Academic Stress in an Achievement Driven Era: Time and School Culture

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Dedication

The author wishes to dedicate this dissertation in memory of Dr. Carolyn "Lyn" Mrowka. There are so many reasons to dedicate this to her: she raised her son to be the man of my dreams; she was a cheerleader and mentor as I applied for and worked through this program; she was a role model in my career. Most importantly, though, Lyn Mrowka was an educator who never lost sight of what was truly important in life: friends and family, love and living life to its fullest. For that reason, I dedicate this research in her memory.

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First, I would like to thank the students who inspired me to begin this research and those who shared their experiences with me.

I would like to thank Dr. Kelly Sherrill, for all of her support and guidance throughout this research process.

Without the support and cooperation from the faculty and administration at the study site, from the unwavering support of my principal and the willingness of colleagues to sacrifice ever-precious time to talk with me about this important subject, this research would have never been possible.

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Abstract of Dissertation

Academic Stress in an Achievement Driven Era: Time and School Culture

Whether academic achievement is defined as passing a state-mandated test for graduation or earning "A's" in a rigorous course load and having a resume full of extra-curricular accomplishments, the pressure to achieve is pervading public education, creating a culture of competition and causing academic stress. A culture of competition within a school can negatively affect adolescents during a developmental stage in which other's expectations influence the way adolescents' view themselves. Many school leaders struggle with how to rigorously prepare students for the 21st century and global markets, within the confines of a seven-hour school day.

Popular and journalistic literature acknowledged the issue of academic stress (Robbins, 2006), and some researchers recognized the prevalence of academic stress among high achieving students (Connor, Pope, & Galloway, 2009; Pope, 2001; Pope & Simon, 2005; Richard, 2009) in this academically competitive time. However, the literature had not yet addressed how the school's organizational culture, specifically the scheduling of courses, organization of time, homework and workload policies, and extracurricular activities caused or alleviated academic stress. The researcher conducted three-part interviews with students and school leaders to learn about their experiences with academic stress in an academically competitive school culture. The researcher learned that there were positive and negative impacts of academic stress and that some of the main causes included simultaneous deadlines, conflicts between extracurricular

activities and homework, and busywork. This study is important for school leaders, particularly to examine whether and how high school students perceive and articulate that time-related school components common in high school culture (such as scheduling, homework/workload policies, and extracurricular activities) contribute to these students' stress levels. The study illuminated similarities and differences in student versus school leader perception about the stress of time-related school components on students. The researcher hopes that the understandings gained from this study will help school leaders make decisions on how to schedule teacher and student time.

Table of Contents

Dedication iii
Acknowledgments iv
Abstract of Dissertation v
List of Figures xi
List of Tables xii
CHAPTER I 1
INTRODUCTION 1
Context/Overview 3
Research Problem/Research Gap 3
Theoretical Framework 4
Conceptual Framework 5
Perfectionism and Over Motivation. 5
Stress on Adolescents. 6
Statement of the Problem: Competitive School Culture 9
Schools as Organizations. 9
Trending Toward a Competitive School Culture. 10
Effects of School Culture & Academic Stress on Adolescents. 13
Factors Attributed to a Competitive School Culture. 13
Impact of Time. 15
Purpose 17
Research Questions 18
Significance of Project 18
Methodology 19
Delimitations 20
Limitations 21
Definition of Key Terms 21
CHAPTER II 24
LITERATURE REVIEW 24
Theoretical Foundation 24
Effects of Stress on Adolescents 27

Positive Impact of Stress. 28
Negative Impact of Stress. 29
The Impact of a Competitive School Culture 37
The Impact of Time on a Competitive School Culture 38
Suggestions for improvement 43
Conclusion 46
CHAPTER III 47
METHODOLOGY AND RATIONALE 47
Design 47
Researcher Reflexivity Statement 48
Sample 49
Instrumentation 51
Procedures 53
Analysis 56
Ethical Considerations 59
CHAPTER IV 60
RESULTS 60
Overview of Study Site and Participants 60
School Culture 63
Academic Stress 68
Impact of Academic Stress 68
Positive Impact. 69
Depression. 71
Academic Dishonesty. 72
Disengagement/School Avoidance. 73
Lack of Sleep/Health Issues. 75
Tenets of School Culture and Academic Stress 76
Student course selection. 77
Workload. 78
Rigor. 79
First AP Experience. 79
Pace of Instruction. 81
Simultaneous Deadlines. 82
Conflicts between Homework and Extracurricular Activities. 82

Busywork. 84
Sacrifice of Personal Time. 86
Tenets of Time and School Culture and Their Impact on Academic Stress 87
School Year Calendar 88
The School Schedule 88
Exceptions to the standard school day schedule 94
Extracurricular Activities Schedule 95
Homework/Workload Policies 96
Student and School Leader Perspectives 98
Conclusion 100
CHAPTER V 101
INTERPRETATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS 101
Interpretations and Conclusions 102
Academic Stress. 102
Impact of Academic Stress. 103
Conceptual Framework 108
Theoretical Framework. 108
Tenets of Time and School Culture and Their Impact on Academic Stress 110
First AP experience. 112
Homework Policy. 112
Flex Time. 114
Advisory Period. 115
Collaboration. 116
Student/School Leadership Relationship 117
Administration. 117
Teachers. 118
School Counselors. 120
Policy Makers 123
Limitations 123
Recommendations for future research 124
References 126
Appendix A: IRB Approval 153
Appendix B: Informed Assent Form 154
Appendix C: Parent Permission Form 156

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form (for School Leaders) 158
Appendix E: Interview Questions 160
Appendix F: Advisory Period Transcript 163

List of Figures

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework……..…. 5

List of Tables

Table 1: Student Participants…….. 62

Table 2: School Leader Participants……63

Table 3: Effects of Academic Stress……69

Table 4: Hours of Sleep…….. 75

Table 5: Other Contributing Factors to Academic Stress…….. 76

Table 6: Time-related Causes of Academic Stress……. 77

Table 7: Student Schedules……. 83

Table 8: Bell Schedule…… 89

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In her book, *The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids*, journalist, Alexandra Robbins (2006) shadowed eight students at the academically competitive Walt Whitman High School (Whitman) in upper, middle class Bethesda, Maryland. At Whitman, she witnessed an "overachiever culture" (p. 15) which included students who discussed their SAT scores at parties, believed a "B" was a bad grade, and felt their lives were defined by numbers such as grades and test scores. The atmosphere at Whitman was so competitive that one girl reported her physics project was stolen by a peer who hoped to achieve accolades at a national physics competition with the stolen project. This competitive school culture is evident in other communities, as well. Robbins interviewed students in eight states who echoed the sentiments of the Whitman students.

Denise Pope (2001) shadowed five successful students at Faircrest High School (Faircrest), located in a wealthy California suburb. Faircrest was a comprehensive high school with a 95% college matriculation rate, and one that boasted of recognitions for its academics. Pope witnessed many of the same problems related to academia that Robbins observed in Maryland. One student admitted to sleeping only two or three hours a night to keep up with the workload. Several students admitted to cheating, occasionally or habitually, to maintain their grade point average with the least amount of effort possible. Another student struggled to balance her passion for the arts and maintain the course rigor and grade point average needed for admission to an elite college.

In *Race to Nowhere*, a documentary about the stressors middle income, suburban, American school students are subjected to in an achievement-driven society, producer

Vicki Abeles (2010) featured interviews with many students, from elementary school through college, who experienced the negative effects of stress due to academics. Abeles emphasized the crux of the problem of academic stress by including an interview of the mother and a friend of a bright, talented 13-year-old girl, who committed suicide after she received a failing grade on a math test. Other interviewed students reported illnesses, disengagement, and academic dishonesty in reaction to the pressures of homework, extracurricular activities, and grades.

Reports like those of Robbins (2006), Pope (2001), and Abeles (2010) raise questions about how high school culture has contributed to student stress. One may inquire whether an association between high school academic culture and student stress is limited to select high achieving students or demanding schools, or whether the association affects all students, particularly as national education standards increase and colleges seemingly have more competitive admissions processes. By understanding adolescent development and teenagers' emotional and physical responses to stressors, school leaders can better equip themselves to provide a strong academic and emotional foundation for America's high school students.

Previous research on academic stress has specifically focused on students' reactions to high stakes standardized testing (Pickering, 2010; Hollingsworth, 2007; Ryan, et al, 2007; Wheeler, 2006; Mulvernon, Stegman, & Ritter, 2005), but few explore student perceptions of the school environment or the role of school leaders have in understanding student needs and creating an environment in response to the overall push for higher national standards and an increasingly competitive educational environment (Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010; Pahnos, 1990).

Context/Overview

Academic stress is a byproduct of an achievement-driven culture. While high standards and pressure can motivate some people to achieve, too much pressure on impressionable adolescents can have serious negative consequences. School leaders need to understand how students perceive their educational experiences because those leaders are in a position to make changes within their schools that impact the school culture and will allow students to work toward high standards in a supportive environment.

Research Problem/Research Gap

Most of the previous research on stress, anxiety, and rising school curriculum standards had focused on test anxiety and standardized tests, with mixed reviews about its impact (Pickering, 2010; Hollingsworth, 2007; Ryan, et al, 2007; Wheeler, 2006; Mulvernon, Stegman, & Ritter, 2005; Kohn, 2000). Researchers linked high parental and school expectations to high educational achievement (Jacobs, & Harvey, 2010; Liu, et al, 2009; Al-Fadhli, & Singh, 2006; Zuniga, 2004; Schoen, et al, 2003) and adolescent stress (Richards, 2009; Rao, 2008; Robbins, 2006; Riley, 2003; Kaplan, Liu, & Kaplan, 2001). In his review of the literature on the impact of academic stress, Putwain (2007) found that the separation of academic and test anxiety was unclear and many studies failed to clearly differentiate between the two. Although the students' response to standardized testing was a key component of academic stress, researchers found the problem was greater than test anxiety (Richards, 2009; Pope, 2001). Student stress resulted from elements beyond the standardized tests. The constant demands of the educational system and expectations of achievement for students in academically competitive high schools contributed to and caused student stress, as well (Pope, Richards).

Despite a plethora of research on adolescent behavior in schools, very few studies had explored the school experience from the students' perspective (Pope, 2001). Maehr and Midgley (1996) wrote that the students were the "ultimate client and product of the educational process" (p. 20). There had been studies that examined teachers' perception of students' needs and administrators' perception of teachers' stress, but not on the administrators' perception of student needs (Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010; Pahnos, 1990). Changes in the quality and rigor of curriculum had an impact on students. Understanding the tenets of school organizations that either support or conflict with adolescent development will determine the success or failure of those changes (Presseisen, 1982). The researchers who focused on the impact of academic stress conducted their studies in high achieving schools and with high achieving students. However, the impact of academic stress on average or low achieving students could be even more detrimental (Ryan, et al, 2007). Research was needed to understand how the culture of the school impacts students and if or how the perception of the school culture varies between students and their school leaders.

Theoretical Framework

The theories used to frame this study were Socially Prescribed Perfectionism and the Optimal Pressure Model. Socially Prescribed Perfectionism is a maladaptive form of perfectionism that stems from the perception that others have extremely high, and often impossible to reach, expectations of an individual (Hewitt & Flett, 1993; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). A person with Socially Prescribed Perfectionism has a fear of criticism and an intense need for the approval of others (Hewitt & Flett, 1993). When Socially Prescribed Perfectionists cannot reach or control the perceived expectations of others, the result is

often anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues (Hewitt & Flett, 1993). Previous studies did not explore the connection between the experience of the adolescent in high school and Socially Prescribed Perfectionism. Researchers linked pressure and high expectations with high achievement (Jacobs, & Harvey, 2010; Liu, et al, 2009; Al-Fadhli, & Singh, 2006; Zuniga, 2004; Schoen, et al, 2003). However, there was a point when the level of expectation became detrimental (Constanzo, Woody & Slater, 1992). Several researchers linked too much pressure, typically from parents, with poor self-esteem, anxiety, and negative stress (Rao, 2008; Levine, 2006; Verna, 1996). Costanzo, Woody, & Slater (1992) referred to this as over motivation, too much pressure which led to a decrease in performance. They described the Optimal Pressure Model, which, when charted, created an inverted "U" shape, where achievement was low when there was no motivation, increased as motivation increased, then dropped when motivation turned into over motivation. Research was needed to determine what school leaders were doing or could be doing to maintain a reasonable expectation of achievement in an academically challenging environment while alleviating the negative effects of stress.

Conceptual Framework

Perfectionism and Over Motivation.

Both high expectations and pressure potentially had a positive impact, unless the expectations and pressure became too burdensome then the impact became negative (Hewitt & Flett, 1993, 1991; Costanzo, Woody & Slater, 1992). School leaders need to understand how faculty can maintain high expectations and an appropriate amount of motivational pressure without causing a negative impact.

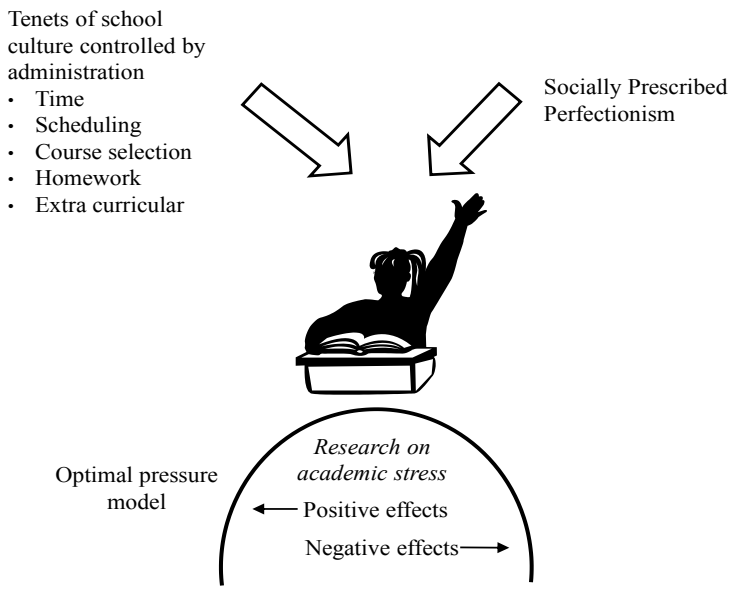

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Stress on Adolescents.

While learning to handle responsibility is an important part of becoming an adult, too much academic pressure may have negative consequences for an adolescent who is not developmentally ready to handle the stress. During the early 1900's, the "Father of Child Study", G. Stanley Hall, dubbed adolescence, ages 13-19, as a time of "storm and stress" due to the potentially catastrophic changes adolescents undergo during puberty (Rogers, 1969). Although many modern researchers discredited this exaggerated portrayal (Rogers, 1969), adolescence became recognized as a potentially vulnerable time in emotional and psychological development. As young people progressed through the stages of adolescence, they were attempting to determine who they were and who they should be (Damon & Lerner, 2008). Conger (1971) stated the five key aspects of adolescent development were adjustment to physical changes, becoming independent of caretakers, develop effective social and working relationships, prepare for a vocation, and develop a sense of personal identity (as cited in Presseisen, 1982). Mergendoller (1982)

wrote that during adolescence, young people developed cognitive skills, identity, relatedness, and autonomy. The cognitive skills were important, as adolescents needed to be able to reflect and analyze in order to recognize their own identity and understand their responsibilities and opportunities (Mergendoller). During adolescence, social expectation and psychophysiological impulses united to form the adolescent's sense of self (Mergendoller). The major tasks of adolescent identity building were to reconcile the image of self through activities outside of the home, to gain acceptance of friends, and to acquiesce the demands of superiors, including teachers (Presseisen, 1982). Adolescence brought a preoccupation with what others thought about the adolescent, at times creating conflicting views of self. Ultimately, adolescents internalized the expectations of others by the late adolescent stage (Damon & Lerner, 2008). Erikson's developmental stages placed adolescents in the "Identity vs. Role Confusion Stage," in which they experienced physiological changes and impending adult responsibilities and became concerned with the opinions of others and how those opinions compared with the adolescent's sense of self (Erikson, 1963). Self-reflection, along with an assessment of how others valued his or her achievements, contributed to the adolescent's development of self-identity. During adolescence, young people organized "skills, interests, and values into a core sense of self and [apply] it to present and future pursuits" (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 20). The constant questioning of self could lead to an identity crisis caused by the pressures of the expectations from family, friends, teachers, and society (Nakkula & Toshalis). Researchers who studied the effects of academic stress found that students were stressed, anxious, angry, and/or depressed, or finding themselves coping by disengaging, self-medicating, cheating, or sacrificing good eating and sleeping habits to compensate

(Connor, Pope, & Galloway, 2009; Robbins, 2006; Pope & Simon, 2005; Pope, 2001;). While most research on stress dealt with its negative impact, additional research showed that stress can be beneficial if the stressed individual has support and positive coping strategies (Karlsen, Dybdahl, & Vittersø, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Armeli, Gunthert, & Cohen, 2001).

Yeager and Dweck (2012) demonstrated the impact of student mindset on academic resilience. They established that if students believe that intelligence is fixed, academic resilience is impaired. However, when students realize that all people have the ability to change, they established the mindset that challenges could be overcome with time, effort, patience, help, and new strategies (Yeagar and Dweck).

Ainslie, Shafer, and Reynolds (1996) defined stress as "a response which taxes, drains, and ultimately undermines the optimal functioning of an individual" (p. 920). Researchers defined stress as a normal reaction, triggering an adrenaline rush, to help human beings in dangerous or difficult situations (Jones & Ginsburg, 2006). Jonas and Ginsburg recognized that all situations where something important was at stake, especially when one's value was dependent upon his or her performance, led to stress; however, it was an individual's ability to respond to it that could have a positive or negative impact. Researchers defined academic stress as all work conducted in the classroom, homework, preparation for exams, deadlines, college admissions "the work students conduct[ed] as part of the normal school curriculum" (Putwain, 2007, p. 210). Academic stress came from exams, excessive homework, poor academic performance, time management issues, competition with peers, and parent or teacher expectations (Burnett & Fanshawe, 1997; Leung, Yeung, Wong, 2009). A moderate level of stress

could motivate a student to prepare for an exam or energize an athlete for a game; however, when stress became chronic, it became dangerous (Jones & Ginsberg). Research was needed to determine how school environment or culture impacted students' stressors in positive and negative ways, so that school leaders could change those policies and practices to reduce the negative effects of stressors.

Statement of the Problem: Competitive School Culture

Schools as Organizations.

Organizations could have a positive or negative impact on the people who are a part of them (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Many researchers on the impact of organizations on its members referred to the research of Bronfrenbrenner (1979). Bronfenbrenner studied how the environment influenced human development. The primary settings, such as family, school or workplace, and peer group, initiated and sustained patterns of motivation and activity in the development of a person that then acquired a momentum of their own (p. 284-5). Hamilton (1982) wrote that schools were a key component in the lives of adolescents, so the impact of the school organization on adolescent development needed to be explored. The school's influence on adolescents was different from that of family and peers because it was the first formal organization with rules and external expectations that the adolescents experienced (Hamilton). Schools facilitated or impeded adolescent development as adolescents solidified their view of themselves (Hill, 1982; Mergendoller, 1982). Furthermore, Newmann (1982) noted that challenge, with a "reasonable possibility of success" combined with "some risk of failure" to promote adolescent development was a key aspect of a developmentally productive environment.

Trending Toward a Competitive School Culture.

Competition has long been an integral part of the American education system since the Soviet Union launched Sputnik into space in 1957 (Cross, 2004). Over the decades, the countries with which the United States has competed have changed from the U.S.S.R in the 1950s to the Japanese in the 1980s to India and China in the 2010s, but the call for competition and quality continued to surge forward, followed by periods of access and equality (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The secondary school climate of the 2010s was one of competition and rigorous standards as the United States strove to compete in a global economy. On February 17, 2009, U.S. President Barrack Obama signed the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009* (ARRA), part of which included $4.35 billion for the *Race to the Top* (RTTT) grant competition. RTTT included a challenge to schools to implement rigorous standards and assessments to prepare students for a competitive 21st century economy and offered a reward in grant money to the top proposals (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2009). On June 2, 2010, the federal government released a voluntary set of Common Core Standards to ensure that students who attended American schools were ready for college and career and were able to compete in an international job market (USDE, 2010). Later in 2010, President Obama extended his *RTTT* competition to schools that implemented rigorous standards and assessments to prepare students for a competitive 21st century economy (The White House, 2010). As of 2011, 21 states, plus the District of Columbia, had received grants from the government to implement programs that raise academic standards, improve science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education and prepare

students for college and careers (USDE, 2011). Since 1957, educational policy in the U.S. has established a tradition of educational competition.

In addition to the impact of politics in creating a competitive educational environment, popular national publications such as *U.S. News and World Report* and *Newsweek* annually have ranked and rated American public schools each year based on their scores for state and Advanced Placement Assessments, as well as their ability to prepare all students for college (Morse, 2010). Some people argued that the practice of national rankings prompted schools to implement on a wider scale Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs and encouraged students to enroll in these courses for the sole purpose of competing with other schools (Matthews, 2006). School leaders risked students experiencing failure, frustration, and alienation when students began taking a course unprepared for the rigor and expectations therein (Sadler, 2010). Sadler (2010) also found that while College Board, the company that created the AP program, pushed for more AP options in more schools, the program reached a point of diminishing returns; while more students were taking AP courses, more students were not passing the AP exam at the end of the course. With a wider range of students taking AP or IB courses, research was needed to determine what school leaders can do to create a supportive, challenging academic environment and decrease the negative student stress.

The college admission process also contributed to the culture of competition. In the 2012 *State of College Admission* report, the National Association of College Admission Counseling reported that the number of high school graduates reached 3.34 million in 2008-2009 (Clinedinst, Hurley & Hawkins, 2012). While the researchers found a slight decline in the graduation rate between 2009-2012, researchers projected that there

will be 3.2 million graduates by 2018. Researchers predicted that the number of high school graduates will remain consistent through the year 2021 (Clinedinst, Hurley & Hawkins). The U.S. Department of Education surveyed the high school transcripts of students at 610 public schools and 130 private school and found that students took an average of 27.2 credits, compared to 23.6 credits in 1990 (Nord, et al, 2011). That is the equivalent of 420 additional hours of instruction and in more rigorous courses than their 1990 counterparts (Nord, et al). Furthermore, the number of ACT test takers rose by 45% and the number of SAT test takers rose by 27% between 2002-2011 (Clinedinst, Hurley & Hawkins). Additionally, the selectivity of colleges increased in 2009; this is especially evident at the most highly selective schools, i.e. those accepting fewer than 50% of applicants. In 2001, the average acceptance rate at four-year colleges was 71.3%. That rate dropped to 63.8% in 2009, creating the perception that college admissions were becoming more competitive. Between 2001 and 2011, the number of applications to college increased by 60%, partly due to growing numbers of high school graduates, but also because more students applied to more colleges. Seventy-nine percent of the freshman class of 2011 submitted three or more applications, and 29% applied to seven or more colleges, creating the perception of a more competitive college admission process at American colleges and universities. Admissions officers reported that grades in college prep classes, rigor of curriculum, and test scores were the top deciding factors for college admission; the essay, teacher recommendations were moderately important; extracurricular activities, work, and AP, IB, or SAT II subject test scores were of limited importance (Clinedinst, Hurley & Hawkins). However, the more selective universities valued the additional parts of the application more heavily because so many of their

applicants have similar grades and test scores (Clinedinst, Hurley & Hawkins). Because of the perception that college admissions were increasingly more competitive, students felt the pressure to take challenging courses and have high grades and test scores, along with large numbers of extracurricular activities and AP or IB courses to make themselves more appealing within the college admissions process. This perception of increased competition for college admission also led to the need for more research on what school leaders were or could be doing to create a more supportive school culture.

Effects of School Culture & Academic Stress on Adolescents.

Researchers found that schools could have a positive or a negative impact on adolescent development (Hill, 1982; Mergendoller, 1982). When school policies and practices clashed with adolescent needs, stressors were increased. For example, when adolescents felt forced into selecting a college or university while they were still developing their sense of self, they were prevented from experiencing the "creativity and expectations which [were] critical for adolescent development and well-being" (NACAC, 2009, p.6). Ultimately, because adolescents believed that others formulated their opinions about the adolescent based on whether or not they achieved, they felt compelled to achieve by passing tests, getting good grades, taking tough classes, becoming involved, and volunteering in order to have a successful future. This compulsion to achieve created a stressor for the students, because their focus was on the end result, not learning.

Factors Attributed to a Competitive School Culture.

Researchers and writers suggested that some educational practices and the competitive organization culture of schools might be contributing to student stress (Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009; Kohn, 2004; Pope, 2001). Because students are not

"walking bundles of cognitive personalities" (Metz, 1982, p. 109) or "robots," (Pope, 2001, p. 37) but they do spend a great portion of the day at school, more research needed to be done to examine how the traditional tenets of public schools might be contributing to adolescent stress. Deal and Peterson (2009) wrote that a school's culture could influence the emotional well-being of the staff, students and community. Maehr and Midgley (1996) conducted studies on school culture and focused on the tenets of schools that influence school culture including organizational goals, the roles of individuals within the organization, the technology available and used, the tasks asked of students, the grouping of students, status and how it is attained, and how time is organized. The policies and practices that Maehr and Midgley focused their research on were selected because these policies and practices had a direct effect on the students' beliefs about whether their school was focused on achievement or learning. Deal and Peterson focused on the symbolic aspects of culture; how architecture, decorations, leaders' actions, and routines create a shared attitude within an organization. The tenets studied by Maehr and Midgley and Deal and Peterson were considered for this study. However, since this study examined the role school leaders played in alleviating student stress through school culture, the study was limited to the tenets over which school leaders had predominant control. School leaders had an impact on school culture depending on how they prioritize budget, space, and time (Hoy & Miskel, 1991). The organizational goals, budget concerns, and the course offerings, which affect the grouping of students are often determined at a district wide level. The roles of individuals within the organization, the decorations within the building and the tasks asked of students were more dependent on the teachers. The community, student body, staff, or administration could impact status

and how it is attained. While the principal may have had input on the layout of a new school building, most school level administrators took a position in an already established building. Ultimately, the way school leaders organized time within the school day and the symbolic aspects of culture, like the actions of administrators and routines, were the items most likely to be influenced by the school leaders.

Impact of Time.

Maehr and Midgley (1996) wrote that the way schools have organized their time has influenced the culture of a school. A bell schedule rigidly enforced the way time was organized, typically into 45-50 minute blocks (Maehr & Midgely). The willingness or unwillingness of school leaders to alter the bell schedule for special events, and for what types of events, also influenced school culture (Maehr & Midgley). Furthermore, time spent "on task" had become a measure of successful instruction (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Beyond the structure of the schedule, the way students were scheduled into classes impacted the school culture. Sadler (2010) reported that with the push for more rigorous academics, there had been a drastic increase in the number of students taking AP courses. A veteran AP teacher from New York claimed that pushing students into higher level courses to attain higher national rankings was a disservice to students because there was a difference between a "bright student to be absorbed for hours working on a favorite subject…" and an average student "who struggles until two o'clock in the morning to master the massive amount of material of a course in which he has little interest" (Mathews, 2006, p. 63). It was this teacher's opinion that students were being pushed to take too rigorous of a course load, which was not in the best interest of the students (Mathews). Pope (2001) reported that at Faircrest, school leaders made purposeful

scheduling choices, like scheduling all AP science courses during the same time slot in order to prevent students from taking more than one AP science course in a year. However, despite some limitations, students were still encouraged to take honors and AP courses. In cases where students were not tracked, college bound students found themselves choosing courses based on how the grade in the course would enhance their transcripts for college (Pope, 2001), as opposed to selecting courses with a realistic idea of how much time will be required to be successful in the course.

In all classes, the curriculum is a guideline of what tasks a student should complete for each course. In some schools the curriculum was driven by assessment. Curriculum changes in a competitive environment, especially for courses that culminated with a high stakes test, usually led to teachers covering more content during the school year (Pickering, 2010). When students struggled with the material, they had to dedicate more time to practice and study after school hours (Mathews, 2006).

While faculty interaction or lack of interaction contributed to school culture (Maehr & Midgely, 1996), Pope (2001) reported that often teachers, and administrators failed to observe the emotional toll of academic stressors on the students because these students were either academically successful or were perceived as unmotivated, rather than anxious or stressed (Pope). Many teachers did not interact with other teachers outside of their department, due to time constraints and workload, which prevented them from discussing in common students and getting to know the whole student (Pope).

Traditionally, researchers considered play crucial to development of children and adolescents, relieving tension, encouraging interaction, inspiring creativity. It allowed for the acceptance of error, the pleasure of success, and the development of a sense of humor.

However, in light of pressure to achieve, the role of play in the educational environment had been marginalized (Deal & Peterson, p 246-7). For many students, their after school hours were also impacted by school responsibilities. Limited free time during the day meant that students were often doing homework during lunch or during other classes (Pope, 2001). Furthermore students reported that they were not getting enough sleep due to an abundance of homework (Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009; Pope, 2001). Kralovec and Buell (2005) reported that not only is homework exhausting and often completed dishonestly, but that it was the primary contributing factor of dropout rates. Painter (2011) reported that community groups, inspired by the documentary *Race to Nowhere* have campaigned to encourage school districts to "take back the break" and institute policies that limit homework on holiday breaks.

In addition to homework, when students were involved in an abundance of extracurricular activities, they reported a loss of valuable sleep (Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009; Pope, 2001). More research was needed to determine how a school's schedule, homework policy and extracurricular activities impacted students' stress.

Purpose

The American educational environment experienced a turn toward a competitive state, resulting in a plea for increased rigor in the classroom. This "do more and do it better" concept had contributed to a stressful school environment for adolescents. This had been shown to have negative or even tragic results for adolescents because of their developmental stage, when they are especially prone to internalizing the high expectations of others (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). A few studies were conducted in which the researcher showed that high achieving students dealt with academic stress

caused by the demands of a rigorous curriculum and extracurricular activities; however, none of these studies include average or low achieving students (Pope, 2001; Ryan, et al, 2007). School leaders have the opportunity to counteract these stressors because they have the power to shape school culture. Furthermore, those leaders need to understand how the students perceive the school's culture, specifically the scheduling of courses, organization of time, homework and workload policies, and extracurricular activities and its relation to academic stress. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how students experience their school's organizational culture, whether they perceived that experience as academically stressful, and how their perception compared to the perception of the school leadership.

Research Questions

How do adolescents perceive the academic expectations through the culture of their high school?

How do adolescents experience the culture of their high school?

How do adolescents experience the tenets of the school culture: scheduling of courses, time, and extracurricular activities during a typical day?

Is there a discrepancy between the perception of school culture, specifically related to stressors from the administrators' and the students' point of view?

Significance of Project

School leaders are responsible for shaping the culture of a school (Hoy & Miskel, 1991). This study was significant for school leaders to help them understand how their students perceived the time-related tenets of school culture and whether they had an

impact on academic stress. The results of this study would allow school leaders to make time-related changes that promote realistic, yet challenging, expectations for students and to create a school culture that is academically successful, not stressful. This would help school system administrators to make decisions on how to schedule teacher and student time. Additionally, this study would contribute to the research literature about schools in middle to upper class suburban neighborhoods and student stress that has been documented in books and documentaries like *The Overachievers, Doing School,* and *Race to Nowhere*, but has not been explored as in depth within the research community.

Methodology

Pope (2001) voiced a concern the student voice was not heard enough in educational research. Constructivism, according to Crotty (1998), focused on how the individual made meaning out of the world. Schwant (1994) wrote, constructivists 'are deeply committed to the …view that what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective' (as cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 57). Hystad, et al (2009) found their research supported the concept that an individual's perceptions were key in how he or she reacted to challenges. From this perspective it is important to hear the voices of the people most directly impacted by the rising national standards in education and the increasing competitiveness of college admissions: the students.

The researcher a basic interpretive qualitative study of the perceptions of high school students and school leaders to understand the student experience in education and explore if or how the tenets of school culture related to time contribute to student academic stress. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with five student participants and five school leaders at a high achieving high school. Student participants

from a range of academic achievement levels volunteered to discuss their experiences with academic stress. The researcher invited school leaders to participate if they make or had made decisions concerning scheduling, homework, extracurricular activities or other time-related school components at the school where the student participants attended. This included school leaders who were currently in place at the students' school during the time frame of the study and who were responsible for proposing, designing, enacting, or implementing the time-related school components on which this study will focus. Three interviews were held with each participant, and each interview lasted 20-30 minutes and was recorded for transcription and analysis.

Delimitations

This study included a sample of high school students, who had experienced academic stress, and school leaders who make or have made decisions concerning time-related components of the school day within a high achieving high school environment.

The setting of the study was a high achieving high school in an upper-middle to upper class neighborhood in suburban Northern Virginia. The researcher selected this school as the site of the study, not only because of its highly competitive academic environment, but also because it gave high stakes End of Course Assessments in fulfillment of the state-mandated graduation requirements, and offered and encouraged students to enroll in AP courses. The school had changed its master schedule at least once in the previous three years so that upperclassman and school leaders had experienced more than one type of schedule.

Limitations

Interviewing participants required the participants to speak honestly about their experiences with time, school culture, and academic stress. Students might have tempered their opinions based on what they thought adults wanted to hear. Students who volunteered could be outliers, not reflecting the experience of other high school students. School leaders who were vested in the changes they proposed and implemented might have been reluctant to critique them honestly. There was also a concern that because adolescents were so enmeshed in the culture of achievement within their respective school they might not have been able to discern what policies or practices contributed to their stress. Furthermore, students who disengaged or who avoided school as a result of stress were unlikely to volunteer to participate.

Definition of Key Terms

Stress: Ainslie, Shafer, and Reynolds (1996) defined stress as "a response which taxes, drains, and ultimately undermines the optimal functioning of an individual" (p. 920). They recognized that all situations where something important is at stake, especially when one's value is dependent upon his or her performance, leads to stress; however, it is an individual's ability to respond to it that can have a positive or negative impact. Jones and Ginesburg (2006) defined stress as a normal reaction, triggering an adrenaline rush, to help human beings in dangerous or difficult situations. Putwain (2007) pointed out that stress can be a cause or an effect and reminded researchers that it is important not to assume that a stressor will cause an equal amount of stress in each individual.

School Leaders: all building level administrators including the principal and assistant principal or principals and/or other faculty members who design, propose, enact, or implement decisions concerning schedules, extracurricular activities, workload, or other time-related components.

Academic Stress: stress caused by "the work students conduct as part of the normal school curriculum" (Putwain, 2007, p. 210): homework, preparation for exams, deadlines, college admissions. Academic stress comes from exams, excessive homework, poor academic performance, time management issues, competition with peers, and parents or teacher expectations (Burnett & Fanshawe, 1997; Leung, Yeung, Wong, 2009)

Test Anxiety: "feelings of tension and anxiety that interfere with the ability to communicate what one knows in a test situation" (Austin & Partridge, 1995, p. 1).

Flex time: a period of time within the school day where students have a choice as to where they would like to spend their time. At the site of the student, this flex time was used for academic purposes: remediation, enrichment, tutoring, make-up assignments or time to study or work on homework.

Advisory Period: A 20-minute period within the school day. Each advisory teacher was randomly assigned four or five students from each grade level for a total of 16-20 students in their advisory. During this time the teacher serves as a mentor to students. It also provides a time to complete administrative tasks without taking instructional time away from teachers.

Homework: Prior to the study the researcher conceptualized homework as any work completed outside the 90-minute class period, including reading, practice problems, projects, research, and studying. The study revealed that the student participants construed homework as two-type: valuable assignments (projects, papers, studying for exams) or busy work (worksheets, answering questions from the text).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter the researcher reviewed previous research related to the concept of academic stress, the competitive school culture, and the impact of school organization on adolescents. Academic stress is a student's reaction to the demands of a typical school curriculum (Putwain, 2007). While many researchers of academic stress focused primarily on students' reactions to assessment (Pickering, 2010; Hollingsworth, 2007; Ryan, et al, 2007; Wheeler, 2006; Mulvernon, Stegman, & Ritter, 2005), the purpose of this study was to explore what school culture, specifically relating to time during the day, had on the stress level of all high school students. While some studies focused on student perceptions of school culture or time or compared the perceptions of parents and students, teachers and students, or various faculty members, few studies examined the perceptions of the school administrators and the students about the school climate and stress (Hong, Wan & Peng, 2011; Mitchell, Bradshaw & Leaf, 2010; Richards, 2009; Tatar & Bekerman, 2009; Grant, et al, 2004; Kember; 2004).

Theoretical Foundation

Two theories, Socially Perscribed Perfectionism and Optimal Pressue Model, both dealt with imposing expectations and the resulting stress and helped to explain why educators need to address the issue of stress. Costanzo, Woody and Slater (1992) examined three sources of pressure: expectancy of success, intrinsic value of success and situational consequences of success and found that pressure created an inverted "U" shape in relation to performance. They found that both a lack of pressure and multiple pressure sources created a decrease in performance, while a single source of pressure

improved performance. Not only did the number of pressure sources have an influence, but the level of pressure did as well. Costanzo, Woody, and Slater built their Optimal Pressure Model theory from the theory of Humphreys and Revelle (1984) who surmised that over arousal leads to a decrease in available short-term memory and therefore, a decrease in academic achievement.

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism is the pressure to live up to others' expectations. Hewitt and Flett (1993) defined Socially Prescribed Perfectionism as "the belief that others are imposing perfectionist standards on the self" (p.58). Blatt (1995) wrote that these standards are high, and often unrealistic to attain. Socially prescribed perfectionists found themselves motivated by a fear of failure, whether they avoided participating in a class because they feared they would not know the correct answers, procrastinated to put off those feelings of failure or took a challenging course simply to prove that they were as good as others who took the course (Neumeister, 2006; Neumeister, 2004). Perfectionism combined with self-blame or distress could cause depression, and while some forms of perfectionism could have a positive impact, researchers believed that Socially Prescribed Perfectionism was maladaptive (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Researchers linked Socially Prescribed Perfectionism and depression (O'Conner, Rasmussen, & Hawton, 2010; Chang, et al, 2008; Cook, 2007; Hake, 2006; DeCicco, 2005; Klibert, et al, 2005; McCreary, et al, 2004; Stornelli, 1997; Hewitt & Flett, 1993; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Other researchers also linked Socially Prescribed Perfectionism to anxiety (Chang, et al, 2008; Cook, 2007; Klibert, et al, 2005; Klein, 2004; McCreary, et al, 2004; Stornelli, 1997), test anxiety (Stoeber, Feast, & Hayward, 2009), social anxiety

(Laurenti, Bruch, & Haase, 2008), low self-esteem (Klibert, et al, 2005), low self-confidence (Stoeber, Feast, & Hayward, 2009), lack of motivation (DiCicco; Dykstra, 2006; Klibert, et al, 2005), suicide proneness (Klibert, et al, 2005), shame and guilt (Klibert, et al, 2005), loneliness (Chang, et al, 2008), lower GPA (Dykstra, 2006; Bull, 1997; Stornelli, 1997), and disordered eating (Bardone-Cone, 2007; Chang, et al, 2007a). According to Hill, Zrull, and Turlington (1997) men who had Socially Prescribed Perfectionism tended to be more emotionally distant, controlling, aggressive, and manipulative, while women were socially anxious, embarrassed, gullible, overly generous, permissive, attention-seeking, too self-disclosing, and were unable to be alone. Both genders tended to be controlling, distrustful, and were less empathetic than their peers. Chang, et al, (2008) theorized that individuals with Socially Prescribed Perfectionism linked acceptance with perfection and interpreted requests from others as demands.

Family relationships also played a role in a child's development of Socially Prescribed Perfectionism. Cook (2007) assessed 97 children and their parents for perfectionism and found when parents had overly high expectations for their children, and withheld approval until those expectations were met, or who were self-oriented perfectionists, meaning they put the pressure on themselves rather than felt the pressure from others themselves, their children were more likely to become perfectionists, as well. However, boys who had mothers who were socially prescribed perfectionists themselves were typically not perfectionists, perhaps because their mothers wanted to shield their children from the pressure they faced or the boys associated stressing over others' expectations with unhappiness. While parent influences alone were not likely to produce

socially prescribed perfectionists, other influences made that more likely. Klein (2004) had 106 Division 1 athletes complete a series of questionnaires, scales, and inventories to assess anxiety, perfectionism, and parent and peer attachment and found that as attachment to parents increased, the level of Socially Prescribed Perfectionism decreased.

Cook (2007) wrote that adolescents faced pressure from peers, teachers, and school. Some associated respect with accomplishments, which reinforced the perfectionist tendencies. However, the students, teased for their accomplishments, were more likely to disengage. Stoeber, Kempe, and Keogh (2008) found that perfectionists felt high levels of pride when successful, but also felt more shame in failures. However, Stoeber and Yang (2010) found socially prescribed perfectionists felt less satisfied regardless of the outcome of their endeavors. One researcher, Bull (1997) linked Socially Prescribed Perfectionism to low self-esteem and GPA, and theorized that more students with low GPA's experience Socially Prescribed Perfectionism because more pressure was placed on them to improve than their high achieving peers.

Effects of Stress on Adolescents

Grant, et al (2004) conducted a review of existing research on stressors and their effects on children and adolescents, and found that 88% of the research studies linked stressors to psychopathology. Stroud, et al (2009) compared the physical and emotional effect of stress on 39 children, ages 7-12, and 42 adolescents, ages 13-17 during several scenarios. They looked at performance stressors, giving a speech and completing math problems in front of the class, and social stressors, being rejected by a peer. They found adolescents showed a significantly greater physical response to stress than the children did. They also self-reported a greater negative emotional effect in performance conditions

than during social conditions. Researchers speculated that the performance stressors could have evoked a defeated response, whereas, the response was more defensive during the social stressors. Rao (2008) surveyed 588 twelfth grade students and found that students experienced the pressure of academics in various ways: some experienced stress or depressive symptoms, while other experienced anxiety. Akram and Kahn (2012) studied 400 senior secondary students and found that academic stress did not have an effect on the students' problem solving abilities while taking the PSAT. Putwain (2007) explained that while the demands of the school curriculum were the stressors, students experienced a variety of reactions to those stressors.

Luthar (2013) wrote that much research established a link between low socioeconomic status and stress, however, she noted there is a significant amount of maladjustment in teenagers with a high socioeconomic status. According to her research there are comparable levels of substance abuse, criminal behavior, depression, anxiety, and sleep issues between the two groups, and she suggested that privileged youth are more vulnerable today than in previous generations.

Positive Impact of Stress.

Most research on stress deals with its negative impact, although there has been some research on the positive outcomes of stressful situations (Karlson, Dybdahl, & Vittersø, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Armeli, Gunthert, & Cohen, 2001). Linley and Joseph (2004) reviewed 39 studies that focused on the positive changes in individuals who suffered from trauma and adversity and termed this phenomenon "adversarial growth" (p. 11). The researchers noted that the greater the amount of time that had elapsed since the trauma, the more adversarial growth that was reported. Karlsen,

Dybdahl, and Vittersø (2006) examined the effect of stress on 142 veterans. They learned that stress can be beneficial and allow psychological growth if individuals cope in a problem-focused manner. It can also lead to a low sense of well-being, most often associated with individuals who coped through avoidance. Armeli, Gunthert & Cohen (2001) surveyed 447 college alumni and 472 college students about stress and found that those who experienced the most stressful events also reported the most growth, if they had support and coping strategies; however, less growth was reported by students and alumni who had moderate stress but few resources or maladaptive coping strategies.

Negative Impact of Stress.

Anxiety.

Researchers have linked academic stress to anxiety (Leung, Yeung, and Wong, 2010; Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009; Pope & Simon, 2005; Pope, 2001). Klein (2004) also linked pressure from others to succeed in athletics with anxiety and a fear of negative evaluation by family, teammates, and coaches. While some students learned to adapt to a high-pressure academic environment, other students felt anxious due to the competition and manipulation that occurs to become a successful student (Pope, 2001).

Kaplan, Robbins, and Martin (1983) surveyed 7,618 seventh grade students and followed up with an interview nine years after the initial survey. They examined the antecedents of psychological distress in young adults and found that while individuals typically tended to focus on positive perspectives of themselves and minimize the negative, an experience of rejection by family or peers or the failure to meet new expectations, could cause psychological distress ten years later. Anxiety also interfered with an individual's cognition and ability to focus attention (Sarason, 1981).

Luthar and D'Avanzo (1999) conducted a survey of 488 tenth grade students and compared suburban and urban youth and found anxiety levels for suburban youth were significantly higher. This surprised the researchers who knew that the urban youth dealt with issues like poverty, racism, and exposure to violence. The researchers interviewed the suburban youth and their administrators who attributed the anxiety to the pressure to excel in academics and extracurricular activities.

Pickering (2010) interviewed nine middle school teachers from western New York about the impact of NCLB and learned that the teachers believed that more students were exhibiting test anxiety. One teacher explained a domino effect of test anxiety, stating the stress started with administrators, then fell to teachers, and then to students. Segool (2009) assessed 335 elementary school students in suburban Michigan and found students to be more anxious and stressed over standardized tests than over regular classroom tests, as reported by both the students and their teachers.

In a study conducted by Cade (2007), 27% of 3,000 American School Counselor Association members from across the United States reported seeing students often for test anxiety, 69% said they see students for test anxiety periodically, while only 14% said they never saw students for test anxiety. The symptoms that counselors saw most frequently and attributed to test anxiety were going blank, stomach symptoms, sleeping problems, and heart palpitations. Counselors observed that truancy and inability to concentrate occurred just as frequently, but they did not attribute them to test anxiety as often. Finally, counselors concluded that testing was a source of concern for students and that the pressure to perform and frequency of test anxiety cases were increasing. Pearson (2009) interviewed six sophomore students from an academically successful Colorado

school district and found that students with test anxiety experienced upset stomachs and brain freeze.

Nicholson (2009) gave the Test Anxiety Inventory, a 20-item Likert-type scale, to 200 eleventh grade students from a Catholic high school in Tennessee and found that 63.5% had low test anxiety, 30% had average test anxiety, and 13% had high test anxiety before the PSAT/NMSQT. However, the researcher did not give the test anxiety inventory again before the ACT, which is a test with more implications for the test takers future, leaving the reader to wonder if the results of the Test Anxiety Inventory would have been different for a higher stakes test. When the researcher gave the Test Attitude Survey to 33 repeat ACT takers, from the original 200 study participants, the students responded that they did not like the tense, high stakes pressure of testing.

Cade (2007) surveyed 541 school counselors about the causes of text anxiety. Counselors attributed parental expectations, student self-expectations, and low self-esteem as the prominent sources for test anxiety (Cade, 2007). In this particular study, the researchers did not list "school expectations" as a choice on the survey, which might or might not have been an additional prominent cause of test anxiety.

Depression.

Studies have linked depression with academic stress, although researchers have found that that linkage becomes weaker with strong social support (MacGeorge, Sampter, & Gillihan, 2005). Ang and Huan (2006) connected academic stress with both depression and thoughts of suicide. Individuals who felt pressured by others to maintain high standards were more likely to be depressed (Hake, 2006). Individuals who failed to meet the high expectations of self and others had lower self-esteem (Leung, Yeung, & Wong, 2009; Liu, Kaplan, & Risser, 1992). Rao (2008) surveyed 588 senior students in India

who reported that academic stress made them doubt their abilities to perform well in school. Pope and Simon (2005) found students reported feeling depressed when they realized that by earning a "B," an above-average grade, they might be at a disadvantage in the highly competitive world of college admissions. Trudeau (2009) surveyed 225 students and interviewed 25 students from both selective and non-selective high schools and found that students considered a "C" to be a bad grade, and earning bad grades led to feelings of disappointment, panic, sadness, low self-esteem, and embarrassment. While 64% of the students reported learning from their mistakes after receiving the bad grade, the other 36% let those negative emotions linger. Ross and Broh (2000) surveyed 24,599 eighth grade students from over 1,000 public, private, and parochial schools throughout the United States and found that if students believed that their academic success was a matter of luck or in the hands of powerful people rather than their own effort, then their grades and test scores suffered; however, if they did well as a result of their own actions then their self-esteem improved. Conner, Pope and Galloway (2010) wrote that 24% of 3,645 students from high achieving schools in California that they interviewed reported feeling depressed within the last month. Furthermore, 7% of those students confessed to cutting themselves. According to Brown (2008), who surveyed 875 children, 25% of those children had hurt themselves when stressed or upset by banging their heads or hitting, biting, burning or cutting themselves. Simmons and Blyth (1987) reported that the school environment has an effect on the students' sense of well-being. Adolescents, especially girls, showed a decline in participation in school activities, self-esteem, and achievement after transferring from a small elementary school to a larger, more impersonal middle school and this decline followed them through high school.

Kadison (2004) surveyed 200 directors of college counseling centers and reported that while cases of depression and thoughts of suicide were a major concern on college campuses, many afflicted students did not seek help because they did not realize they had a problem, or were too proud to ask for help. These might also be factors preventing high school students from asking for help.

Anger.

One study found anger to be the emotional response to stress. Nazer-Bloom (2005) spent time in an upper middle class high school to study student stress and their coping mechanisms. Her first step was to run focus groups to learn about what stressed these students and discovered that not only were students feeling overwhelmed with academics, especially when combined with family stress, as well, they were reacting to that feeling with anger. One female student claimed the demanding schedule, expectations of family and teachers, and lack of free time contributed to her anger. When asked how she coped with stress, another female student responded, "crying and being really over-dramatic, hitting and breaking things" (Nazer-Bloom, 2005, p. 70). Other girls claimed to break things, insult others, and pick fights with others.

Self-Medication.

In order to cope with academic stress, students are turning to illegal drugs or alcohol either to give them the extra boost of energy needed to complete their tasks or to temporarily escape from those demands. Conner, Pope and Galloway (2010) found that in a one-month period 24% of the 3,645 students they interviewed had used legal stimulants and 8% had used illegal stimulants to help them stay up to study. Hall, et al (2005) surveyed 381 college students from a Midwestern university and reported that college students used illegal stimulants to stay awake to study, to be alert during testing, and for

partying, but only 14% of the students interviewed felt the stimulants had a long term positive effect on their academics.

Some students reported using alcohol to escape (Way, et al, 1994; Conner, Pope & Galloway, 2010). Lyons (2004) found high school students are more likely to drink alcohol if they are unhappy at school. Luthar and D'Avanzo (1999) found suburban youth attributed their substance abuse to psychological distress more frequently than their urban peers.

Academic Dishonesty.

Pope (2005) shadowed five of the "best and brightest" (p. 2) students at an academically competitive affluent public California high school and found that successful students reported resorting to cheating and manipulation to get good grades. These students created alliances with adults, worked on homework in one class for another, complained fervently to get a better grade or simply resorted to cheating (Pope, 2005). Conner, Pope, and Galloway (2010) found that 95% of juniors and seniors in their survey of 3,645 students from high achieving schools in California had cheated at least once. Trudeau (2009) interviewed eight students from a non-selective high school, and when asked for additional comments, one of the students reported widespread cheating.

Disengagement.

Kaplan, Liu, and Kaplan (2005) found that in order to avoid the feeling of rejection at school, students became less vested in the system and lost motivation to achieve. Eccles and Midgely (1990) referred to two different theories that explain students' disinterest in school. The first was the cumulative stress theory, which provided that puberty and transition in education compounded stress leading to a lack of motivation for students. The second is the Person-Environment fit theory, which provided

that mental health, and motivational problems occurred when the environment did not meet a person's needs. If a school setting was not developmentally appropriate, i.e., the standards were too high or the teacher was not supportive enough, this led to a student's lack of motivation.

Several researchers specifically linked the increase of standardized testing due to NCLB to increased testing anxiety (Hollingsworth, 2007, Conner, Pope & Galloway, 2010). Hollingsworth (2007) surveyed 749 students from two different California high school communities and discovered that students did not react with anxiety to teacher stress about standardized testing, as was expected, instead they disengaged. One student in the study by Conner, Pope, and Galloway said, "I get emotionally stressed and have breakdowns, or I go the completely opposite way and stop caring" (p.56). Additionally Hollingsworth also learned that teachers tended to resort to rote teaching methods to prepare students for standardized testing, which also led to student disengagement.

Students experienced disengagement due to academic stress outside of the classroom, as well. Trudeau (2009) interviewed one student who claimed the fear of not being accepted into a college was so overwhelming he or she just stopped trying. Golden (2009) studied 285 junior and seniors from a central Tennessee high school and found that students who fell within the range of introvert on the Myers Brigg Personality Assessment tended to disengage due to the stress of the college search and application process. The college search process was a very social one; everyone wanted information about where the student was applying, and an introvert would be uncomfortable with the attention. During the application process the student was presenting themselves to the university in the hopes that he or she would be accepted, also opened up the opportunity

for rejection. Additionally, the introvert also had fewer resources to talk through the stress, research has shown that, having a social support network is an important key to alleviating academic stress (Kaplan, Lui, & Kaplan, 2005; MacGeorge, Sampter, & Galloway, 2005; Klein, 2004.)

Poor Health Habits/Lack of Sleep.

Adolescents need 9.25 hours of sleep each night, and without that amount of sleep risk lapses in memory and attention, depression, and slowed reaction time (Carskadon, 1999). Vollmer, et al (2011) found that students who were "evening types" were more vulnerable to stressors. The researchers explained that adolescents tend to become more evening-oriented during puberty. The "evening types" have more difficulty coping with the expectations at school because they are often fatigued during the school day. Pope (2001) shadowed five high achieving students at an affluent California high school and found that students were exhausted and stressed, sacrificing sleep, healthy eating habits, and exercise to study. Foust, Hertberg-Davis, and Callahan (2009) interviewed 84 students from four high schools with AP or IB programs and found lack of sleep to be a major problem among high achieving students. Astill, et al (2013) conducted a repeated measures study with 28 secondary school students and found that students average about 7.38 hours of sleep during school breaks; they averaged almost an hour less of sleep during the regular school week but sleep more efficiently. However, during exam weeks the students slept almost an hour and 20 minutes less and the quality of the sleep decreased.

Pope (2001) shadowed five high achieving students at an affluent California high school and found some students reported frequent illness due to little sleep and poor eating habits, stomach problems and a potential ulcer due to stress. Weight loss was

another result of the stress (Rao, 2008). Richards (2009) observed a committee to examine stress in a suburban high school and found that while committee participants might not have initially connected their health issues to stress, with education about stress, they did make the connection. Rao (2008) wrote that some of the 24 students he interviewed also reported headaches, although few attributed them to school stress. Hystad, et al (2009) and MacGeorge, Sampter, and Gillihan (2005) found an association with academic stress and physical ailments. Conley and Lehman (2010) studied 99 undergraduate students who experienced significant elevations in systolic blood pressure during times of acute academic stress, which could put students at risk for future health issues.

Trudeau (2009) interviewed a student who claimed to stay up late studying for days before a big test. Rao (2008) found that students were not getting enough sleep because that would mean they did not have enough time to finish all of their homework. Six hours seemed to be the maximum amount of sleep for most of the 24 students he interviewed. Foust, Hertberg-Davis, and Callahan (2009) interviewed a student who said, "Six out of my seven days are home doing my homework until, like, four in the morning" (p. 305). Foust, Hertberg-Davis, and Callahan (2009) interviewed 84 AP and IB students who acknowledged that in order to maintain a heavy workload and a social life they willingly sacrificed sleep, despite the consequences.

The Impact of a Competitive School Culture

Conner, Pope, and Galloway (2010) collected information from 3,645 students from seven California high schools with high academic performance. Grades, college admission, school work, and standardized tests were major stressors for these students.

Seventy percent of the students reported feeling stressed out about academics all the time or most of the time. Just over half of the students admitted they worried about grades, tests and college acceptance. Pope (2001) interviewed five students at Faircrest High School, an academically successful public high school in California, who were deemed to be the best and brightest by the school counselor. These students maintained high grade point averages (GPAs) and test scores, and received accolades for extracurricular accomplishments. However, the researcher learned that students were having negative emotional reactions, such as worry, anxiety, depression, stress, anger and obsession over grades and were making uncomfortable choices such as cheating, arguing for grades, and sucking up as they attempted to be successful in school. Students were having a hard time balancing school and their personal lives, often sacrificing their health and time with family and friends to study. One interviewee equated being a student to being a robot. Another described high school as "a way of building up tolerance for stress" (Pope, 2001, p. 156).

The Impact of Time on a Competitive School Culture

Prisoners of Time (2005), a report by the National Education Commission on Time and Learning originally published in 1994 and rereleased in 2005, reported that American students were "captives of clock and calendar" (p. 5). They stated the majority of students are in school 180 days a year or nine months of the year. They are typically in school from 7:30 a.m. to 2:15 p.m or 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., spending an average of 51 minutes in each class. In contrast to the competition from countries like India or China, "we expect them to learn as much as their counterparts abroad in only half the time" (*Prisoners of Time*, p. 5). It was also noted that some students took three to six times

longer than their peers to learn the material, meaning struggling students were penalized with bad grades because they could not keep pace with their peers. Students in the middle were also considered victims of time, because their teachers focused their attention on the highest and lowest achieving students, not making time for those in the middle. Pope (2001) also noted the impact of time in her case study, stating the typical day in a school system was broken down into six or seven periods a day for less than an hour each, students were tracked into course levels, and success was determined by grades and class ranks, feeding the pressure of competition.

Pickering (2010) found that the implementation of No Child Left Behind had an impact on how teachers managed time during the school day. The researcher interviewed nine teachers about the impact of high stakes testing on day-to-day instruction. Eight out of nine teachers believed there was an increase in the pace of instruction (Pickering).

Juster, Ono, and Stafford (2004) found students spent more time in school and studying in 2002-2003 than in 1981-1982. Pearson (2009) interviewed six students and learned that they had to make tough choices concerning academic load, extracurricular activities and elective classes, often sacrificing enjoyable non-academic activities to keep up with studying and schoolwork. Students spent a large portion of their day involved in schoolwork, and averaged 3.07 hours of homework per night, although 25% of the students reported spending six or more hours. In order to complete their homework, 60.9% admitted they had to miss time with family and friends, and 60.3% had to drop out of a fun activity to focus on schoolwork (Connor, Pope, & Galloway, 2010). Foust, Hertberg-Davis, and Callahan (2008) interviewed 84 students at four high schools that offered AP or IB programs and found that Advanced Placement (AP) and International

Baccalaureate (IB) students were willing to deal with the stress in order to maintain academic rigor and a social life. Students reported that they worked through lunch and during less challenging classes on schoolwork, and often sacrificed extracurricular activities and time with friends and family. The researchers reported that while students recognized benefits of taking challenging coursework, such as pride and bonding with classmates, they also dealt with negative perception from peers, a heavy workload, lack of sleep, and stress.

Galloway and Pope (2007) conducted a survey of 496 ninth through twelfth grade students from a public school and a private all-girls school in an upper middle class neighborhood and found that students averaged 3.04 hours of homework a night, while the range was from 0 to 8 hours. They also found that 77.4% of the students reported stress-related physical symptoms. Of the students who worked more than 3.5 hours a night on homework, 77.9% had dropped an extracurricular activity to keep up with school work. Additionally 70.2% of the students felt exhausted, and 28.9% gained weight (Galloway & Pope).

Rice, Leever, Christopher and Porter (2006) surveyed 608 college students residing in an honors residence at a large, southern public institution. They assessed the participants for perfectionist tendencies and perceived stress and found that at the end of the semester there was a stronger correlation between perfectionism and the effects of perceived stress at the end of the semester, than at the beginning. The researchers noted that the end of the semester brings a greater focus on achievement.

Adolescents experienced heightened effects of stress, both academic and social, because they have little time to relax (Richards, 2009). Zuzanek (2009) used data from

the 2001 and 2003 Survey of Adolescent Time Use and Well-Being Study from which researchers gave 219 adolescents in Ontario a beeper and asked the participants to record what they were doing, where and with whom, in addition to how they felt at that moment when they were beeped 8 times a day. Zuzanek concluded that increased homework load did not make kids unhappy but did alleviate boredom, increased anxiety, loneliness and depression. Students reported poor sleep and eating habits, and parents who were too tired themselves to help with the completion of homework. While the homework itself was not stressful, the time management associated with the homework completion was stressful.

Dickeson (2001) surveyed 75 high achieving students in Indiana about their educational experience. Students responded teachers had the biggest impact, positive or negative; however, other positive aspects were the challenging AP courses, the supportive atmosphere, the flexibility of course offerings at the school or at home, and a variety of extracurricular activities. Other negative aspects were too many course requirements at the expense of electives, and personal stress due to lack of time. The researcher asked students what changes they would like to see in the curriculum, and they responded with a request for more advanced courses, less homework, flexible class schedules and more hand-on learning. Finally when asked what other changes they would like to see, one student wrote in a request to push back the school start time.

In countries with reputations for higher academic standards, adolescents faced the same stress-related issues (Rao, 2008; Riley, 2003). Rao (2008) surveyed 558 students and interviewed 24 students during their senior year in Chennai, India. The researcher

found that 77.5% of the students felt their senior year was stressful. Students spent most of their hours of the day in both structured and unstructured study.

In addition to the impact of the academic workload, another part of the problem was that educators did not immediately recognize the impact of stress because their students are succeeding academically. Pope (2001) found that teachers often did not get to know the whole student due to limited time, extensive curriculum, and the students desire to only let the teacher see a certain side of his or her personality. This inhibited teachers from being able to see the emotional effects of stress on students. In a study comparing the anxiety and substance abuse patterns of urban and suburban youth, Luthar and D'Avanzo (1999) conducted a study of 224 urban students and 264 suburban students in the Northeast and asked the teachers of these students to rate their students. The researchers found suburban youth were more likely to report substance abuse, anxiety, and days absent from school, yet teachers rated the suburban students more positively than they rated their urban peers.

School-related activities beyond the classroom were identified as contributing to student stress, and as a result many students dropped extracurricular activities to focus on academics (Connor, Pope, & Galloway, 2010; Pearson, 2009; Galloway & Pope, 2007). Richards (2009) interviewed a parent who commented that most students struggled with stress, and another parent who believed that there was too much stress caused by school, especially for the student athletes (Richards, 2009). However in a study conducted by the College Board, Everson and Millsap (2005) evaluated the SAT scores of student athletes who graduated from high school in 1995. The Student Descriptive Questionnaire that students complete when registering for the SAT identified the student athletes. Students

involved in extracurricular activities had higher SAT scores and the achievement gaps common in ethnic and gender groups decreased amongst student athletes, supporting the idea that participation in these extracurricular activities was valuable.

Some school leaders attempted to alter the traditional school schedules into block schedules attempting to alleviate some of the issues in education (Zepeda & Mayers, 2006; Veal & Flinders, 2001). Zepeda and Mayers looked at 14 studies examining the impact of block scheduling through the eyes of administrators, teachers, parents and students. They found that school leaders implemented block scheduling in an attempt to increase rigor. The researchers reported that after the implementation, there was less teacher stress, better student attendance, fewer student discipline problems, and higher achievement, but none of the studies examined the impact on student stress. Six of the 14 studies looked at student perceptions, but only one was qualitative. From the student's perspective, block scheduling gave them more time for in-depth learning, better grades, and more teacher support. Overall, the reviews of the block schedule were positive, but did not address the issue of student stress. Veal and Flinders (2001) surveyed teachers, parents and students and found that students experienced less stress in a block schedule than they had the previous year following a traditional schedule.

Suggestions for improvement

Some school leaders and educators recognized the impact of academic stress and have implemented plans to help alleviate student stress (Connor, Pope, & Galloway, 2010; Richards, 2009; Trudeau, 2009; Cade, 2007; Pope & Simon, 2005). Trudeau (2009) asked 24 students what would help reduce anxiety related to testing and the students responded with reduced workload, more assignments as opposed to tests,

coordination throughout the school of major tests, diversifying teaching methods and less competition amongst the students for grades. Kadison (2004) suggested the following for dealing with the mental health needs of students: provide immediate access to care, implement wellness and stress management programs, work with staff and local hospitals to coordinate care, peer counselors, get information out to students. Conner, Pope, and Galloway (2010) wanted to make it clear that they were not advocating a watered down curriculum, but felt that students could be better served with fewer transitions during the school day, more downtime, staff training in stress reduction, reducing the weight of exams or replacing them with projects, and spacing out exams. Struthers, Perry, and Menec (2000) determined through their research that if instructors encouraged good study skills and time management, it would help alleviate student stress.

At Wheatley High School, the faculty created a committee dedicated to the task of reducing student stress. In turn, the committee created an action plan. Included in the action plan were the following strategies: communicating with the faculty and community, reducing testing during the midterm period, making lunch mandatory, equip teachers to include stress reduction strategies into their classroom. While long-term effects were still undetermined, staff became more empathetic of student stress and felt empowered to help (Pope & Simon, 2005).

Richards (2009) implemented a committee to examine stress in a suburban high school. The committee found that students desired to be more involved in the definition of success and that rigor should not be based on an amount of work and pacing of the class but high expectations. Cade (2007) polled counselors who implemented programs

training teachers and working with parents to reduce testing anxiety in their schools. Popular strategies included study skills, test prep and relaxation techniques.

Another unique suggestion focused on the physical environment of the school. Matsuoka (2008) found that the environment of a school influences student performance. By providing students access to elements of nature, views of vegetation through windows or fresh air at lunch, student stress is reduced and students perform better academically

Finally, having social support, whether it is family, school personnel, or peers, can help alleviate the impact of stress. The data in a study by Klein (2004) suggested that athletes' feared negative evaluations from their parents less if they felt more attached to their parents. Other researchers have found that when a student felt attached to his or her school, GPAs went up (Williams, 2007) and school related stress decreased (Kaplan, Lui, & Kaplan, 2005). MacGeorge, Sampter, and Gillihan (2005) suggested that social support might help alleviate stress for students.

Colleges and universities train professors and resident assistants to identify the signs of psychological distress. Some work to raise awareness of mental-health services, while others conduct wellness programs. Harvard provides free massages to students in the dorms and runs a program called "Caring for the Harvard Community" each spring (Young 2003). Princeton University created a Bridge Program, which allowed freshman to spend a year abroad doing volunteer work. One of the four benefits of the program was that students had a break from the pressure of academic life (Cliatt, 2008). Stanford University School of Education created the Challenge Success program that worked with secondary schools to create site-based programs that reduce student stress (Conner, Pope, and Galloway, 2009).

Conclusion

The current research on high achieving students and schools revealed that academics, and the expectations that students will achieve in a rigorous curriculum, were capable of causing high levels of stress in adolescents. These stressors caused students to feel anxious, depressed, angry, and disengaged, and to turn to unethical or unhealthy tactics such as cheating, taking illegal drugs, or sacrificing sleep, in order to cope with the pressure they are facing. Since America's schools are under pressure to raise curriculum standards, the question is what could be done or what is being done to help counteract these negative consequences? School leaders have little control over some of the elements of school culture; however, they can influence how time is spent during the seven-hour school day and implement policies that impact the time spent on homework or extracurricular activities. In turn, those decisions can affect the culture of the school, making it successful, not stressful.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND RATIONALE

Design

The researcher conducted a basic interpretive qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews with students and school leaders about the educational experience. The researcher selected this approach because stress is a complicated emotion and to truly understand if or how educational policies and practices contribute to academic stress, the voices of the students needed to be heard in educational research. School culture directly affected the students (Maehr & Midgley, 1996). While there had been a lot of research on education, few studies involved the perspective of the students (Pope, 2001; Seidman, 1998). Furthermore, while few studies on school culture focused on the student perspective or examined the differences in perceptions between administration and faculty or faculty and students, fewer examined whether there was a difference in perception between school leaders and students (Hong, Wan & Peng, 2011; Kember; 2004; Mitchell, Bradshaw & Leaf, 2010; Richards, 2009; Tatar & Bekerman, 2009; Grant, et al, 2004).

The researcher considered both a qualitative and a quantitative approach; however, she decided the quantitative approach could not adequately capture the true student experience. Variations in definitions of academic stress made pinpointing it in a survey very difficult; furthermore, the participants might not have recognized the information sought by the researcher in the same way (Putwain, 2007). Creswell (2007) acknowledged that for some studies "quantitative measures and analysis of statistics do not… fit the problem" (p. 40). Therefore, the researcher decided to use a basic,

interpretive qualitative approach. Interviews with open-ended questions allowed for the student to share his or her experience with academic stress without getting caught up in labels and definitions, and allowed the researcher to find commonalities within the student experiences, in addition to comparing the students' perceptions with those of school leaders.

A basic, interpretive qualitative study was consistent with constructivist epistemology of the researcher's study. Constructivists believed that the truth was derived from each individual's perspective and how he or she makes meaning of his or her experiences (Crotty, 1998). In a basic, interpretive qualitative study, the researcher acknowledged that there were multiple interpretations of a single event, which meant there were multiple realities (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the researcher explored a topic that had not been widely researched; therefore, there was no established knowledge base. The researcher aimed to describe, understand, and interpret the experience (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the researcher wanted to develop an understanding of how the tenets of school culture related to time impacted academic stress. The researcher looked at commonalities across the participants' descriptions of their experiences with time, school culture, and academic stress and developed a composite description of the shared experience (Creswell, 2007) as well as compared the perceptions of time, school culture, and academic stress between students and school leaders.

Researcher Reflexivity Statement

According to Gelgin (2010) qualitative researchers needed to be aware of the personal and professional meaning they derived from their research and the influence that the experience of the participants, audience, and stakeholders have on the research

processes before choosing the subjects, during the interview process, during the writing, and when applying the findings to the practice. Gelgin wrote that by engaging in personal reflection and discussions with others and sharing relevant information with the audience, the researchers increased their accountability. In this study, the researcher, a school counselor, chose to research academic stress after counseling students who were struggling to manage academic stress. During the course of the study, the researched changed jobs and returned to the classroom. The researcher was working as an English teacher at the study site while conducting interviews. The researcher found herself evaluating and even altering her own teaching practices as a result of the interviews. Constant personal reflections and conversations with her chairperson, allowed the researcher time to reflect on how the research was having an impact on the researcher. As a faculty member at the study site, she felt responsible for sharing the students' voices with other faculty members and school leaders at the study site.

Sample

In a basic interpretive qualitative study, certain criteria are essential for selecting participants, but unlike quantitative research, there is no minimum or maximum number for the sample size (Merriam, 2009). The number of participants must be enough to satisfy the purpose of the study and interviews should be held until the point of saturation is achieved (Merriam, 2009).

The population was all high school students who attended a public high school with a rigorous, academically competitive environment, typically in an middle or upper class, suburban setting. The researcher selected the study site because the high school had attained success academically, athletically, and artistically. Within the local community

the average income was $120,000.00 a year per household; 68.5% of the residents had earned a Bachelor's Degree, and 34% earned a graduate or professional degree (Citi-Data, 2013). The school selected offered an AP Diploma Program and operated on a block schedule. Furthermore, the school leaders had implemented and junior and senior students had experienced at least two different schedules with varying lengths of class periods and arrangements of flex time during their tenure as students at this school. The school had been academically successful, with a 96% to 98% pass rate on the high stakes assessments in English, math, and history (*School Profile*, 2013). The average SAT score in 2010 was 1770, which is above the national average of 1500. Of the over 2,000 students enrolled in the school, 40% took at least one AP course, 100% of those students took the AP exam and 89% of those students scored a 3 or above on the AP exam. The AP program incorporated rigor for academically talented students, while the state mandated tests were graduation requirements, which added pressure for struggling students. In addition to the study site's academic success, the school profile stated the Performing Arts Department, school newspaper, yearbook, and literary magazine had been recognized for their successful programs and the athletic program was highly competitive. Even the front of the building boasted of the state championships and awards won by various sports teams, the marching band, and the journalism department.

For the sample in this study, ten participants volunteered from the student body and school leadership of a high achieving high school that had high stakes assessments as a graduation requirement, and that offered and encouraged students to take Advanced Placement courses. The researcher solicited volunteers by visiting advisory classes and explaining the study (see Appendix F for the advisory period transcript). The researcher

asked students to volunteer if they had experienced academic stress and were willing to talk about it. The advisory teachers gave the names of potential volunteers to the researcher. The student participants who volunteered were from a range of academic achievement levels. As an employee of the school the researcher first approached school leaders who she knew had made decisions concerning scheduling, homework, extracurricular activities, or other time-related school components or who worked with academically stressed students. The researcher used a snowballing technique to procure additional names. From the 11 school leaders approached, seven agreed to participate. The researcher limited the number of school leaders to an amount equal to the students, eliminating 2 school leaders who held the same position as one school leader who had previously volunteered. The researcher interviewed current or former school to validate the information shared by the students, as part of the triangulation, and to compare perceptions of the school culture with those of their students.

The researcher excluded from this study any volunteers who were current or former students or who might potentially be students in the researcher's class to avoid the undue influence of an authoritative figure. Furthermore, the researcher also had no supervisory or other authority over any of the interviewed school leaders.

Instrumentation

The researcher collected data via semi-structured interviews. The researcher interviewed the participants because interviews were necessary to learn how individuals interpreted their own experiences (Merriam, 1998). The researcher used semi-structured interviews because she needed specific information about time and school culture (Merriam, 1998). In this study the researcher needed information on the student's

experience within the school culture, specifically how the time was managed within that culture and how that contributed to or alleviated student stress. The researcher structured the interview process to ensure that she would be able to compare data from the various interviews; however, too much structure would limit the description of the individual's experience of the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2005).

Seidman (1998) recommended interviewing participants three different times over the course of a two to three week period. Each interview had a different function: the first interview was a life history to learn about the experience in the context of the participant's life (Seidman). In this study student participants talked about their past experiences in education, how they selected their courses, and to describe their other responsibilities, family issues, or peer problems that might also contribute to stress. School leader participants discussed their perception of the educational experience provided for students and explained how decisions concerning scheduling were made. The second interview allowed the participant to reconstruct the experience (Seidman). In this study, the student participants reconstructed how they typically spent a day in this academically high achieving environment. The school leadership participants described their perception of the student experience. Seidman wrote that the third interview should give the participant a chance to reflect. In this study, both the student and school leader participants reflected on the concept of academic stress and what from their experience contributed to academic stress. Seidman recommended a 90-minute interview, but suggested that a researcher could shorten for younger participants. The researcher for this study wanted to be sensitive to the fact that these students were already experiencing academic stress since they volunteered for the study because they had experience with

academic stress, and therefore, wanted to reduce the amount of class, homework, or extracurricular time missed. Therefore, the researcher reduced the interview time to approximately 30 minutes, approximately equivalent to the amount of flex time and/or lunch time students had most days at this study site. To balance the student participant interviews, the school leader interviews followed the same format (see Appendix E for interview questions).

Research Questions

Maxwell (2005) wrote that research questions explained what a researcher was trying to learn and provided focus and guidance for how he or she would conduct the research. In this study, the main research question was "How do adolescents experience the culture of their high school?" This question stemmed from the literature that school culture could contribute to stress (Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009; Kohn, 2004; Pope, 2001) and that many of these adolescents were experiencing negative emotional or physical reactions or were dealing with the stress by disengaging or cheating (Pope, 2001). The question posed by this researcher explored whether the school leaders' perception of the student experience aligned with that of the student participants' perception of their experience and how or if time management during the school day, specifically the bell schedule, homework policies or practices, and extracurricular activities contributed to or alleviated school stress. This addressed a gap in the previous research.

Procedures

The role of the researcher in this basic, interpretive qualitative study was to collect data as a key instrument in the research study (Creswell, 2007). The goal of the

researcher was to understand the experience, and the researcher listened to the verbal commentary, as well as observed the non-verbal communication, checked with the participant for accuracy and explored unexpected responses (Merriam, 2009).

In this study, the researcher first procured approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of both the university where the researcher was a student and the school district in which the researcher wanted to conduct the study. Next, the researcher procured the proper permissions from the school and school system to interview students and school leaders. Then the researcher presented the study to advisory students (see Appendix F for Advisory Period Transcript) and asked school leaders to participate in the study. The researcher also used the snowball technique to procure other potential school leader participants. Merriam (2009) described snowball sampling as the most common form of purposeful sampling where the researcher asked participants who easily met the requirements of the study to recommend other potential participants. Once the researcher had the names of potential participants, she obtained written consent from the school leader participants (see Appendix D for consent to participate form), written assent from the student participants (see Appendix B for assent to participate form), parent or guardian permission to meet with each student participant (see Appendix C for parent permission form). Both the parent permission form and the consent/assent forms stressed that participation was voluntary, and the participant had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. All forms also explained that the researcher would keep the participant's identity anonymously and not tie the content of the interview to the student or school leader in any publicly identifiable way. The form also included a passage that stated that if the student participant, during the course of the interview, mentioned

information that caused the interviewer to become concerned with the student's well-being, the researcher would report the information to the proper resources available through the school system.

The researcher contacted school leader participants by e-mail or phone and set up a meeting to discuss the study. However, to avoid any undue influence on the student participants, the researcher met with the potential student participants with their counselors and discussed the purpose of the study and the information in the informed consent paper work so that there were no questions once the informed consent paperwork was given to each student. The researcher also provided her contact information to the parents of potential student participants to answer any questions they might have had before giving permission for their child to participate in the study.

Once the researcher obtained the applicable assent, consent and permission forms, the researcher conducted three 30-minute interviews with each participant. The researcher interviewed the participants interviewed at their school, as individuals were more likely to be open if they were interviewed in a safe setting (Creswell, 2007). The researcher interviewed student participants in the researcher's classroom during flex time and school leader interviews were conducted at convenient times for the school leaders, typically in their offices. Seidman (1998) recommended strategies for conducting quality interviews and protecting the identity of the participants. During the interview the researcher asked open-ended questions (see Appendix E for interview questions), and prompted the participant only if he or she went off topic. During most of the interview, the researcher listened, asked questions for clarification purposes and asked for concrete details. The researcher recorded the interviews with a digital voice recorder and saved the

files in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Participants helped the researcher determine a pseudonym to use during the interview to help protect their identity. As a gesture of appreciation, the researcher selected a book, valued at ten to fifteen dollars, and presented it to each participant upon completion of the third interview.

Analysis

Once the researcher had the interviews transcribed, she read the transcripts, made a list of significant statements and began to develop categories or relationships between the data (Maxwell, 2005). The researcher used a constant-comparative analysis. She used Chapter 2 as a guideline to find initial categories of information: the presence of academic stress, school culture, causes of academic stress, positive and negative effects of academic stress, and student/school leaders perceptions. From there, the researcher followed emerging trends in the feedback from the interviewees. Creswell (2007) defined constant comparative as the "process of taking information from the data and comparing it to emerging categories" (p. 64). Through coding, the researcher organized data into categories and broad themes (Maxwell; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Seidman, 1998).

Trustworthiness

In basic, interpretive qualitative research, the researcher was a human instrument (Creswell, 2007). Both the researcher and the context of the interview could have had an impact on the participant. The researcher minimized the impact by asking open-ended questions (Maxwell, 2005). The researcher in this study hoped her prior experience as a school counselor would help with the interview process. The researcher learned through past experience that with patience and good listening skills, a student would open up and

share his or her feelings honestly which might not have happened if the counselor or interviewer jumped to conclusions or led the student to talk about certain problems.

Reliability

The nature of qualitative research makes the replication of studies challenging; however, the researcher provided a well-organized presentation of procedures to enhance external reliability (Weirsma & Jurs, 2005). Reliability was determined by an accurate representation of what the participant experienced. A good quality recording and a transcription that included pauses and conversational overlaps helped to provide reliability for the research. The researcher also allowed each participant to review the transcripts of his or her interview to make any changes, additions, deletions, or clarifications, that they felt were necessary to accurately reflect their experience.

Validity

Validity for a qualitative study is attained if there is a "logical analysis of the results" and "adequate theoretical construct and research procedures are used so that others can understand the results" (Weirsma & Jurs, 2005, p. 216). Lincoln and Guida (2001) added that in order to achieve validity the researcher must exhibit fairness, by including the experiences of all participants, and rigor in methodology and interpretation. Creswell (2007) suggested the following to check for validity:

- Did the researcher bias the results?
- Is the transcript a valid reference of the participant's experience?
- Have alternate conclusions been acknowledged and addressed?
- Is the description of the phenomenon unique to this situation or can it be generalized?

The researcher will use memos to help identify and restrain bias, and will use an accurate transcription of the interview to document the participant's experience. The three-interview structure will allow the researcher to check for internal consistency within a participant's experience; interviewing multiple participants will enable the researcher to connect experiences among the participants (Seidman).

Having other researchers review the procedures for the study, called a "peer review," also helps to add validity to the study (Creswell, 2007). The researcher is fortunate to be part of a doctoral cohort, of which several peers and professors were trained in qualitative research methods. The researcher asked one of her cohort members to review the transcript and analysis to ensure an accurate reflection of the participants' statements. The researcher also worked with a methodologist with experience in qualitative research to help to ensure validity.

Triangulation is the act of collecting data from multiple sources, to check for bias (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Weirsma & Jurs, 2005) Triangulation was achieved for this study because the researcher conducted three interviews with each student who experienced academic stress, and corroborated the data from the interviews with school leaders along with publically available school records including written and unwritten policies in scheduling of student classes, course catalog, homework policies, testing trends, daily bell schedules and extracurricular schedules from the school's website and school profile. By comparing the students' perceptions the school leaders' perceptions and publically available school records the researcher was able to find consistencies in the way students experienced the school culture, as well as misperceptions.

Ethical Considerations

Because the researcher chose to work with adolescents, it was her of the utmost concern to protect the participants from feeling vulnerable or being portrayed without dignity (Seidman, 1998). Seidman suggested several strategies to protect vulnerable populations, like high school students. First the researcher helped the participants to understand that participation in the study is completely voluntary, and that the participant could withdraw at any time without repercussion. Secondly, the participant had the right to ask that the researcher not use any information stated during the interview. The researcher kept the participants anonymous. The researcher informed the participants that the interview would be transcribed, but that precautions were taken to keep identifying information from being shared. For example, the participants helped choose a pseudonym to use during the interview, and the researcher kept any written information with the participants' real names in a locked location, separate from the transcripts. The researcher used those pseudonyms in the final paper. The participants learned that the information collected would be used in a publically available dissertation.

Because the researcher was also a faculty member of the school where the study was conducted, the researcher was obligated to report certain information pursuant to federal and state laws and school and school district policies. Student participants and their parents were informed of this ethical obligation, and the researcher requested that student participants refrain from discussing any illegal or untoward activities that would necessitate such reporting by the researcher.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Overview of Study Site and Participants

The study site was a public high school in an upper middle class, suburban community. The community population earned an average of $120,000 a year per household; 68.5% of the residents had earned a Bachelor's Degree, and 34% earned a graduate or professional degree (Citi-Data, 2013). The population is approximately 2,300 students (*School Profile*, 2013). The researcher selected the study site because the high school had attained success academically, athletically, and artistically. The school had been academically successful, with a 96% to 98% pass rate on the high stakes assessments in English, math, and history (*School Profile*, 2013). Over the past five years, *U.S. News and World Report* and *Newsweek* had both ranked the school amongst the top schools in the United States. The average SAT score in 2010 was almost 300 points above the national average of 1500. Of the over 1,000 juniors and seniors enrolled in the school, 76.7% took at least one AP course, 100% of those students took the AP exam and 77% of those students scored a 3 or above on the AP exam (*School Profile*). The AP program incorporated rigor for academically talented students, while the state mandated tests were graduation requirements that added pressure for struggling students. In addition to academic success, the school profile and school website stated that the Performing Arts Department, school newspaper, yearbook, and literary magazine earned recognition for their successful programs. Furthermore, the athletic program was highly competitive, winning regional and state championships.

The students and staff at the study site had experienced at least two different versions of year-long, block bell schedule. From 2010-2012, the schedule consisted of three 90-minute blocks that met every other day, a 45-minute constant period that met every day, four 30-minute lunch sessions built into the third block of the day, and a 30 minute "flex time." In 2012-2013, the schedule changed to include four 90-minute blocks that meet every other day, a 20-minute advisory period, four 30-minute lunch sessions built into the third block of the day, and two 35-minute "flex times" every other day. The school leadership implemented flex time in 2010-2011 and added the advisory period in 2012-2013.

The leadership team at the study site included the principal, five assistant principals, one activities director, the director of student services, and the Instructional Leadership Committee (ILC). The ILC included the previously mentioned administrators but also included department chairs, team leaders, an AP coordinator, and any other teachers who wanted to be a part of instructional leadership at the high school. This format allowed for any faculty member in the building to take a leadership role. Mrs. Edwards pointed out that many of the initiatives at the study site were teacher-driven.

The student participants volunteered to participate in the study. The researcher presented the study to advisory classes and asked students to volunteer if they had ever experienced academic stress and were willing to be interviewed by the researcher. See the advisory period transcript (Appendix F). From those discussions, 11 students expressed interest in the study; however, the researcher disqualified four volunteers because they were current or former students of the researcher and one additional volunteer because she was a sophomore and could potentially be a student of the researcher in the future.

The researcher met with six potential qualified student participants and his or her school counselor, discussed the risks and benefits of participating in the study, and gave the potential participants the appropriate forms. Five of the six potential student participants returned the proper paperwork and participated in all three interview sessions (see Table 1 for information about student participants).

Table 1: *Student Participants*

	Adam	Todd	Claire	Rose	Heather
Grade Level	Junior	Junior	Senior	Junior	Senior
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
# of Years Attending This High School	1	3	4	3	4
Courses	AP Biology, AP World History, English 11, Anatomy and Physiology, Algebra, US/VA History, Geometry	AP Language and Composition, Honors U.S. History, Spanish, Creative Writing, Math, Physics, AP Psychology	AP Psychology, AP Calculus, AP Literature, AP Comparative Gov, AP US Government, Study Hall, Anatomy and Physiology, Theater	AP Language and Composition, Honors U.S. History, Spanish III, Journalism, Pre-Calculus, Physics, AP Psychology	AP Government, AP Psychology, AP Chemistry, AP Calculus A/B, Honors English 12, French IV, Study Hall
School-based Extracurricular Activities	Soccer, Debate Team	Red Cross Club, Key Club, UNICEF	Theater, Crew	Newspaper section editor, class officer, basketball manager	Basketball
Other Extracurricular Activities		Martial arts/boxing		Part-time job	

Additionally, the researcher interviewed five school leaders who had made decisions concerning scheduling, homework, or other time-related school components, who supervised or sponsored extracurricular activities, or who worked with academically stressed students at the study site. The researcher selected school leaders from the researcher's prior knowledge about scheduling decisions made within the school. The

researcher also used a snowballing technique to procure additional participants. (see Table 2 for school leader participants).

Table 2: *School Leader Participants*

	Dr. Atkinson	Mr. Brown	Dr. Carter	Mrs. Davis	Mrs. Edwards
Years in education	26	15	20	9	18
Years at current school	6	6	9	3	18
Position	Teacher	Activities Director	Administrator	Counselor	Administrator
Other responsibilities	Staff development trainer, AP exam grader for College Board	Supervises math department			Supervises science department, Attendance, Flex Time Coordinator

School Culture

The researcher asked each interviewee to describe the culture of the school. All 10 interviewees commented on the academically rigorous school culture. Two students and one school leader claimed the school culture was focused on grades. Two students identified the culture as competitive, while two school leaders used the term "driven." Other descriptors included: diverse, successful, challenging, stressful, boring, rigorous, academically demanding, and achieving.

Three school leaders and two students attributed the courses selected by the students to creating a rigorous school culture. Mrs. Davis pointed out that most freshmen took at least one honors class. Mrs. Edwards claimed that many freshman students were encouraged both within the school and by parents to take honors classes for all four core freshman courses. Both student, Adam, and Mrs. Edwards stated that every student is encouraged to take at least one AP class before graduating, although Mrs. Edwards pointed out that some students take four to five per school year. Dr. Carter stated that

60% of sophomores take AP World History, the only AP course available to sophomores. The push to take higher level courses, continued through the students' junior and senior years. Mrs. Davis commented, "a lot of [the students] start in honors in the beginning and just have nowhere else to go, so they choose the higher level classes for lack of options." Dr. Atkinson agreed, "It's trickling down… the kids are pushing themselves; the parents are allowing the kids to push themselves…which means we're having more and more kids who are coming through the pipeline…[who] need these more advanced classes." According to Dr. Atkinson, during the 2012-1013 school year, 21 students from this high school were taking multivariable calculus and linear algebra, a sophomore level math course at the university level. Student, Heather, commented, "It's crazy how many people are ahead one year ahead [in math], or two years ahead or maybe three and that's standard." Todd talked about how all of his friends had been in the gifted and talented program in elementary school, had taken honors classes in middle school, and so they came to high school as a high achieving group of students. He mentioned that his friends all had over a 4.0 GPA, indicating that as juniors they had taken at least one AP course. According to Dr. Carter, even the general education classes added to the rigorous school culture and prepared students for college level work.

Three of the school leaders believed that part of the reason so many students were willing to try advanced courses was because of the school's open enrollment policy. There were no barriers to taking an advanced placement course, short of completing the prerequisites. Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Edwards discussed many of the supports that were available to students who challenged themselves by taking rigorous courses, including supportive and available AP teachers, flex time, and the writing center, which is a

student-run tutoring center. Dr. Atkinson explained that in addition to teaching the content of the Advanced Placement Physics course, she also spent a great deal of time teaching her students good learning skills. She told parents at the open house at the beginning of the school year, "I'm gonna teach your kids to read. I'm gonna teach 'em how to do math. I'm gonna teach 'em social skills. And if I do all that very, very, well, they're gonna learn a lot of physics." Mrs. Edwards explained that the school leadership had established that students should be encouraged to take the Advanced Placement classes without having to worry about their test scores, and that the school administration supported this philosophy. She emphasized that if teachers were not worried about test scores, they were more likely to welcome and support students who were challenging themselves by taking more rigorous coursework. Dr. Carter stated, "Philosophically, I'm not impressed with a student's ability to sit down and take a 50-question end-of-course, multiple-choice test to determine that they 'learned something'… I continue to look at what… 21st century skills are we equipping our kids with; what thinking skills, what problem solving skills we are trying to develop." Despite the claim that school leadership did not focus on test scores, Adam and Claire both felt that the administration wanted the students to earn high scores on their exams.

Furthermore, three students and three school leaders attributed the expectation of attending college to creating the rigorous school environment. According to Mr. Brown, 95% of students go on to a two-year or four-year college. According to three of the school leaders, the parents and community expected that students who graduated from this high school would attend college. Adam said, "[e]verybody just has a certain goal, a certain place where they want to go for college, and for school. And everybody's just

doing whatever they can, and basically everything they can to reach that goal." Dr. Carter pointed out that the school did not have any vocational programs, that it was strictly an academic program, with AP courses. Claire lamented that strict focus on academics, calling the school "pushy" with a focus on the core classes. Five of the interviewees commented on how many of the students felt obligated to attend highly selective colleges. Mrs. Davis noted that most of the high achievers in the school applied to Ivy League schools and top state schools. Both Todd and Rose lamented that their peers would scrutinize the reputation of their choice college. Todd claimed the college choice had to be "Yale" and Rose pointed out that attending community college was not acceptable.

Four of the interviewees pointed out that the ambitious school culture was not limited to academics, but included sports, fine arts, and other extracurricular activities, too. Dr. Carter pointed out that out of 2200 students, 1200 participated in athletics, and 500 participated in fine arts programs. He said, "All but maybe 20% of our students are actively engaged for many hours a week outside of the traditional academic studies." Mr. Brown and Dr. Carter discussed the various accolades the school had received for academics, athletics, and fine arts. Heather pointed out that "we have many state championship banners while some schools have one or maybe none." Adam, Heather, Mr. Brown, and Mrs. Davis stated that being an athlete gave students a more vested interest in the school. All five students were involved in at least one school based extra-curricular activity, and all five had participated in at least one athletic activity during their time as a student at this school. Adam stated, "The school cares about the sports and about the athletes themselves." Heather supported that by saying, "if you are an athlete,

you are more connected to the school." In addition to athletics, Dr. Carter mentioned that there were many academic honor societies and academic clubs, and that many of them had been successful in various competitions. He summed up the ambitious culture of the school by saying, "The expectation is that you are going to participate- not just to participate, but to do well and help the team win. And it's hard for me to imagine an area in the whole school where that idea or ideal hasn't just permeated."

Finally, three of the school leaders and two students commented on the high expectations within the school. Dr. Carter stated that the administration made it a goal to hire "top quality teachers that provide the most rigorous, thought-provoking courses that could and should be taught to students of this age." He also pointed out that many of the head coaches were also teachers within the school, further establishing the high school as an academic-minded institution. Both Todd and Adam agreed that their teachers had high expectations of the students, although Adam felt that high expectations were about effort and Todd felt the high expectations were about grades. Dr. Atkinson stated, "We've worked hard to establish the level of rigor needed without killing 'em… It's like a balance beam in gymnastics. You walk a tight line between pushing on 'em to reach their potential, and pushing so hard they have a nervous breakdown." Mr. Brown pointed out that the high expectations also come in the form of peer pressure.

The one area where students and school leaders seemed to have a drastic difference of perception was in terms of what motivated the students. Both Dr. Atkinson and Dr. Carter emphasized a desire to teach critical thinking skills to students. Mrs. Edwards stated, "We push our students to want to learn more, not just grade-wise, but to expand their knowledge." Adam felt that his teachers were supportive of his learning. He

said the "teachers here push students to excel as far as they can, and as best they can… [and] are proud of their students based on how hard they are trying." However, three of the participants felt that grades were more important. Todd lamented that school was "less about learning, more about grades." Rose echoed that sentiment, "Everyone's just worried about grades and high quality college." Even Dr. Atkinson admitted that her students were more concerned with getting an "A" than using the critical thinking skills.

Students and school leaders agreed that the culture of the study site was rigorous and competitive. They agreed that the culture was impacted by the open enrollment policy for AP courses, the expectation that students will attend college, and the high expectations of the students from multiple sources. Students and school leaders differed in their interpretations of what motivated students to take on those academic challenges.

Academic Stress

All five students claimed that they personally have experienced academic stress. All ten participants stated academic stress existed at this high school. Mrs. Davis stated, "academic stress manifests itself, not just in high achievers but all across the board." Mrs. Edwards stated that stress is a problem only for some students. Dr. Carter said that he had been a school based administrator for 17-18 years and "until a couple of years ago, I'd never heard of school anxiety and now I probably deal with a dozen to twenty… kids a year that won't come to school anymore."

Impact of Academic Stress

During the course of the interviews, students and school leaders shared information about the effects of academic stress. Both students and school leaders

commented on the positive and negative impacts of academic stress. An overview of the findings is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: *The Effects of Academic Stress*

	Positive Impact	Depression	Academic Dishonesty	Disengagement/ school avoidance	Lack of sleep/ Health issues
Adam	X	X		X	
Todd		X		X	
Claire	X			X	X
Rose	X			X	
Heather	X		X	X	X
S. L. 1	X		X	X	
S. L. 2			X		X
S. L. 3			X	X	
S. L. 4	X				
S. L. 5	X			X	

Positive Impact.

Adam and Dr. Atkinson talked extensively about the positive impact of academic stress. Adam struggled with the term "stress" as a negative word, but he did not want to focus on the negative aspects of the challenges and sacrifices that he made to learn. He explained,

> I see this whole topic in a positive way. I think this is a positive experience, and I'm learning so much so quickly…. just having the mindset of looking at it from a positive point of view is totally different. I can sit here all day saying, 'Oh, I have so much work that I have to do this and do that, think about the negative things that are happening in life and the things I have to deal with.' …[I]f I do make it to college, I'll be the first person in my family to get to college. So the first immigrants, the first – I'm also the oldest brother. So if I put all those factors in a negative point of view, I just – I don't think I'd get anywhere. I think I'd just be so

> undetermined and lose that motivation and that ambition to do – so looking at it from a positive point of view, saying, 'Okay, this happened. It's okay. Just keep moving forward. Get up and keep moving forward. Just keep on moving forward. You know, deal with it and just learn from your mistakes so you don't do it again.' And I think that's just – you have to look at it from a positive point of view and keep your eye on the goal the whole time.

Adam went on to explain how he has learned to maintain a positive attitude from his father. He explained,

> [H]e's the reason why I came here. He came here before we did. He actually had a pretty decent job. Back in my home country… but he looked forward and he knew that we would have such a better future if we came here, so he came here and then he brought us. And he told me – since day one he's been telling me that America is so special and is so advanced, because it's the only country in the world where… as much as you work, that's how much you gain.

Adam explained that he saw this gain both as a student and an athlete.

Dr. Atkinson agreed that students could gain a lot from academic stress. She explained that most of the stress involved in her classes comes when students are asked to think critically and solve problems independently. She explained,

> Well, I want them to be better at doing, so I have to get out of the way. And it can be hard, because they will push and push and push and push and push to get you to tell them what to think and do, because that's how it's always been. And yet once they get that epiphany, they're astonished at what they can think and reason and figure out. But it is stressful for them, and it is stressful for me. Do I want to

relieve that stress? No, because the things we learn the best are the things we've struggled with. If you take away the struggle, you do not have long-term learning. Dr. Atkinson differentiated between the stress caused by critical thinking, as opposed to the rote memorization of facts or vocabulary. She explained that one was positive for the students, the other a pointless power trip.

Four of the school leaders and three of the student participants explained that the one of the positive outcomes of the stressful high school environment was that the students were prepared for college. Two of the school leaders and Rose questioned whether the students were actually over-prepared for college. The two school leaders explained that when alumni return to visit the high school, they often comment that college is easy for them. Mrs. Edwards stated that the majority of students were college-ready, although she had concerns that teachers and administrators give students more than one chance to be successful in these rigorous courses; she questioned how they would succeed in college.

Depression.

Two students brought up depression during their interviews. Adam mentioned that because of a busy school schedule students spend less time with their friends causing them to feel depressed and lonely. Todd discussed a clinical definition of depression. He explained how his own experience with depression or dysthymia during his sophomore year caused him to fail two classes and had a drastic impact on his GPA. "[l]ast year, when [the depression] was really bad, my grades dropped, like, just – like, I had a 2.1 last year and this year, I have a 3.8 and the year before that, I had, like, a 3.5." He sought the help of both the school psychologist and an outside psychologist to help him deal with his

depression; however, he still believed that academic stress, specifically caused by standardized testing and rote teaching methods, in combination with some problems at home were to blame for his depression.

> [A]t the same time, I will never get that year back and when I apply to college, they're gonna be, like, 'This kid's got a 2.1 for a year. What's going on?' you know? And so, the kid with 4.0s, who never suffered from depression and did all his homework, you know, he's gonna get my spot in college because of damages caused, I would say. I would say, most certainly, I felt stressed out by school 100 percent. And I had some stuff going on at home, but I'm not at home as much as I am at school.

In Todd's AP Language and Composition class, the students were assigned a project to research a problem and propose and implement a solution. He chose to research depression and school, and his solution was to write to his state legislature to gain compensation for students who miss school due to mental health issues. He was inspired by his own experience when he learned that it would cost him approximately $1200.00 to retake the two classes that he failed his sophomore year over the summer. He felt there should be some sort of fee waiver or reimbursement for students who were struggling with mental health issues caused by the stressors of school. He also pointed out that many students in his AP Language and Composition class chose to do projects on depression and academic stress because there were people at school who were suffering.

Academic Dishonesty.

Three school leaders mentioned academic dishonesty was a result of academic stress; however, only one student admitted to occasional academic dishonesty. Dr. Carter

stated he had anecdotal evidence from students claiming that they cheated because of the pressure to keep a high GPA. Heather admitted to occasional academic dishonesty in order to keep up her GPA.

> I have to admit, I lied a couple of times saying, 'Oh I forgot it on the printer.' And then [the teacher will say] 'Okay, well, e-mail it to me.' And then you have to get home and do it really quickly, and then you e-mail it to them. But I mean, it's for the grade.

Disengagement/School Avoidance.

Two students and two school leaders mentioned feelings of disengagement. During her first interview, Claire stated, "I'm not really stressed out all the time and I don't know if it's just because I'm burnt out by this point or I just don't know." She went on to explain that for her school was more about memorizing facts. Todd also felt that school was not about real world skills but more about completing worksheets and learning rote facts. He said,

> At this point, it's just a place you go for eight hours where they give you worksheets and you do them. And I know, like, I keep repeating worksheets, but, really, that's, like, that's all I'm seeing. I'm not seeing, like, a lot of effort from teachers, besides a select few, that I like as teachers; that, besides those select few, really all I see is just there's no fun. I mean, and maybe school's not supposed to be fun. My dad's always telling me, like, 'What gives you the idea that everything's supposed to be fun?'

Both Todd and Claire lamented that they wished that they had more opportunities to be creative in school. Adam mentioned that he saw disengagement amongst his peers, while Dr. Atkinson observed it amongst her students. Adam said,

> I've… met students [who have a] large amount of work [but] they wouldn't sacrifice time or sacrifice anything, and they'd just not turn it in as simple as that. They would just not turn in their work, and when I started to find out and realize stuff like that, I was just very surprised in a way where you can just give up. You know? I think the students that do not turn in their work and just give up, it really reflects on their character and where they want to go and their mindset.

Dr. Atkinson observed, that students with multiple AP classes would

> manage their stress by not doing homework. They pick one [class]. They pick that they're just not going to do the homework for and they do the others. But then they've got to deal with the lower grade and making the choices about that…they're managing it by going passive. And we give it a name it's senioritis but it's that going passive thing to help relieve the stress.

Mr. Brown stated,

> I think it does hurt some of our students who are not as successful, and that is one of the things that I do notice here because they're disenfranchised by the success that so many of our students have and how they tout it.

While none of the students that I interviewed mentioned missing school to alleviate academic stress, three of the school leaders mentioned that academic stress and school anxiety caused some attendance problems. Two of the students and one school leader mentioned the avoidance of particular classes during their interviews. Rose

admitted that she had considered dropping a class because she did not like the feedback she was getting from her teacher, but ultimately decided to stay in the class. Heather also dropped from an honors math class into a regular math class because of too much homework, and had considered dropping others.

Lack of Sleep/Health Issues.

Two students and one school leader mentioned a lack of sleep or health issues. After asking students to explain their daily schedule, the researcher calculated the amount of sleep each student got each night (see Table 4)

Table 4: *Hours of Sleep*

	Adam	Todd	Claire	Rose	Heather
Hours of Sleep	4.5-7.5	6.5	4.5-6.75	4.5-6.25	5.5-7

Claire spoke most frequently about needing more sleep. During the course of her interviews she mentioned napping during study hall, in the car before practice, and to and from practice when her friend was driving. She also mentioned frequently falling asleep in the shower, and once falling asleep behind the wheel on the way to practice. Heather, who mentioned that she gets stomachaches when she does not get enough sleep, also explained that having a first period study hall allowed her to sleep in occasionally. Mr. Brown brought up health issues but explained how he had students who would come to class sick so they did not have to miss a test.

The researcher confirmed that academic stress did exist at the study site, with both positive and negative effects. Next, the researcher explored which tenets of school culture had an impact on academic stress.

Tenets of School Culture and Academic Stress

During the third interview, the researcher asked all participants to reflect on their experience with academic stress, specifically what caused the academic stress. Notably, however, the topic of academic stress came up unsolicited during earlier interviews, too. Some of the responses were unique to one participant. Adam discussed the stressors involved with being a new student in the school. Todd discussed social issues like cliques and dealing with the opposite gender. Dr. Atkinson discussed how being asked to think critically and independently caused stress amongst her students. Several of the causes that came up in multiple interviews were not directly applicable to this study, which focused on the time-related aspects of school culture, but still contributed to academic stress. Those causes included: the expectation that students will attend an elite college, parental expectations, teacher expectations, grades, testing, critical thinking, and unrealistic goals. Table 5 gives a brief overview of how frequently the following were mentioned as contributors to academic stress.

Table 5: *Other Contributing Factors to Academic Stress*

	Expectation of Attending College	Testing	Parental Expectations	Grades	Teacher Expectations	Unrealistic personal goals
Adam	X	X		X		
Todd	X	X	X	X	X	
Claire		X	X			X
Rose	X			X	X	
Heather		X				
S. L. 1			X	X		
S. L. 2	X		X		X	
S. L. 3	X	X	X			
S. L. 4	X		X	X		X
S. L. 5	X		X	X		X

This study focused on the organization of time as it related to school culture. The researcher found several trends associated with the organization of time that participants discussed during the interviews (See Table 6). The time-related causes included student course selection, workload, rigor, concurrent deadlines, conflicts between homework and busy schedules, the first AP experience, busy work, the sacrifice of personal time, and the pace of instruction.

Table 6: *Time-Related Causes of Academic Stress*

	Student course selection	Workload	Rigor	Pace of instruction	Simultaneous Deadlines	Conflicts btn. homework and busy schedules	First AP course	Busy work	Sacrifice of personal time
Adam		X			X	X		X	X
Todd		X						X	
Claire			X		X	X		X	
Rose		X		X	X	X	X		
Heather		X	X		X	X	X	X	
S. L. 1								X	
S. L. 2					X	X		X	
S. L. 3	X		X	X	X			X	
S. L. 4	X				X			X	
S. L. 5	X	X			X			X	

Student course selection.

Three of the five school leaders cited that student course selection, specifically taking a more rigorous course load than the student could handle, was a cause of academic stress. Dr. Carter pointed out that if students took on a more rigorous course load than they could handle, they were allowed to change out of the class during the school year; however, he believed most students knew what they could handle. Mrs.

Davis explained that only a small group of students opted to change into a less rigorous course, and they were usually freshman. Dr. Carter and Mrs. Edwards explained that administrators and counselors met with students who signed up for five, six or more AP classes, or students whose academic records did not reflect success in earlier classes to make sure the students were placed properly. Dr. Atkinson and Mrs. Davis stated that the school counselors were an integral part in helping students take a challenging but manageable course load. Mrs. Edwards pointed out that proper planning and taking courses with curriculums that complement one another can help alleviate some of that academic stress. Both school leaders Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Edwards stated that it was harder to convince the high achievers to step back than encouraging students to challenge themselves. None of the students mentioned their course selection as a cause for academic stress; however, two of the students mentioned that they had to sign up for AP classes in order to get into college. Todd mentioned that he needed to take AP classes because the weighted grade would boost his GPA, and Claire mentioned that a college admissions counselor had explained to her that if she wanted to be "taken seriously" by an elite state school, she would have to take AP Calculus and Anatomy during her senior year.

Workload.

Four out of the five students and one school leader stated that the students had a heavy workload. Both Heather and Rose brought this up in two out of the three interviews. However, both participants believed the large amount of work was due to only a select group of teachers. Heather explained how she had to drop one class because of the excessive workload. "I've always taken an honors math class except one year I got

a teacher who just overloaded us with homework and I just couldn't do it. I didn't have time with basketball and everything and so I had to switch out into non-honors and then I stayed on the non-honors track." Dr. Atkinson explained that for her class "I have assignments every day in all my subjects, regardless of weekend, holiday, whatever. There's always assignments." At the same time, Heather also acknowledged that for the most part the work load was "manageable."

Rigor.

Two of the students, Heather and Claire, and one school leader, also commented on the rigor of assignments. Claire discussed the difficulties of taking AP Calculus, especially considering the upcoming AP exam.

> [T]hat was probably a mistake because I've had to do a lot of tutoring … it's been kind of an uphill struggle all year. And especially now with the AP exam coming up and we'll doing all the review I'm realizing I don't know it, anything that's going on. I haven't been learning anything in this class. It's this thing where I've memorized enough to get me through the quiz every day but not enough to probably have any real understanding of the subject.

Mrs. Davis mentioned that some students stressed, not because of the rigor of the work itself, but because some teachers were strict about a specific formatting of the homework.

First AP Experience.

Two students, Heather and Rose, also mentioned that their most stressful school years were in combination with the first AP class that they took. During her sophomore year, Rose opted not to take World Civilizations II, a class that combined AP World History with an Honors level English class designed to prepare students for the rigors of

AP U.S. History and AP Language and Composition. Instead, AP Language and Composition was her first AP class. Rose stated,

> a lot of people had the experience, so, kind of, getting an idea of what AP experiences were and me not really having any idea besides knowing you read a lot, you do a lot of workload, you have a lot of work outside of class. You have to be prepared for that and, like, I thought it wasn't – I still think that I adapted to it pretty well, but it was just getting into it at first definitely made it more stressful 'cause I was, like, 'Oh, my gosh. I have so much to do. Like, when am I gonna fit this in?'

For Heather, the most stressful time was during her junior year taking AP Physics B, along with one other AP course. She explained AP Physics was "basically my first AP class. And so it was like that, plus it's AP science, plus it's Physics" in combination with her first year playing Varsity basketball, created a very stressful year. She had opted to not take Physics I, a class that prepared students for the rigors of AP Physics B, because she considered the redundancy of material a "waste of time." However, Dr. Atkinson explained that the introductory course provided students with a foundation for physics, including concept building and reading instruction. She explained she often considered dropping AP Physics B, but did not. To help her be successful in the course, her school counselor came up with a creative solution which involved having her miss her weightlifting class occasionally, to sit in on a second session of AP Physics. When challenging material was being covered in class, she had the benefit of sitting through it twice. Heather believed that this experience was beneficial to her, "I think like that…

making it through all of that really helped with my classes this year. 'Cause I took four APs this year and only two last year. But… they don't seem nearly as bad as last year."

Pace of Instruction.

Rose, Mr.Brown, and Dr. Carter commented that the pace of instruction was a cause of academic stress. Rose explained that she felt the pace of some of her classes went too quickly,

> some people had… a more rapid teaching style and just went over something for… a few minutes and automatically… moved on to the next section and… expected us to know it. But, whereas I am, I need to go through it a little bit more to… fully understand it, which is normally what I have to end up doing outside of school… so I can… catch up and figure out what's actually going on.

Rose attributed this to the teacher's teaching style, but Dr. Carter believed the school year calendar had more of an impact on the pace of instruction.

> [T]he AP exams are given on national dates and it's the first two weeks of May and one of the things that contributes to the academic stress is we don't start until after Labor Day so we have to condense yet another month's worth of material for our kids.

Mr. Brown mentioned that many homework assignments were given on things that the teacher did not have time to cover during class as a result of trying to cover too much information in too short of a time period.

Simultaneous Deadlines.

Four of the five students mentioned that having multiple deadlines at the same time caused academic stress; Heather brought this point up in two separate interviews. She gave the example of having an assignment due on the same day as a test. She said,

> teachers who make big things due on the same day as a test—that's the worst. Because clearly you're trying to study for the test. But if you have to do this assignment that's not… studying for the test. I mean, if it was a study guide, that's okay because it's for the test. But if it's an assignment about, you know, chairs and you're studying for the desks, you don't want to do the chair assignment because it's not helping you in any way.

She pointed out that "a lot of teachers don't take into account that we have seven other classes." Mr. Brown also stated that teachers created assignments in a "vacuum" not taking into consideration the students' other classes. Mrs. Edwards cited an example; during the month of January, within a two-week period, the ninth graders had a major project due in each of their core classes. Heather and Rose both cited the end of each quarter as being particularly stressful due to many conflicting deadlines. Adam and Claire pointed out that the end of the year is especially stressful with state-mandated assessments, AP exams, final exams and final projects.

Conflicts between Homework and Extracurricular Activities.

Two of the four students mentioned that trying to balance a busy extracurricular schedule with assignment deadlines also contributed to academic stress. The researcher asked each student participant to explain a typical day for him or her during the school year (see Table 7).

Table 7: *Student Schedules*

	Adam	Todd	Claire	Rose	Heather
Wake up	5:30 (except the morning after games) 2:00 a.m.	5:30	6:30	5:30-6:15	5:40-5:50
Leaves for school	7:00	7:05 (sometimes late)	7:00 (usually late)	6:35 (picks up friend on the way)	6:50
School	7:20-2:05	7:20-2:05	7:20-2:05	7:20-2:05	7:20-2:05
After School Activities	2:05-2:30 meet with teacher or clubs 3:00-5:00 practice 5:30 -6:00 food TV Or 5:00-10:00 games	2:05-2:30 or 3:00 club meetings 3:00-9:00 maybe boxing or procrastinating	2:05-3:15 go home, change 3:15-4:00 drive to practice 4:00-6:00 practice 7:10 home, eat, shower 7:30-8:30 tutoring 1 day a week, or downtime	3:00-9:00 or 10:00 work (2 school days a week) or spend time with father (1 day a week)	2:30-4:30 time to relax, watch TV, talk to mom, homework and/or nap 5:00-7:00 practice or 6:00-10:00 games
Homework	6:00-8:00 (except the morning after games) 2:00 a.m.-5:30 a.m.	9:00-11:00	9:00-12:00	10:00-12:00	8:00-10:00
Bedtime	10:00 (1:00 or 2:00 during exams)	11:00	1:00-2:00 (on a good day 12:00)	12:00 or 1:00	10:30 (can be as late as 12:00)

Four out of the five students were involved in time-consuming extracurricular activities for at least part of the school year. Todd was the only participant who was not involved in a school-sponsored sport anymore. He explained that he quit the track team because he did not have time to do homework and participate in track. None of the students started their homework directly after school due to extracurricular activities. Heather mentioned that while she had tried to get homework done between the end of the school day and beginning of practice, but she felt too rushed and stressed. Heather also pointed out that her schedule as a senior was much easier than her schedule as a junior. She explained that last year there was more "staying up way late, cramming and

procrastinating." Adam stated that his schedule varied during the year, soccer season and exam time being the busiest, so he came up with a creative way to get everything done. Adam explained that during soccer season, he would arrive home from games around 10:00, exhausted. He needed to sleep, so he would determine how many hours it would take him to complete his homework, and then would set his alarm to get up that much earlier than his normal 5:30 a.m. alarm. Rose, who had a part-time job in addition to her school-based activities stated,

> Some of [my teachers] pile on a lot of homework, expecting all of us to be able to get it done, even though, I mean, it's junior year and I have a job and [I am] taking hard classes. So, there's a lot of other work I also have to get done in the same time period. So, sometimes, I think it's, kind of, I don't want to say cruel, but, kind of, cruel for them to, like, expect so much out of us.

She added that she was the only one of her friends who managed to keep a job all year long, in addition to her school responsibilities. Claire explained that her schedule, with a busy after school schedule, was probably typical of most students. She stated, "Kids do a lot of after-school activities and stuff. So I think other kids are getting their homework… started around 9:30, 10:00 when I do. I think it's pretty typical." Mr. Brown explained that as the activities director, the lack of time to complete homework was often brought to his attention by the parents of athletes.

Busywork.

The other major cause of stress was what the students referred to as "busywork" and gave examples completing worksheets or recording facts and definitions. Three out of five of the students, and all five of the school leaders all referenced the difference

between “busywork” and meaningful work. Three students talked about the lack of effort that they put into these “busywork” assignments, as opposed to the more meaningful assignments. Claire mentioned that she would complete busywork while watching her shows, but turned off the distraction for the more serious assignments. Adam referred to “busy work” as his “easy work” or “lighter work” and always started with those assignments to get them out of the way. He said he often completed them while socializing via social media. Todd was very adamant in expressing his frustration with this type of work and explicitly stated that he just does not do it, despite knowing it might have ten percent effect on his grade.

> [E]ven when I know that every little homework assignment counts, I still can’t, like, get myself to do it because I’m just, like, ‘This is such a waste of time. There’s so many other things I could be doing.’ And even if the things I’m doing aren’t fun, like working on a project or writing a paper, I still appreciate that there’s some sort of, like, liberty, some sort of, like, freedom to, you know, assert your skills in the project or in a writing paper. Like, I would rather write for six hours or on a research paper than do, like, two homework assignments at this point and I just can’t get around to doing it.

Heather also claimed that she had skipped homework assignments or half-heartedly completed them if the teacher was not going to grade the assignment and would focus more on the assignment if she knew the teacher would grade for accuracy or if her grade was borderline between an A and a B. Both Heather and Todd claimed that they could still be successful in the class, even if they did not do the homework because they study

for the tests. The school leaders clearly were aware of this problem and were starting a dialogue amongst faculty members to address homework. Dr. Atkinson stated,

> if the burden where to be able to complete the definitions of 25 terms every week – and spell them correctly, because I'm that kind of person – that is high stress for no apparent educational outcome… It's a power trip. It's stress for the sake of sticking it to the kids…If we as teachers worked a little harder on figuring out what are the important things we want them to know and what is the pathway that's gonna get them to those important things, and then that's the expectation we place on the kids rather than hoop jumping.

Dr. Carter asked,

> Why are we just filling the time of the student just repeatedly doing the same thing over and over and over again, when they can clearly just sit down and demonstrate in three or four problems that they know how to do the work.

Mrs. Davis pointed out that when students who probably had not done any homework all year were at risk of not passing a course, the "wheeling and dealing" began and "the question needs to be answered is have [the students] mastered [the material] and I don't think teachers really go back and look at the homework."

Sacrifice of Personal Time.

Mr. Brown questioned that with so many students under a lot of pressure to take rigorous courses, become involved in school activities, and participate in community service, in order to be considered for the "next level" or admission to a selective college, "where is the time for a student to actually be a kid?" Adam believed that it was that sacrifice of personal time which caused academic stress.

> [L]et's say, [there is a] movie that just came out or TV show that you're used to watching, or friends are going out, for example… Sometimes you're gonna have to sacrifice those. You're gonna have to sacrifice time with friends. You're gonna have to sacrifice just time in general to do the things you have to do to complete your work in school. And by work I mean the large picture, like homework, school work, studying, and everything. So I think the stress comes by the result of those sacrifices.

While Claire and Todd did not specifically speak of sacrifices, they both discussed how they often made the choice to use flex time to socialize, rather than do homework because as Todd explained,

> I definitely weigh…communication with other people, hanging out with friends, …over my homework…I would rather do homework at a time when I'm not around people who I'm interested in and who I've befriended at a time when I have that opportunity 'cause at my house, it's just like me.

Todd and Claire chose not to make some of the same personal sacrifices that Adam made.

Tenets of Time and School Culture and Their Impact on Academic Stress

The researcher found several trends in how school leadership organized the time, which were discussed during the interviews. The school year calendar, the bell schedule and exceptions to the bell schedule, the extracurricular schedule, and homework policies are all elements of time management which had an impact on school culture. There were some elements of time management that the school leadership had control over and others that came from higher up in the educational hierarchy.

School Year Calendar

The 2012-2013 school year ran from September 4 through June 18. Teachers reported back to work the last week in August and the students began the Tuesday after Labor Day. The students had a seven-day winter break and a one-week Spring Break. Students had no school on Federal holidays and staff development days at the end of each quarter. Testing dates were scheduled nationally or by the state. The AP exams were given the first two weeks of May. The end-of-course state-mandated exams were given the last two weeks of May. Rose believed that starting the school year earlier would help alleviate academic stress because the teachers would not have to rush through the lessons to prepare for exams. Dr. Carter felt that the school year start time should be earlier,

> [O]ne of the things that contributes to the academic stress is we don't start until after Labor Day so we have to condense yet another month's worth of material for our kids. And I feel very strongly that we need to move the date into August.

He had lobbied the state government to get that changed, although the 2013-2014 school calendar will be similar to the 2012-2013 calendar.

The School Schedule

The 2012-2013 bell schedule was an "A/B" schedule with four ninety-minute classes on each day. Students had four academic courses on "A" days and three on "B" days. Additionally on "B" days, students had two approximately 30-minute sessions of flex time and a 25-minute advisory period during their fourth block. On many Wednesdays throughout the school year, students had a one-hour late arrival, which provided time for teacher collaboration. Mr. Brown pointed out that the schedule was tweaked each year. Table 8 is the bell schedule that was in effect at the time of the study.

Table 8: *Bell Schedule*

"A" Day	**"B" Day**
1st period 7:20-8:49	**2nd period 7:20-8:49**
3rd period 8:55-10:26	**4th period 8:55-10:26** Student Advisory 8:55-9:20 1st flex time 9:25-9:53 2nd flex time 9:58-10:26
5th period: 10:32-10:57 A lunch 10:26-10:57 B lunch 10:58-11:28 C lunch 11:29-11:59 D lunch 12:00-12:30	**6th period: 10:32-10:57** A lunch 10:26-10:57 B lunch 10:58-11:28 C lunch 11:29-11:59 D lunch 12:00-12:30
7th period 12:36-2:05	**8th period 12:36-2:05**

Block Scheduling.

The two school leaders who had been through the school district's transition from traditional to block scheduling discussed it. Dr. Carter explained that the block schedule helped alleviate the stress of a seven-period day. He explained that not moving the students every 52 minutes helped calm the school down creating fewer discipline problems. Mrs. Edwards commented that the "A/B" schedule gave students more time to understand the material or get help from a teacher because students had an extra day between classes. Adam, who moved from a school with nine periods that were 45-minutes each, agreed stating there was more time to complete his work when he had an extra day between classes. The other four student participants had only experienced the block schedule.

Flex Time.

According to Dr. Carter and Mrs. Edwards, the school district required all schools to provide students with some sort of remediation and enrichment time during the school day. Dr. Carter explained that this high school studied some of the programs already in effect at neighboring schools and implemented their own "flex time." During "flex time," students had the choice to go see any of their current teachers for additional help or to make-up missing assignments, go to the writing center to be tutors, or to work quietly in the library or a teacher's classroom on homework. There were two 30-minute periods of flex time built into the "B" day schedule. Mr. Brown pointed out that previously students had flex time every day, but by building in a 90-minute period that included the advisory period and the two flex periods, the administration was able to create a more balanced A/B block schedule. Dr. Carter and Mrs. Davis explained that students had a choice of which teachers they wanted to see during "flex time," unless the student was failing or close to failing a class, at which point students were assigned to the teacher of the class or classes in which he or she was struggling.

All five of the school leaders agreed that school leadership designed flex time to provide time for students to be remediated or to get extra help in their classes during the school day. Mr. Brown pointed out that many of the struggling learners had conflicts that previously prevented them from staying after school to get assistance from teachers. Two of the school leaders pointed out that there was also supposed to be an enrichment piece to the "flex time," but that most likely that was not happening. Mrs. Edwards explained that she had observed the formation of study groups and the advanced students tutoring other students in the writing center. She pointed out that the writing center was in the

process of expanding into a student learning center, which would include math and science tutors, as well. Dr. Atkinson stated, "my room is very popular" during flex time with students asking questions, working in small groups, and even using her computers to print out assignments for other classes. She referred to her room as a "safe haven" for working, and that if anyone was being too loud or not working appropriately, they would be removed. She explained that flex time was a "stress diffuser" because it was time to get homework done, get help, or even socialize if the students were caught up with their work. Three of the school leaders also acknowledged that not all of the students in the building were using the time wisely. Mr. Brown stated that the leadership team was looking into changes to make sure the students used their time productively. Dr. Carter stated that the struggling students were not using it well, but those students who were succeeding academically were benefitting from the time. Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Edwards both mentioned that they had received feedback from teachers and students who wished that the flex time was offered every day as it had been the previous school year.

The researcher asked each student during the interview how he or she used his or her "flex time." Rose, Adam and Heather all claimed to take advantage of the flex time to get work done or work on homework. Heather stated, "if I have homework that I just can't get to that night, and I don't wanna stay up, you know, 'til midnight, then I can do it in flex time." Claire used the time to work on AP Calculus homework with friends from that class, retake quizzes in Calculus to get a higher grade or to socialize with friends. Claire stated,

> It's nice to have that cushion there to know that if I need to study for this test or I need to do this, I have that time, but I get there and I just I don't have anything

> that's so important. Homework I do the night before just because it's a mindset I think… it's nice to have a little bit of social during the day. I know a lot of kids have other friends in their classes. I don't. Most of my friends are not in my classes.

Todd mentioned that he preferred to have the flex time every day, like it was last year, but he used the time to study or do homework but "usually, I just end up talking to friends for an hour.

He mentioned that he saw the time as a "a waste of time in terms of productivity" but that its "certainly a stress reliever" because he had the opportunity to relax for an hour.

Advisory Period.

Dr. Carter discussed in detail the implementation of the advisory period. Prior to the implementation of the advisory period, the administration had access to some data that informed them that the students at this high school perceived that they lacked a relationship with their teachers. He stated,

> As [an administrator] of a school that is incredibly successful, in any county, state, national, or international standardized test, it's still very worrisome to me that the students' perception is a lack of relationship with their teachers. And I think that's something that we need to address, and hopefully this schedule will help that a little bit.

Coincidentally, around the same time, a team of teachers went to San Diego to observe a charter school with a strong focus on 21st Century Learning. One of the things they noticed was the strong student-teacher relationship, "All [of] the students felt as though they had one adult in the building they could connect with," explained Dr. Carter.

Dr. Carter, Mrs. Davis, and Mrs. Edwards explained that the school leadership team decided to implement the advisory period to help kids connect with an adult in the building who did not assign the students a grade. School leadership randomly assigned four or five students from each grade level to an advisory teacher. This created a group of 16-20 students in each advisory. Two of the school leaders mentioned that another purpose of the advisory period also allowed time for administrative tasks, so that activities like the distribution of report cards, did not take away from instructional time. Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Edwards pointed out that students could get to know students from other grade levels. Mrs. Edwards stated that the leadership team thought the advisory period would reduce stress and build a school community. School leaders Mr. Brown and Mrs. Edwards both mentioned that the leadership team was looking at better use advisory time.

When the students were asked about the advisory period, only one of the students talked about forming a relationship with the teacher. Two students talked about the administrative purpose of the advisory. Todd explained that it was a time to "go and listen to a teacher talk about events" while Heather saw it as an opportunity to take roll. Rose and Adam both used the time productively. Rose said she would "squeeze in work" and Adam used the time to plan how he would spend his flex time, after school time and be prepared for the next day's classes. Heather said her advisory teacher was nice and helped her with her college essay and added that having an advisory teacher was "helpful if I had to go to her. But I haven't really had to." Adam mentioned forming bonds with students from the other grade levels. The friendships he formed in advisory inspired him to become involved with one of the clubs.

AVID elective.

Mrs. Davis talked about an elective course that was new to the study site during the 2012-2013 school year, called Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). AVID was a national program that aimed to help students become college ready. The elective class helped students with organization, note-taking, and study skills. To be part of the program, AVID students took at least one honors or AP class. Enrollment in the AVID course, "really prepare[d] them for being competitive for some schools, for some colleges, but it also [gave] them support." None of the student commented on the AVID program, but it was a program in its first year and was open only to qualified freshman and sophomores.

Exceptions to the standard school day schedule

Dr. Carter explained that there were few exceptions to the typical school day schedule. There were typically one to two pep rallies per year, Multi-cultural Day, and no outside assemblies. Multi-Cultural Day was an assembly where students performed traditional songs and dances from their respective cultures. He explained that he made that exception because "that's actually part of what we're doing here at the school, as opposed to me bringing in a speaker from the outside." Dr. Carter explained that the administration wanted to "make sure the teachers get the maximum number of minutes per – literally – per day that they can with their kids." School leadership would alter the standard bell schedule during testing time. Dr. Carter explained that the school had tried many variations of the testing schedule.

> [T]he school year for us pretty much ends by the first week of May because we're testing from there on out, between AP testing starting the second week of May

> through the SOL testing that starts later in May, and by the time the SOL exams end, we're right into final exams – why we have final exams is kind of beyond me – between the AP exams and the SOL exams, it seems like we can call it a day there, but we don't, we have final exams on top of it… It's incredibly disruptive to the flow of the school day, what the teachers are doing. Sometimes they have the kids for very long periods of time, or they don't see their kids for an entire week, and any other combination you can imagine in between.

Mrs. Edwards mentioned that another exception to the typical bell schedule was that most Wednesdays the students arrived one-hour late to school, which provided the teachers with time to collaborate.

Three of the student participants claimed they appreciated the late arrival day to sleep in, catch up on work, or even come to school to make-up a test or quiz.

Extracurricular Activities Schedule

Most aspects of the extracurricular schedule were beyond the control of the school leadership. Mr. Brown and Dr. Carter explained that an outside organization scheduled the games. Mr. Brown explained that three factors determined the practice schedule: available space, the needs of the athletes, and the coach's availability. The lack of space often meant that teams had to practice away from campus. Mr. Brown gave the example of the freshman boys basketball team who practiced at a local middle school. Claire had mentioned that she had to drive 30-45 minutes to the practice facility of the crew team. Dr. Carter said coaches did not begin practices before 3:00, which gave student athletes time to meet with teachers, if needed. It also gave time for teachers who were coaches to transition from one job to the other. Some coaches, especially for the freshman and JV

teams, provided study halls for the athletes between the end of the school day and beginning of practice, but they were not necessarily mandatory.

Homework/Workload Policies

During the interview, the researcher asked the school leader if there was an official workload or homework policy in effect at the high school. Two school leaders mentioned that there was no school policy, but that departments or grade level teams developed their own workload and homework policies. Mr. Brown referred to specific guidelines for homework set forth by the school district that homework should not exceed two hours per night. "It is recognized that students vary significantly in the amount of time they need to complete given assignments. Teachers should estimate the amount of time the average student would require to complete an assignment. In general, homework across disciplines should not exceed… 2 hours at the high school level. Long-term projects may require additional time. Teachers should adjust daily homework assignments accordingly" (School District, 2008). Two of the school leaders estimated how much time they thought students spent on assignments outside of the school day, Mr. Brown estimated 1-3 hours; Dr. Carter estimated 4-6 hours. Mr. Brown stated, "we have assignments that are given for students solely on the purpose of, 'Learn this material 'cause we don't have time necessarily to go in depth on it.'" Three school leaders mentioned that there were ongoing discussions amongst the leadership team about at the potential development of a homework policy.

Student participants budgeted an average of two to four hours of homework, in addition to flex time and lunchtime for doing homework. Todd claimed he did not do any busy work, and Heather claimed that she had skipped homework assignments that were

not contingent on a grade. Heather felt that AP teachers overestimated the amount of time needed for homework.

> And then with AP classes, they always tell you like how many hours of homework would go with that class. Like as a general rule. And I never really thought that was that accurate. But, I don't know, maybe it is. Well, I'm taking four APs this year, and I'm not—I don't spend that much time on homework. That's for sure…I don't know what they count, like those hours as, maybe if it's like study time, too."

Heather differentiated between homework and studying time.

Dr. Atkinson explained her approach to homework for her physics classes. She required each student to keep a spiral notebook that she called a journal. In their journal students kept all class notes and assignments. At any point in time, students took an unannounced, open-journal quiz. Quiz questions were slight variations from problems in the assignments. She explained, "if they've done their work, they should be able to finish that very quickly. And I'll time it. I have strict timing, because this – if they did it, fine; if they didn't, they can get some of it done." Students might have worked in groups to complete the assignments but they were responsible for understanding everything in their journal. She explained that any student who simply copied the notes would not understand the differences between the assignment problem and the quiz problem. She explained, "[S]o, in a nutshell, do I give homework? Yes. Do I collect homework? Never… Do I assess homework? Yes. Right? But I don't collect homework."

Student and School Leader Perspectives

During the course of the three interviews, the researcher asked similar questions of the student participants and school leaders and compared responses. As presented throughout this chapter, the school leaders shared many of the same concerns as the students. During the first interview, the researcher asked the students two questions, specifically about the administration of the high school:

> What are the expectations of your teachers, administrators, counselors, and/or coaches of students here at _____ High School?
>
> Do you feel as though the administration has a good understanding of what it's like to be a(n) _____ student?

Only Heather claimed to have any personal contact with the administration through participation on the state-championship winning varsity girls basketball team and other school activities. She claimed that, the administration really seemed to care about the well-being of the students. She acknowledged, however, that many of her peers claimed to never see the administration. Despite not having personal contact with the administration, all four had a negative perception of the administration's expectations of them as students. Claire believed that "they just want us all to get into good colleges, and not shame the school publicly." Rose believed, "[they] just want the students to look good so the teachers and administration look good." Adam speculated that the administration wanted to maintain the school's reputation with high graduation rates, GPAs and SAT scores. Four of the student participants claimed that some of the teachers

were understanding, compassionate, and had realistic expectations, while others did not. Todd explained,

> I took AP Lang and my teacher, he's a cool guy. So, I enjoy, like, having a person I can talk to. And as someone who's viewing English as a future, maybe, or writing, things like that, it's always nice to have someone who has done it before, right? And so, there's like that mentorship, sort of, aspect that comes in.

Three of the students felt that the school counselors were "nice" and had best interest of their students at heart. Heather explained that she had a good relationship with her school counselor, who helped her devise a creative way to get through her challenging AP Physics course. However, Heather claimed that many of her classmates did not know their school counselor and Todd lamented there was no outreach from the counselors.

Dr. Carter also commented on the disconnect between students and school leadership.

> I bet you your kids would be surprised if they knew my thinking on what they're going through. And that disconnect to a certain extent bothers me as well. I can only do so much; the teachers need to be very much involved in this as well but, as I said, I think the kids would be surprised if they came to the realization that we feel or as the leader of the schools feels as though it may be a little too much here. We could dial it back a little bit and they'd still be just as prepared

Despite the evidence that there were few discrepancies between the students' and school leaders' perceptions of school culture, the students *perceived* the differences existed. The perceived expectations were not necessarily accurate.

Conclusion

The researcher found that the study site provided a plethora of information to better understand how a school's culture, specifically the elements of time management which impacted that culture, impacted academic stress. Students at the school were enmeshed in a culture of academic rigor, competition and stress. School leaders were reluctant to eliminate all of the academic stress was not going to help prepare the students with the critical thinking skills necessary for college success. The school leaders were working toward some effective solutions to alleviating the negative impacts academic stress: "flex time," the advisory period, support systems for students taking rigorous courses, and the AVID elective. There were, however, some areas where school leadership could do more to alleviate academic stress. Better coordination between academic areas to reduce simultaneous deadlines would help reduce stress during high-pressure times of the year. Better communication between the school leadership and student body could help the students feel more supported, less disengaged, and therefore, less stressed. Chapter V will discuss the researcher's interpretation of these results and provide recommendations for working toward a less stressful school environment.

CHAPTER V

INTERPRETATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore how students experienced their school's organizational culture, whether they perceived that experience to be academically stressful, and how their perception compared to the perception of the school leadership. The researcher wanted to understand how the students perceived the school's culture as related to time management, specifically the scheduling of courses, organization of time, homework and workload policies, and extracurricular activities and their relation to academic stress. The researcher explored the following primary research question: How do adolescents perceive the academic expectations through the culture of their high school? This primary research question led to the following secondary research questions:

How do adolescents experience the culture of their high school?

How do adolescents experience the tenets of the school culture: scheduling of courses, time, and extracurricular activities during a typical day?

Is there a discrepancy between the perception of school culture, specifically related to stressors from the administrators' and the students' point of view?

The researcher selected the site for this study, based on the school's reputation as an academically rigorous and successful school. It embodied the American push for a more globally competitive educational system. The researcher collected data through five three-part interviews with students and five three-part interviews with school leaders. The researcher found that this "do more and do it better" attitude had contributed to a stressful

school environment for the students at a point in their development when they were especially prone to internalizing the high expectations of others (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). The researcher interviewed some students who found value in the academic challenges they faced, who were making sacrifices in order to keep up with the perceived expectations of others and some who were disengaged. The researcher also discovered that the use of flex time and the advisory period helped eliminate academic stress; however, simultaneous deadlines and conflicts between homework and busy extracurricular scheduled contributed to academic stress. The researcher also learned that academic stress could be positive if it was linked to critical thinking, whereas busywork and rote teaching created stress with no positive benefit. School leaders were aware of the concept of academic stress and were making changes that could potentially change the school culture and intentionally or unintentionally alleviate the consequences of academic stress; yet, the students were not always aware of the administration's concern for their well-being.

Interpretations and Conclusions

Academic Stress.

One aspect that most participants agreed upon was that this high school was academically competitive and that academic stress existed. The students felt that they were expected to attend an elite college; they made choices about what courses to take and in some cases, what activities to participate in, because they were trying to be competitive for these elite colleges. Much of the pressure related to academic stress focused on the perceived expectations of the college admissions department. Several participants pointed out that in Virginia, the state of the study site, there were fewer

options for attending an in-state school than in some of the surrounding states. Even though there are approximately 50 colleges and universities to choose from in Virginia, students focused on fewer than ten, because they felt the reputation of the college was important. The state of Virginia is home to two of the top 10 public colleges and universities, University of Virginia and The College of William and Mary (*Best Colleges*, 2013). Both schools have very competitive admissions, with University of Virginia admitting 29.6% of applicants and The College of William and Mary admitting 32% of applicants (*Best Colleges*, 2013). Claire addressed the importance of the reputation of a college in one of her interviews. She had been accepted via early decision at a larger, well-known prestigious institution, but had then visited a smaller, lesser known institution which suited her better and had a program in the field in which she wanted to study. She expressed some regret in her decision but decided, "I know I'm gonna be happy there. I know I'm gonna end up fine. It's not gonna be a problem, and it's a very, very good school" and stated she could go to the smaller school for her Master's degree. Because students were competing for spots at the larger, well-known, in-state institutions, they perceived that they were competing against their classmates for a limited number of spots (Chandler, 2010). This led to an intense focus on grades, GPA, course selection, and extracurricular activities.

Impact of Academic Stress.

As participants discussed the culture of their school, trends emerged indicating to the impact of academic stress: disengagement, depression, lack of sleep, and academic dishonesty. Research suggested that there were other impacts: anxiety, anger, drug and alcohol use and self-medication (Connor, Pope & Galloway, 2010; Leung, Yeung, and

Wong, 2010; Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009; Hall, et al, 2005; Nazer Bloom, 2005; Pope & Simon, 2005; Pope, 2001). It is possible that because the students were being interviewed by a faculty member, they were reluctant to talk about issues that could get them "into trouble" like drug and alcohol use, self-medication or cheating.

Positive Impact of Stress.

Both Adam and Dr. Atkinson discussed the positive impacts of stress. Dr. Atkinson differentiated between the stress of memorizing rote information, which she viewed as pointless, as opposed to the stress of critical thinking, which she believed would help the students succeed in higher education. Linley and Joseph (2004) coined the term "adversarial growth" (p. 11) to describe the positive changes experienced after dealing with adversity. Furthermore, Newmann (1982) noted that challenge, with a "reasonable possibility of success" combined with "some risk of failure" was a key aspect of a developmentally productive environment. If students were stressed and were able to problem-solve to surpass those stressors, they would be stronger students because of it. The increase in academic stress was occurring at a time when many high school students had support through the school and family, as opposed to college, where long distances and large institutions could inhibit access to that support system. At the high school, they had access to emotional support through school counselors, psychologists and some caring teachers and school leaders, along with the support of their families. Academically, support was available through the student learning center, teachers who taught study skills as part of their curriculum, and flex time to meet with teachers.

While stress could lead to strong students if students were equipped with problem-solving skills to surpass stressors, when individuals coped with stress through

avoidance, those individuals experienced higher stress levels (An, et al, 2012) or a low sense of well-being (Karlsen, Dybdahl, & Vittersø, 2006). The students who disengaged put themselves at a greater risk of the negative consequences of stress. The researcher learned that Todd did not connect with his teachers or school counselor; he quit the track team and chose not to complete homework. He was diagnosed with dysthymia, a chronic form of depression, during his sophomore year. His avoidance of stressors may have contributed to his diagnosis, while that is most likely not the cause of his depression, it certainly exacerbated the symptoms.

The participants overwhelmingly agreed that the students would be academically prepared for college because of the rigor of their high school curriculum. This supported the research by Foust, Hertberg-Davis, and Callahan (2009) who found that students were willing to maintain a heavy workload and sacrifice sleep, because they felt the end result was worth it.

Depression.

Previous research had linked academic stress and depression (Ang & Huan, 2006; Hake, 2006; MacGeorge, Sampter, & Gillihan, 2005). Todd attributed one of the causes of his depression to the rote teaching methods, lack of creative outlets, and the challenge of living up to the perceived 4.0 Ivy League-bound expectation. Pope and Simon (2005) found students felt depressed when they realized that by earning a "B," average, they might be at a disadvantage in the highly competitive world of college admissions. While Todd preferred to seek treatment outside of school, it is important to note that he did have some resources available to him in school: his school counselor, the school psychologist, even his AP Psychology class. Todd explained that none of his teachers were sympathetic

because they were not aware of the depression that he was feeling. While he chose not to share that information with his teachers, he was still frustrated by the lack of empathy from his teachers and the lack of outreach from the school counselor and psychologist. Pope (2001) found that teachers often did not get to know the whole student due to several factors including the student's desire to only let the teacher see a certain side of his or her personality. It is important for teachers to know the signs of depression and so that school staff can be more proactive in opposing depressions' negative impact on a student's education.

Disengagement.

Claire and Todd, two drastically different students, both experienced disengagement. Claire was taking five AP courses, and Todd had failed two courses the previous year but was taking two AP courses in an effort to bring up his GPA. These two students who expressed the highest levels of disengagement were also the two most creative students; one was involved in theater and the other, creative writing. Both aspired to be writers. They both lamented the lack of opportunities to be creative during the school day. Eccles and Midgely (1990) wrote about the Person-Environment fit theory, which provided that mental health and motivational problems occurred the environment did not meet an individual's needs. If a school setting was not developmentally appropriate, i.e., the standards were too high or the teacher was not supportive enough, this could lead to a student's lack of motivation. In this case, the lack of a creative outlet could be contributing to the student's disengagement. The school itself, however, offered many elective courses allowing for creativity including 13 different theater classes and three levels of creative writing (*Study Site Course Catalog*).

Dr. Carter commented on the inability of the school leaders to run more creative elective courses because students chose to take more electives in academic courses: foreign languages, social sciences, and science courses. The school leaders made decisions to run the courses based on student enrollment. While Todd was enrolled in Creative Writing, Claire was not enrolled in any theater classes. She chose to take academic electives, specifically AP Calculus and Anatomy, because she believed she needed those courses to get into an elite state institution. The disconnect between student perception and the information made available through the course catalog and school leader interviews could be contributed to the school culture.

Lack of Sleep

Research recommended an optimal 9.25 hours of sleep for adolescents (Carskadon, 1999). The student participants in this study ranged from 4.5 to 7 hours of sleep, with an average of just under six hours of sleep per night. A lack of the appropriate amount of sleep could lead to depression (Carskadon) or a diminished ability to cope with stressors (Vollmer et al, 2011).

Academic Dishonesty

While students did not discuss academic dishonesty, with one exception, the school leaders discussed the link between stress and cheating, which was supported by previous research (Connor, Pope & Galloway, 2010; Trudeau, 2009; Pope, 2005). There was a possibility that students were reluctant to admit to cheating because they were talking with an adult faculty member. None of the students mentioned academic dishonesty, in the sense of copying someone else's answers; that information came from the school leaders. One student, Heather, admitted to telling lies to get extended time to

finish an assignment, which is a form of academic dishonest One the other hand, another student, Rose, stated she was periodically allowed to turn assignments in late because her teachers trusted her, which is not a form of academic dishonesty, but does provide support for Pope's observation that students created alliances with adults in order to get a better grade (Pope, 2005).

Conceptual Framework

Both high expectations and pressure potentially had a positive impact, until the expectations and pressure became too burdensome then the impact became negative (Hewitt & Flett, 1993, 1991; Costanzo, Woody & Slater, 1992). Pressure from time constraints and internalized expectations, real or perceived, contributed additional stressors. As the researcher listened to the experiences of the students, she examined where pressure and expectations seemed appropriate and where the expectations and pressure became too oppressive for adolescents who were internalizing these perfectionistic standards.

Theoretical Framework.

The researcher used two theories to frame this research: Socially Prescribed Perfectionism and the Optimal Pressure Model. Costanzo, Woody and Slater (1992) found that pressure created an inverted "U" shape in relation to performance. Not only did the number of pressure sources have an influence, but the level of pressure did as well. They found that both a lack of pressure and multiple pressure sources created a decrease in performance, while a single source of pressure improved performance. Students at this study site talked about the expectations of their teachers and administrators, and the perceived expectations for enrollment into an elite university.

School leaders talked about the expectations of parents and the community. Many of these students were facing pressure from multiple angles. Claire, a senior, discussed one of the reasons she felt that she was able to handle the academic stress better than some of her classmates, "While my parents have always pushed me to do my best, in recent years I've managed to convince them I have most of my academics under control. Many of my peers have their parents still breathing down their necks." While she had the pressures of college acceptance, she did not have the pressure of high parental expectations. She even commented that she felt less pressure now that she had been accepted to college. Todd, a junior, still had the pressure of college acceptance, peer pressure to achieve, the pressure of teacher's expectations, and social pressures. One of the students, Adam, who moved to the area from Egypt had a very different outlook than the other four student. Despite the stress of adapting to a new school and a different culture, he had a positive perspective on academic stress. Other students discussed perceived pressure from school leadership, peer pressure, and the pressure of college admissions, and even the political pressure and pressure from the media. Furthermore, important tests and projects occurring simultaneously, along with duties to academics and extracurricular activities create additional pressure points.

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism is the pressure to live up to others' expectations. Hewitt and Flett (1993) defined Socially Prescribed Perfectionism as "the belief that others are imposing perfectionist standards on the self" (p.58). The school leaders who were interviewed said that they wanted students to learn for the sake of learning and have time to be a kid, but students interviewed had a perceived expectation that they had to take AP courses, earn straight A's, and be involved in competitive

extracurricular activities. There was clearly a disconnect. The disconnect could be explained by the culture of the school and the developmental stage of the adolescent. Despite the intentions of school leadership to focus on learning, there are tenets of time management and school culture that still contribute to a culture of achievement. The amount of time dedicated to testing- two weeks for AP exams, two weeks for state-mandated end-of- course exams, and then one week dedicated to final exams pointed to the importance of test scores. The lack of communication between departments concerning important deadlines led to mixed messages with each teacher giving the impression that his or her class was the most important class. Even the building itself with the state championships listed on the front of the building demonstrated that the achievement of the students at the high school was valued. These tenets of school culture in combination with the perceived expectations of college admissions along with peer pressure and perhaps family pressure created the perception that others expect the adolescents to attain highly established standards. Damon and Lerner (2008) wrote that during the late adolescent stage these expectations of others, or in this case, perceived expectations became internalized by the adolescents.

Tenets of Time and School Culture and Their Impact on Academic Stress

At the study site, school leaders implemented several initiatives intentionally or unintentionally to reduce the negative consequences of academic stress; however, academic stress still existed so there was more that could be done. The block schedule allowed more time between classes to comprehend lessons and complete assignments. Flex time and the advisory period provided time when the students could relax and regroup. That fit with Conner, Pope, and Galloway's (2010) research that students could

be better served with fewer transitions during the school day and more downtime, along with the research of Veal and Flinders (2001) who found that students experienced less stress in a block schedule than in a traditional schedule. By stretching out the school days and allowing down time, the school leadership team alleviated the pressure of consistently imminent deadlines.

Struthers, Perry, and Menec (2000) determined through their research that if instructors encouraged good study skills and time management, it would help alleviate student stress. Dr. Atkinson discussed the time she spent teaching study skills in her AP Physics class. Other programs like AVID have the potential to equip more students with the study skills needed to be successful in advanced classes. Providing support for students who have internalized perfectionistic standards and encouraging them to use the support, could help the students understand that there is value in the learning process and not just the academic achievements.

However, students stated that the end of each quarter was a time of increased stress due to multiple deadlines occurring at the same time. This supported the findings of Rice, Leever, Christopher and Porter (2006) who found that at the end of the semester there was a stronger correlation between perfectionism and the effects of perceived stress at the end of the semester due to a greater focus on achievement. The students also reported that busywork, work that could be completed with little effort but took up time, created stress. These multiple deadlines create additional pressure points, propelling students toward the negative end of the Optimal Pressure Model.

First AP experience.

Two students suggested that their most stressful years coincided with their first AP classes. Because the school had an open enrollment policy for advanced classes, students could still choose to take an AP class without taking the corresponding preparation course. Neither young lady took the traditional pathway to go into those AP courses. Heather did not take Physics I before taking AP Physics, so she missed out on some of the fundamentals of physics before taking the AP course. Students should be encouraged to take those courses, which act like stepping-stones into more rigorous courses, whether honors or AP. Support systems should be established in place for students who did not follow the recommended sequence of courses, perhaps including a study hall or enrollment in the AVID course, if the student qualified. Mrs. Davis suggested that the AVID program could serve more than the small group of students who were currently enrolled, "AVID's, kind of, small right now…maybe, if it was just part of the school culture... If we did that through advisory… maybe that's something that could help with academic stress 'cause those kids will feel like they have the support." Providing support for and encouraging students to use available support strengthens the expectation that one does not need to be perfect, just willing to accept a challenge.

Homework Policy.

A homework policy was already in the discussion phase at the study site. School leaders saw a need to address the workload of the students and the purpose of homework. For the most part, the students felt that their teachers assigned a fair amount of work, but what caused the stress was simultaneous deadlines, finding the time to complete the assignments with a busy extracurricular schedule and busywork. This supports the

research of Zuzanek (2009) who found that the time management associated with the homework completion was more stressful than the homework itself. In creating a homework or workload policy, the faculty needs to address the purpose of the assignments. Three of the student participants claimed to complete "busy work" half-heartedly, while one claimed he did not do it at all. Student participants and school leaders reported cases where teachers did not assess the homework or the teachers would excuse the homework for some students. This leads to the questions, "If students can half-heartedly complete an assignment or skip it all together and still be successful in the class, is the assignment really necessary?" Instead, assignments that allow for student creativity and critical thinking, as opposed to rote drills and memorization, might be more valuable to the students. This supports the research of Ross and Broh (2000) who discovered that when students experienced higher self-esteem, when they felt that their academic success was in their own hands instead of those of an authority figure. Projects allow students to take more ownership of the outcome than a test. Dr. Atkinson spoke about the journals that students kept for her physics courses. In these journals students took notes and answered assigned problems. Dr. Atkinson never collected and graded the journals, but the students used the notebooks during pop quizzes and while studying for tests. It is interesting to note that none of the students cited examples from physics class as they complained about busywork, despite the fact that four of the participants were either currently enrolled in the course or had already completed the course, perhaps because they see the value in the assignments, as opposed to seeing them as busywork.

Furthermore, teachers need to honestly look at how long it takes to complete assignments, study for exams, write papers, and allow sufficient time for students to

complete those tasks pacing it out to approximately 15-25 minutes of homework each night. Fifteen to twenty-five minutes of homework from four teachers would meet the two hours of recommended homework time suggested by the School Board in combination with the additional time that flex time provided. One student suggested that when teachers allowed at least one weekend between the date the assignment was given and collected to work on projects in made the deadline less stressful. Better coordination between departments on due dates of major exams and projects, or even cross-curricular projects, would alleviate the pressure of simultaneous deadlines. Allowing students to take ownership of their own deadlines, would also help lessen the burden of deadlines.

Stanford University's Challenge Success program recommended giving students a break from academic stress by creating homework-free holidays and summer vacation. Dr. Carter claimed that while he supported the idea of a homework free summer vacation, the school calendar made it difficult to enforce because students enrolled in AP courses were at a disadvantage compared to peers around the country who started their school year in August. He claimed that if the school year started earlier, the school leadership would eliminate all summer work, but as it was, they settled for reducing the summer work to one whole school reading assignment and AP assignments.

Flex Time.

Flex time may have been established for the purpose of remediation and/or enrichment, but it was a proven to have a valuable secondary purpose. It was a de-stressor. Both school leaders and students expressed a desire to have flex time every day. One student, Rose, suggested that there be more of this time available, in the form of a mandatory study hall. Her suggestion reflected the students' desire for more time to

work. An additional idea for students who preferred to give themselves a mental break during the day could be to offer sessions in stress relief such as yoga, meditation, games or art, in order to de-stress. Cade (2007) polled counselors who implemented programs training teachers and working with parents to reduce testing anxiety in their schools. Popular strategies included study skills, test prep and relaxation techniques.

Advisory Period.

The advisory period received a neutral review. None of the student participants had a problem with it, but did not see the most beneficial purpose of it: to build a school community. Previous research had shown that when a student felt attached to his or her school, school-related stress decreased (Kaplan, Lui, & Kaplan, 2005). While Heather certainly demonstrated feeling connected to the school, she also admitted to experiencing academic stress; however, she became a stronger student from the experience, moving from two AP classes to four, her senior year. She said that she felt supported by school leadership and that she had an open relationship with her school counselor. Adam talked about the support he felt from his father. Rose talked about the trust her teachers had in her. It becomes clear that perhaps having a connection with an adult is a key component. Advisory gave students a chance to form one more relationship with an adult. Research on the mentorship of adolescents has found that students find value in the interpersonal relationships, the emotional support, and the break from daily stressors through their relationships with their mentors (Spencer & Liang, 2009; Casey, 2000). Casey (2000) examined the roles that mentors had in the affective, social, and vocational development of gifted students and wrote, "They might master the regular curriculum content without too much assistance, but they master life much better with the appropriate help." This

was the first year advisory had been implemented at the study site. In future years, school leaders could consider getting student input as to which advisory teacher might be a good fit. Providing teachers with discussion points might help the students and their advisory teacher develop a relationship. Those relationships might build a stronger school community and alleviate some of the negative consequences of academic stress. This prediction is supported by the research of MacGeorge, Sampter, and Gillihan (2005) who suggested that social support might help alleviate stress for students. Casey (2000) also suggested bringing in mentors from outside of the school. This would give time to teachers to focus on providing extended instruction to struggling students, but give other students the opportunity to be mentored by someone in a field which they are interested in pursuing.

Collaboration.

According to Pope (2005), many teachers did not have the time to interact with other teachers outside of their department, preventing them from discussing in common students and getting to know the whole student. Having students report to school one hour late one day a week, gave teachers a chance to collaborate within their teams or departments. Using that time to allow collaboration between departments could be beneficial to alleviate the stress of simultaneous deadlines. Furthermore, students appreciated the downtime to either sleep or get work done. Giving teachers more time to collaborate, could be mutually beneficial to stressed out students, by giving them more time to work on projects, study, or catch up on much needed sleep.

Student/School Leadership Relationship

Few previous studies of school culture focused on the student perspective and the differences in perception between school leaders and students (Hong, Wan & Peng, 2011; Kember; 2004; Mitchell, Bradshaw & Leaf, 2010; Richards, 2009; Tatar & Bekerman, 2009; Grant, et al, 2004). At this study site school leaders included administrators, counselors and teachers. Because so many of the initiatives were teacher driven, it was necessary to examine the role each group played.

Administration.

Administration impacted the school culture by hiring top quality teachers to provide stimulating, challenging lessons to students. They further impacted the culture of the school by giving teachers permission to not focus on test scores. This helped to support the open enrollment policy for advanced class. It supported the research of Pickering (2010) who found that there could be a domino effect of test anxiety, starting with administrators, falling to teachers, and then to students, if there is too much of an emphasis on test scores. However, administrators could observe classes and make suggestions for changes that teacher need to make to eliminate "busywork" or coordinate a schedule of deadlines for test and major projects.

Both students and school leaders mentioned the various achievements of the students, academically and athletically. This clearly shows a sense of pride in those accomplishments. However, the researcher learned that this was all the students perceived was valued. Administration needs to find ways to value and promote the learning behind the accolades, equally, if not more than the achievements. A shift towards standards based grading could possibly help to shift the focus from grades to

learning by creating a standardized way to communicate about the students skills, as opposed to achievements.

By making sure teachers got the maximum amount of instructional time per day by not making exceptions to the typical school day schedule, the administration emphasized the importance of learning. However, more exceptions, like the Multicultural Day, which fall in line with school goals could help to shift the focus to learning without the pressure of academic achievement. Multicultural Day gave the students a break and embraced the non-academic talents of students in the building. Designating advisory or flex time for fun, team-building activities could help relieve stress and build better adult/student relationships throughout the building.

There had been studies that examined teachers' perception of students' needs and administrators' perception of teachers' stress, but not on the administrators' perception of student needs (Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010; Pahnos, 1990). The school leadership clearly had an understanding of the students' needs, but that understanding was not reflected back to the students. The students perceived that the administration just wanted them to achieve to make the school look good. More open communication between students and school leaders needs to occur. Richards (2009) implemented a committee to examine stress in a suburban high school. The committee gave students, parents, and faculty members a voice in creating solutions to academic stress.

Teachers.

Previous research indicated that teachers had the biggest impact on positive and negative student experiences in school (Dickeson, 2001). Additionally, Klien (2004) found that student athletes felt less anxious about negative evaluations if they felt

attached to their evaluator. The administration had access to some data that informed them that the students at the study site perceived that they lacked a relationship with their teachers. This could perhaps explain some of the stress surrounding grades; if the only affirmation the student receives from a teacher is a good grade, then they are more likely to react negatively to a lower grade. All five student participants gave mixed perceptions of their teachers, stating that some were supportive and others seemed to "just pile the work on." Todd lamented a lack of concern from his teachers when his grades dropped drastically. Pope (2001) reported that often teachers failed to observe the emotional toll of academic stressors on the students because these students are either academically successful or were perceived as unmotivated, rather than anxious or stressed (Pope). Todd experienced this because he chose to disengage and chose not to complete homework assignments. Teachers need to be able to recognize the symptoms of depression and other mental health issues related to academic stress. They also need to be aware that disengagement can be a product of academic stress.

The push for standardized testing could contribute to the academic stressors experienced by the student participants. Hollingsworth (2007) learned that teachers tended to resort to rote teaching methods to prepare students for standardized testing, which also led to student disengagement. Several students referred to completing worksheets. Because some students were reluctant to complain about specific teachers or classes, the researcher could not specifically connect standardized testing and rote teaching methods. Rose had expressed her concern with the pace of instruction. Pickering (2010) found there was an increase in the pace of instruction as a result of state-mandated assessments (Pickering). While the existence of standardized tests is out of the control of

teachers, teacher can control how much time is given to test preparation and the teaching methods used to teach students the skills and material that is tested.

If teachers assign projects in place of some testing and allow flexibility in deadlines, this will allow students to take more ownership of the learning process. Teachers coordinating cross-curricular projects or at least coordinating due dates of major projects and tests could help alleviate the stress of simultaneous deadlines.

Yeager and Dweck (2012) wrote that an important task of educators is to prepare students to respond with resilience to the challenges that they faced. They established that when students related success to ability instead of effort, students felt more discouragement, vulnerability and stress. According to Yeager and Dweck, when well-meaning teachers compliment students by stating "you are so smart" or console students with statements such as "math isn't your thing" they associate success with an innate, unchangeable ability. However, when educators emphasize that all people have the ability to change, they established the student mindset that challenges could be overcome with time, effort, patience, help, and new strategies (Yeagar and Dweck). Teachers can help students establish resiliency by staying focused on the student's efforts rather than abilities.

School Counselors.

School leaders and students both indicated that school counselors had an integral role in making sure that students chose appropriately challenging courses. Two school leaders believed that it was harder to convince the high achievers to step back than to encourage students to challenge themselves. A study conducted by researchers at the University of North Carolina found that there was no difference in the first year

performance between students who completed five or ten college prep courses in high school (Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013). The researchers suggested that changes would need to be made in admissions and communicated to parents and students. School counselors should be the key communicator of the message that the reason educators encourage students to take rigorous courses is to help students be successful in college, not simply to earn acceptance into college. During college counseling sessions, counselors can be the key communicator a student can acquire a good education at a lesser-known institution. They can help students find the "best fit" college or university. Robbins (2006) suggested that counselors should help students find a school that suits them, not spend time strategizing how to "reengineer a life" to fit a particular school (p. 365). School counselors should help students find a balance between interests and rigor. However, school counselors might have an uphill battle in this task. Researchers have shown that ninth grade students are more likely to talk to their parents as opposed to their school counselors about college planning (Radford & Ifill, 2011). They suggested that college counseling programs have less of an impact on students whose parents have college degrees (Radford & Ifill).

Making sure that school counselors have an accurate idea of what the workload is like in the various classes can help ensure students are taking a manageable workload. Heather mentioned that she believed the approximations of homework load were inaccurate. Whether that is because she differentiated homework and studying or whether the counselors had an inaccurate picture of the course work, was not determined, however, better communication between the teachers and the counselors can ensure students are given a less stressful schedule. As part of the Stanford University Challenge

Success Program Menlo-Atherton High School created a Rigor Scale to for their counselors to use, which identified the number of minutes of homework, the amount of nights per week that homework is required and then ranked the courses in rigor. Mrs. Edwards suggested that some courses partner well with one another while other cover content that is very different. If counselors are aware of the curriculum in courses, they will be better able to advise which courses partner well with one another and could help students make a more appropriate four-year plan.

Furthermore, school counselors should encourage students to take the recommended course pathway to ensure they will be successful in learning the material in more rigorous courses. However, when students choose to follow a separate pathway, counselors can help identify the students who are taking their first AP course, and ensure that proper supports are in place for that student. Perhaps that means scheduling a study hall in addition to the rigorous coursework, or enrolling them in an elective like the AVID elective.

Finally, school counselors can provide emotional support for academically stressed students. Todd mentioned that he enjoyed his AP Psychology class because it gave himself and his classmates the opportunity to discuss their mental health and to see that they were not suffering alone. School counselors could run groups for students who are struggling with academic stress, depression, anxiety, or even for students who to take a less traditional pathway to a college degree or career. Social support may help alleviate academic stress (MacGeorge, Sampter, & Gillihan, 2005).

Policy Makers

Policy makers could help alleviate academic stress in two ways. One is to pass legislation that would guarantee more seats at in-state institutions to in-state residents. In 2013 some elected officials in Northern Virginia proposed a law that would limit the number of out of state residents being accepted to Virginia universities (Chandler, 2013). This would reduce the number of out of state residents from 33% of the students accepted at the University of Virginia and 38% at the University of William and Mary to 25% (Chandler; Dean J, 2013).

Secondly, legislatures could provide more funding for mental health services in the public school system. By either increasing the staffing of school psychologists and school counselors or creating partnerships between public schools and existing mental health facilities, depressed, anxious, or self-medicating students could receive the treatment they need with less interruption to their school year.

Limitations

Interviewing participants required the participants to speak honestly about their experiences with time, school culture, and academic stress. The students might have tempered their opinions, especially those that would have them admit to drug or alcohol use, self-medication, academic dishonesty, anger, or anxiety. Despite the assurance of confidentiality, the students were reluctant to mention specific subject areas and teachers. Furthermore, the students could have been outliers, who do not reflect the beliefs of other students within the school building. School leaders who were vested in the changes they proposed and implemented might have been reluctant to critique them honestly. There was also a concern that because adolescents were so enmeshed in the culture of

achievement within their respective school they might not have been able to discern what policies or practices contributed to their stress. Claire, who claimed to have control over her stress, did not get enough sleep each night, admitted to falling asleep at inappropriate or even dangerous times, and chose a college she was not convinced she want to attend because it was a "good school." She believed that she was doing what was expected of her to do. Furthermore students who disengaged or who avoided school as a result of stress were unlikely to volunteer to participate because they would not have been in the advisory period when the researcher presented the study to request those volunteers.

The researcher conducted the study during the last four months of the school year, with some of the interviews occurring after AP exams were completed. At this point in the year, the students are more relaxed that they might have been in November or March. Conducting this study during a different time of the year, might yield different information.

Recommendations for future research

Many of the school leaders and students attributed the cause of academic stress to the competition for limited choice of colleges. Further research could explore students experience more academic stress in states with more or fewer public institutions. The impact of technology, especially the distraction and mismanagement of time due to technology, was mentioned, but not thoroughly explored in this study. This impact of technology on academic stress could be another future study.

Because research suggested that rote teaching methods caused disengagement and was more pronounced in courses with a state-mandated assessment, future research could explore if there is a trend of more stress and/or disengagement in courses with a state-

mandated end-of-course assessment and rote teaching methods. Furthermore, researchers could explore if reducing the amount of homework has a positive or negative impact on student stress levels and achievement. Finally, a follow up study could be conducted in three years to determine if students felt a strong bond with faculty because of the advisory period.

Because this study was completed in a upper middle class, suburban community, research will be needed to see how students in urban, rural, and impoverished settings respond to academic stress. While Lthar (2013) established that adolescents of high and low socioeconomic status experience comparable levels of stress, drug and alcohol abuse, criminal behavior, depression and anxiety, it would be worthwhile to explore how socioeconomic status impacts response to academic stress. It would also be valuable to explore whether students who experience non-academic stressors like poverty, family issues, abuse, and cultural differences respond to academic stress.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

WASHINGTON, DC

Date: January 4, 2013
To: Kelly Sherrill,

From: The George Washington University Committee on Human Research, Institutional Review Board (IRB), FWA00005945

Re: Correspondence dated 08/29/2012
Subject: **IRB#081251** -- *Academic Stress in an Achievement Driven Era: Time and School Culture*
Sponsor: n/a
Risk Level: **Minimal** **Status:** Active **Expiration date: 1/4/2014**

This is to certify that the Institutional Review Board has **fully approved** the above referenced protocol via expedited review procedure under category # **6 and 7** of 45 CFR 46.110.

The expiration date of this project is **1/4/2014.** HHS regulations at 45 CFR 46.109(e) require that **continuing review** of research be conducted by the IRB at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk and **not less than once per year**. The regulations make **no provision for any grace period extending the conduct of the research beyond the expiration date of IRB approval. When your protocol expires all research activities must stop.** Please mark your calendar now to insure that the IRB receives a renewal request 30 days before the anniversary date of the project, if this study is expected to extend beyond one year.

This protocol has been approved for **a maximum number of 25 subjects** to be enrolled under the auspices of George Washington University. If you wish to increase enrollment beyond this number, you must submit a modification request to the IRB and obtain approval before exceeding this number.

Please note that the IRB must be notified if the project is altered in any way (change in location, personnel, number of subjects, age of subjects, or any change in research protocol). If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Office of Human Research either by email at ohrirb@gwu.edu or via phone at 202-994-2715.

MPB/meb

Appendix B: Informed Assent Form

Informed Assent Form

Academic Stress in an Achievement Driven Era
IRB #081251

Principal Investigator: Dr. Kelly Sherrill
Principal Contact: Mrs. Karyn Mrowka

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Karyn Mrowka, a teacher here at Oakton High School and a graduate student at The George Washington University in the Education Administration and Policy Studies doctoral program.

You are being asked if you want to take part in this study because you have identified yourself as a student who has had experience with academic stress. Please read this form and ask me any questions that will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Taking part is completely voluntary and even if you decide you want to, you can quit at any time. Your academic standing will not be affected in any way should you choose not to take part or to withdraw at any time.

The purpose of this study is to determine how academic stress is experienced by students at Oakton High School so that school leaders both here and at other high schools can create a supportive, challenging school environment. We will specifically asking you questions about how and why you selected the courses that you are currently taking, how you spend your time during an average school day, how much homework you have and how you approach it, and what extracurricular activities you participate in and how that schedule impacts your daily routine.

The total amount of time you will spend in this study is 90-135 minutes over the course of six weeks. We will meet three separate times for 30-45 minutes during Cougar Time, lunch, or study hall, so that I can interview you about your experience.

The study has the following risks:

You may feel some emotional stress/discomfort answering the interview questions. You are free to skip any question(s) or stop the interview at any point. If you reveal something during the interview that causes me to become concerned about your emotional or physical well-being, I will refer you to your school counselor who will then follow proper School District Public School policies to ensure you gets the proper support.

There is a small chance that someone not on our research team could find out that you took part in the study or somehow connect your name with the information we collect about you; however, steps are being taken to reduce this risk. First, you will select a pseudonym to use. This will be the name you will be referred to during the interview sessions which will be audio recorded. This is also the name you will be referred to in the interview transcripts, my notes, and final paper. Any information with your real name on it (i.e. this document) will be kept in a separate, secure location.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any published articles or presentations, I will only refer to you by your pseudonym. The researcher will also leave out any uniquely identifiable information from the paper and any published articles or presentations.

Your records for the study may be reviewed by the departments of George Washington University responsible for overseeing research safety and compliance.

Taking part in this research will not help you directly; however, the benefit to society will be a better understanding of the high school experience through the eyes of a student in an increasingly rigorous educational environment. As a token of her appreciation, Mrs. Mrowka will provide each participant a book upon completion of the third interview.

Talk to the research team if you have questions, concerns, complaints, or think you have been harmed. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Kelly Sherrill, listed on the front of this form at 678.266.2787 or sherrill@gwu.edu , or the Principal Contact, Mrs. Karyn Mrowka at 703-319-2941 @ kamrowka@sshs.edu. For questions regarding your rights as a participant in human research call the GWU Office of Human Research at 202-994-2715.

If you agree to take part in this study, please sign below:

I agree to participate in the study conducted by Karyn Mrowka, entitled "Academic Stress in an Achievement Driven Era." I understand that I will take part in three separate 30-45 minute interviews over the course of the next 6 weeks, and that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time.

Name (print):

_____

Name (sign):

_____

Date: _____

After you sign this Assent form, the research team will provide you with a copy. Please keep it in case you want to read it again or call someone about the study.

DO NOT SIGN ON OR AFTER THE EXPIRATION DATE OF: 01/04/2014

Appendix C: Parent Permission Form

Parent Permission Form

Academic Stress in an Achievement Driven Era
IRB #081251

Principal Investigator: Dr. Kelly Sherrill
Principal Contact: Mrs. Karyn Mrowka

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Your son/daughter has been invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Karyn Mrowka, a faculty member at Study Site High School and a graduate student at The George Washington University in the Education Administration and Policy Studies doctoral program. Please read this form and feel free to ask me any questions that will help you decide if your son/daughter should be or should not be included in the study.

Recently in the media the concept of stress related to academics has been garnering a lot of attention. Last year at Study Site High School, the PTSA sponsored a showing of Race to Nowhere which addressed this issue. It is also the subject of The Secret Lives of Overachievers by Alexandra Robbins (the same author who wrote The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth, one of our summer reading choices this past year).

The purpose of this study is to determine how students spend their time at Study Site High School and after school and whether or not that impacts academic stress. I will specifically asking questions about how and why each student selected his or her courses, how time is spent during the school day, how much homework students have, what extracurricular activities students participate in and how much time each day is dedicated to those activities. In addition to interviewing your child, I will request a copy of his/her schedule from the school counselor.

I will meet with your child three separate times for 30-45 minutes so that I can interview him or her about his or her experience.

Participation in this study will not affect your child's academic standing in any way even if he/she chooses not to take part or withdraws at any time. Interviews will be conducted during Cougar Time, lunch, and/or study halls, to eliminate missed class time for participation.

While this study has minimal risk with participation, the following risks have been identified:

The records of this study will be kept private. Individual interview transcripts will not be seen by anyone other than the research team. However, in the case that your child reveals something during the interview that causes me to become concerned about his or her emotional or physical well-being, I will refer your child to his/her school counselor who will then follow proper School District Public School policies to ensure your child gets the proper support.

There is a small chance that someone not on the research team could find out that your child took part in the study or somehow connect his/her name with the information collected about your child; however, steps are being taken to reduce this risk. Your child will chose a pseudonym to use during the interview, which will be audio recorded. This is the name I will use to refer to your child's insights in my paper, and in any published articles or presentations. I will not use any uniquely identifiable information attained during the interview.

The records for the study may be reviewed by the departments of George Washington University responsible for overseeing research safety and compliance.

Talk to the research team if you have questions, concerns, complaints, or think you have been harmed. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Kelly Sherrill, listed on the front of this form at 678.266.2787 or sherrill@gwu.edu , or the Principal Contact, Mrs. Karyn Mrowka at 703-319-2941 @ kamrowka@sshs.edu. For questions regarding your rights as a participant in human research call the GWU Office of Human Research at 202-994-2715.

If you agree allow your son/daughter to be interviewed for this study, please sign below:

I give _____ permission to participate in the study conducted by Karyn Mrowka, entitled "Academic Stress in an Achievement Driven Era." I understand that he/she will take part in three separate 30-45 minute interviews over the course of the next 6 weeks, and that he/she has the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time. I give the researcher permission to access my child's school schedule. I also understand that I will not have access to my child's individual interview transcript, nor a summary of the interview subject; however, I can request a copy of the completed paper at the conclusion of the study.

Your child's name (print): _____

Your name (print): _____

Your name (sign): _____

Date: _____

After you sign this permission form, the research team will provide you with a copy. Please keep it in case you want to read it again or call someone about the study.

DO NOT SIGN ON OR AFTER THE EXPIRATION DATE OF: 01/04/2014

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form (for School Leaders)

Informed Consent Form

Academic Stress in an Achievement Driven Era
IRB #081251

Principal Investigator: Dr. Kelly Sherrill
Principal Contact: Mrs. Karyn Mrowka

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Karyn Mrowka, a graduate student at The George Washington University in the Education Administration and Policy Studies doctoral program.

You are being asked if you want to take part in this study because you have been identified as a school leader who has an impact on one or more of the following aspects of Study Site High School: designing and implementing the school schedule, scheduling students into courses, making decisions involving extracurricular activities and/or working with students who are experiencing academic stress. Please read this form and ask me any questions that will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Taking part is completely voluntary and even if you decide you want to, you can quit at any time. Choosing not to participate in this study will have no impact on your employment status.

The purpose of this study is to determine how academic stress is experienced by students at Study Site High School so that school leaders both here and at other high schools can create a supportive, challenging school environment. The questions you are asked will revolve around your perceptions of student stress design of the schedule, student course selection, homework/workload for students and the impact extracurricular activities on students.

The total amount of time you will spend in this study is 90-135 minutes over the course of six weeks. We will meet three separate times for 30-45 minutes so that I can interview you about your experience. We will arrange the schedule in a way that works most conveniently for you.

The study has the following risks:

You may feel some emotional stress/discomfort answering the interview questions. You are free to skip any question(s) or stop the interview at any point.

There is a small chance that someone not on our research team could find out that you took part in the study or somehow connect your name with the information we collect about you; however, steps are being taken to reduce this risk. First, you will select a pseudonym to use. This will be the name you will be referred to during the interview sessions which will be audio recorded. This is also the name you will be referred to in the interview transcripts, my notes, and final paper. Any information with your real name on it (i.e. this document) will be kept in a separate, secure location.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any published articles or presentations, I will only refer to you by your pseudonym. The researcher will also leave out any uniquely identifiable information from the paper and any published articles or presentations.

Your records for the study may be reviewed by the departments of George Washington University responsible for overseeing research safety and compliance.

Taking part in this research will not help you directly; however, the benefit to society will be a better understanding of the high school experience through the eyes of a student in an increasingly rigorous educational environment. As a token of her appreciation, Mrs. Mrowka will provide each participant a book upon completion of the third interview.

Talk to the research team if you have questions, concerns, complaints, or think you have been harmed. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Kelly Sherrill, listed on the front of this form at 678.266.2787 or sherrill@gwu.edu , or the Principal Contact, Mrs. Karyn Mrowka at 703-319-2941 @ kamrowka@sshs.edu. For questions regarding your rights as a participant in human research call the GWU Office of Human Research at 202-994-2715.

If you agree to take part in this study, please sign below:

I agree to participate in the study conducted by Karyn Mrowka, entitled "Academic Stress in an Achievement Driven Era." I understand that I will take part in three separate 30-45 minute interviews over the course of the next 6 weeks, and that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time.

Name (print): _____

Name (sign): _____

Date: _____

After you sign this Consent form, the research team will provide you with a copy. Please keep it in case you want to read it again or call someone about the study.

DO NOT SIGN ON OR AFTER THE EXPIRATION DATE OF: 01/04/2014

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Student Interview #1:

Describe your educational experience here at _____ High School.

Potential Follow-up questions:

Do you believe your experience is typical of _____ High School students? Why or Why not?

What are the expectations of your teachers, administrators, counselors, and/or coaches of students here at _____ High School?

Every school is said to have its own culture, what is the culture like here? What is valued most by students, teachers, administrators, counselors, and/or coaches? How would you describe this school to another student who is about to transfer here?

Do you think _____ High School is different than other high schools? Why or Why not?

What do you feel as though you are adequately prepared to go on to college after graduation?

How did you decide what classes to take? Do you feel as though you have a lot of options? Who helps you decide which classes to take? Who do you talk to if you have a question about the courses?

Do you feel as though the administration has a good understanding of what it's like to be a _____ student?

Student Interview #2:

Describe a typical day for you as an _____ High School student.

Potential Follow-up Questions:

Do you feel as though a typical day for you is typical of most students?

When do you get up in the morning?

When do you leave for school? How long does it take you to get there?

What time do you get home from school in the evening?

How do you typically spend your free time in the evening?

What time do you go to bed?

How much time do you spend in classes each day? What do you do during lunch? What do you do during flex time?

How much time is there between classes? What are you typically doing?

What is your homework like? On a typical evening, how much time do you spend on your homework? Is your homework time dedicated solely to homework, or do you multitask (watch T.V., text with friends, tweet/or check social working sites, surf the web, play video games)

Do you give your full effort to completing homework? Why or why not?

Do you use time during the school day to complete homework? If so, when?

Do you ever not have homework complete on time? Why? What do you do when you realize you didn't/couldn't complete your homework?

Do you believe teachers give you enough time to complete each assignment to the best of your ability?

How do extracurricular activities play a role in your day? What activities are you involved in? What is the typical practice/meeting schedule for that/those activities?

Student Interview #3:

Do you ever feel stressed as a student and why?

Potential Follow-up Questions:

Do you think other students feel stressed? More or less? Why?

Has adding flex time/advisory period into the school made an impact on stress? How so?

Are there things that the faculty/administration at _____ High School could do to help alleviate the stress felt by students?

Is there anything you'd like to share with me about being a student that we haven't covered?

School Leader Interview #1:

Describe the educational experience here at _____ High School.

Potential Follow-up Questions:

How does the faculty and administration at _____ High School try to create a rigorous environment for the students?

What are the expectations of your teachers, administrators, counselors, and/or coaches of students here at _____ High School?

Every school is said to have its own culture, what is the culture like here? What is valued most by students, teachers, administrators, counselors, and/or coaches?

Do you think _____ High School is different than other high schools? Why or Why not?

What do you feel as though _____ High School students are adequately prepared to go on to college after graduation?

How are decisions about course scheduling made? How are decisions about which courses to offer made? How are decisions about student enrollment in courses made?

School Leader Interview #2:

What does a typical day look like for a _____ High School student?

Potential Follow-up Questions:

Why is the school day schedule set-up the way it is? Why did _____ High School choose block vs. traditional scheduling, flex time, etc?

Are there homework/workload policies in place? What are the typical expectations of teachers for student workload?

How are schedules for extracurricular activities determined?

School Leader Interview #3:

Do you feel as though student stress is an issue here at _____ High School? Why or Why not?

Potential Follow-up Questions:

What has the leadership at _____ High School done to help alleviate some of the stress that is typically associated with an academically competitive environment?

Appendix F: Advisory Period Transcript

My name is Mrs. Mrowka. I am a teacher here at Study Site High School and a graduate student at George Washington University. I have been researching academic stress. Perhaps some of you attended the PTSA showing of "Race to Nowhere" last school year or some of you may have read the book Overachievers by Alexa Robbins (who also wrote our summer reading book). Both of these talk about the concept of academic stress. Academic stress is defined as stress caused by all work conducted in the typical classroom: homework, preparation for exams, deadlines, college admissions. Some researchers define academic stress is "the work students conduct as part of the normal school curriculum" (Putwain, 2007, p. 210). Other researchers say that academic stress comes from exams, excessive homework, poor academic performance, time management issues, competition with peers, and parents or teacher expectations (Burnett & Fanshawe, 1997; Leung, Yeung, Wong, 2009). My focus is to learn about how students perceive their educational experience, how they spend their time during the school day and how school impacts a student's time before and after school. I am looking for volunteers who have had some experience with academic stress who would be willing to be interviewed about the subject. I am looking for juniors or seniors, who have never had me as a teacher (to help eliminate any bias in the study). We would meet three times for 30 minutes apiece, and I would set up these meetings during Flex Times. If you are interested, please let Mr. or Mrs. _____ (advisory teacher) know, and they will pass your name along to me. I'll set up a meeting with you, your school counselor and myself, to go over the details of the study and give you paperwork to take home to be signed by your parents.