he got what he needed from them. But I’ve seen other situations
where students and/or athletes are the ones in the classroom who are causing the
disruptions, not going to class on time, or skipping classes and things like that.
Robert’s mentor went on to say that, “First and foremost, it’s the connection with coming to school. I think that, many times, the athletes’ attendance is, at times, twice as good as other students.” Robert’s mentor could not see him succeed without sports:

I don’t know that he would have made it out of the ninth grade without athletics. He clearly was a student who wasn’t very vocal and, again, I feel like he would have probably slipped through the cracks had he not been involved in sports. . . .

If he had not been involved in athletics, I highly doubt that he would have been as successful. I only knew him because the people in the community told me about a student who was coming. Initially, my connection with him was through athletics, but then it became personal after I got a chance to know him.

Of the nine participants, six shared their drive to do well academically was in order to benefit from interscholastic athletic participation. The goal of participation motivated and kept these young men focused academically. Although participation in athletics motivated the participants, three of them were more intrinsically motivated to do well academically, regardless of sports participation and the eligibility policy. The other six participants substantiated that staff “provided a supportive environment.” They also believed teachers wanted them to succeed because they knew they were athletes, but they made them focus on school first. Mogo’s mother confirmed, “We co-parented from day one. When he was frustrated in class, his “school mom” would take care of it.” Qwan’s mentor added,

It truly takes a community to raise our youth, it takes everybody to be involved. It’s hard for just a parent to do it. It’s hard for just a teacher or a coach; it needs to be everybody and everybody plays a role.
The findings related to the support for athletics brought out some concerns regarding basic psychological needs. It seemed as though sports provided the setting to set the course for all of the participants in one way or another, but for six out of the nine participants, parents and mentors believed that interscholastic athletic participation—not school—made the difference. Several of the students and parents believed that without sports, the participants would have not received the academic support they needed, and they would have more than likely fallen through the cracks of the educational system. Three participants were intrinsically driven to succeed academically, but they also identified some concerns regarding motivation and inconsistent drive to go to school and/or even college. In general, involvement in interscholastic athletics played a major role in the motivation of all of the participants to succeed academically.

In examining what motivates and inspires young urban males, it was clear that both family and community had an impact. Family and neighborhood members, teachers, coaches, and church members provided the participants with positive and negative experiences, which nurtured a sense of relatedness through their lived experiences as well as being provided their autonomy to make their own decisions/choices. The participants all understood the impact their choices and decisions would have on their success. They were intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to defeat the odds and provide better futures for themselves, their family, and their community. It appeared that the participants’ interscholastic athletic participation was a signal to their families and communities to protect, support, and guide them from poor choices and decisions, and, ultimately, to support their academic success. In addition, the level of competence of athletic performance possessed by the student athletes, as well as
their autonomy to make decisions, played a critical role in supporting and fostering intrinsic motivation, which is critical in education and athletics.

The themes that emerged from participant responses to Research Question 2 were: staying in the game, circle of friends, and crossing the finish line. The first theme, staying in the game, centered on three findings interscholastic athletic participation, eligibility, and coaches/mentors, which supported and encouraged the student athletes to succeed academically and athletically (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3
Research Question Two – Theory, Themes, and Findings

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**Research question 2.** What role can interscholastic athletic participation play in young urban males’ academic success?

**Theme 1: staying in the game.** Three findings emerged within the theme of staying in the game. The first finding was the impact of interscholastic athletic participation during each of the participants’ high school experiences. The participants
all spoke of how interscholastic athletic participation helped to build character, identity, lifelong friendships, sense of self, confidence, belonging, and high self-esteem. All nine participants connected interscholastic athletic participation to their high school success. Dano shared the significance of athletics in his life when he commented,

I believe the biggest thing in playing sports is that it kept me involved with friends and off the streets. It just gave me a place to go where I could relieve my stress and have fun without hitting the streets.

He also added, “Sports really are a big factor and reason why many students go to school. Through my interscholastic sports participation, I have learned a lot about how to be a leader, how to be a good friend, and how to just succeed.” Dano could not imagine high school without sports. He expressed his strong attachment to high school athletics, “I don’t think there’s any way I could go to school and not play sports.” He explained further,

Without sports in high school, I don’t think that I would have had a positive high school experience. School would have been just a daily routine, it would have just been the same thing every day going to school, learning the material, taking tests with nothing to look forward to.

Elon supported Dano’s sentiments when he commented on the outcome of his participation. “I believe interscholastic sports participation was a privilege, and it helped build my character, values, and discipline. Sports is something that really helped me stay focused.” Mattman expressed, “I would had still tried to take the same path, I think it probably would have been a little harder; it may have taken longer seeing that sports helped ground me.” He believed that athletics contributed directly to his success. “I
would have had a different high school experience that might have limited my success
due to the impact sports played in my life and academic success.”

Mattman, like several others, described how athletics helped with focus and
direction. He shared,

Participating in sports allowed me to stay focused on my goals; it helped me
prioritize my needs, so if I had to sacrifice hanging with friends to do my
homework, it was done. . . . Playing sports really helped discipline me and helped
guide me towards the right path.

Mogo was one of the participants who couldn’t imagine his life without having
sports. “High school would have been the same thing every day. I think I would just be
there just pushing through it, while at the same time, I had to do it.” Mogo stated, “If I
didn’t have sports, I would have still gone to college. I’d have the grades to maybe go to
most any college I wanted to, but college would not have been the same experience.”

Kevin’s school experience was different. Unlike Mogo, Kevin expressed that,
“Participating in sports played a major role in my life, because school didn’t really
motivate or push me to be there.” Kevin disclosed, “Sports taught me a lot; it helped me
realize who I could depend on and how I had to go out there and do things on my own to
get it done.”

Kevin couldn’t imagine high school without sports. “It would have been
difficult.” He also believed that athletics impacted his academic record. “If I didn’t have
sports, I know my grades would have suffered.” Kevin also revealed, “My teammates
were the majority of my friends in high school.” He believed, “I would have graduated
high school, but I probably would have been working at a factory for the rest of my life.”
Kevin’s mentor added, “Kevin would have eventually gained the support, but sports made it easier because most people he connected with were athletes, regardless of the sport.”

Qwan’s comments were similar to the feelings of all of the participants as he commented,

Sports took up a lot of my time. I couldn’t really do anything after school. That’s when a lot of stuff started to happen; so once you go to practice or games after school, it’s like you go home and go right to sleep.

Qwan also shared that athletics improved his socialization. “Without sports, I think everybody would have been more distant in school, including myself. I would be distant from people. I’m really not a social person. Football made me like people.”

Qwan’s additional comments were revealing. “I would have just hit the street, nothing else, because I really don’t believe I would have attended school.”

Greg shared his feelings about the hope that athletics afforded to him,

The absence of sports would have made it hard to go to school every day. It would have been very boring. Not a lot of things to look forward to; I looked forward to practice, I look forward to try outs; I definitely look forward to games, everyone looks forward to games.

Tay, like all of the other participants, couldn’t imagine school without sports, but he shared,

I believe I still would have graduated, because I did not want to be the only one from my family not to graduate from high school. However, I don’t believe the
system would have provided the same support if I was just a regular student on campus.

Robert contributed to the discussion of athletics as a motivational tool. “The absence of sports in high school wouldn’t have been good, because I would have not had anything to motivate me to go to school.” Robert stated, “It’s sad, but true, sports is what motivated me to get through high school.” Robert said that without sports, “I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to meet so many supportive people. I met all of my friends through sports. If I didn’t have sports, I would honestly say I would probably have got caught up in the streets.”

Interscholastic athletic participation, and its impact on all of the participants, played a major role in success. All of the participants identified and recognized the value that sports participation played in their high school careers. Findings indicated a sense of belonging and relatedness within the school environment. The involvement, alone, built a sense of self, established purpose and identity amongst peers, and provided a confidence and sense of motivation to represent self, family, and program.

The second finding in the theme, staying in the game, was eligibility and the impact it had on many of the participants. The participants confirmed that the school district’s eligibility policy held them accountable. In one way or another, it kept them focused and extrinsically motivated to do well in order to participate in interscholastic athletics. Even though the eligibility policy held participants accountable, three participants, Dano, Mogo, and Greg, believed that eligibility did not necessarily give them an external push to motivate them to do better in order to participate in sports. These three young men would have done well with or without the eligibility policy, but
the other six individuals would have struggled academically, and they would not have received the support they needed had they not participated in sports.

The impact of the eligibility policy was positive in many ways. For example, Elon commented, “The eligibility policy influenced and motivated me to do well academically in order to participate in sports.” Mattman voiced, “The eligibility policy allowed me to set goals for myself. If I didn’t get the grades, then I was not allowed to play.” He commented further, “The responsibility of keeping academics at the core, while using sports as a privilege, held all athletes accountable.”

Kevin, Qwan, and Robert also acknowledged that the eligibility policy played a major role in giving them direction and guidance. Kevin shared, “I watched teammates that could have been the best athletes with two Fs get pulled right from the team.” Kevin disclosed the benefits of athletics and academics when he stated, “With the grades, you graduate; with sports, you get life lessons. If you want to succeed in life, you need both.” Greg expressed how the school district eligibility policy contributed to his success. “If my grades were bad, I couldn’t play.” Greg also shared,

Everybody wants to play; you don’t want to be the player sitting on the sidelines watching your best friends and your cousins and things like that in a game. It’s hard to cheer them on when you have to sit and watch because your grades are bad. No one respects a kid with bad grades.

Tay commented on the extra attention he received due to athletics and the pressure this put on him to get good grades. He remarked, “It was a real big role, because everybody knew me, so there was no way to get around it. I had to get that GPA, or they would look it up.” Tay divulged, “I had a lot of pressure; I couldn’t let my teammates
down; I had to go to class, and we couldn’t let each other down.” Tay commented further, “Participating in interscholastic sports had a major impact in my high school experience. It helped me stay focused academically and behaviorally due to the eligibility policy.” The accountability provided by the eligibility policy pushed Tay to strive academically, and he worked hard to maintain and improve his grades by working with a supportive group of teachers throughout his high school career.

The eligibility policy initially, extrinsically motivated six of the nine participants; however, it also supported their own intrinsic motivation that influenced the participants’ decisions to continue their athletic participation in college and work to attain a college degree. When looking through the theory of SDT and the lenses of GCT, CGT, and BPNT, it is clear that each participant was motivated to develop a solid foundation of understanding and knowledge. This foundation helped the participants to successfully graduate from high school and attend a 2- or 4-year college institution.

The third finding in the theme, staying in the game was that mentorship/coaching provided a very strong connection in bridging the gap between early experiences and staying in the game. All of the participants, with the exception of Elon and Qwan, had positive coaching experiences. Dano stated, “I had one coach who was always there for me.” Mattman, like Dano, said, “My coaches pushed me to get better and held me responsible as a leader.” Mattman added, “My coach helped build my character; he was like my second parent.” Mogo, like Mattman, affirmed, “My coaches were like my family. They really understood me.”

Elon had mixed feelings about his coach’s commitment and support. He revealed that, “My coach didn’t do anything for me in that of recruitment and college
opportunities; he didn’t help me get into college on a baseball scholarship.” Qwan, like Elon, also shared, “I had a negative experience with one of my high school coaches. He was disrespectful; I’m not good with disrespect at all, so I will respect you until you disrespect me.” Qwan reflected on coaching by making three statements. He commented “I would say respect is number one. Personal relationships is number two. And getting to actually know someone’s family and where they come from is also a great aspect of a coach.”

Kevin’s mentor talked about the partnership of coaching, athletics, and academics. Kevin’s mentor remarked, “The key to success is consistency in communicating the importance of academics and athletics.” Kevin’s mentor added, You have to be a role model, because a lot of young men don’t have role models. Leading by example is one of the main things, so when they see that, often times, they want to know how you got to where you are, and then you bring up the discussion of education, athletics, and how they all play hand in hand.

Qwan’s mentor believed in the nurturing role of a mentor or coach. “You have to care for these kids; you have to act like you are the parent in some ways. You want to treat that young student athlete the same way you would treat your child.” Qwan’s mentor stated, “It’s all about relationships. All success is built on relationships.” He also acknowledged, “Through athletics, you gain a sense of confidence and determination. You deal with meaningful relationships, friends, coaches, counselors, administrators, and when you build those relationships, you don’t want to disappoint them, and I think that’s big.”
Greg’s mother was extremely appreciative of his coaches and thought that Greg’s coaches were instrumental. She commented, “Fantastic was the only word I could use to describe his coaches. Not only were the coaches there for football, but they were there for his academics as well.” Greg’s mother commented further,

I’ve heard in the news and from other parents [that when] the coaches see a star in football, basketball, or baseball and they focus on that, but they’re not too focused on the academics. Greg’s coaches were focused on his academics, first and foremost, and then his football.

The role of mentor and coach provided an additional level of support and guidance that aligned with basic psychological needs. The mentors and coaches became advocates for these young men and the go-to person for their families. Although two of the participants acknowledged some negative experiences, they also had some positive ones. The participants had family, community, peers, staff, and coaches who influenced and guided them to the present day. Mentors and coaches, like family, community, and friends, contributed to the students’ basic psychological needs and goal setting by working closely with all of the participants. Moreover, the mentors became key building and community stakeholders in order to make sure the students stayed focus on accomplishing their success.

The coaches and mentors capitalized on the resources of the community and educational systems in order to contribute to the needs of the participants. The coaches had expectations for their athletes, but they provided a level of autonomy that allowed the participants to make their own choices. The relationships with the coaches and mentors, such as that with family and community, strengthened the participants’ understanding of
choices, decisions, and consequences. The blend of autonomy and relationship provided a stronger level of competence to help the athletes with decisions and choices that were aligned with their goals and dreams.

The coaches encouraged a level of autonomy, but they immediately held students accountable for their actions and choices. The connection between family, community, and peers strengthened athletes’ competence in academic and athletic success. Family and community connections helped participants overcome the odds, but it also encouraged, guided and recognized their ability to succeed academically and athletically. Such support enabled participants to believe in themselves and their future goals and dreams.

**Theme 2: Circle of friends.** The second theme, *circle of friends*, focused on the role each participant’s friends played in their lives. Parents of the student athletes helped them realize the critical nature of their choices and, eventually, the athletes realized the importance of their choice of friends. All of the participants spoke of the need to have like-minded, goal-driven peers. They also shared their experiences as it related to their peers and the positive/negative outcomes that were witnessed and observed within their families, communities, and schools.

Elon, Kevin, Qwan, and Robert did not initially understand the importance of peers, but through their own individual experiences and personal involvement in sports, they learned the importance of associating themselves with individuals who had similar goals and dreams. The emerging finding of friends as it related to interscholastic athletics, was unique in that it played a major role for all of the participants. Most, if not
all, of the participants could only identify their friends through interscholastic athletic participation.

Sports played a significant role in opening the doors to the participants’ social lives and gaining acceptance amongst their peers. Dano, Elon, and Mogo limited their *circle of friends* so that they could focus on their goals and dreams academically and athletically. Mattman associated himself with a positive group of friends. He stated, “It was like a brotherhood to me.”

Kevin specifically spoke of a former teammate in high school who beat the odds when he was a sophomore. Throughout high school, Kevin recognized, “It’s important to focus, to not live for the moment, but to live for the future.” Kevin, like all of the participants, surrounded himself with people who were similar to him. They were go-getters; they were athletes trying to get to that next level.

Greg also commented on the importance of friends when he commented, “I surrounded myself around good friends who pushed each other to be the best they could be; regardless of sports, my friends helped me be the person I am today.” Tay added, “My teammates were also my classmates, so my *circle of friends* were all wrapped into one.” Tay continued and stated,

I was aware of the different groups in high school but made a conscious decision to hang out with classmates that had the same plans and goals. All my friends wanted it as bad I did, but we also wanted to see each other succeed and accomplish our dreams.

Robert admired his teammates’ hard work in the classroom because they made him step up his game in the classroom as well. Robert explained, “Don’t be afraid to be
different; you know, don’t follow the crowd, leave the crowd.” Robert’s mentor recognized that athletics meant a great deal to Robert. “Robert had a positive band of peers just because he didn’t have to be somebody he wasn’t and, again, partially, it was based on the fact that he was a pretty good player and that he could be himself.” His mentor also revealed, “Early on, what a lot of our students struggle with is trying to find a place, and Robert found a place of acceptance through athletics as well as his identity.”

Most of the participants had autonomy in selecting their friends. In all situations, the participants selected their friends based on the criteria that their friends wanted to achieve athletic and academic success, too, as well as be competent in those areas. As a result, the participants and their immediate circle of friends had similar goals and dreams. They motivated and inspired one another to continue to pursue their academic and athletic goals, generating intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Their demonstration of competence in deciding their circle of friends was based on their personal experience as it related to family, community, and peers.

At some point, the participants became role models within their family, community, and schools. In most cases, they tried extremely hard to convince their peers to make better decisions and choices, but they could not convince them all. Unfortunately, they all dealt with the tragic loss of others for many different reasons. Nonetheless, they remained role models for their peers.

**Theme 3: Crossing the finish line.** The first finding in the theme of crossing the finish line was self-awareness. The student athletes displayed a keen awareness of self that contributed to their success. The participants also took advantage of their personal connections to key people within their schools who encouraged, motivated, and inspired
them to stay on task. They also contributed to their own growth as they experienced success and realized the sources of support.

Dano shared, “I had a positive high school experience; however, it was my individual internal and external drive that inspired and motivated me to succeed.” Elon, on the other hand, had some major adjustments to make behaviorally and academically before he could take advantage of the educational system. Elon stated, “It was the opportunity to play baseball that changed my trajectory behaviorally and academically.”

All of the other participants indicated that there were key people within the school who contributed to their success. Mattman commented, “My school staff pushed me, and the teachers’ encouragement really helped me. School was a place where I felt comfortable, cared about, and appreciated.” Elon added, “Teachers have the power to influence youth, as long as they are open to talk, and they’re not pushing them away.”

Mogo acknowledged the influence of athletics and key individuals in the school. He stated, “I connected well with my teachers, and I really began to understand myself and my potential. They really helped me through my high school career.” He commented further, “My teachers wanted me to succeed, because they knew I played basketball, but they made me focus on school first. If I needed help in anything, they were always there to help me.” For these participants, school was like a family; everybody looked out for one another. Greg’s insightful comments about a sense of connection were illustrated when he stated,

A lot of students don’t listen to adults because they feel that they are just there to get a paycheck or they just don’t care about the students. When you’re around
somebody outside of school or even inside of school that shows you that they care, it’s easier to do what they say.

In addition to the levels of support that students received, many of the student athletes recognized that they were also accountable for their success. Robert’s mentor reflected on the reciprocal relationships blossomed. Robert’s mentor stated,

I think that, again, it’s something that he invested in, and for students going forward, one of the things I would tell people is that it’s a two-way street. It can’t be just the mentor or the coach or the adult pouring things into the student. There has to be some give and take both ways. Robert personally did it both ways. He was receptive to some of the things they were asking him to do, but [he] also was willing to accept help too. I think that is what the difference is. Being successful or not is being able to have that person accept some of the things that you’re leading them towards.

There was evidence of self-awareness on behalf of all the participants as they recognized the types of choices made within their families, communities, and high school experiences. As they observed and reflected on their choices, decisions, and consequences, they understood their own individual strengths and weakness. Moreover, they all accessed the supports and resources provided by all stakeholders within the larger system to address those weaknesses.

High school was a home away from home, and it provided a level of support, encouragement, and acknowledgment that was strengthened through athletic participation. Many of the participants recognized the opportunity for additional educational support due to their athletic participation. The participants were aware of
how athletes could form a stronger support structure by including teachers, counselors, and educational staff into their high school experience. The “co-parenting” model, along with the need for mentorship, was corroborated and recommended by many of the participants.

The participants truly addressed their own personal psychological needs because of the journey they had traveled. The foundation and drive to succeed started at home with family, then it continued within the community, and connected to the educational system through interscholastic athletic participation. This interconnectedness was an overall team of individuals who were truly invested and committed to the lives of these young men. Family, community members, peers, teammates, teacher, administrators, and coaches/mentors created a level of support that motivated the participants to stay on the right path to the finish line.

The second finding within the theme of crossing the finish line was relatedness. Relatedness was exemplified by the gains made by the participants as a result of athletics. As Dano acknowledged, “I believe participating in sports kept me involved with friends and off the streets.” He also described the critical nature of sports as it tied to school motivation. “Sports is the main reason why many students go to school.” Dano also expressed that, “without sports, I don’t believe I would have had many friends; I think it would have been difficult for me to make friends.”

Mattman talked about the connections that athletics facilitated for him. “Sports allowed me to connect with a lot of people. As a leader within the building, it allowed my peers to break from their shell and to talk to me because they knew that I was approachable.” Mattman also stated,
It’s tough; I needed other people to encourage me besides myself, pushing me to do what I need. Sometimes I need those people to remind me and to let me know that I’m worth it, that I can do it, and they believe in me.” “Sports allowed me to not be afraid to talk to people. When I played a sport, I connected with people I didn’t even know and then I went to different schools and talked to other kids and made more friends.

Greg’s mother believed that sports brought out the best in him. She commented,

Sports built Greg to be a leader. . . . It helped him socially; he’s never been really a shy, timid child, but I think, socially, it helped him to come out more and interact with large groups of peers as a role model.

Qwan’s mentor shared,

I don’t know if Qwan would have that same drive if he didn’t play sports. I don’t know if he’d be as motivated to go to college if he didn’t play sports. I think part of his motivation is because he can play sports. Many of the reasons why they come to school is to play sports.

Qwan’s mentor also believed in the power of confidence and connectedness that athletics provided for Qwan. “Sports gave Qwan immediate confidence and a sense of identity—a sense of belonging to a group with a common goal.” Qwan stated this for himself. He did not believe that he could have succeeded without sports by sharing, “I probably wouldn’t have even been at school.” Tay’s remarks provided further support for the role athletic participation plays in relatedness. Tay stated, “I don’t think the educational system would have put as much effort into me if I was just a regular student on school grounds. Sports played a major role in my social life at school, and it allowed
me to grow and mature as a young man.” Tay added, “Without sports, people would not have wanted to be around me as much or talk to me.”

Likewise, for Robert, who was a person that others looked up to, he was a pretty good athlete, and he had success on the court, which translated into popularity and success school. He didn’t need to be a person he was not, because he was accepted through athletics. He did not face the peer pressure that other students faced who did not have an avenue through which to shine. Robert, as a result, had a solid sense of identity in school and did well on the basketball court and in academics.

Many of the participants claimed that it would have been a lot more difficult to make friends without interscholastic athletics. They all affirmed that sports allowed them to connect with a lot of people. Interscholastic athletic participation was a key motivational factor for all of the participants. Athletics provided both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Of the nine participants, 100% described their desire to further their careers. At the time of the interviews, all of the participants were competing at the college level. The internal drive to continue to compete and the external reward of recognition and acknowledgement provided a strong sense of self and belonging among the student athletes.

Summary of Results

Chapter 4 presented the research questions that guided this qualitative phenomenological study. It also presented the data gathered by the researcher in conducting the semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine former high school urban African American and Latino male student athletes and their identified parent or mentor. Three themes emerged for each research question. For Research Question 1, the themes
were: one, two, ready, set, go – early experiences, training to break the cycle, and setting the course.

In one, two, ready, set, go – early experiences, the support, guidance, and direction provided by family and community provided a strong foundation of love, commitment, accountability, respect, encouragement, and educational focus throughout each participant’s experience. What was consistent across all of the participants was evidence that basic psychological needs seemed to be met. The participants were exposed to a sense of relatedness from their family’s dynamics, significant adult’s guidance, and personal expectations based on many experiences. Their experiences led to a more sophisticated understanding as it related to choices, decisions, and outcomes. The sense of autonomy that the students developed and expressed provided support for commitment and respect toward their family and their desire to make their families proud.

In training to break the cycle, two findings emerged. The participants were affected by lived experiences and also demonstrated success in their personal choices and decisions. All of the participants were exposed to a variety of lived experiences that included violence, drugs, alcohol, gangs, death, incarceration, and school dropouts. All of these situations played out in their personal lives, which, in turn, trained them to make tough choices and decisions in order to attain success in their own personal lives. Through the lens of self-determination, what was evident was an internal and external drive to succeed and overcome their existing situations.

In setting the course, two findings emerged. These findings were support for athletics by parents and support for athletics from other significant adults. All of the
participants emphasized the importance sports played in their high school experience. Many shared that athletics provided a sense of purpose in keeping them focused, disciplined, and motivated in going to school because they had something to look forward to after school. The involvement of parents and mentors provided a strong level of support in the educational system because all were stakeholders that held them accountable.

The early experiences within family and community provided a strong authentic understanding of the personal lived experiences and outcomes for the athletes based on the choices and decisions they made. The experiences they went through also strongly aligned with the importance of interscholastic athletic participation as an anchor to their success in school and within the community. In Research Question 2, three themes were identified: staying in the game, circle of friends, and crossing the finish line.

In staying in the game, two findings emerged. Interscholastic athletic participation was instrumental for all nine of the participants in building leadership, character, discipline, responsibility, and respect. Interscholastic athletics participation also cultivated a sense of identity, belonging, and purpose. Many, if not all, of the parents and mentors shared how sports also strengthened the relationship within the educational system between teachers, staff, and coaches. The second finding, eligibility, contributed to staying the course or staying in the game. The eligibility policy played a role for all of the students by reinforcing accountability and responsibility. Although two out of the nine participants shared that the eligibility policy did not motivate them to do better, because they were going to work hard and do the best they could, regardless of any external policies. Nonetheless, all of the participants shared the importance of sports
and their level of commitment to their educational journey through sports. These themes helped to explain the journey of each participant and the influential support provided from childhood to adolescence by family, community, peers, education, and interscholastic athletics.

In the theme, circle of friends, classmates, peers and teammates within their family, community, and school were identified as like-minded and goal driven. Although all of the families played a role in educating and guiding these young men into making good choices, they had to eventually select their own circle of friends. The neighborhood and community were also very supportive in guiding these young men in the right direction. A circle of friends kept them all grounded and focused. Fortunately for all of the participants, it was through sports that they established a circle of friends. Many, if not all of the participants, shared that without sports, they probably would not have been as social or accepted amongst their peers. Interscholastic athletics participation was what provided them with an identity and a sense of belonging in school and the community.

Finally, in the theme crossing the finish line, the finding of self-awareness emerged and was supported by all of the participants as they indicated that school was a nurturing and comforting environment. School was their home away from home, and it provided a level of support, encouragement, and acknowledgment that was strengthened through athletic participation. Many shared that they believed there was an increase in educational support as it related to athletic participation and that the participants built a stronger support structure for themselves by including teachers, counselors, and educational staff into their high school experience. The “co-parenting” model, along with the need for mentorship, was corroborated and recommended by many participants.
All of the participants shared the sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence and described how it was cultivated and strengthened within their families, communities, and schools. Their participation in interscholastic athletics gave them a sense of belonging and identity in their high school and their communities. Many shared that the absence of sports would have drastically changed their high school experience because sports were the main reason they had identity in the community and school. Their success on the athletic fields provided them with a level of acceptance, and it also increased support for them to stay focused and lead by example.

The six themes that emerged from this study started with participants’ early experiences and how they were supported within their families and community. These findings aligned with the researcher’s journal and vignette responses. The foundation of all of the participants’ choices and decisions to achieve academic success were rooted in these early experiences. The support to maintain and sustain their commitment and focus to achieve academically and athletically was tied to multiple stakeholders within all aspects of their lives. The positive impact of interscholastic athletics embodied these relationships with discipline and a connection to their education, which closed the gap between community and education and ultimately afforded the student athletes the opportunity to achieve academic success.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to capture the perceptions and lived experiences of urban males who participated in high school interscholastic athletics, successfully graduated from high school, and attended a 2- or 4-year college institution. Discovering and understanding the motivations of young urban males with regard to their academic pursuits is a vital part of improving the quality of urban education as well as graduation rates for urban males.

To better understand the obstacles that young urban males face across the context of school, home, and life, this study examined the following questions:

1. What has motivated and inspired young urban males to achieve academic success?
2. What role can interscholastic athletic participation play in young urban males’ academic success?

In posing these questions, the researcher sought to better understand self-determination in urban males who overcame challenges and successfully graduated from high school.

Implication of Findings

The six themes that emerged from this study started with the participants’ early experiences and how they were supported within their families and community. These findings aligned with the researcher’s journal and vignette responses. The foundation of
the participants’ choices and decisions as young men regarding academic success was rooted in these early experiences. The support they received in their early years allowed them to maintain and sustain their academic commitment as young men.

Four distinct implications emerged from the results of this study. First, it was evident that early experiences shaped the direction that the participants took in their lives. Their early experiences included instances that were shaped by the participants’ family and community support, guidance, unconditional love, and encouragement. These early experiences helped the participants to understand the struggles and obstacles that, in turn, influenced their drive to overcome and succeed in school despite challenging circumstances. All of the participants were exposed to situations that included violence, drugs, alcohol, gangs, death, incarceration, and cases school dropout. These occurrences played out in their personal lives, which trained them to make tough choices and better decisions in order to attain success in their own lives.

Although the participants faced many challenges, the support they received from their family throughout these early experiences helped them overcome obstacles as well as enhance the participants’ level of perseverance and determination to succeed. Research results have indicated that parents and family members of urban males do have an effect on their academic success. Beamon and Bell (2006) found that if parents of African American males increased their emphasis only on athletics during the socialization process, poor academic performance and instances of behavioral problems increased. However, parents who supported academics through educationally related social activities had a positive effect on the academic performance of African American males. Also, the more parents of African American athletes encouraged academic
achievement over athletics, the better the athletes performed in the classroom (Beamon & Bell, 2016).

Flowers’ (2015) study also supported the impact of family and positive academic achievement for Black males. Findings emerged with one main theme concerning family: all participants noted that family mattered. The involvement, support, and encouragement from family was a significant link to academic identity formation. Many participants indicated that their academic success was due to the continued love and support of their families.

Results from Hartman (2008) support these findings because Hartman contended that success is contingent upon a variety of factors including, but limited to, social background, parents, peers, and school. The individual choices and decisions made by the study participants were rooted and motivated by the lived experiences within the family, community, educational systems, and with peers ultimately anchored the student participants and motivated them to succeed.

Second, it was evident from this study that multiple stakeholders were involved in the journey of all participants. Stakeholders included, but were not limited to, family, community, peers, teachers, counselors, coaches, mentors, and administrators. The results of Harris et al. (2014) supported the involvement of multiple stakeholders as they pointed out that a consistent, collaborative approach overloaded with cultural competencies was necessary to facilitate such successful outcomes. Harris et al. (2014) focused on two of Bronfenbrenner’s theory layers: Microsystems (layer closest to the student that comprises family, school, and neighborhood) and mesosystem (layer that provides the connection between structures in Microsystems). Layers were applied to
engagement in behavior, academics, cognitive function, and parental and educational competencies (Harris et al., 2014).

Harris et al. (2014) found that it was important for stakeholders to work together with a team approach. Stakeholders not only work together, but also communicate expectations and execute a shared vision for the success of all students. In addition, Harris et al. found it significant to have cultural competencies that emphasizes the ability to effectively interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds and dismantle stereotypes regarding Black male student athletes, with a focus on education before sports, to prepare student-athletes for college and life was also significant.

Harris et al. (2014) also spoke about the importance of coaches working with teachers to provide the resources and support that young men need to be successful. The connection made between coach and teacher is vital and was validated by most of the participants in this current study, with exception to two athletes who shared both positive and negative experiences. Coaches initiated and developed relationships between student athletes and teaching staff in order to increase the support needed to guide students academically. Coaches established a level of support within the educational system that sustained, encouraged, and recognized athletes through meaningful and purposeful interaction to meet the athlete’s needs.

Coaches in this study considered their athletes as their “own” once the athletes transitioned into the coaches’ programs. The student athletes trusted and relied on their coaches as mentors and role models who held them accountable both on and off the field. The coaches’ focus was to use athletics as the tool to keep the athletes motivated and
inspired to achieve academically. The coaches solidified the internal support needed that ultimately aligned academics plus athletics that yielded success.

Peers were also stakeholders. All of the student participants in this study established a supportive and positive relationship with their peers through participation in sports. Many, if not all, shared that, without sports, they probably would not have been as social or as accepted among their peers. All of the participants managed to associate themselves with like-minded, goal-driven peers who helped motivate and encourage academic and athletic success. Moreover, interscholastic athletics provided them with an identity and a sense of belonging within school and the community. While some of the participants struggled with fitting in and making good choices during their earlier high school experiences, they all realized the importance that interscholastic athletics had in helping them make friends and in being accepted by their peers.

The support, guidance, protection, and encouragement, which was provided by the community through community members, neighborhood folks, recreation center staff, and church members, was unique because the community of stakeholders encouraged and supported these young men to do well academically and athletically. Even questionable members of the neighborhoods encouraged these students to stay away from suspect activities and focus on better opportunities. Their families and community experiences contributed to a solid foundation and understanding of the impact of support, love, commitment, respect, hard work, and sacrifice.

Third, it was evident that participation in interscholastic athletics provided relevant connections across family, community, and education. The athletics required a level of commitment and accountability that supported the goals and dreams of each
participant, but it also instilled character, leadership, and respect. Many of the participants shared a sense of purpose by staying focused, disciplined, and motivated in school because they had something to look forward to after school.

Interscholastic athletics was a tool that provided the strength to the students to meet academic expectations and achieve success. Tower (2008) suggested that in determining the factors related to motivation and sports participation, an argument could be made that student athletes do well in school primarily because the eligibility to play their sport is predicated upon a modicum of success within the classroom. Tower (2008) shared “it can be argued that, since schools have eligibility policies and grade requirements, the success a student athlete achieved could be for the sake of playing and not for learning” (p. 8). The athletic eligibility policy in the WNYCS District provided an overall expectation and requirement that was vital to attaining academic and athletic success.

The results from this study indicate that the district’s board-approved athletic eligibility policy was a significant factor in the student participants’ academic success. The findings confirm that maintaining athletic eligibility requirements reinforces the motivation for struggling athletes as well as to provide a justification for their academic effort. The participants believed that maintaining good grades was important and that they were motivated to perform well in the classroom by the athletic policy.

The eligibility policy held the participants accountable academically, but it also provided the structure, guidance, discipline, and responsibility to do well academically in order to participate in interscholastic athletics. Tower (2008) argued that student athletes do well in school primarily because of eligibility. These findings also proved to be true
for seven of the nine participants in this study. They considered interscholastic athletics a privilege that included rules and accountability. Findings from this study support Tower (2008) in that participants discussed the eligibility policy and how maintaining the mandated requirement helped them stay focused on academics in order to be rewarded with interscholastic athletic participation.

Participation in athletics contributed to character development. Character development through athletics is supported by Stephens and Schaben (2002). Research results indicated that participation in interscholastic athletics instills in youth a sense of character, self-esteem, and discipline. Results further indicated that interscholastic athletics help children set goals, organize, and prioritize their time, and interscholastic athletics helps to develop self-confidence. Stephens and Schaben (2002) found that if athletes were encouraged to transfer these skills to their academics, they could have greater success in the classroom and community, allowing their efforts and their dedication to transcend the confines of the classroom walls, the sports fields, and the gymnasium floors. The current study supports Stephens and Schaben’s (2002) research in that all of the participants reached their initial goals, and organized and prioritized their time while managing both academics and their athletic responsibilities.

In addition to the accountability of the athletic eligibility policy and character development, coaches and mentors also provided support to the participants who helped them maintain a focus on academics while participating in athletics. Results from DeMeulenaere (2010) supported the findings of this research in that DeMeulenaere emphasized the importance of positive adult role models that encourage and support student athletes and their future. DeMeulenaere (2010) also revealed that other factors,
not just involvement in sports, were crucial to increased academic achievement. These factors included: structured schedules, availability of effective incentives, use of strategies to build confidence, development of positive adult and peer role models, and encouragement to develop future aspirations.

The sense of autonomy displayed by the participants was possible because each young man learned to value the opinions and advice of his parents, mentors, and community members. The student athletes developed a desire to make their supporters proud. Spray et al. (2006) indicated that autonomous situations, regardless of their goal involvement, result in greater enjoyment and performance for the subject. The sense of autonomy continued to be evident as the young men participated in interscholastic athletics in college.

Guidance for these promising student athletes was critical, and the families and mentors provided guidance and support to help these young men stay focused on accomplishing their dreams. Families already provided a foundation through multiple experiences, which allowed these young men to make conscious decisions and choices. Mentors and coaches supported the families by linking additional resources, which strengthened the support needed to prepare these young men for college and/or a career. Interscholastic athletics allowed for the synergy to take place as these young men transitioned from community to high school.

Fourth, it was evident in this study that the participants’ identity and sense of belonging contributed to their success. All of the participants developed a sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence that was cultivated and strengthened by their families, communities, and schools. Their participation in interscholastic athletics gave
them a sense of identity, self-confidence, and belonging in their high school and communities. The absence of sports would have drastically changed their high school experience, because their participation in sports was the main reason they had an identity in the community and school. Their success on the athletic fields provided them with a level of acceptance, and it also increased support for them to stay focused and lead by example.

The parents involved in these young men’s lives met their basic psychological needs, while encouraging and supporting their goals and dreams to succeed both academically and athletically. Their parents built each participant’s internal and external motivation through experiences that ultimately triggered explicit goals and dreams that came to fruition. For all of the participants, the initial source of support started with family. All four Latino males had both a mother and father in their lives, and the five African American males were raised in single-family households headed by their mothers. Niehaus et al. (2011) pointed to the importance of fostering self-efficacy for Latino students by empowering them to believe that they were capable of completing academic tasks and reaching their desired goals at school. Findings by Niehaus et al. were supported in this research study in that participants described how their sense of identity and belonging was fostered by multiple stakeholders.

Although the findings by Wright (2011) did not speak directly to the participants’ racial or ethnic identity, Wright (2011) supported the idea that student success was strongly related to a conceptualization of academic achievement that was based on who the subjects were and what they had overcome. All of participants in this present study intensely identified as successful urban males with a desire and need to overcome the
odds. They were all well aware of the societal obstacles in front of them both academically and socially, but their personal identity and belief to succeed allowed them to overcome and achieve.

All of the participants were able to cross the finish line due to an increase in their self-awareness which ultimately allowed them to succeed personally and academically. DeMeulenaere (2010) found that participants in his study represented an exception to the prevalent norm because the participants excelled, despite the pervasive failure of so many of their peers. The nine athletes in this study were also scholar athletes. Although each participant highlighted their own personal journey through the interview and vignette, they all captured and explained the importance of their education and how previous lived experiences, choices and decisions helped frame and motivate them to succeed.

The link between self-determination theory, as it relates to relationship motivation theory, basic psychological needs theory, and goal content theory, was evident prior to the student athletes’ high school experience, as all of the participants shared their personal experiences outside of the educational system. All of the participants were internally and externally motivated to succeed. Their experiences encouraged a strong sense of positive outcomes within family and community that strengthened their relationships and friendships. The participants, along with their families and community, viewed unfortunate circumstances as a means to inspire and motivate themselves and others.

The defining difference for all of the participants was their interscholastic athletic participation. Interscholastic athletics strengthened their support structure by increasing the number of stakeholders involved and invested in their future. The presence of sports
for all of the participants had a major impact on their personal and educational success. The participants took advantage of their connections to key people within their communities and schools, and these individuals encouraged, motivated, and inspired them to stay on task. The participants also began to grow personally as they experienced success and realized the sources of support they could access to achieve their goals and dreams.

Basic psychological needs were not only cultivated within each participant’s journey, but their basic needs were understood and strengthened throughout each and every experience. These young men comprehended and valued their relatedness to their past experiences, and they established a competence in their choices and decisions through the autonomy provided by their stakeholders. Their success was initiated by their own motivation and determination to succeed and overcome the odds, but their ultimate goals were assisted by support and encouragement from significant adults who also connected right back to their involvement in interscholastic athletics.

**Web of Support**

In examining all of the data gathered from student athletes, family members and others, a concept of an interconnected “web of support” emerged and highlighted a pattern that contributed to the participants’ success in high school and into college. The web of support represents the importance of understanding our youth and providing a support structure that is focused, committed, and determined to meet their needs, goals, and dreams. The web concept is personal and individual. To be successful, it needs to be developed for each *student* based on their internal and external motivation and inspiration to succeed. The center of the web of support is the individual student. Surrounding the
student is a support structure built around their interest and key stakeholders, who are ultimately fundamental to their success. The web emerged as having six components connected to each student’s success.

The first component of the web of support comprises the participant’s family and community experiences. The community, as witnessed through this research, played a major role in establishing a foundation for these participants prior to their high school educational experience and their involvement in interscholastic athletics. One might think that the community would be a strong negative influence in the path to success, but the comments from the participants and their significant adults proved otherwise. The participants felt safe, respected, supported, encouraged, and recognized within their community, and they were internally and externally motivated to do well for themselves, their families, and community as they focused on accomplishing their goals and dreams.

The second component of the web of support included churches and recreational centers. The beliefs, values, norms, expectations, accountability, and consequences provided by family and community aligned with the expectations at church and in recreational centers. The churches and recreational centers in the participants’ lives became an extension of their families, as the members mentored and guided these young men outside of their homes to stay focused on many different aspects of life. The mentors used their own stories to motivate these youths into making better decision and choices so that the athlete participants could accomplish their goals and dreams.

The third component of the web of support was interscholastic athletic participation. Athletics was the most significant component for all of the participants within the study. Sports not only provided the participants with an opportunity to look
forward to after-school practices and games, but sports also held students accountable to attend school, maintain good grades, and lead by example. Interscholastic athletic participation provided relevant connections across family, community, and education. Athletics required a level of commitment and accountability, which supported the goals and dreams of each participant, as well as instilled character, leadership, and respect.

The fourth component, peers and athletes—in and out of school—provided both positive and negative experiences; however, the participants’ choices, and consequences for these choices, were built upon their desire to change their trajectory by selecting friends wisely as well as to lead others who were off track. The participants indicated that their friends were likeminded, goal oriented, and motivated to overcome the odds, graduate, and go to college. Interscholastic athletic participation provided a sense of belonging, identity, confidence, and purpose. Friends became another layer of support that allowed for an authentic relationship built on similar experiences and overall challenges and obstacles.

The fifth component of the web included coaches and mentors who had a great deal of influence over student athletes within the interscholastic athletic programs. Coaches and mentors navigated within the educational system and community to strengthen the much-needed support for these youth. Similar to their families and the expectations of their community, the students’ coaches also voiced their expectations that academics was a priority. The participants’ coaches and mentors capitalized on the resources and personnel within the educational and community systems to enhance the support, guidance, and structure needed to guide each individual student athlete.
The sixth component in the web of support included teachers and support staff who played vital role in the academic success of the participants. Coaches initiated and developed relationships between student athletes and teaching staff in order to increase the support needed to guide student athletes academically. Teachers increased the level of support within the educational system that sustained, encouraged and recognized its athletes through meaningful and purposeful interaction.

In this study, the web of support started with family. However, in many cases for the urban male families, the web may also have started elsewhere, such as in the community, with peers, within the educational system, with coaches and mentors. The catalyst that brought this web of support forward in this research was their participation in interscholastic athletics. The participation bridged the gap between family/community and the educational system, ultimately resulting in academic and athletic success for all nine African American and Latino males. It provided these young men with a committed group of stakeholders who were personally and professionally invested in them and their future. The support structure established for all of the participants was based on their personal interest and what motivated and inspired them to succeed. Although the catalyst within the web of support may have varied significantly from one individual to another, the most important aspect was the synergy that took place within the web of support, enabling all key stakeholders to be aware of their role and impact on the success of each student.

Figure 5.1 represents one individual’s web of support. All of the webs may have had some similar components, but the impact of each component varied from one student to the other. Figure 5.1 identifies interscholastic athletic participation as the key
component for seven out of the nine participants in this study. It was only through this involvement that these young men were able to develop a robust web of support that would not allow them to fall through the cracks.

*Figure 5.1. Web of Support – Interscholastic Athletic Participation.*

*Figure 5.2. Web of Support – Family and Community.*
Figure 5.2 represents the two participants within this study whose key component within the web was based on their early experiences with family and community. Although, these participants also relied on interscholastic athletic participation, their main driver and motivator was the value and respect they had for their family and community and wanting to do right by all of them.

The two examples provide two unique influences with the group of nine African American and Latino males. The web concept can be applied to any students, regardless of his or her interest, as long as the significant adults provide the need accountability, expectation, guidance, nurturing, encouragement, and recognition along the way. The two key aspects of the web are that it is student centered and it exists specifically to meet the needs of the individual student.

Limitations

The study had two limitations. The study participants centered on a particular criterion and demographic: participants had to be urban African American or Latino males who participated in two varsity high school sports, graduated, and went on to college. The criteria and demographics limited the research because it only focused on a specific group of student athletes who graduated and went on to college.

The second limitation was that the study was conducted in one urban area and only included athletes from one district in a state that has several other urban, suburban, private and charter schools with similar criteria and demographic information.

Recommendations

Recommendations for practice. Educators can work with the findings of this study to examine how professionals are supporting students. The first recommendation is
for school leaders to create a plan to develop and maintain a web of support for students in challenging circumstances. School district leaders must understand interscholastic athletic participation and motivation and their impact on academic success, including how students need to be supported.

Once school leaders understand the connection between motivation and academics, principals and others should create a subcommittee of key personnel within their buildings that would be charged with developing a student survey, looking to identify students’ personal needs and interests. The survey should be administered to all students. The subcommittee would analyze the results and do a gap analysis to identify what they currently have to support students’ needs and interests. The subcommittee would then network and collaborate with district and community leaders to determine what those leaders might do to fill the gaps. The result would be to either bring additional resources into the school or partner with community agencies to make resources available from outside the school. The subcommittee could then create a directory listing and identify all of their students’ needs and interests.

Once a structure for resources is developed, the school leadership would meet with students individually and construct a web of support for each student using the directory. Students would be placed into teams, based on their individual needs and interests. The teams would be assigned to an adult within the school who would be responsible for supporting, guiding, nurturing, and strengthening their individual webs of support. Prior to assigning the teams, building leaders would provide training sessions for all building personnel regarding mentoring strategies and techniques to keep students
engaged and motivated to learn. All personnel would then be given their teams with the expectation of modeling and implementing the training strategies and techniques learned.

All personnel would meet with their student teams weekly to build and establish relationships, trust, and respect. Teachers would be required to log and monitor student success and report to leadership team quarterly. Teachers and coaches would be evaluated on students’ overall growth as it related to building or district policy, as well as they would be examined on their level of involvement and commitment to each student’s individual web.

School leadership, teachers, and coaches would conduct targeted parent conferences with the purpose of strengthening the individual student’s relationships as well as creating a web of support for the group in which each student would participate. Targeted parent conferences would allow staff with the opportunity to engage in conversations that would align additional resources and personnel from the family and community, again, strengthening the web of support. Through parent conferences, families would gain knowledge and awareness of the needs of their child as well as the ability to advocate for and expect that their child was receiving the support needed to meet his or her needs and interests. In addition, during these conferences, teachers and coaches would take the opportunity to invite and recognize parents and families that have been critical supports to their children. These parents would also be asked to speak alongside their children as they shared their stories to others. The school leadership would also invite students who had graduated and gone on to college or career to speak and share how their web of support allowed them to accomplish their goals and dreams.
School leaders should engage the community by inviting them to their student and parent-focused events that highlight the power of others in the lives of their youth. Leaders should look to establish a community-led youth committee focused on students and their individual needs and interests. Community leaders would be informed of the research and its findings because they would play a critical role in the life of these young men and women. Communicating these findings outside of the school and in the community would also develop a sense of understanding and awareness as it relates to the community’s role and its impact on young adults.

Coaches and mentors within the educational system should also understand the role they play in connecting student athletes to resources within the school. In many cases, coaches and mentors are the point of contact and the initial support for young adults. The coaches and mentors would initiate a web of support if it had not been initiated before they came into contact with the students. However, it takes leadership and the integrity of the educational system, along with family and community, to hold all stakeholders accountable for their youths’ future. Establishing buy-in within the educational system and with its key leaders is critical in establishing a model that would meet the needs of all students. Students’ voices must also be heard within this type of approach.

Once stakeholders fully commit, a subcommittee must be established to develop a policy that aligns and supports students, but also holds them accountable academically and socially within the educational and community system. The policy must also have multiple evaluation measures that can be used to also hold stakeholders accountable including but not limited to district, building, family and community.
**Recommendations for future research.** A recommendation for future research would be to examine the female perspective by designing a similar study with young female athletes from urban districts who successfully graduated and went on to college. Another study that might be helpful would be to interview or conduct focus groups of young athletes—some who were successful and some who were not successful—to compare the factors that impacted their lives and future plans. Future researchers might also consider conducting a similar study with rural or suburban district and compare the findings and results in different types of districts.

The need for further qualitative research that reports the voice of students and their lived experiences is critical in urban districts because these stories and findings provide an in-depth understanding of the overall struggles and obstacles many urban youths have to overcome in order to succeed. Further research could also focus on other student-related interests, such as music, art, and dance, to determine how those interests support and impact academic achievement.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact interscholastic athletic participation had on academic success. The researcher focused on young urban African American and Latino male athletes who successfully graduated from high school and attended a 2- or 4-year college. Completing this investigation within an urban district required an investigation of the full scope of the participants’ social, personal, and emotional experiences. Through the theoretical frame of self-determination theory, the researcher investigated the role that interscholastic athletic participation played in academic success.
School systems that educate large populations of urban males have alarmingly high dropout rates (Greene & Winters, 2006; Ross, 2006). In addition, it is not clear which factors most directly contribute to the academic success of young urban males who have participated in interscholastic athletic programs. Few studies have reported the perceptions of young urban males specifically regarding what motivates them to be academically successful. Although research has explored the relationship between athletics and academics by examining variables such as citizenship, attendance, and grade point average, little research exists in investigating the motivations that help young urban males to succeed academically. Additionally, there are few studies documenting the voice of African American or Latino males who have successfully navigated high school and college. The life experiences of young urban males have not yet been adequately captured in the research and, accordingly, they were the focus of this study.

This research study used a qualitative approach as the strategy of inquiry design to gain insight into what motivates young urban males. The research was conducted in an urban area located in Western New York. Using high school historical data, the researcher selected nine urban males, who were over 18 years of age, from local area colleges who were former WNYCSD student athletes and who, at the time of the study, were enrolled in a 2- or 4-year institutions of higher learning in Western New York. The qualitative study employed a descriptive research design based on data collected during individual interviews, responses to a vignette, and notes from the researcher’s journal. Through this triangulation of data collection, the study looked to answer the research questions. The data analysis included four types of coding: a priori, open coding, axial
coding, and selective coding. The process of coding allowed the researcher to combine data for ideas, categories, and themes.

The findings throughout this qualitative research design started with the participants’ foundational early experiences and what they were exposed to within their families and community. The participants’ ability to maintain and sustain their commitment and focus to achieve was supported and tied to those experiences with multiple stakeholders within all aspects of their lives. The positive impact of interscholastic athletics embodied these relationships. Their supportive community, discipline, and education ultimately afforded them with the opportunity to achieve academic success.

The research results indicated a strong connection between interscholastic athletic participation and academic success through its qualitative design. The lived experiences of these young men supported the need to establish and implement the concept of a web of support with a focus on interscholastic athletic participation.

The results further indicate that the psychological needs of the student participants were addressed by their families and the community in many displays of unconditional love, encouragement, and support. All of the participants were determined to do better for themselves and their families. Their experiences played a critical role because they observed and witnessed many examples of positive, as well as challenging, situations in their families, with their friends, and in their communities. As many of the participants reflected on the decisions and choices that others made, they sadly realized that many of those actions resulted in the consequence of incarceration and death. The participants did not plan to follow this brutal cycle of failure.
As evidenced by the data, the families of the nine participants were extremely involved and supportive. More importantly, they were also committed to making sure these young men would not fall victim to the vicious cycle of failure that plagues urban youth across the country. The families instilled a strong level of respect in their children. This level of respect, in turn, held them accountable for their actions and decisions.

All of the families worked very hard to provide for these young men, but they also worked just as hard to stay involved in their children’s lives. Their consistent struggle and commitment was respected and acknowledged by the participants. As a result, the student athletes developed intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to do right by their family but also to do right for themselves. Through these experiences, the participants’ relatedness to their families’ struggles and commitment to overcome obstacles motivated them to do what was needed to do in order to reverse or change the trajectory of their futures.

The lived experiences of family and community were solid examples of choices, decisions, and serious challenges. In addition, one cannot underestimate the educational struggles the families faced in their own environment and within a systemic cycle of failure that impacts urban communities. The difference for this group of individuals was that their parents used their own life challenges as an opportunity to prevent and make adjustments to stop their children from repeating the cycle.

The parents provided these young men with authentic experiences, but they also guided them through experiences using a different lens with education being the overarching key to success. They all had a very strong level of influence over their children’s lives and a very strong focus on academics with high expectations and
accountability. The parent’s experiences provided a level of relatedness between the parents and the participants. Through this relatedness emerged the powerful family support to meet the basic psychological needs of these young men.

The families initially had high expectations of these young men, which included a focus on education, respect, and family; however, there was a shift from the family mandates when the young men developed an understanding of what was expected of them. Once this occurred, the young men were given the autonomy to make their own decisions and choices, although, the values instilled by their families led them down a path that allowed them to see life’s opportunities.

Relatedness, as understood within the family, allowed the young men to see the need for change, but they also understood what was necessary for them to do in order to change the cycle. Relatedness strengthened their awareness of life circumstances, as well as the consequences for their choices, which gave them a level of competence to decide right from wrong and, eventually, attain autonomy without constant guidance from their parents.

The support, guidance, protection, and encouragement that was provided by the community through church, recreation centers, and the neighborhood was unique in that every one of the student athletes’ communities encouraged and supported these young men to do well academically and athletically. Even questionable members of the neighborhoods encouraged these students to stay away from suspect activities and to focus on better opportunities. Their family and community experiences contributed to a solid foundation for success and an understanding of the impact of support, love, commitment, respect, hard work, and sacrifice.
The participants were also exposed to a sense of relatedness through community dynamics and expectations based on many positive and negative experiences. Those experiences led to a more competent understanding of the choices and decisions that would lead to positive outcomes. The findings related to the community indicate that the participants had a strong attachment to their communities and desired to make their communities proud. The close personal interactions and relationships with family and community were essential for the participants’ well-being and contributed to their need for relatedness.

The community provided a unique level of support for all of the participants. Although these young men could have easily fallen victim to their environment, the community did not allow them to fall and become another statistic. Even though there were many times when the participants had to make some tough decisions in order to survive, they always had the support of their community to guide them. Members of their community supported, guided, nurtured, recognized, and encouraged these young men to stay focused, and that support helped to determine the direction of their journey to accomplish their goals and dreams.
References


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Appendix A

Permission Request to District

Date: 1-11-2015

Office of Student Equity and Placement and the Legal Department

RE: Permission to Access Initial Data for Research Study

Dear: To Whom it May Concern,

I am writing to request permission to access and utilize WNYCSD Data to conduct my research study. I am currently enrolled in the ED.D. Program in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College and am in the process of writing my dissertation. The study is entitled The Impact of Interscholastic Athletic Participation on Academic Success of Urban Males.

I am interested in the WNYCSD as my initial access to data for my study. For the purpose of the study, I will utilize district data sources to compile list of district graduates who participated in interscholastic athletics programs and are currently in college all over 18 years of age.

If approval is granted, former students and selected student parents will participate in individual interviews in a quiet setting outside of the WNYCSD.

Your approval to access and utilize this data will be greatly appreciated. I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have. You may contact me at my email address: ___________________ or you can call me on my cell at ____________.

Sincerely,

Carlos M. Cotto Jr.
Appendix B

District Approval

February 5, 2015

Carlos M. Cotto, Jr.
420 Black Walnut Drive
Rochester, New York 14615

RE: Approval for research

Dear Mr. Cotto:

This letter serves as formal Rochester City School District research approval for your proposed research, The Impact of Interscholastic Athletic Participation on Academic Success, in satisfaction of your Doctorate at St. John Fisher College. Please feel free to share this letter with any appropriate parties, including your Research Subjects Review Board.

As part of the District’s research approval process, you will be required to sign a Research Agreement from our Department of Law, which will cover areas of destruction of confidential data, as well as your stating your willingness to present your findings at designated District professional development events.

With as many as approximately 100 research, survey and intervention requests per year, there are specific criteria that must be met to gain District approval for a proposal. The request must tangibly benefit students, their parents, staff, schools or departments. Alignment with the Superintendent’s Goals is preferred. Along with meeting District goals, it must be supportable by the schools or departments impacted. We believe your proposed study has met these criteria and has earned the support of the District.

Please continue to work with us, as you have, as you move forward with this study. Once you have completed this project, please forward to the Department of School Operations your final report.

Very truly yours,

Barbara Goldammer,
Acting Executive Director of Student Equity and Placement

Barbara Goldammer,
Acting Executive Director of Student Equity and Placement

XC: Department of Law
Department of School Operations Research/Survey Review Committee
Appendix C

Selection Criteria and Process

Inclusion Criteria: All potential participants will be former WNYCSD students who are currently in college with no affiliation to high school interscholastic program. Participants will self-identify once selected and researcher will interview all participants.

Urban Males (African American and Latino)

Accomplishment:

Former high school student athlete in the WNYCSD
Minimum of 2 years of HS Sports Participation (Varsity Player)
Graduated from high school
Currently enrolled in a 2 to 4 year college – Full Time

Step 1. IM&T Dashboard and Data System
Data Source: WNYCSD district-wide database
Data Used: Student names, Varsity participation, Ethnicity/Race, and Graduation status
Objective: Identify potential participant pool of alumni who meet the initial selection criteria

Step 2. Athletic Director Input
Data Source: Athletic Directors at each WNYCSD high school represented in list from Step 1
Data Used: College enrollment, Contact information
Objective: Narrow potential participant pool to alumni who are enrolled at college and for whom there is contact information available

Parent/Mentor interviews will be generated from student’s interviews. All former WNYCSD potential candidates will be interviewed first. The former WNYCSD students currently in college during the interview process will be asked to identify an influential parent or mentor to be interviewed after their interview is complete.

8-10 potential students all over 18 years of age and one of their selected parents or mentors
Appendix D

Letter to Interscholastic Athlete

Carlos M. Cotto, Jr.

Dear ________________,

I am a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College conducting a study on the impact of interscholastic athletic participation on academic success of urban males. I am requesting your participation, which would consist of about an hour of your time for an individual interviews.

Individual interviews will take place at a mutually convenient public place of participant’s choice during the months of May and June. There will be one interview for each participant lasting approximately one hour. The focus of the conversation will be on your perspectives and experiences as a former high school athlete and its overall impact on your academic success.

With your permission, I will record our conversation with a digital voice recorder. The interviews will be transcribed, analyzed and coded. For the purpose of protecting your privacy, recording and transcriptions will be kept in a secured locked cabinet. Your identity will remain anonymous during the study and after the dissertation is completed. The results of this research may be presented in conferences and publications in educational journals.

You may withdraw from participation in the study or refuse to answer particular questions without penalty at any time. I will be asking a few questions during the interview, but I look to establish an environment that is comfortable as we engage in great conversation. The interview will take place in a public area of your choosing. The attached consent form describes the risks and benefits of participating in this study.

If should you be interested in a copy of the report once it is completed, I would be happy to provide one to you.

I appreciate your participation and assistance in completion of this dissertation.

My faculty supervisor is Dr. Marie Cianca ________________ ________________.

Sincerely.

Carlos M. Cotto, Jr.
Appendix E

St. John Fisher College Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: The Impact of Interscholastic Athletic Participation on Academic Success of Urban Males.

Name of Researcher: Carlos M. Cotto Jr.

Faculty Supervisor: Dissertation Chairperson: Dr. Marie Cianca

Committee Member: Dr. Alisa James

Purpose of the study: Discovering and understanding the motivations of young urban males, with regard to their academic pursuits, is a vital part of improving the quality of their education and their graduation rates. There are cases in which interscholastic athletics appear to possess the ability to uniquely contribute to academic success (DeMeulenaere, 2010). However, clear support is lacking. In light of such insufficient support, this study seeks to investigate the factors that have positively impacted young urban males who chose to participate in interscholastic athletic programs and who also achieved academic success. Additionally, the study will focus on motivational factors that play a role in supporting positive achievement in young urban males, regardless of the challenges they face in life. Study will look to interview former Rochester City School District interscholastic athletes all over 18 years of age, graduated, and currently in two or four year institutions. Selected athletes will then identify an influential parent or mentor who will also be interviewed. Parent/Mentor interviews will be generated from student’s interviews. All former RCSD potential candidates will be interviewed first. The former RCSD students currently in college during the interview process will be asked to identify an influential parent or mentor to be interviewed after their interview is complete.

Approval of study:

Place of study: Interviews will take place at a mutually convenient public place of participant’s choice during the months of May and June. Interviews will be conducted in a public setting at a local college or local library in an enclosed classroom or conference room setting to assure privacy.

Length of participation: Interviews are estimated to last approximately one hour or until questions have been addressed and/or responded too. Additional time may be needed for demographic questions and response to a vignette. All interviews will be recorded using digital voice recorder. The interviews will be transcribed, analyzed and coded.

Risk and Benefits: There are no identified risks or benefits for participation in this study.
Methods for protecting confidentiality: Confidentiality will be maintained during the interviews and no identifiers will be used during the interview process. Confidentiality will be maintained by coding the participants’ names. No personal information will be shared with anyone. Confidentiality statements will be signed by the transcriber. Interview data, tapes, and any supporting documentation will be maintained in a locked cabinet. The researcher will store all information for three years from conclusion of the dissertation process and then destroy all documents, recordings and documents by paper shredder and deleted files.

Your rights: As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above named study

Name (Participant)________________________________________
Date____________________________________________________
Signature________________________________________________

Name (Researcher)________________________________________
Date____________________________________________________
Signature________________________________________________

All interviewed participants will receive a personal thank you card and will be given a $10.00 gift card as a token of thanks for their participation in the study.

If you have any further question regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above.
Appendix F

Letter to Selected Interscholastic Athlete Parent/Mentor

Carlos M. Cotto Jr.

Dear __________________,

I am a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College conducting a study on the impact of interscholastic athletic participation on academic success of urban males. I am requesting your participation which will involve individual interviews. You have been selected as a parent or mentor who has been influential in the life of a former City School District Athlete. The athlete has given me permission to interview you.

Individual interviews will take place at a mutually convenient public place of participant’s choice during the months of May and June. There will be one interview for each participant lasting approximately one hour. The focus of the conversation will be on your perspectives and experience as a parent of a former high school athlete and overall impact on his academic success.

With your permission, I will record our conversation with a digital voice recorder. The interviews will be transcribed, analyzed and coded. For the purpose of protecting your privacy, recording and transcriptions will be kept in a secured locked cabinet. Your identity will remain anonymous during the study and after the dissertation is completed. The results of this research may be presented in a conferences and publications in educational journals.

You may withdraw from participation in the study or refuse to answer particular questions without penalty at any time. I will be asking a few questions during the interview, but I look to establish an environment that is comfortable as we engage in great conversation. The interview will take place in a public area of your choosing. The attached consent form describes the risks and benefits of participating in this study.

If should you be interested in a copy of the report once it is completed. I would be happy to provide one to you.

I appreciate your participation and assistance in completion of this dissertation.

My faculty supervisor is Dr. Marie Cianca ________________ __________________

Sincerely.

Carlos M. Cotto, Jr.
Appendix G

Interscholastic Athlete Interview Protocol - Demographics

Introduction:

I would like to thank you for taking the time to do this interview. I would also like to congratulate you on your accomplishments as WNYCSD graduate. As you may be aware, the WNYCSD has the lowest graduation rate in the state and you are one of very few males that has successfully graduated and continued on to college. The purpose of this interview is to better understand how you successfully accomplished this goal. I would like to learn more about the challenges that you may have faced throughout your high school experience and how you overcame them to attain academic success. That includes talking about whether participating in sports played a role in your academic success. The interview will last approximately an hour.

The interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. After your interview is completed, I will delete all your identifiable data. I will provide you with a pseudonym in order to protect your identity.

Is there a particular name you would like for me to use?

Before we get started with the interview, I would like to share a few things.

1. If you don’t want to answer or talk about a particular question just let me know and we will move on to the next question.
   a. If you would like for me to come back to a particular question please let me know as well.

2. If at any point during the interview you have questions, feel free to ask them.
   a. I want to make sure you are comfortable and that we have a great conversation.

Thank you,

OK, I would like to start the interview with a few personal questions about you and your family if you don’t mind. Again, if you don’t want to answer any questions just let me know.

1. Ok, what would you like to have as a pseudonym for the interview?
   a. How old are you?
   b. How do you identify yourself – Latino, African American?
   c. Growing up who did you live with?
   d. Are you the 1st in your family to graduate from High School?
      i. If not who else?
      ii. Did your parents or mentor?
   e. Are you the 1st in your family to go to college?
      i. If not who else?
      ii. Did your parents or mentor?
f. Growing up what would you say your family’s finances were like?
   i. Would you say middle class?
   ii. Would you say poor?
Appendix H

Interview Questions for Interscholastic Athletes

1. What do you think has gotten you to where you are today in terms of your academic success?
   Probes:
   How has your family contributed to your success? (Q1 & SDT)
   Could you share what motivated you to be a success? (Q1 & SDT)
   How did school personnel contribute or not contribute to your success? (Q1 & SDT)
   How about your community? (Q1 & SDT)

2. Why do you think you are where you are today, when many of your classmates could not attain the same goals? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)

3. How did participating in sports influence and/or contribute to your success? (SDT)
   Probes: (Positive/Negative)
   Did the district Eligibility Policy/Regulation influence and/or contribute? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   How did family influence and/or contribute? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   Do your peers influence and/or contribute in a positive or negative? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   How did your coaches influence and/or contribute? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   Did anyone in your school influence and/or contribute? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   How about community? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)

4. Imagine your high school experience without sports.
   Probes: (Positive/Negative)
   What would high school have been like? (Q1 & SDT)
   How do you see yourself doing in classes and in socializing with friends? (Q1 & SDT)
   Where do you think you would be today without sports? (Q1 & SDT)

5. We have spoken of all these influences, but you ultimately made the decisions that let you graduate and go to college.
   What motivated you to succeed? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   Probes: (Positive/Negative)
   What did you learn from these experiences and people? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   What do you think you can pass on to younger students now from your own experiences? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)

6. What suggestions and/or recommendations would you give to high school students that could help them succeed? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your overall academic success? (Q1) Or your involvement in Interscholastic Athletic participation and its impact in your life? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
Appendix I

Interscholastic Athlete Parent or Mentor Interview

Introduction:

I would like to thank you for taking the time to do this interview. I would also like to congratulate you on your son’s accomplishments as a City School graduate. As you may be aware, the City School District has the lowest graduation rate in the state and your son is one of very few males that has successfully graduated and gone on to college.

The purpose of this interview is to better understand how your son successfully accomplished this goal. I would like to learn more about the challenges that you may have faced throughout his high school experience and how you assisted him in overcoming and attaining academic success. This includes talking about whether participating in sports played a role in his academic success. The interview will last no more than an hour.

The interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. After your interview is completed, I will delete all your identifiable data. I will provide you with a pseudonym in order to protect your identity.

Interview Questions for Interscholastic Athletes selected parents:

1. What do you think has gotten your son to where he is today in terms of his academic success? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   Probes: (Positive/Negative)
   How have you contributed to his success? (SDT)
   Could you share what motivated you son within school and the community? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   How does he handle the pressures of his peers and community? (Q2 & SDT)
   Talk about how high school personnel may have or may not have contributed to his success? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   How about his community? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)

2. Why do you think your son is where he is today, when many of his classmates could not attain the same success? (Q1, Q2 & SDT)

3. How did participating in sports influence and/or contribute to your son’s success? (Q2 & SDT)
   Probes: (Positive/Negative)
   Did the district Eligibility Policy/Regulation influence and/or contribute? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   Did family influence and/or contribute? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   Did his peers influence and/or contribute in a positive or negative? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
How did coach and/or coaches influence and/or contribute? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
Did high school personnel influence and/or contribute? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
Did the community play a role? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)

4. Imagine your son’s high school experience without sports? (Q1 & SDT)
   Probes: (Positive/Negative)
   What would have your individual support and involvement been like? (Q1 & SDT)
   How do you see your support and involvement in his life through school, peers and community? (Q1 & SDT)
   Where do you think he would be today? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)

5. We have spoken of all these influences, but ultimately your son was motivated to graduate from high school and go to college.
   Probes: (Positive/Negative)
   What do you think your son learned from these experiences and from other people? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   As a parent, what do you think you can pass on to others based on your son’s success? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)

6. What suggestions and/or recommendations would you give to other parents that could assist them with their children? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)

7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your son’s overall academic success? (Q1, Q2, & SDT) Or his involvement in Interscholastic Sports and its impact? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
Appendix J

Interscholastic Athlete Vignette/Short Story

(Using Self-Determination Theory)

A young man is living in a single family home. His siblings have dropped out of school and are involved in neighborhood activities. Many relatives also live in the neighborhood and are involved in the same activities. The young man, like many of his family members, is bright and gifted athletically, but the pressures of his community are constantly pulling at him. If he remains focused, he will be the 1st to graduate from high school and attend college. After the vignette, the researcher will ask participants:

1. What specific steps would you suggest to this young man to be successful in academics through Interscholastic Athletic Participation? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)

2. What motivational advice would you provide this young man as he transitions into high school and athletics? (Q1, Q2, & SDT)
   i. What can parents do to motivate? (Q1 & Q2)
   ii. What can coach do to motivate? (Q1 & Q2)

3. What advice would you provide his parents both academically and athletically? (Q1/Q2)
   a. What about coaches, as it relates to guidance, mentorship, leadership, role model, support, and accountability? (Q1 & Q2)
   b. What about teachers, as it relates to guidance, mentorship, support, and accountability? (Q1, Q2 & SDT)